A Case Study of Teaching Choral Singing in an Urban Secondary School of Anambra State Applying Learning Theories

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Abstract

The target of teaching choral singing or whatever it entails should always be for the choral teacher and choristers to achieve a musical result. In this paper therefore, a case study of the techniques of choral teaching in a typical urban secondary school was done. The researcher employed the instruments of observations of the choral teaching and learning procedures, interview of the choral teacher and some choir members, and the study of some of the choir relevant documents. The paper focused on the extent some learning theories were applied to the teaching and learning of songs as various analyses were done. It was found that different variables and consequently various theories were employed in the teaching of voice in the school.

Introduction

The new Harvard dictionary of music defined chorus as “a body of singers who perform together, either in unison or in parts, usually with more than one on a part”. Choral or choir singing is having a group of people; boys and girls or men and women sing together. Choral singing is quite contrasted to solo or other individual singing practices. A choir is taught together and presents together as a group. Ekwueme (1993:3) wrote thus: “When a group is trained to combine the qualities of good singing with the diverse other qualities that can be achieved from group choral activity, including the wide contrasts of range, dynamics, tone colour, etc., then a good choir is produced.”

Choral teaching in secondary schools could be seen as a foundational stride towards producing people with great touch of professionalism in singing. Singing is done in secondary schools in many ways like in classroom teaching, assembly singing, solo singing and choral singing. The focus of this paper is on choral music teaching in secondary schools, an urban secondary School in Anambra state was used as a case study. The school has a choral group by name Young Voices. The Young Voices at the time of the study was four years and three months old. It is a choir of mixed voices of adolescent boys and girls between the ages of eleven (11) and fifteen (15) years old. The choir master happened to be one of the music teachers employed in the school.
In music teaching and learning, certain things come into play for learning to properly take place. Things like musical appreciation, musical understanding, musical knowledge, musical skills, musical attitudes and musical initiative. Learning theories abound which were consciously or unconsciously applied to music teaching by the music teacher. In this paper therefore, following the observations made by the researcher on the way the choral teacher handles the teaching of songs, some learning theories were observed to have been applied.

Literature Review

The literature review covers literature on music teaching techniques which invariably work under established learning theories. Hence some learning theories were also reviewed.

Music Teaching/Learning Techniques

Since history, man has always searched for facts about music that are yet unknown, questions about music that have remained unanswered and effect or outcomes of music that have not been properly estimated (Mbanugo 2009:123). Different choral teachers have different approaches to choral teaching but all have one objective in mind – to bring out the best in the voices they work on. In teaching choral, the teacher should create an atmosphere of friendliness during classes with the students, this is essential as it affects the way the students receive instructions and directives. Onyiuke (2003) notes that:

*Within the music class the teacher should make adequate effort to establish a favourable musical knowledge, understanding, and responsiveness. The teacher should provide both stimulating and challenging environment where the child [the learner] can explore to achieve his/her objectives (p.69).*

An atmosphere devoid of friendliness and kindness hampers choral teaching. Establishing an interest in your students will make them come out of their shells and be themselves and also learn well.

A choral teacher should be able to keep what is unique about an individual voice and still give the student the tools he/she needs to make it better. He/she should deal with his/her students in the choir as individuals with different background, exposure and disposition. In line with this, Cranmer (1974:59) comments thus:

*The teaching of singing is a most personal and individual job, and because the whole of singing is done by the singer himself each pupil becomes a separate problem.*

A choir needs the guidance of a teacher in its learning. Self learning may not go well with practice like choral. Graves (1954:32) supports the idea of having a teacher to teach singing as he postulates:

*Music, the arts and languages cannot be acquired without a teacher, and the role of the teacher is not only to import information and correct errors*
but also to record progress, to create enthusiasm and lead the way to the mountain tops.

Following the above postulate, it stands to reason that it is essential to have a choral teacher to teach the students. Singing cannot be learnt from books. Books only give ideas which a choral teacher can use in putting his students through. In choral teaching, both the teacher and the taught have their parts to play to make it work. In the words of Henderson (1979:166)

It takes many elements in developing a vocal artist. Commitment almost always ranks first, the vocal instrument second, musicianship very near to the first two, and then come personal appearance (charisma), and inner drive.

Summarizing the teaching strategies, Jones (2000) in his article – Psychological Hints for Teaching Singing writes about psychological hints and approaches for teaching singing and the hints are quite in agreement with Vella’s (2002) extensive teaching strategies. Their findings are summarized as follows:

- establishing and maintaining a good rapport with the students;
- recalling previous lessons;
- investing in the process and not the result;
- using positive motivation;
- beginning each lesson with a single concept in mind;
- engagement of learners (active learning);
- long – term realization – having the singer think in co-ordination rather than bits and pieces;
- bringing the lesson to an end by reviewing what was accomplished and congratulating the student on that accomplishment.
- Immediacy of learning (feedback, purpose, and goals).

Learning Theories

Learning leads to changes in behaviour and any analysis of the learning process must give attention to the types of behaviour involved and of kinds of changes desired (Leonhard and House 1972:132). Learning is commonly defined as a process that brings together cognitive, emotional and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing, or making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values, and world views (Illeris, 2004). It is also thought of as the way in which information is absorbed, processed, and retained. On the other hand, a theory is not just an idea. It is an idea that is a coherent explanation of a set of relationships that has been tested with lots of research. If the idea survives rigorous testing, that theory is said to have empirical grounding. Learning theories are elaborate and proven hypotheses that describe how exactly this procedure occurs. These theories can give one some consistent ways of looking at classroom practice and some rational explanations for what occurs. Learning theories address key questions, for example, how does learning happen? How does motivation occur? What influences students’ development?
Behavioural Learning Theories

There are essentially two types of behavioural learning theories, the operant conditioning and the classical conditioning. Domjam (2003) clearly distinguished the two as he wrote that operant conditioning is a form of learning during which an individual modifies the occurrence and form of its own behaviour due to the consequences (e.g. reinforcement) of the behaviour while classical conditioning deals with the conditioning of reflexive (reflex) behaviours which are elicited by antecedent conditions. Behaviors conditioned via a classical conditioning procedure are not maintained by consequences.

**Operant Conditioning:** Edward Thorndike (1874 – 1949) is considered by many to be the first modern education psychologist who sought to bring a scientific approach to the study of learning. Thorndike believed that learning was incremental and that people learned through a trial and error approach. His behaviourist theories of learning did not consider that learning took place as a result of mental constructs. Instead, he described how mental connections are formed through positive responses to particular stimuli. For Thorndike, learning was based on an association between sense impressions and an impulse to action. Thorndike favoured students’ active learning and sought to structure the environment to ensure certain stimuli that would ‘produce’ learning (Hilgard and Bower, 1975).

The father of modern behaviourism, B. F. Skinner (1904 – 1990), further developed Thorndike’s Stimulus-Response learning theory. Skinner was responsible for developing programmed learning which was based on his stimulus response research on rats and pigeons in experiments that provided positive reinforcement for “correct” responses. He considered learning to be the production of desired behaviours, and denied any influence of mental processes. Programmed learning gave proper reinforcement to the student, emphasized reward over punishment, moved the student by small steps through discrete skills and allowed the student to move at their own speed. (Skinner, quoted in Hilgard and Bower 1975). Both Thorndike and Skinner learning theories involve operant conditioning.

**Classical Conditioning:** The classic example of classical conditioning was made by Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936), a Russian physiologist. He observed the production of saliva by dogs as they were fed when he noticed that saliva was also produced when the person who fed them appeared (without food). In his experiment, he paired a sound, a tone, with feeding his dogs so that the tone occurred several times right before and during the feeding. Soon the dogs salivated to the tone, something like they did to the food. They had learned a new connection: tone with food or tone with saliva response. Tone which was meaningless originally, became meaningful and caused them to salivate after the experiment. This new pairing is classical conditioning.

**Cognitive Learning Theory**

Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980) was the first to state that learning is a developmental cognitive process, that students create knowledge rather than receive knowledge from the teacher. He recognized that students construct knowledge based on their experiences and how it occurs is
related to their biological, physical, and mental stages of development. Piaget spent years observing very young children and mapped out four stages of developmental growth: sensorimotor (from birth to about 2 years), preoperational (roughly ages 2–7), concrete operations (encompassing ages 7–11) and formal operations (ages 11-15) (Hilgard and Bower, 1975). His work acknowledged the utility of some behaviourally-guided rote learning while also arguing that other activities that support students’ exploration are essential.

Russian scientist Vygotsky (1896 – 1934) extended Piaget’s developmental theory of cognitive abilities of the individual to include the notion of social-cultural cognition – that is, the idea that all learning occur in a cultural context and involve social interactions. He emphasized the role that culture and language play in developing students’ thinking and the ways in which teachers and peers assist learners in developing new ideas and skills. Vygotsky proposed the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which suggested that students learn subjects best just beyond their range of existing experience with assistance from the teacher or another peer to bridge the distance from what they know or can do independently and what they can know or do with assistance (Schunk, 1996). His work led to an emphasis on theories of assistance or “scaffolding” that help students learn in systematic ways. Following Piaget, the developmental learning theorists brought to education the ideas that teachers can be more effective if they organize learning so that it is responsive to the child’s stage of development, if they connect learning to the child’s prior knowledge and experiences, and if they use the social and natural environments as opportunities for learning.

Progressive Learning Theories

The Progressives embraced Piaget’s ideas about child development, Vygotsky’s ideas about socially situated learning and the construction of knowledge, and the age-old emphases on both experience and thinking or reflection as a basis for learning. Building on the ideas of the progressives, Jerome Bruner further explored the notion that disciplines have certain structural elements – core ideas and approaches to knowledge and understanding. He developed the idea that if complex material is broken down into its essential ideas, any student can learn any subject matter. Bruner, (1977) developed the concept of spiral curriculum which returns to the same subject matter with the student at periodic points in time, but at each “spiral” the material is substantially deeper in its intellectual demands.

Multiple Intelligences Learning Theory

Howard Gardner’s *Multiple Intelligences Learning Theory* suggests that there are a number of distinct forms of intelligence that each individual possesses in varying degrees. Gardner proposes eight different ways of knowing (learning styles): visual/spatial; verbal/linguistic; musical; logical-mathematical; body-kinesthetic; intrapersonal (e.g., insight, metacognition); interpersonal (e.g., social skills); and naturalistic intelligences. This theory implies that learning should focus on the particular intelligences of each person, and that different intelligences represent not only different content domains, but also learning modalities. Gardner (2001).
Situated Learning Theory

Jean Lave developed the situated learning theory. Lave’s Situated Learning Theory proposes that learning is a function of the activity, context, and culture in which it occurs; in other words, a function of how the learning activity is situated. This theory combines two concepts: (1) learning takes place in context and (2) learning occurs in collaboration with others. It emphasizes that “learning is not something that just happens, or is just inside the head, but instead is shaped by the context, culture, and tools in the learning situation” (Hansman, 2001:45).

Applying Learning Theories

To effectively apply learning to choral teaching practices, the choral teacher needs to understand the learning theories as principles that have been. However, the events in classrooms are influenced by many different variables and no single theory can take care of all the variables. The teacher has a complicated job; he has to consider the various sources of knowledge and theory that exist, take into account the very specific classroom situation and students he is facing and determine when and how theories can inform his practice. Teachers in the classroom experience what Lorti (1975:17) called the “multidimensionality and simultaneity of teaching”. For these reasons there is not a one-to-one correspondence between theory and practice. Integrating theory into practice involves a process of developing a deep understanding of how people learn, what influences motivation, what influences development, what counts in the social context, et cetera. For choral teachers therefore, learning theories provide some guidance in making decisions about teaching strategies.

Research Methodology

The study was limited to the observation of the application of learning theories to choral teaching and learning in the school. The researcher paid several visits to the School to observe the Young Voices’ rehearsals to see for herself how choral was being taught and learned by the choral teacher and the students, respectively.

The instruments for data collection were direct observation of the choral teaching and learning procedures, interview of the choral instructor, some of the choir members (students) and the study of some relevant documents (including personal information of members, repertoires, attendance register, the schools end of year brochure).

Findings and Analysis

The most recent attendance register showed that the choir has a strength of 43 choristers. The classification of these choristers with regards to their age, sex and the voice parts they sing have been summarized as tabulated in Table 1 below.
Table 1: Age, Sex and Voice Parts of the Young Voices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (Years)</th>
<th>Soprano</th>
<th>Alto</th>
<th>Tenor</th>
<th>Bass</th>
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<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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</table>

Selection Procedure for the Choir

The teacher reported that a notice was given for those who are interested in singing or joining the choir to indicate their interest. When they gathered, the teacher subjected them to an auditioning exercise from which the ones with good voices were selected. There were those interested in singing but whose voices were not in tune. Those persons were gently advised to leave as their voices were not good enough.

From the selection mode adopted, it can be inferred that the cognitive learning theories took precedence over the behavioural learning theories. In Merriam (2007) assertion, cognitive approach assumes that prior knowledge plays an important role in learning unlike behavioural approach which reduces complex human behaviour to simple cause and effect. Hence, if the teacher had wanted to use behaviourism which has an underlying assumption that environments shapes behaviour absolutely, then she could have chosen all that indicated interest in enrolling without considering their ability because they will be subjected to the same environment.

Furthermore, the teacher reported that boys whose voices have not changed may be grouped among soprano and alto singers. Girls were usually the soprano and alto singers. For the boys, the voice placement may change over time. This is because as time goes on, the voices of the little boys will most likely start to break, then they will be moved to either tenor or bass. The adolescent boys in senior secondary and those whose voices have broken even by twelve years in junior classes were grouped among the tenor and bass singers. This observation of developmental stages of boys with regards to their voice placement was in line with the Swiss biologist/psychologist- Jean Piaget’s theory. This theory as it impacts learning submits that educators must plan a developmentally appropriate curriculum that enhances their students’ physiological and conceptual growth.
Goals Setting/Objectives

A goal as defined by Radocy and Boyle (1979:287) “is something toward which an organism directs its behaviour... All ‘purposeful’ behaviour is directed toward a goal, which is not necessarily obvious, spiritually uplifting, or ‘important’.” A goal can be short-term or long-term. The short-term goal for the choir was to master two songs repertoire before the end of the term, while the long-term goal is to become the best young voices/choir in secondary schools of Anambra State urban.

Before any goal could be achieved, there is need to have a well set instructional objectives. The conductor usually had instructional objectives for each rehearsal which she sometimes read out to the students before commencement of rehearsals. She also documented them in her choir notebook. The instructional objectives read something like:

At the end of this section the students are expected to do the following:

1. Identify and count the number of bars the music section contains
2. Mention the number of musical phrases the section contains
3. Sing through a particular section of a song
4. Sing the solfa notation of the section from memory.

Rehearsals

Rehearsals for the young voices held once a week on fridays during the period of the school’s friday programme which lasts for one hour twenty minutes (1 hr:20 mins.) on the average. Rehearsals were also extended to two or three times a week when there was a programme in view in which the choir was expected to perform. Students in the school’s choral group were exempted from work as rehearsals simultaneously hold each time there was manual labour and compound cleaning in addition to time for friday programme. Several rehearsals were observed by the researcher and the observations made as follows.

Vocalize (an exercise for the study of singing to vowels) Greenish (1953) was one of the method employed by the choral teacher in training the singers. Before each rehearsal began, some vocalize were used to get the students’ voices ready for singing. Little body exercises were also done in order to warm up the whole body in readiness for the day’s rehearsal. The rehearsals started with prayers either by the teacher or a student. Students were given files each which contain the songs for learning. Before each day’s rehearsal proper, the choristers refresh their memory of the songs they have learnt before. This is in line with Vella’s and Jone’s extensive teaching strategies which has recalling previous learning as necessity for long time retention.

The choral conductor/teacher commended the students’ efforts and progress in mastering the song. The teacher’s commendation thus motivated the students to form the habit of being positive and enthusiastic about rehearsals and having the disposition of eagerness to learn each time. For Clark Hull, motivation is the basis for reinforcement, which in turn serves as both a drive and a reward. Performers may be motivated to perform well at some future date and be driven toward that goal (Radocy and Boyle 1979:296).
On the other hand, the choir was observed to be preparing towards performing on invitation outside the school. The outing as reported by the teacher/choral conductor was successful and that the choir performed excellently. A positive reinforcement thereby came from the Principal of the school through entertainment for the choir and a gift of 80 leaves exercise book and a pen for every student in the choir who participated in the performance. The choir was constantly being reminded by the teacher that much is required of them as they serve as one of the mirrors through which outsiders evaluate academic excellence of the school. Therefore, the students armed with this consciousness took their song learning and choir attendance seriously.

Use of Multimedia

It was found that multimedia like playing of cassettes, Audio CDs, Videos CDs or any other simulation software were not used to enhance the choral lessons of the students in their song learning. The lack of these multimedia instruments will reduce the learning and retention of what was learnt by the choristers. This was in line with Gardner’s multiple intelligency learning theory. Howard Gardner asserted that each individual possesses varying learning styles (multiple intelligence) as discussed earlier. In other words, when multimedia is integrated into learning process it will take care of individual learning styles. Hence, it is recommended that multimedia should be used.

Repertory

In music learning, both stimulation-induced maturation (age maturation) and musical maturation are important. This is evident in the type of songs in the choir’s repertory because the students are in their formal operational stage. Their cognitive intellect at this age has developed to accommodate not just non-notated songs but also notated songs in solfa notation. The choir being studied here is an adolescents’ choir and it was not devoid of some problems associated with maturation. This evidently may have necessitated and influenced the choice of their song repertoire. Keyboard instrument was used to accompany the songs some of the times. Accompaniment for the African songs/chorus were indigenous musical instruments like ekwe, udu, ogene, ichaka, alo, okpokolo, igba and oyo.

The scores being used were mainly in solfa notation. Therefore the issue of sight singing in staff notation does not arise. The students’ maturational ability has limited them from handling some songs which their voice ranges could not accommodate. Some of the students who have not had previous stimulating musical experience did not learn song as fast as those who have had and those who are musically endowed.

Conclusion

Teaching choral singing is a serious business and for learning to take place, the teacher and the taught have their parts to play. The study has investigated the choral teaching methods employed by the choral conductor of the Young Voices in teaching the choir. It was found that
different variables and consequently various theories were employed in the teaching of voice in the school. It went further to analyse the extent the voice teacher applied the learning theories to her teaching methods.

References