

AMERICAN MUSIC TEACHER PREPARATION THROUGH THE LENS OF A RUSSIAN AND A KOREAN PRESERVICE TEACHER

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For the past seven years, colleges and universities in the United States have hosted more than half a million foreign students. Although research has been conducted on the various academic and emotional challenges facing international students, there is a paucity of research regarding the unique issues involved in preparing foreign students to become American music educators. Thus, the purpose of this study was to gain insight into the educational experience of international students and examine what aspects of the university music teacher training program were most challenging.

Data for this qualitative study were collected via informal class observations, as well as individual interviews with a Russian and a Korean preservice teacher at The University of Texas at Arlington. Interview questions included the following categories: academic issues, English language proficiency, sociocultural factors, instructional suggestions, and unique contributions.

Results indicate that the students' elementary and secondary educational experience was highly dissimilar from that in the United States. The Russian student reported that music education was an integral part the school curriculum in her country, whereas the Korean student reported that academics were the primary focus in her country. English language proficiency in terms of listening, writing, and speaking, was identified as one of the greatest challenges faced by the students. The Korean student expressed great difficulty adapting to the American culture and felt ostracized by the other students, whereas the Russian student felt comfortable with the American culture and identified the professors and students as an "important part of her life." The Russian student suggested that the goals of the assignments be clear, the explanations thorough, and the necessary resources provided. The Korean student needed greater reassurance that it was acceptable to ask the professor for help outside of class. The Russian student felt that her unique contribution was her wealth of experience with various cultures and music educational experiences. The Korean student felt that her strong sense of morality and character was something that was sorely needed in American society and something she was uniquely equipped to share.

Recommendations to improve students' listening ability include professors speaking slowly and clearly, writing key terms and homework assignments on the board or providing a handout, and providing copies of notes or an outline of lecture material. To improve oral production and communication skills, the use of a diagnostic tool and mechanical exercises was suggested, along with assignment to an English speaking partner. In an effort to encourage international students to participate in class discussions, it was suggested that they be provided possible discussion questions in advance, create an atmosphere that is conducive to questions, and provide students time to reflect before

responding to questions. Professors were encouraged to limit the use of slang, idioms, and proverbs, and, if used, follow with an explanation. Recommendations to assist the students academically included thorough explanation of the course and expectations, discussion of common American educational practices, and encouragement of students to approach professor for assistance with assignments.

Slide 2 - For the past seven years, colleges and universities in the United States have hosted more than half a million foreign students. According to *Open Doors 2006*, 564,766 international students were enrolled in higher education in the United States in 2005/06, with a 5% increase in the Fine and Applied Arts field.

Slide 3 - The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the educational experience of international students, to examine what aspects of the university music teacher training program were most challenging and to provide educators with tools to be better able to identify and address the needs of international pre-service teachers.

Slide 4 - Data for this qualitative study were collected via informal class observations, as well as individual interviews with two international students at The University of Texas at Arlington. The participants were seeking Texas teacher certification in all-level music, with an emphasis in choral music education. Both students were female, married, and had children. The participants represented different countries; Namhee from Korea and Francheska from Russia. Students were interviewed in my office during the spring 2007 at The University of Texas at Arlington. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes and students were asked the same questions. The interviews were transcribed and an analysis of the content was conducted.

Slide 5 – Academic Issues - Describe your music education experience in your native country.

Slide 6 & 7 - Francheska attended school in Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. She explained that it was very competitive to be accepted into a public music school in Russia. At the age of six, she had to take an entrance exam with included some music theory elements, ear training, and piano performance. She did well on the exam because she had begun private piano lessons a year prior to the exam. She began public music school at seven years of age. Francheska's music classroom had a huge poster of the Circle of Fifths hanging above the piano. She said the poster "was a music Bible for us children." Additional theory posters were on the walls, as well as portraits of composers who wrote music for children.

Slide 8 & 9 - Namhee attended school in Seoul, South Korea and began public school at the age of seven. She remained in the same classroom all day and did not have a special room designated for music. Namhee remembers the president's picture on the classroom wall, along with pictures of national heroes, but there were no musical pictures or posters. The classroom teacher was responsible for teaching music. Students learned to read solfege, but the teacher moved very quickly, and as a result very few students participated because they were unable to process the solfege quickly. They did not use hand signs and

did not have a rhythmic counting system. The teacher taught songs by rote and accompanied the class on a pump organ or piano. Although the Korean elementary schools were coeducational, in middle school and high school students attended same-gender schools. Namhee did not receive any musical training in middle school, but in high school, she had a music class once a week in which they just sang. She recalled that her friend had a violin and she had never seen one before and had no idea what it was. Namhee stated, "I was embarrassed because I was in high school and had never seen a real violin." She added that she had no time to watch television because she studied at school all day and at home all night, so she had no exposure to stringed instruments. Her high school also had a choir, but it was an audition group. Namhee said that only the very best singers were in the choir and they practiced daily. The choir did not have concerts because there was no auditorium, but they did perform at special ceremonies. The band at Nahmee's high school led in military marches in which all of the students were required to participate. All of the students were required to wear uniforms and were trained to be soldier nurses. (Nahmee attended school in post-war Korea).

Slide 10 – Academic Issues - How do music programs in Texas schools compare to those in your country?

Slide 11 - Francheska stated that music programs in Texas public schools promote a great feeling of pride. In addition, she said, "I classify the choral art as a very professional and high level of art in the Texas public schools."

Slide 12 - Nahmee explained that in Texas they address all different learning styles so that all children can learn and enjoy music. She stated that in Texas schools, they have the philosophy that all children have musical aptitude and they simply seek to find what their area of strength is and focus on that. She went on to say that in Texas all students have the opportunity to learn about music. She said, "And when I came here [Texas] I was so glad because my daughter was in violin in school and she can compete and have motivation. If I had been born here I would be something by now because I have so much patience and desire for piano."

Slide 13 – Academic Issues – What were the roles of music and music education in your country?

Slide 14 - Francheska stated that she thought that music education became a required part of the public school curriculum in the mid-1930s and the public music school system began around 1950. She explained that music education was a required part of the educational process in her family and they considered music classes equally important as physics, algebra, and languages. She went on to say, "People love singing in Russia. They sing at home, in the parks and at work. Song is an important part of life for Russian people, as well as instrumental music."

Slide 15 & 16 - In Korea, however, Namhee explained that little time was devoted to music and art because the emphasis was on academics. She stated, "The emphasis was to study and pass the test and do well on the test." She said that Koreans were very

education-oriented, particularly in the unstable post-war society. Namhee said that people did not have the money to provide their students with private musical training. She remembered begging her mother to take piano lessons, and her mother's response was, "Unless you are gifted, we cannot afford it." Namhee recalled, "I didn't think I was gifted but I really loved it. When I listen to music I just cry. I would pass by someone's house and someone play the piano and then I just stood there against the wall and listened and then cry. I loved it that much but I never thought I was gifted." Namhee went on to say that as people became more economically prosperous, they began to enroll their students in piano lessons. She explained that there were numerous music institutes and students would walk to the institute after school for lessons.

Slide 17 – Academic Issues - What are some of the greatest academic challenges you face as an American university student?

Slide 18 - Francheska indicated that her greatest challenge has been the large number of opportunities and choices. She stated, "Student's life is busy and interesting in any country. I generally like educational process. I like to be a student at UTA." Nahmee said she did not feel challenged academically, except regard to language.

Slide 19 - English Language Proficiency - How difficult has it been for you to overcome the language barrier in terms of verbal and written communication?

Slides 20 & 21 - Francheska replied: "I take a role of a listener in the conversation, this is my nature. I enjoy listening to native English speakers. This is very melodic and rich language. Europeans say that French is a language of love. English is a language of music to me." She went on to say that her confidence with her verbal communication skills depends on the vocabulary and personality of the person with whom she is communicating and the number of times she has met with the person. She explained that she usually checks the grammar at least three times before sending a written communiqué.

Slide 22 & 23 - Nahmee feels that verbal communication is critical to her success as a teacher. She stated, "If I can communicate well, I can teach well... Even though I have an accent or I can't speak eloquently I can still communicate with children." She said that feels confident teaching students through 6th grade, if they are respectful. She explained, "If they start to argue then I don't know how to discipline with eloquent speech." Her primary concern is communicating with older adolescents and adults, specifically teachers and principals. In terms of written communication, she usually has an English tutor. She explained, "I am always nervous. I will write, throw it away, and write it another way."

Slide 24 - Sociocultural Factors - What are some of the differences between your culture/society and American culture/society?

Slide 25 - Francheska responded as follows: "American people have a great ability of patience toward different cultures and each other. They are open and very sensitive. They

are not prejudiced, respect moral principles, and values of others. The number of choices and opportunities for self-expression amazes me in this country.”

Slide 26 & 27 - Namhee said that in Korea the teacher had complete authority and had more power than the parents. A typical teacher would have 60 children in a class with no assistant, but she did not have any discipline problems because the parents supported the teacher. She explained that the worst thing a student could do was to get a bad grade, because that indicated that they were not studying and did not have respect. The teacher did not have to repeat instructions, and the students always had all of their materials and were prepared for class. Students who broke the rules were either hit on the hand with a ruler or were spanked with a stick. The worst act of rebellion Nahmee recalled was when girls in high school cut their bangs, which was forbidden, in that all girls were required to wear braids and to keep their hair out of their face so it would not interfere with their studying. Out of the thousands of students in her high school, Nahmee could only remember three or four students getting in trouble. In terms of values, Nahmee stated that oftentimes American parents do not set the appropriate moral example and thus their children do not respect or obey them. She said that the lack of respect makes it more difficult to manage discipline in the American classroom. She went on to say the emphasis in American education is on gaining knowledge, whereas in Korea teaching morality and building character are important elements of the educational process. Additionally, Nahmee said that Americans were not trustworthy. She explained that she did not feel that she could trust anybody because they might say, “I love you. You are my best friend” and then the next day they turn their back on her. She feels that such declarations are meaningless to Americans.

Slide 28 – Sociocultural Factors - What is the status of a music teacher in your native country?

Slide 29 - In Russia, Francheska stated that it was a great honor to be a music teacher. She said it was a respected position that included a lot of responsibility and hard work. Likewise, Namhee said that music teachers, like all teachers in Korea, were treated with great respect.

Slide 30 – Sociocultural Factors - On a social level, how well do you relate to your fellow music education students? Do you feel accepted or isolated by your fellow students?

Slide 31 - Francheska’s responded as follows: “I am always glad to come to the class and meet my fellows, as well as my professors. I think about them as a part of my life and we have common goal to be the music educators.” She stated that she never felt isolated or like an outcast at UTA and that she had many friends in the music department.

Slide 32 - Nahmee stated that she had a very difficult time relating to her fellow music education students. She said, “They are going to be an educator and they don’t have respect. They do no really include. They are not acceptive. They clique with their own friends and any outsider they treat as an outsider.” She felt that each time she tried to get close to someone, another student would try to block that relationship. She said, “You are

going to teach my grandchildren and my grandchildren look like me and you have a prejudice against a culture and you are prejudiced about my speech.” She did mention that towards the end of the semester the other students became nicer and talked with her more.

Slide 33 – Instructional Suggestions - Do you have any suggestions regarding how music education professors can communicate course content more effectively?

Slide 34 & 35 - Francheska stated that she needs a goal, a clear plan, and the appropriate resources to attain that goal. Namhee suggested that professors reassure students that they are welcome to come and ask questions about assignments. She said, “I always hesitate to come and ask. I feel bad to ask outside of the classroom and that is why I spend so much more time trying to figure out simple things.” She explained that the reason she hesitates is that she fears that, as a college student, the professor expects her to already know certain information, plus it is a matter of her self-dignity. Namhee also stated that she did not feel that it was fair to the other students for her to get extra time and attention from the professor. Another challenge Namhee mentioned was language. She said that sometimes professors speak so fast that she has difficulty processing the meaning of the words and therefore misses the content of the lecture.

Slide 36 – Francheska and Namhee come from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds and as a result must overcome a number of challenges as they make the transition to becoming a teacher in American classrooms.

Slide 37 - Both students had a music educational background that is dissimilar to that in American public schools. In addition, both students were raised in a society in which teachers were highly respected and honored. Therefore, preparing to become a music educator in the US requires that they become familiar with an educational system that is quite foreign to their experience.

Slide 38 - Both Francheska and Namhee expressed concern regarding written communication. They explained that they would review their writing several times before completing a communiqué or assignment. When the students were asked to participate in the interview, they each requested that I give them the interview questions in advance. They both indicated that they would feel more comfortable if they had some time to read over the questions and process the material in advance. Francheska wrote her responses in Russian and then translated them to English for the interview. Having taught both Francheska and Namhee in four music education courses, the researcher had the opportunity to observe their writing skills. The work they turned in had a few grammatical errors. However, they frequently would have to redo assignments because they did not understand the written instructions. The other music education professor reported that they had the same difficulty in her classes.

Slide 39 - In terms of oral proficiency, both participants expressed concern with their ability to communicate orally. In a classroom setting, both students tended to be quiet and joined in discussions only when asked to do so. However, whenever a musical question

was asked, they would be quick to respond, and did so with confidence. When teaching a class of their peers, both participants visibly struggled in that students would have difficulty understanding the information they were trying to convey and they would have to repeat their instructions frequently. Their pacing was much too quick and they limited their interaction with the other students in terms of checking for understanding. They seemed to want to complete the lesson as quickly as possible with a minimum of interaction with the class. An additional impediment to their teaching was their inability to model English diction for their students, which is critical a critical aspect of music training, particularly in elementary and choral music classes.

Slide 40 – Nahmee and Francheska had divergent views regarding American culture. Francheska described Americans as being “open” and “sensitive” to different cultures, and respectful of the moral principles and values of others. On the other hand, Namhee felt that Americans did not have moral values or character and as a result the children were undisciplined and disrespectful. She also described Americans as “untrustworthy” and “prejudiced.” The two participants also had different experiences in terms of their relationships with their fellow music education students. Francheska described the other students as being a part of her life and indicated that she had many friends in the music department and, as a result, never felt like an outcast. On the other hand, Namhee felt that there was a sort of conspiracy among the music education students to isolate her and to keep her from becoming a part of the group.

Slide 41 – Both participants expressed concern about written communication. They requested copies of the interview questions in advance, and Francheska wrote her responses in Russian, then translated them to English and used her notes. Both students had frequently had to redo assignments in their music education classes because they did not understand instructions and were more successful when provided with a model.

Slide 42 – Recommendations - **Oral Production & Communication Skills**

Conducting a diagnostic upon the particular areas of English that are the most challenging for an international student to pronounce and subsequently employing certain mechanical exercises may assist in reducing accent. Dauer (1993) and “Pronunciation Power” (1996) can assist in identifying problem areas and provide practice exercises. In order for international students to successfully change their native speech patterns, however, they must learn to self-monitor and self-correct. The use of audio-and video-taping can be useful tools for feedback. Having English-speaking partners to communicate with in order will aid in developing true conversational fluency.

Slide 43 – Recommendations – **Vocabulary** - Use of idioms or slang may cause international students to misinterpret the meaning of a word or a phrase, so it is important for university faculty to choose their words carefully when communicating with foreign students. For example, the literal meaning of the phrase *get out of here* is “leave”; figuratively it means “you are joking.” If a professor uses slang, idioms, proverbs, or a long series of nouns or adjectives, it would be helpful to have the idea repeated in terms the student can understand. Also, the use of words such as *can* and *can't* sound highly similar, but can completely change the meaning of a sentence. Therefore, perhaps it

would be helpful if foreign students familiarize themselves with the informal language used in the US. Dave's ESL Café [<http://www.eslcafe.com/>] is a resource for international students to learn American idioms and slang and for university faculty to familiarize themselves with ESL (English as a Second Language) issues.

Slide 44 - At the beginning of the semester, if the instructor will take the time to meet with the international students after class to discuss class rules, expectations, and teaching methodologies, as well as provide the students an opportunity to ask questions and express concerns, that will open dialogue early on and will allow students to feel more comfortable about approaching their instructor. Many international students will go to a professor's office as a last resort because they are unsure of the welcome they will receive and are fearful that questioning a professor could be construed as an insult to the professor's ability to explain the subject matter. This will help remove the negative stigma associated with approaching the professor outside of class.

Slide 45 – We do not fully realize the intense emotional struggle that our international students face as they attempt to adjust to life in a foreign country. As university professors, we can assist our international students in their transition to American culture and education by being sensitive to their unique academic and sociocultural issues. This email from Francheska deeply touched me and underscored the importance of this research study.