

MUSIC TEACHERS' COMMUNICATION WAYS HELPING PRESCHOOL CHILDREN TO ENGAGE WITH LEARNING OBJECTS AND TO EXPLORE THEIR CRITICAL ASPECTS

Daiva Zitkeviciene, Ona Monkeviciene

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

ABSTRACT

This article aims to reveal the variation-theory-grounded ways that music teachers use to communicate with pre-school children and direct their attention to learning objects (sounds of music) and the critical aspects of learning objects (music sound qualities) while listening to music. Variation theory is a novel didactic approach in the musical education of pre-school children. A learning study based on the theory of variation as a phenomenographic approach and a strategy for a lesson study as a form of participatory action research were employed. While conducting the empirical research, attempts were made to identify the ways in which music teachers communicate with children, which are grounded in variation theory and direct children's attention to learning objects and their critical aspects. The research distinguishes two groups of ways of music teacher communication that encourage children to listen to music: music teacher communication that directs children's attention to feeling, understanding and discerning the learning object, i. e., sounds of music (group one) and the critical aspects of learning objects, e. g., pitch, duration of music (group two). These ways that apply variation theory are new and enrich the didactics of early music education.

Keywords: *early childhood, learning object, music education, qualities of musical sounds, variation theory.*

Introduction

From the perspective of contemporary learning paradigms, didactic research on early education is among the most relevant in the growing area of scientific research. Recently, an obvious focus has been observed on dialogue communication in education, specifically the interaction between teacher and child. Dialogue communication creates conditions for children to engage in educational activities, to direct their attention toward learning object, to think, act and explore together with the teacher and other

children as well as to reveal accumulated experiences in different ways. Having envisaged possibilities for communication between teacher and child and between children (Cohrssen et al., 2014; Gjems, 2010; Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011; Pramling et al., 2019), researchers have also shown the importance of communication in the process of children's music learning. The teacher-child interaction as multimodal communication establishes possibilities for teachers to involve infants with music theatre performances (Barbosa et al., 2021). Research shows that teachers apply a range of communication ways to encourage children to sing, listen to music or play the piano; live music performances ask children questions, demonstrate agreement or disagreement, discuss music, comment, instruct, apply different means of communication (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015; Kultti, 2013; Zitkeviciene, 2018). Through verbal communication, synaesthesia, body movement and singing, children create musical meanings, share their musical experiences and develop their understanding (Wallerstedt, 2013; Zitkeviciene & Monkeviciene, 2020).

An innovative trend in the modelling of learning processes is based on the theory of variation, which emphasises the relevance of directing the child to the learning object and its critical aspects. Variation-theory-based education allows children to discover new knowledge, create meanings, develop their own understanding and notice changes in their understanding. As a mediator between the child and the learning object (Veraksa et al., 2016) and by applying the contrast pattern of variation, the teacher employs ways of communication to model contrast situations in which children feel, perceive and discern learning objects and their critical qualities and reflect on their knowledge through this contrast.

After introducing the theory of variation, Wallerstedt (2010) analyses how a teacher can encourage children to feel and understand the learning objects of music, e. g., the music metre. Other researchers (Zitkeviciene, 2018; Zitkeviciene & Monkeviciene, 2020) have applied patterns of variation theory seeking to reveal how music teachers' communication with children enables the latter to feel, perceive, understand and discern qualities of musical sounds (pitch, duration, timbre) and to demonstrate their own knowledge. However, didactic studies applying the theory of variation to early music education and analysing ways of teacher-child communication in music activities have been scarce so far. The aim of the research presented in this article is to explore ways of communication between music teachers, who use the contrast pattern of variation theory, and children that direct children's attention to learning objects and their critical qualities while listening to music.

Methodology

A learning study (Lo & Marton, 2012; Marton & Tsui, 2004), which is based on the variation theory as a phenomenographic approach (Marton, 2015, 2018), and a lesson study as a form of participatory action research strategy (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) were employed in this research. The learning study provides opportunities to model the communication ways of music teachers as mediators between children and the music being listened to, directing children's attention to the learning object, i. e., musical sounds, and to the critical aspects of the learning object, i. e., qualities of musical sounds. The model of a learning study was adapted to young children's learning through musical activities in early childhood education (Ljung-Djärf et al., 2013).

A two-cycle learning study was planned and implemented. The musical activities assigned to each cycle were performed by three teachers working in different groups of children. In each musical activity, teachers applied all other pre-modelled or spontaneously emerging ways of communication for teachers as mediators between children and the music being listened to. These communicative encounters were designed to direct the children's attention to the object of music learning and to help them feel, understand and discern the object of music learning (musical sounds) and its critical aspects (duration, pitch of musical sounds).

Sample of the research

Three music teachers working in different kindergartens in Vilnius, Lithuania, participated in the research, who were chosen using criterion-based selection (Bitinas et al., 2008). The following criteria were considered 1) the music teacher's openness to innovations; 2) the music teacher's experience to conduct action research; 3) the music teacher's ability to collaborate with researchers in a constructive way; 4) good relationships between the music teacher and children as well as their parents; 5) spacious premises tailored to musical activities. All the three music teachers selected for the research complied with the aforesaid criteria, had a good personal and professional contact with one of the researchers. Three groups of children from the same age group (i. e., 5-6 years), who the music teachers worked with, were chosen and 65 children in total participated in the research.

Ethics of the research

The requirements for information, voluntary consent, confidentiality, and the use of data for research purposes were followed in planning and conducting the study. The collected data were used only for the purpose of the study. Consent for the children's participation in the study was obtained from their parents.

Data collection and analysis

The data for the learning study were collected from videos recorded during children's musical activities. During the review of the recordings, different essential episodes of musical activities were selected for analysis. This selection method was grounded on the critical incident technique. The selected critical episodes were transcribed verbatim on the basis of video recordings. Each participant in a musical activity was coded, and participants' verbal language, gestures and body expressions were written down in the transcription material. The analysis of research data mostly focussed on the music teachers' ways of communication, which were used to direct children's attention to the learning object and critical aspects of the learning object.

Results

The analysis of critical episodes of musical activities organized by music teachers distinguished music teachers' ways of communication with children, which enabled them to direct the children's attention to the pitch qualities (high/low) and duration qualities (short/long) of musical sounds. The process and character of analysing critical episodes are disclosed by the analysis of the first critical episode (Table 1).

Telling the fairy tale, the music teacher suggests remembering the song and singing it together in the first critical episode. Singing serves as a mediator between the learning object and the children. Attention is directed to the learning object using the doll of Little Red Riding Hood, a fairy tale character, via her intentions to sing the song, her walking as if jumping in the air as demonstrated with hands and arms and her cheerful and playful, as if singing, voice using different intonations.

To direct the children's attention to the critical aspects of the learning object, contrasting qualities of musical sounds (high and low musical sounds), on the basis of the contrast pattern of variation theory, the music teacher creates associations with high and low musical sounds through the images of birds and a bear: she speaks in a high voice when referring to birds and uses a low voice and hand and arm movements (swinging to the sides) to imitate a bear, offering a challenge to the children ('Let us, children, listen to how the birds and then the bear do that'). This shows that she is waiting for an answer by demonstrating a ('frozen') facial expression and using a (contiguous) voice.

Using their voice, words and singing, children express their engagement with the learning object of musical sounds; guess the character of the fairy tale by watching the teacher's body movements and voice intonation; and employ different body movements and different voice intonations to demonstrate the critical aspects of the learning object, i. e., high and low musical sounds.

Table 1. The First Critical Episode: Music Teachers' Communication Directing the Children's Attention to the Learning Object and Its Critical Aspects.

18	T	<i>So, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when suddenly an idea to sing something merry came to her head (T says in a more cheerful voice as if singing). And she remembered a well-known song, 'Two Roosters' (further holding a doll in her hands, T shows her cheerfully walking as if jumping in the air). Do you know this song? (employing thoughts, movements, face mimes, different intonations, hand movements of the fairy tale character; the doll of Little Red Riding Hood directs children to the learning object, i. e., musical sounds).</i>
19	C	<i>Yeeees (expressing engagement in the learning object by voice or verbally).</i>
20	T	<i>Let us all sing this song (directing to the learning object by singing).</i>
21	C	<i>(Children together with the music teacher sing the song) (through singing, children engage with the learning object, i. e., musical sounds).</i>
22	T	<i>((After singing the first verse of song, the music teacher continues her story). So, Little Red Riding Hood decided to sing this song. And, you know, the little birds heard her sing (T pronounces the word 'little birds' in a continuous and thinner voice) and they say, 'Little Red Riding Hood, we also know this song. And we want to sing it...' (in the thinnest, most cheerful voice possible) ... Little Red Riding Hood heard how the birds sang and started dancing together with them...And later (T says in a continuous voice), when the birds sang, you know (T says in a lower voice), this song was heard by (a short pause) a very nice ... big-footed ... (the music teacher says in a lower voice and swinging to the sides imitates a bear and with a 'frozen' facial expression and waits for the children to answer who else heard the song) (facial expression, hand and arm movements, demonstration of contrast of pitches (high/low sounds) and words (singing of birds and bear direct children to the critical aspects of the learning object, i. e., qualities of high and low musical sounds).</i>
23	C	<i>(Several children react to the question of the music teacher quickly) ... bear (according to movements of the music teacher voice intonation, the children guess the character of the fairy-tale, which is associated with low musical sounds).</i>
24	T	<i>(The teacher continues her fairy tale) ...which also wanted to sing the song. Let us listen, children, how birds and then bear do that (following the contrast model of variation theory, the music teacher directs the children's attention to the critical qualities of the learning object, i. e., high and low musical sounds, with the help of words (birds/bear), which are associated with a thin and high or low and gruff voice).</i>
25	C	<i>(While listening to the music composition, the children try to demonstrate birds and bears, adapting their movements to the music they are listening to. Imitating the birds, the children use cheerful and thin voices, and movements of the bear are followed by low voice intonations) (different body movements, contrasting voice intonations demonstrate the critical aspects of the learning object, high and low musical sounds).</i>

Note. Numbers represent the locations of critical episodes in the succession of episodes; T represents a music teacher; B1, B2, etc. represent boys; G1, G2, etc. represent girls; C represents the responses of several children at a time.

Systematisation of Results and discussion

The analysis of critical episodes of musical activities organised by the music teachers distinguished two groups of ways used by music teachers to communicate with children. The first group (Figure 1) includes ways of communication that help to direct the children’s attention to the learning object, musical sounds.

The systemised results show that the teacher directs the children’s attention to the learning object directly, by singing, singing intonations and using toys that ‘sing’. However, frequently, teachers attract the children’s attention to the learning object of musical sounds indirectly, creating meaningful associations or providing hints, e. g., encouraging the production of short squeaky sounds like a chicken or asking questions about the long wings of swans. Squeaking and shortness create associations with short sounds, while slowness and flapping with wings refer to a slow tempo, features which are associated with music. Emotional statements, exclamations and questions also direct children’s attention to learning objects, in this case musical sounds, because music evokes strong emotions in children (Fig. 1).

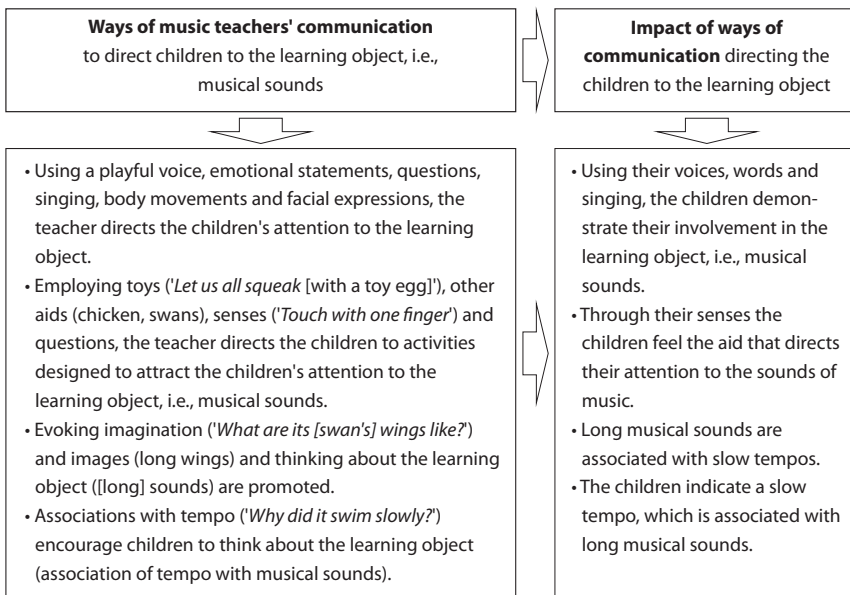


Figure 1. Ways of music teachers’ communication to direct children to the learning object

The second group of ways used by music teachers to communicate with children help to direct the children’s attention to the critical aspects of the

learning object, i. e., duration of musical sounds (short/long) and pitch (high/low) (Fig. 2).

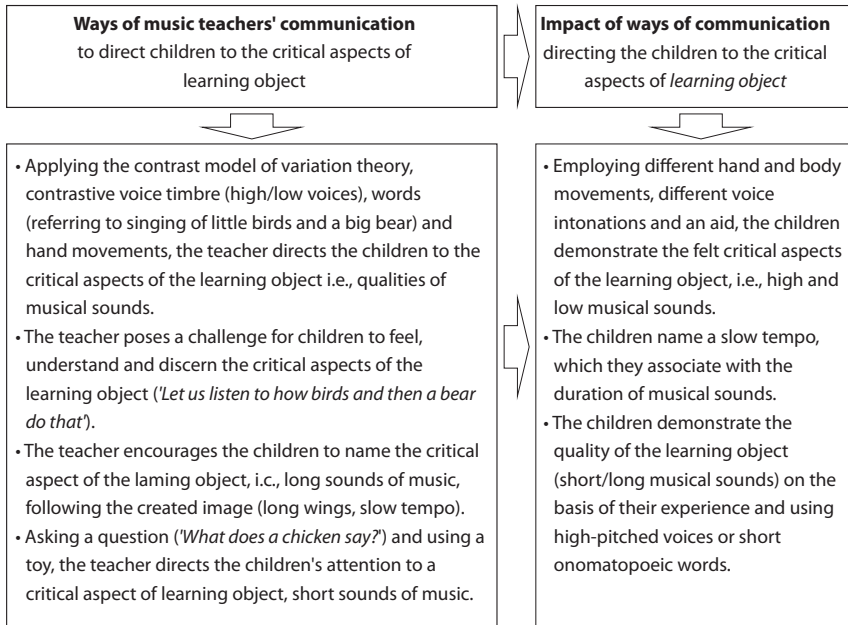


Figure 2. Ways of music teachers' communication that direct children to the critical aspects of learning objects

The contrast model of variation theory was used by teachers to reach the established goal. They demonstrated contrastive qualities of musical sounds using contrastive timbres of voices. They selected objects with high or low voices and with body parts and movements that are long and slow or short and fast; they evoked children's images and referred to the contrastive 'singing' of the selected objects. Children's reaction and engagement show that all this contributed to their feeling of the contrastive qualities of musical sounds.

Ways of music teachers' communication to direct children's attention to the learning object and its critical aspects by applying the contrast pattern of variation theory in music education have not been investigated so far. The results of the conducted research enrich the direction of research by Wallerstedt (2010, 2013) and Barbosa et al. (2021).

Limitation of the research

The obtained results cannot be generalised because the criterion-based sample (the Learning study was carried out only in 3 early age education institutions, and only in Vilnius) rather than a non-probability one was

selected for the conducted research. However, they are useful discerning certain new didactic tendencies and foreseeing further possibilities for developing this didactic trend.

Only one area of musical activity, i. e., listening to music, prevailed in the research. Variation-theory-grounded ways of the music teacher's communication with children were not tested in other interrelated musical activities (singing, rhythmisation, playing, improvisation, etc.). A broader scope of research could have opened up more possibilities for theoretical and empirical substantiation of peculiarities applying variation-theory-grounded ways of communication with children employed by music teachers in early childhood education.

Conclusions

This qualitative research distinguished two groups of ways of music teachers' communication that encourages children to listen to music:

- Ways of music teacher communication that direct children's attention to the learning object: employing a playful voice, toys, a visual aid, singing, a concentrated facial expression; using senses; evoking imagination and images; associations; and using body movements.
- Ways of music teacher communication that direct the children's attention to feeling and understanding the critical aspects of the learning object: using contrasting voice timbre, hand/arm movements that represent sound qualities, stagnant facial expressions; asking questions that direct children's attention to different sound qualities; using toys that symbolise a respective sound quality; posing challenges to the children.

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