Music Education Students' Evaluation of the Balance between Theory and Practice in Specialised Courses

Pham Thu Huong, Nguyen Thi Le Huyen

Faculty of Music Education, National University of Art Education, Hanoi, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Specialised courses in music teacher education need to combine theoretical knowledge with practical skills, yet little is known about how students in Vietnam experience the balance between the two. This descriptive study examines how Music Education students at the National University of Art Education, Hanoi, evaluate the distribution of theory and practice hours in their specialised courses. A questionnaire developed by the researcher asked students to rate the balance in each course, the amount of practice time, the effect of the current balance on their learning and confidence, the conditions for practice and the balance they would prefer. Data were analysed with descriptive statistics, and open-ended responses were coded into themes. Students saw the largest imbalance in courses where theory should lead directly to teaching skills, such as Harmony and Music Teaching Methods, while they rated purely theoretical and purely practical courses as mostly balanced. They rated class size, individual feedback and access to practice rooms as moderate or low, and students who were not piano or keyboard majors felt less ready to apply harmony in accompaniment. The study offers evidence that can guide changes to the design of specialised courses in music teacher education programmes.

Keywords: music teacher education, curriculum, theory and practice, specialised courses, student perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Music teacher education combines two kinds of learning. Students take theoretical subjects such as music theory, harmony, music history and teaching methods, and they build practical skills in voice, instruments, sight-singing and ear training, conducting, accompaniment and micro-teaching. Since the total number of hours in a programme is limited, each programme has to decide how to divide time between theory and practice. The way students and graduates value different parts of the curriculum is an important source of evidence for these decisions. In a survey of 601 practising music educators, Groulx (2016) found that student teaching, ensembles, applied lessons, conducting, early field experiences, aural theory and music theory were valued most, and that education courses and educational psychology were valued least. Music theory and aural theory were among the most valued components, next to practical ones. This suggests that the value of a course may depend less on whether it is theoretical than on how clearly it connects to professional work.

Concerns about the time available for building musical and teaching skills appear in several countries. Jurkić Sviben et al. (2021) surveyed 320 final-year student teachers in Croatia and Serbia and found that most did not feel trained enough to teach the music curriculum in primary schools. The authors suggested that this may reflect too few music hours both in the students' own schooling and in teacher education programmes, and they called for these programmes to be revised. Esteve-Faubel et al. (2009) examined whether the time set in a music study guide under the European Credit Transfer System suited primary education students specialising in music, in particular those with little prior musical knowledge. They found that students' previous academic knowledge influenced how they estimated the time and effort their studies required. Difficulties in gaining certain competences appeared only among students who entered university with no musical experience.

In Vietnam, there is little systematic evidence on which specialised courses Music Education students see as too theoretical or short of practice time, or on the reasons behind their views. Programmes need this evidence if they are to adjust the balance between theory and practice where it matters most.

This study aims to describe how Music Education students at the National University of Art Education (NUAE) evaluate the balance between theory and practice hours in their specialised courses. It identifies the courses in which students see the largest imbalance, examines how students think the current balance affects their learning and their confidence to teach, and describes the conditions in which practice takes place. It also compares students' evaluations by year of study and main study, and compares the current balance with the balance students would prefer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How Students and Teachers Value Theory and Practice

Research on music teacher education often asks students or graduates which parts of their training were most useful. Groulx (2016) found that practising music educators valued student teaching, ensembles, applied lessons, conducting, early field experiences, aural theory and music theory most, and education courses and educational psychology least. About 83% of the respondents had taught outside their area of specialisation at some point in their careers. The author therefore recommended that programmes provide at least basic preparation for more than one career path. This finding suggests that graduates judge their training in part by how well it prepared them for the range of work they later faced.

Studies of student perceptions point in a similar direction. Wang and Wang (2024) surveyed 359 undergraduate music majors at five institutions in western China about how well their curriculum prepared them for employment in terms of professional knowledge, professional skills and soft skills. Perceptions differed by school, intended professional direction, educational background and gender, and the study found that higher music education offered too few chances to work with communities and industry. Lim et al. (2024) described a new Bachelor of Education in Instrumental and Vocal Teaching in Singapore, which was designed because conservatoire graduates were often poorly prepared for careers in studio teaching. A thematic analysis of focus groups with the first two cohorts identified three themes, namely contextualisation, criticality and conversations. Together, these studies suggest that students and graduates value training that is closely tied to the work they expect to do.

Time Allocation, Workload and Prior Experience

The question of balance is also a question of time. Jurkić Sviben et al. (2021) suggested that student teachers' weak sense of preparation in music may reflect too few music hours in their schooling and in their teacher education programmes. Esteve-Faubel et al. (2009) found that difficulties in gaining certain competences appeared only among students who entered university without musical experience, and they recommended reinforcement or foundation courses for these students. This suggests that the same allocation of time may suit some students but not others.

Workload adds another layer. In a systematic review of 29 studies, Jääskeläinen et al. (2023) examined how music students in higher education experience their workload. They made recommendations in three areas, namely strengthening students' ability to cope with their workload, giving teachers tools to help students manage it, and building learner-centred environments in higher music education. They also noted the need for more high-quality research on workload specific to music. Rosset et al. (2022) followed 205 first-year students at a German music university and found that performance majors practised more each day than music education majors. The back and shoulders were the areas most often affected by pain, and in a longitudinal subsample of 62 students, mental health declined between the first and second semester. This study did not examine curriculum design, but its findings indicate that students' health and workload should be taken into account whenever more practice hours are proposed.

Integrating Theory and Practice

Several studies describe ways of linking theory and practice instead of treating them as separate blocks. Causby et al. (2023) reported a self-study in which music education and conducting faculty co-taught an undergraduate instrumental conducting course and a junior-level music education course and created

assignments that linked the two. With 14 students enrolled in both courses, they found that more chances to conduct and to teach peers, with feedback, increased students' comfort and confidence in front of an ensemble. The linked assignments also improved students' conducting and teaching skills and their ability to connect the two. In a study of pre-service and in-service secondary music teachers working on inclusive education, Del Barrio et al. (2024) concluded that music teachers need multidimensional, correlated training that integrates didactic, pedagogical, disciplinary and transversal competences. Liu et al. (2026) evaluated a competence-oriented model for music teacher education with 194 students in a quasi-experimental design. Their intervention combined project methods, master classes, ensemble work, digital tools and reflective practice, and it measured students' perceived professional competence. These studies suggest that the design of practice matters as well as the number of hours.

The studies reviewed here come from the United States, Europe, Singapore and China. They examine the curriculum as a whole, the value of broad types of courses or a single course, and the studies of students' views involved primary student teachers, music majors in general or students in a new conservatoire degree. None of them asks specialist music education students to evaluate the balance between theory and practice course by course, and none includes students in Vietnam. This study contributes in three ways. First, it describes students' evaluations for each specialised course, which shows where changes are most needed rather than whether the programme as a whole is too theoretical. Second, it sets these evaluations against the official allocation of hours, which shows whether students' sense of imbalance follows the number of practice hours or depends on other features of a course. Third, it separates the amount of practice time from the conditions in which practice takes place, such as class size, feedback and access to practice rooms, so that the results can point to changes in how practice is organised as well as to changes in hours.

METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional descriptive survey was conducted at the Faculty of Music Education, National University of Art Education, where the Music Education programme combines theoretical and practical specialised courses. Participants were 86 of 95 invited students in Years 2 to 4 in 2025-2026, 68.6% of them female. There were 30, 29 and 27 students in Years 2, 3 and 4, and 29 voice, 42 piano or keyboard and 15 other instrument majors. First-year students were excluded, having taken few specialised courses.

The researcher developed a questionnaire with five parts. The first part asked for gender, year of study and main study. The second part asked students to rate the balance between theory and practice in nine specialised courses, namely Music Theory, Harmony, Sight-singing and Ear Training, Music History, Voice, Piano or Keyboard, Choral Conducting, Music Teaching Methods and Micro-teaching. Each course was rated with a single item from far too much theory (1) to far too much practice (5), with 3 as balanced, and each rating was analysed as a separate item. The third part was a six-item scale on practice time and the perceived effects of the current balance on learning, and the fourth part was a five-item scale on conditions for practice. Both scales used five-point agreement responses from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), and the wording of every item is shown in Tables 3 and 4. In the fifth part, students chose their preferred ratio of theory to practice for three groups of courses from seven options between 70% theory and 30% practice and 10% theory and 90% practice. They also answered two open-ended questions on which course most needed more practice, and why, and on changes they would suggest to the design of specialised courses.

Content validity was examined by four lecturers, who judged each item for relevance and clarity. The revised questionnaire was piloted with 25 students [state who they were, for example students from a cohort not included in the main sample] to check the clarity of the wording and the time needed to complete it. Pilot responses were not included in the main analysis. Cronbach's alpha was calculated in SPSS 26 from the responses of the 86 participants, separately for the six-item scale on practice time and effects on learning (α = 0.85) and the five-item scale on conditions for practice (α = 0.84). Alpha was not calculated for the course balance ratings or the preferred ratios, because each of these was a single-item measure.

Data were collected through Google Forms in May 2026, and the official theory and practice hours of each course were taken from the curriculum documents for 2025-2026.

Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS 26 with frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. For each course, balance ratings of 1 or 2 were grouped as too much theory, 3 as balanced and 4 or 5 as too much practice. Mean scores on the agreement scales were interpreted in five equal intervals, from very low (1.00-1.80) to very high (4.21-5.00). Results by year of study and main study are reported as descriptive observations only. The study was not designed to test differences between groups, and the subgroups were small, so no inferential tests were applied and these differences should not be read as statistically established. Open-ended responses were analysed through inductive thematic analysis. The responses were read in full, meaningful units were given initial codes, related codes were grouped into themes, and each theme was defined and checked against the responses before the number of respondents in each theme was counted. One response could contribute to more than one theme.

RESULTS

Official Theory and Practice Hours by Course

The share of practice hours ranged from none in Music History to about nine tenths in Voice, Piano or Keyboard and Micro-teaching (Table 1). Music Theory, Harmony and Music Teaching Methods each gave a little over a third of their hours to practice.

Table 1. Official theory and practice hours in specialised courses

Course	Credits	Theory hours	Practice hours	Practice share (%)
Music Theory	3	35	20	36.4
Harmony	3	35	20	36.4
Sight-singing and Ear Training	4	20	80	80
Music History	3	45	0	0
Voice	4	10	100	90.9
Piano or Keyboard	4	10	100	90.9
Choral Conducting	3	25	40	61.5
Music Teaching Methods	3	35	20	36.4
Micro-teaching	2	5	50	90.9

Students' evaluation of the balance in each course

Students saw the largest imbalance in Harmony and Music Teaching Methods, where about two thirds rated the course as having too much theory (Table 2). Choral Conducting followed, with just over half of students giving the same rating. Voice and Piano or Keyboard were rated as balanced by more than three quarters of students. Although Music History had no practice hours, most students rated it as balanced. Few students rated any course as having too much practice.

Table 2. Students' evaluation of the theory and practice balance by course (n = 86)

Course	Too much theory (%)	Balanced (%)	Too much practice (%)	M	SD
Harmony	67.4	29.1	3.5	2.12	0.79
Music Teaching Methods	64	33.7	2.3	2.21	0.81
Choral Conducting	55.8	40.7	3.5	2.36	0.84
Music Theory	47.7	48.8	3.5	2.49	0.78
Music History	31.4	65.1	3.5	2.73	0.74
Micro-teaching	25.6	67.4	7	2.82	0.77

Sight-singing and Ear Training	22.1	70.9	7	2.86	0.7
Piano or Keyboard	12.8	76.7	10.5	2.98	0.66
Voice	10.5	77.9	11.6	3.02	0.63

Adequacy of practice time and effects on learning

Students agreed that the current balance helped them understand course content, but they were less positive about its effect on their practical skills and their confidence to teach (Table 3). The lowest ratings concerned practice time in theory-based courses and students' readiness to apply theory, such as harmony, in classroom tasks such as accompaniment.

Table 3. Adequacy of practice time and perceived effects on learning (n = 86)

Item	M	SD	Level
The current balance helps me understand course content	3.62	0.71	High
The current balance helps me develop practical skills	3.08	0.85	Moderate
Practice time in practical courses is enough to master the required skills	2.94	0.88	Moderate
The current balance builds my confidence to teach music in schools	2.87	0.9	Moderate
I feel ready to apply harmony in classroom tasks such as accompaniment	2.56	0.94	Low
Practice time in theory-based courses is enough to apply what is taught	2.41	0.92	Low

Conditions for Practice

All conditions for practice were rated moderate or low (Table 4). Access to practice rooms outside class received the lowest rating, followed by class size and individual feedback from lecturers.

Table 4. Students' evaluation of conditions for practice (n = 86)

Item	M	SD	Level
Instruments are available in class	3.21	0.89	Moderate
Practice tasks between classes are clearly guided	3.05	0.87	Moderate
Lecturers give individual feedback during practice	2.71	0.93	Moderate
Class size allows each student enough time to practise	2.63	0.95	Moderate
Practice rooms are available outside class	2.48	1.02	Low

Preferred and **Current Balance**

For the three theory-based courses, Music Theory, Harmony and Music History, practice made up about a quarter of official hours, while 52.3% of students (n = 45) chose an equal split between theory and practice as their preferred ratio. For the three teaching-related courses, Music Teaching Methods, Choral Conducting and Micro-teaching, practice made up about three fifths of official hours, and 58.1% of students (n = 50) preferred a ratio of 30% theory to 70% practice. For the three practical courses, Sight-singing and Ear Training, Voice and Piano or Keyboard, 70.9% of students (n = 61) chose a ratio close to the current one.

Differences by year of study and main study

The following comparisons are descriptive. Year 4 students gave Music Teaching Methods a lower mean balance rating than Year 2 students (M = 2.04 vs 2.39), which indicates that they saw the course as more

theory-heavy, and they reported lower mean confidence to teach music in schools (M = 2.71 vs 3.02). Piano and keyboard majors had a higher mean score for readiness to apply harmony in accompaniment than voice majors and students of other instruments combined (M = 2.81 vs 2.31). Because the subgroups were small and no statistical tests were applied, these differences are reported as patterns in the data rather than as established differences.

Open-Ended Responses

Of the 86 respondents, 69 (80.2%) answered the open-ended questions. Harmony was named most often as the course that most needed more practice (42.0%, n = 29), followed by Music Teaching Methods (27.5%, n = 19). Students' suggestions were grouped into six themes through the thematic analysis described in the Methodology, and one response could contribute to more than one theme (Table 5).

Table 5. Themes in students' suggestions (n = 69)

Theme	Frequency	% of respondents
More practice applying harmony at the keyboard	30	43.5
More micro-teaching sessions and classroom practice	28	40.6
Smaller groups in practical classes	21	30.4
Closer links between methods courses and practical courses	17	24.6
More access to practice rooms	16	23.2
Less lecture time in Music History	8	11.6

Two responses illustrate the main themes. A voice major wrote that it was possible to analyse chord progressions on paper but not clear how to turn them into an accompaniment for a children's song (Student 31). A Year 4 student wrote that the methods course explained many techniques but gave each student only one or two chances to try them before teaching practice (Student 63).

DISCUSSION

Students saw the largest imbalance in Harmony and Music Teaching Methods, two courses in which theory is meant to be used in teaching. At the same time, most students rated Music History as balanced, even though it had no practice hours. This pattern suggests that students did not object to theory as such. Groulx (2016) found music theory and aural theory among the most valued parts of the curriculum, and our results are consistent with this. Students asked for more practice in the courses where theory should lead directly to a skill, such as harmonising a melody at the keyboard or trying out a teaching technique. Contextualisation was one of the main themes in the experiences of the student teachers studied by Lim et al. (2024), and students in this study also wanted theory placed in the context of its use.

Students rated the practical courses as balanced, but they were less sure that practice time was enough to master the required skills, and they rated class size, feedback and access to practice rooms as moderate or low. This suggests that part of the problem lies in the quality of practice time rather than its amount. Micro-teaching illustrates this point. Its official hours were mostly practical and most students rated it as balanced, yet more micro-teaching sessions was the second most common suggestion. In a large group, each student may have few turns to teach. Causby et al. (2023) found that more chances to conduct and teach peers, with feedback, increased students' comfort and confidence in front of an ensemble, and Liu et al. (2026) combined master classes, ensemble work and reflective practice in their intervention. These studies suggest that the design of practice, and not only its length, may shape students' development.

Piano and keyboard majors felt more ready than other students to apply harmony in accompaniment. This difference may reflect the skills students bring from their main study. Esteve-Faubel et al. (2009) found that students' previous academic knowledge influenced their estimates of time and effort, and that students without musical experience had more difficulty gaining certain competences. That study concerned students with no

musical background, but a related pattern may apply here. Voice majors and students of other instruments may find the same Harmony course more demanding because they have less experience at the keyboard. Any proposal to increase practice hours should also take workload into account. Jääskeläinen et al. (2023) called for learner-centred environments that help students cope with their workload, and Rosset et al. (2022) found that back and shoulder pain was common among first-year music students and that their mental health declined between the first and second semester. Neither study examined curriculum design, but taken together with our findings on practice conditions, they suggest that changing how existing practice time is used may be more realistic than adding hours.

Confidence to teach music in schools was moderate, and it was lower among Year 4 students than among Year 2 students. Year 4 students had taken more teaching-related courses and had a clearer view of what teaching requires, which may explain why they rated Music Teaching Methods as more theory-heavy. Jurkić Sviben et al. (2021) found that most final-year primary student teachers did not feel trained enough to teach music, and suggested that this may reflect too few music hours in their schooling and in their teacher education programmes. Writing about inclusive music education, Del Barrio et al. (2024) argued that music teachers need training that integrates didactic, pedagogical, disciplinary and transversal competences. Although these studies involved different groups of students, our findings point in a similar direction. Students' readiness to teach appears to depend on how well courses connect musical knowledge with the practical tasks of the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study described how Music Education students at a music university perceive the balance between theory and practice in their specialised courses. Students saw the largest imbalance in Harmony, Music Teaching Methods and Choral Conducting, where they expected theory to lead to teaching skills, and they rated mainly theoretical and mainly practical courses as mostly balanced, including Music History, which had no practice hours. Practice conditions, especially class size, individual feedback and access to practice rooms, were rated moderate or low. Descriptive comparisons suggested lower readiness to apply harmony among students who were not piano or keyboard majors and lower confidence to teach among Year 4 students.

The recommendations focus on changes that are feasible within existing hours and are specific to the courses students identified. In Harmony, part of the existing class time could be used for short keyboard tasks in which students harmonise and accompany school songs, with additional keyboard support for students whose main study is not piano or keyboard, similar to the reinforcement courses that Esteve-Faubel et al. (2009) suggested for students without a musical background. In Music Teaching Methods and Micro-teaching, students could practise in smaller rotating groups so that each student teaches more often, with structured peer feedback, and assignments could be shared with practical courses such as Choral Conducting, as described by Causby et al. (2023). Across courses, a booking system for existing practice rooms outside class hours could improve access without new resources. Because these recommendations rest on students' perceptions, their effects should be checked when they are introduced, for example by piloting them in one course and assessing students' skills before and after.

The study has several limitations. It was conducted at a single institution with a modest sample, and the subgroups by year of study and main study were small, so differences between groups are descriptive and were not tested statistically. The data are self-reported perceptions rather than observations of teaching or measures of learning, and the questionnaire was developed for this study and has not been validated in other settings. The cross-sectional design does not show how students' evaluations change over their studies, and official course hours may not reflect how time is used in each class. Future research could include lecturers' views and classroom observation, use interviews to explore how students judge balance in courses with different purposes, test group differences with larger samples, and follow the same students from their second year to graduation.

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