

Revitalizing Rhythm Instruction Addressing Challenges in Teaching Fifth-Grade Music in China's Mainland

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Abstract. In music education, rhythm is a fundamental and essential element. Developing a strong sense of musical rhythm is particularly important for upper primary school students. In this paper, I analyzed current challenges in primary school rhythm instruction using various methods, including interviews, participation-observation, and case studies. Additionally, I explored effective rhythm teaching strategies through two specific lesson examples, aiming to provide recommendations for optimizing rhythm instruction in fifth-grade music classes in China. The research indicates that teachers should select methods that align with their students' needs, ensure continuity in course content, balance knowledge explanation with rhythmic perception, and nurture students' musical sense of rhythm.

Keywords: Rhythm Education; Primary School Music; Student Engagement; Musical Literacy.

1. Introduction

Rhythm is a fundamental element of music, playing a vital role in students' perception and understanding of music. Fifth-grade primary school students are in a critical period of physical and psychological development. Therefore, the upper primary grades are crucial for cultivating students' sense of rhythm and improvisational skills. However, current research tends to focus on rhythm teaching for lower primary grades, with less attention given to effective strategies for upper primary students. In the meantime, This paper uses the participatory observation method to discover several issues in fifth-grade music classrooms: unclear teaching concepts, limited instructional methods, weak course continuity, inconsistency in balancing the explanation of musical knowledge and the perception of rhythm, and a lack of individualized instruction. These challenges highlight the need for improvement in rhythm teaching at this level.

To address these issues, this paper aims to identify and analyze the problems existing in rhythm teaching in Chinese primary schools through interviews, participatory observations and case studies, explore their root causes, and select three pieces, namely "The Enchanting Fire Pit", "Thoughts in a Quiet Night," and "Let's Row Our Oars," from the standard music textbook for the fifth-graders published by the People's Music Publishing House. By applying methods such as body percussion, rhythm recitation, and conducting diagrams, optimization strategies for implementing rhythm teaching are proposed to enhance students' participation and comprehension.

2. Literature Review

At present, many scholars have explored the field of rhythm, with much of the focus on three areas: improving teacher quality, rhythm instruction for lower and middle primary grades, and the importance of body rhythm teaching methods. Mihaela proposed the significance of rhythm education in Romanian music education for cultivating children's coordination, attention, social skills and cognitive development [1]. Hauge (2012), for instance, researched newer rhythmic concepts and techniques in rock and pop music in the Scandinavian countries, highlighting the importance of teachers being proficient in performance, improvisation, composition, and arrangement [2]. Alamos-Gómez, Tejada, & Farías (2023) argued that teachers should consider fundamental rhythmic elements and design lesson sequences that foster students' musical development [3]. Zhang (2022) emphasized the importance of building strong interactions between teachers and students, suggesting that teachers should adjust their teaching strategies based on students' responses and their developmental stages. By actively guiding the classroom, teachers can encourage students to engage more deeply with the

music, think critically, and become active participants in their learning[4]. Tian (2022) advised teachers to use the Orff method's 'sound' and 'creation' components to address challenges in early music instruction[5]. Chen (2021) encouraged teachers to adapt rhythm training strategies such as body movement, sound-based methods, and situational teaching to students' developmental needs[6]. Liu (2020) highlighted the integration of rhythm training into singing lessons in middle primary grades, advocating for the use of rhythm instruments to cultivate rhythmic awareness[7]. Labes proposes to systematically apply the Kagan cooperative learning structure to music classes, which can effectively enhance students' learning outcomes in both rhythm skills and rhythm knowledge [8].

In conclusion, few studies explore the effectiveness of rhythm teaching strategies specifically for fifth-grade students. Thus, This paper plan to draw from personal teaching experience to explore effective rhythm instruction methods for this age group.

3. Research Methods

This paper employs observation and interview methods to investigate the problems in rhythm teaching within the fifth-grade music curriculum at primary schools. One-on-one interviews were conducted with two fifth-grade music teachers, Ms. Xiong and Mr. Liang, from ESACAS. The interview content covered the time allocation for rhythm teaching in actual classrooms, commonly used teaching methods and student feedback, challenges encountered in teaching and corresponding solutions, the continuity of rhythm teaching across lessons, main difficulties in current primary school rhythm instruction, the impact of rhythm training on students' other musical abilities, and suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of rhythm teaching.

Additionally, one-on-one interviews were conducted with five fifth-grade students, including two boys and three girls, one of whom had experience learning piano. The goal was to assess students' learning progress and classroom participation. The interview content included students' self-assessment of their rhythm mastery, specific difficulties encountered during learning and how they addressed them, as well as their exposure to different teaching approaches. The interview guide also focused on exploring students' learning preferences, asking about their favorite teaching methods and the reasons behind them. It further investigated their willingness to learn rhythm through games, recitation, or life-related approaches. Finally, the guide examined the practical impact and benefits of rhythm learning on students' daily musical interests, such as learning to sing songs.

4. Issues of Rhythm Teaching in Primary Schools

The research results show that the rhythm teaching that rhythm teaching was undervalued, with inconsistent teaching methods and a lack of tailored instruction based on individual student needs, leading to a disorganized teaching process with unclear priorities. Teachers lacked a deep understanding of the Orff and Kodály methods, which led to their improper application in the classroom. In addition, the rhythm teaching in different grades is disconnected, and teachers also find it difficult to balance the theoretical teaching of rhythm and the actual perception of rhythm, reducing students' opportunities to experience rhythm. For instance, during a fifth-grade singing class on Beautiful Summer Pasture, most of the class time was dedicated to practicing the mouth organ. Only five minutes were spent on rhythm instruction, which resulted in mismatches between melody and rhythm, and students struggled to maintain rhythmic coherence. Similarly, in a singing class on Edelweiss, the teacher used audio-visual aids to familiarize students with the melody quickly. While this method was effective for melody recall, it left little room for rhythm instruction, hindering the students' understanding of basic rhythmic patterns. Teachers lack a profound understanding of the Orff and Kodály methods, overlook the importance of rhythm teaching, and reduce students' opportunities to experience rhythm, thereby further hindering their learning process. Additionally,

teachers typically only teach music to one or two grade levels, resulting in a disjointed and discontinuous approach to rhythm instruction across different grades.

These findings underscore the urgent need to address rhythm instruction issues in primary school music education. The key lies in improving teachers' pedagogical approaches and prioritizing rhythm teaching to create a dynamic, engaging learning environment for students. Students expressed a desire to read music and sing along with their favorite songs, but their ability to recognize and apply basic rhythm patterns was limited.

5. Optimization Strategies for Teaching Rhythm in Primary School

In response to the above problems, this paper proposes relevant strategies for optimizing the rhythm teaching in the fifth grade of primary school.

5.1 Encouraging Personalized Learning by Teaching According to Students' Aptitude

To effectively teach rhythm, teachers must consider the physical and cognitive development, existing knowledge, and learning needs of students at different stages of primary school. Tailoring the pace and method of instruction to these characteristics is essential for effective learning.

Primary school students naturally exhibit active thinking and short attention spans. As noted by Wang (2020), "Primary school students are characterized by their active and restless nature, poor sustained attention span, and a thinking process that places a greater emphasis on concrete images and a more perceptual understanding of things and the outside world"[9]. Teachers should engage students' senses and foster a desire to participate in rhythmic activities, which helps them internalize musical patterns and rhythms while maintaining their enthusiasm for learning.

Since younger students struggle to focus for extended periods, teachers should introduce the most important rhythm content early in the lesson when attention levels are highest. As students begin to lose focus, interactive activities such as question-and-answer sessions or group rhythm exercises can re-engage their interest. These activities should involve simple, participatory tasks that encourage students to actively explore rhythms through movement, improvisation, or collaboration with peers.

By incorporating these strategies, teachers can create an engaging and dynamic classroom environment that supports rhythm learning. This approach not only aligns with students' learning habits but also fosters a natural and enjoyable classroom experience, enhancing both rhythm comprehension and overall classroom participation. Students will be better equipped to understand and express music, experiencing musical rhythm in a relaxed and personalized way.

5.2 Diversified Teaching Methods to Develop Students' Multiple Abilities

Current rhythm instruction in primary schools offers a range of diverse teaching methods, such as game-based learning, the sound-rhythm method, situational teaching, and conductor diagrams. Each method has its own strengths and areas of focus, allowing teachers to adapt their approach depending on the content and learning objectives.

For instance, the song *The Enchanting Hearth*, which features the distinctive tonal characteristics of Dong folk music, benefits greatly from the sound-rhythm method. This method is particularly well-suited to songs with tight, structured rhythms, helping students more easily perceive and understand rhythmic patterns. As Di & Charoennit (2022) note, "The coordinated development of language, muscle, and body movements is conducive to the smooth progress of Orff's music teaching and the cultivation of children's sense of rhythm" [10]. The rhythmic movement technique, derived from Orff's music education system, aligns with its foundational concept of "originality" and is highly effective in enhancing students' rhythmic perception.

Another example is the song *Silent Night Thoughts*, based on a Tang Dynasty poem. The rhythmic structure of the piece mirrors the natural rhythm of poetry recitation. By combining poetic rhythm with the musical rhythm of *Silent Night Thoughts*, teachers can help students experience poetic techniques such as antithesis and rhyme, fostering a rich, harmonious form of rhythmic expression.

This approach allows students to feel the rhythmic flow of each poetic line, deepening their understanding of how musical rhythm and lyrics can be intricately linked.

In addition to these methods, simple percussion instruments like snare drums and wooden fish can also be effective tools for teaching rhythm. Incorporating a variety of rhythmic teaching methods not only stimulates students' interest in learning but also meets the needs of students at different levels of musical understanding. Moreover, these methods cultivate students' listening skills and creative abilities, helping to establish an inclusive, student-centered learning environment that promotes active engagement with rhythm.

5.3 Consolidation of Revision and Enhancement of Teaching Continuity

As Liu (2023) emphasizes, "Rhythm knowledge learning is a process of continuous training, development, and consolidation"[11]. For rhythm learning to be effective, it must be sustained over time, fostering consistent practice habits among students. Teachers need to carefully consider the continuity of rhythm instruction across lessons and grades to ensure long-term retention and minimize forgetting.

Consolidating rhythm knowledge goes beyond mere repetition of facts; it involves a deeper understanding and perception of rhythmic patterns. For example, rhythms such as syncopation and dotted notes—patterns that students may have little exposure to outside the classroom—are easily forgotten. To address this, teachers can assign simple, targeted homework focusing on key rhythmic concepts to reinforce what was learned in class. It's essential to carefully balance the volume and difficulty of the assignments so that they effectively reinforce the learning without overwhelming the students. Additionally, teachers should provide comprehensive feedback and encourage students with positive reinforcement to build their confidence.

Another challenge in continuity is the segmentation of music instruction by grade level. Often, individual music teachers are responsible for only one or two grades, which can result in gaps between the curriculum of different grade levels. To address this, it's recommended that music teachers across all grade levels hold monthly meetings to discuss teaching content, progress, and challenges. These meetings should focus on identifying students' mastery of critical rhythmic concepts and addressing any difficulties encountered across different grades. By fostering communication between grade-level teachers, the curriculum can be better aligned, helping to prevent abrupt increases in difficulty as students move from lower to higher grades.

In summary, adding review sessions and strengthening inter-grade communication are key strategies to enhance continuity in music education. Through these approaches, teachers can optimize curriculum design, improve instructional effectiveness, and create a more cohesive and systematic learning environment for students.

5.4 Using the Conductor's Illustrations to Develop Musical Sensibility

Mastering basic rhythmic patterns is fundamental to learning musical rhythm. Once students are familiar with these patterns, the next step—experiencing and internalizing the rhythm—becomes crucial in developing their overall musicality. Di and Charoennit (2022) emphasize that "rhythm is a human instinct and the most direct of all musical elements. It bridges physical and psychological sensations, enhancing auditory and musical abilities through rhythmic practice"[12]. To apply these concepts in practice, I used the song "Let's Row Our Oars" as a lesson example and employed a conducting diagram throughout the session, yielding positive results.

Conducting diagrams are an effective instructional tool that visually guides students through the rhythm and emotional flow of a piece, enabling them to better appreciate the rhythmic beauty of the music. In the case of "Let's Row Our Oars," which is written in 2/4 time, the focus of the lesson was the weak beat—a common challenge for primary school students who are still developing their sense of rhythm and often struggle with accurate timing. To address this, I used a 2/4 conducting diagram throughout the lesson to emphasize the weak beat. Since the piece features two vocal parts, I focused

on introducing the melody of the higher voice in the first section, recognizing that the entire song could not be covered in one session (see Example 1).

Example 1 The higher vocal part of the first stanza of song “Let's Row Our Oars.”

The image shows a musical score for the song "Let's Row Our Oars". At the top left, there is a microphone icon and a pink circle containing a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. To the right of these icons is the title "Let's Row Our Oars". Below the title are six staves of musical notation in 2/4 time, with a key signature of two flats. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings such as accents and slurs. The score is presented in a clean, black-and-white format.

Fig 1. The higher vocal part of the first stanza of song “Let's Row Our Oars.”

At the beginning of the lesson, I sang a scale using a weak-start rhythm while demonstrating the 2/4 beat conducting diagram. Students were asked to identify whether the melody entered on a strong or weak beat. Most students successfully identified the weak beat, indicating that fifth-graders have a heightened sensitivity to strong and weak beats.

Next, I displayed the 2/4 beat conducting diagram on the blackboard, using arrows to show the direction of the hands while conducting. Students were then invited to practice the conducting pattern together. They quickly mastered the 2/4 beat and could follow the conducting diagram independently when prompted.

Afterward, I played the first part of the song and instructed the students to follow along with the audio while conducting. This activity allowed them to directly experience the rhythm of the weak start and the horizontal fluidity created by the empty beats in the music, preparing them for more accurate singing of the weak-start rhythm in the next step.

I then asked the students to slow down the tempo, read the rhythm while conducting, and pronounce the rests with a "pause." This practice helped them accurately grasp the starting position of the weak rhythm and other rhythmic patterns. I accompanied the students, controlling the tempo as they played the rhythms. When the audio was played a second time, the students were able to sing along and make simple artistic adjustments based on my prompts.

In the subsequent extension session, each group selected one student to conduct while the others sang according to the conductor's graphic notation. This activity not only familiarized students with

the 2/4 beat conducting diagram and weak-start rhythm but also stimulated their interest in learning and performance, encouraging them to confidently showcase their skills.

Integrating conducting diagrams into teaching musical rhythm helps students further engage with the rhythm patterns they have learned, deepening their understanding and memory of these rhythms. Through conducting, students learn to accurately express rhythms, identify where to emphasize intensity, and determine when to maintain a gentle approach, thus enhancing the emotional expression of the song.

6. Conclusion

For fifth-graders, a solid sense of rhythm and a comprehensive understanding of rhythmic concepts not only facilitate the learning of songs but also enhance their ability to appreciate music more deeply. This paper explores the challenges in rhythm teaching at the primary school level and proposes corresponding optimization strategies for fifth-grade music rhythm instruction, supported by relevant lesson examples: (1) Teachers must select appropriate rhythm teaching strategies tailored to their students' characteristics. (2) A diverse range of teaching methods can stimulate students' interest, enhance the enjoyment of learning, and support the development of their overall abilities. (3) Teachers should ensure continuity in rhythm instruction and balance the explanation of rhythmic concepts with the perception of rhythmic movement. (4) Using the Conductor's Illustrations to Develop Musical Sensibility This approach enables students to deepen their understanding of rhythm through exploration and practice, fostering a lifelong interest in music.

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