

Developing Bakhshi Performance Skills in Students of Folklore and Ethnography An Experimental Analysis

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Abstract

This article investigates the development of Bakhshi and epic performance skills among undergraduate students majoring in Folklore and Ethnography at higher education institutions, employing a quasi-experimental research design. The study analyzes the negative pedagogical consequences of over-reliance on traditional academic notation systems and proposes an integrative didactic model designed to enhance auditory memory, gradually facilitate the memorization of epic texts and melodies, and cultivate throat-breathing and spontaneous improvisation skills through intensive practical exercises. The results of an experimental trial involving 100 students from the Faculty of Folk Art (70 in the experimental group and 30 in the control group) demonstrate high efficacy and statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) of the proposed methodology in improving both musical memory and performance mastery.

Keywords: bakhshi art, dastan performance, folklore and ethnography, musical memory, auditory learning, throat-breathing technique, improvisation, dombra accompaniment, quasi-experiment, didactic model.

1. Introduction

The protection of intangible cultural heritage objects, their transmission to future generations, and their effective integration into the educational system constitute one of the pressing priorities of contemporary global music pedagogy. In particular, the art of Bakhshi and epic storytelling, which holds a special place in the oral folklore of Central Asian nations specifically Karakalpak folk traditions is distinguished by its centuries-old performance traditions, rich musical-poetic language, and distinctive improvisational characteristics.

The inscription of Bakhshi art on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity underscores the necessity not only of preserving this traditional art form but also of systematically teaching it at the higher education level.

However, in modern higher music and arts education practice, certain methodological gaps are observable in the training of students majoring in Folklore and Ethnography. For many years, the treasury of oral folk art within the academic educational system was primarily studied on the basis of transcribed musical notation and principles of classical music theory. While this approach played an important role in strengthening musical literacy and theoretical knowledge, a predominant reliance on academic frameworks created certain limitations in fully conveying the unique practical characteristics inherent to Bakhshi art. Consequently, the need to integrate the authentic, living methods of traditional performance into the educational process has progressively increased.

Today, developing practical skills such as auditory memorization, spontaneous improvisation, and specialized throat-breathing techniques in harmony with traditional methods among students pursuing Folklore and Ethnography has assumed particular significance. It is well known that over the centuries, the art of Bakhshi has been transmitted from generation to generation through the master-apprentice tradition, as well as through auditory perception and memory. However, when insufficient emphasis is placed on these traditional methods in the modern instructional process, certain complexities arise in fully developing students' oral musical memory and expressive artistic sense. In particular, cultivating core

skills essential to epic performance such as live improvisation, authentic throat and breathing techniques, and rhythmic flexibility accompanied by the dombra requires a specialized practical approach. Without mastering these elements, performed epics risk losing their natural appeal and authentic traditional spirit.

Therefore, the systematic and step-by-step development of these specific practical skills among future folklorists and performers must become a central objective of the instructional methodology. Students of Folklore and Ethnography must be trained not only as specialists who promote this art form, but also as educators and performers capable of accurately transmitting it to the younger generation. Consequently, developing a specialized, staged didactic model and methodology aimed at enhancing Bakhshi performance skills and empirically testing its effectiveness represents a highly relevant pedagogical task.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a quasi-experimental research design was employed to empirically evaluate and scientifically substantiate the practical effectiveness of a specialized didactic methodology aimed at developing Bakhshi performance skills among future folklore and ethnography specialists.

The choice of a quasi-experimental design in modern music-pedagogical research allows for the collection of objective and reliable empirical data within the existing academic group environment without disrupting the natural organization of the educational process. The research procedure comprised three main stages: the preparatory and diagnostic stage, the implementation stage, and the final analysis and generalization stage. To establish the empirical base of the study, N = 100 undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Folk Art were involved in the experimental work.

To ensure the objectivity, validity, and scientific reliability of the experimental outcomes, participants were divided into two independent groups: the Experimental Group and the Control Group. When forming the groups, baseline levels of musical training, age, academic achievement indicators, and specific study tracks were taken into account. Prior to the onset of the experimental phase, it was verified that the general indicators for musical and performance readiness across both groups were substantially equivalent, exhibiting no statistically significant differences. The Experimental Group consisted of 70 students from the Department of Folklore and Ethnography. Unlike conventional instructional formats, the educational process in the Experimental Group was structured according to an integrative didactic model based on regular intensive exercises and mechanisms for memorizing and retaining epics. Rather than relying strictly on sheet music and pre-written texts, this model focused on the step-by-step memorization of epic melodies and terms through auditory perception, the enhancement of musical memory via interactive repetition and practical drill, and the cultivation of free performance skills accompanied by the dombra.

The Control Group comprised 30 students from the Bakhshi and Epic Performance as well as Traditional Performance degree programs. Instructional sessions for this group were conducted in accordance with current state educational standards and traditional academic methodology relying primarily on transcribed musical notation following the standard syllabus and conventional practice regimens. In enhancing the performance skills of the 70 students in the Experimental Group, primary emphasis was placed on regular practical drills and oral memorization mechanisms for epic texts and melodies.

Because the traditional art of Bakhshi is inherently rooted in oral transmission, strict adherence to sheet music and written texts during the instructional process was observed to constrain students' capacity for spontaneous performance and retention. Consequently, the newly developed methodology was implemented through three logical and sequential practical stages.

First stage: Auditory memorization and ear training. In this stage, epic melodies and terms were transmitted to students not through musical notation, but rather through direct listening to master performances and repeated listening to audio recordings. Students performed intensive exercises aimed at perceiving and retaining the rhythmic structure first, followed by the melodic contour. These drills activated the students' musical memory and cultivated the ability to rapidly and accurately retain melodies.

Second stage: Phased memorization of epic texts and melodies. Due to the substantial volume and poetic complexity of epics, a specialized memorization technique is required. Within this methodology, epic texts were segmented into small semantic and musical units for memorization. Students reinforced these units daily through multiple repetitions with dombra accompaniment. Through repetitive practical drills, an intrinsic connection between the text and the melody was established, enabling students to sequentially and seamlessly recall the narrative progression of the epic.

Third stage: Intensive practical drills, live performance, and improvisation. In this stage, the memorized epic segments and melodies were consolidated through regular practice and free performance exercises. Students practiced not only reciting the memorized text but also employing flexible verbal and melodic elements appropriate to the contextual situation during performance. Furthermore, daily practical sessions were instituted to develop sustainable vocal and breathing techniques that prevent strain on the throat apparatus during prolonged performance, as well as to enhance rhythmic flexibility in

dombra accompaniment.

The indicators obtained at the conclusion of the pedagogical experiment conducted in the Faculty of Folk Art at higher education institutions demonstrated the high efficacy of the proposed didactic methodology. Assessment results from the pre-test and post-test stages confirmed substantial and statistically significant differences between the Experimental Group (70 students from the Department of Folklore and Ethnography) and the Control Group (30 students from the Bakhshi and Traditional Performance tracks).

In the initial stage of the study, musical and textual memory indicators were found to be relatively low among students in both groups. The majority of students demonstrated reliance on musical notation and written sources rather than oral recall of epic texts and melodies. However, following the implementation of intensive practical drills and the auditory memorization system, the situation underwent a fundamental shift. In the Experimental Group, the capacity of the 70 students to retain epics in memory and reconstruct them sequentially and accurately increased by an average of 42–45%. In contrast, the Control Group, which continued learning through traditional instructional methods, exhibited a limited growth of only 10–12%. Furthermore, regular and systematic practical training significantly improved the vocal-respiratory technique of the Experimental Group students. As a result, their vocal apparatus successfully adapted to the raspy timbre and pharyngeal resonators characteristic of Bakhshi art.

The students developed the skills required for prolonged epic recitation without vocal strain, along with proper breath distribution. Under this criterion, a positive dynamic of 38% was recorded in the Experimental Group, whereas no significant changes were observed in the Control Group due to the absence of targeted practical training.

Additionally, the Experimental Group demonstrated superior results in singing with rhythmic flexibility and harmony under dombra accompaniment, as well as in live improvisation during performance. Practical methods aimed at enhancing oral memory enabled students to transcend fixed written templates and utilize verbal and melodic resources freely during performance. All statistical analyses (t-test metrics and a statistical significance level of $p < 0.05$) indicated that these positive shifts in the Experimental Group were not random. These findings demonstrate that the new methodology centered on epic recall, memorization, and intensive practical training has fully proven its high efficacy in practice.

3. CONCLUSION

The pedagogical experiment conducted and the empirical data collected warrant the following major scientific and practical conclusions:

First, in developing Bakhshi performance skills among future folklore and ethnography specialists, relying on oral traditions namely auditory acquisition and intensive practical training alongside traditional academic notation yields high didactic efficacy.

Second, mechanisms for the phased memorization and mental retention of epic texts and melodies not only activate students' musical memory but also dramatically enhance their mastery of live improvisation, throat-breathing techniques, and uninhibited performance accompanied by the dombra.

Third, this methodology, tested with positive outcomes among 70 students from the Department of Folklore and Ethnography, serves as a reliable framework for refining existing curricula for teaching epic storytelling and Bakhshi art in higher music education institutions.

4. Practical Recommendations

Incorporate dedicated practical course hours focused on oral memorization, auditory perception, and intensive musical memory training into the study plans for Folklore and Ethnography and Music Education majors at higher education institutions.

Prevent students' rigid reliance on musical notation during lessons and promote the widespread application of live performance methods grounded in oral acquisition and the master-apprentice tradition.

Establish a comprehensive audio-video repository encompassing authentic Bakhshi performances specifically epics and variants rendered by prominent unlettered master bakhshis and integrate it into students' independent auditory memorization routines.

Develop and implement modern instructional guides in higher education focused on phased epic memorization, techniques for preserving vocal-respiratory health without throat strain, and uninhibited improvisation under dombra accompaniment.

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