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From Singing to Playing: Designing Sompoton Learning Materials for Children

Yi Qin[1,2*], Jinky Jane C. Simeon[1]

[1] Academy of Arts and Creative Technology, University Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia
[2] School of Music and Dance, Hunan University of Technology, China

*Corresponding Author: qinyy_dd@sina.com

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Abstract: *Sompoton is a traditional bamboo mouth organ of the Kadazandusun community in Sabah, Malaysia. Although culturally significant, its transmission is typically informal and oral, and structured beginner materials for children remain limited. This paper reports the design and preliminary trial of beginner level sompoton learning materials organized around a singing to playing pedagogical sequence. The materials were designed to bridge oral tradition and classroom learning through three core strategies. First, pitch content was sequenced using a restricted pentatonic tone set aligned with vocal comfort and the tuning characteristics of the sompoton, with early lessons further limited to small tone sets such as mi, sol, and la. Second, rhythm learning followed a preparatory pathway in which learners experienced long and short contrasts through singing and movement before the introduction of rhythmic syllables ta and ti ti. Third, embodied learning strategies were integrated through finger play rhymes, a fingering song with numerical and gesture cues, and simplified stick notation to support connections among sound, movement, and instrumental technique. Preliminary observations from trial sessions indicated that singing activities supported pitch internalization and melodic memory prior to instrumental playing, while the preparatory rhythm approach facilitated clearer recognition of patterns such as ta ti ti. Finger play and gesture cues appeared to improve early fingering coordination and reduce hesitation during initial instrumental exploration. Overall, introducing sompoton playing after vocal and rhythmic familiarity had been established supported greater confidence and accuracy. The study contributes a practical framework for culturally grounded and developmentally sequenced sompoton instruction for children and suggests directions for future classroom based trials and refinement.*

Keywords: Sompoton; Children's Music Education; Singing to Playing; Kodály Inspired Sequencing ; Stick Notation

1. Introduction

The *sompoton* is a traditional bamboo mouth organ of the Kadazandusun community in Sabah, Malaysia. The instrument is traditionally learned through informal oral transmission and is most commonly performed by adults as a solo instrument for personal expression (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004; Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). Although the *sompoton* remains culturally significant, previous studies have reported a gradual decline in interest and transmission among younger

generations, resulting in reduced exposure and continuity within contemporary educational contexts (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020).

One major challenge in introducing the *sompoton* to beginner learners is the absence of structured and developmentally sequenced teaching materials (Wong & Chiu, 2017). The instrument does not employ a standardized fingering system, and traditional learning practices rely largely on imitation rather than written or visual instructional support (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). While such approaches are appropriate within community based contexts, they pose challenges when adapting the *sompoton* for formal classroom learning, particularly for children (Wong & Chiu, 2017). In Malaysia, music learning is also strongly shaped by popular and informal musical experiences, and teachers often report constraints when implementing culturally grounded repertoires in school settings, including limited resources and practical support (Shah, 2006; Wong, Pan, & Shah, 2016).

In music education, singing is widely recognized as a foundational activity for developing pitch awareness, internal hearing, and melodic understanding in children. Pedagogical principles that emphasize sound before symbol suggest that instrumental learning becomes more accessible when learners first internalize musical concepts through vocal experience (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001). Such singing based preparation is also consistent with early music learning approaches that use simplified visual representations to bridge aural experience and symbolization (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). However, these pedagogical approaches have rarely been applied to indigenous musical instruments such as the *sompoton*, which are traditionally taught outside formal education systems (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004; Pugh-Kitingan, 2020).

Recent pedagogical initiatives have begun to address this gap. Simeon and Iggau (2024) developed *Let's Play Sompoton Book 1* as an introductory instructional resource aimed at beginner learners. While this publication represents an important step toward formalizing *sompoton* instruction, the repertoire remains limited in scope and progression, particularly for sustaining long term musical engagement. Similar challenges related to the limited availability of beginner level repertoire based on local melodies have also been reported in Malaysian music education, highlighting the need for pedagogically appropriate and culturally grounded instructional materials (Koning et al., 2020; Wong & Chiu, 2017).

This paper presents the design and preliminary trial of beginner level *sompoton* learning materials for children, grounded in a singing to playing pedagogical sequence. By employing children's songs, solfa based singing activities, and simplified stick notation, the materials aim to support a gradual transition from vocal exploration to instrumental playing (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). The study focuses on the pedagogical rationale, methodological approach, and early observations from trial implementations.

2. Pedagogical Rationale: From Singing to Playing

2.1 Singing as a Foundation for Beginner Instrumental Learning

Singing has long been regarded as a central activity in early music education due to its role in developing pitch awareness, internal hearing, and melodic understanding (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001). Through singing, children experience musical concepts directly through sound and bodily engagement before encountering instrumental or symbolic representations. This process supports the internalization of pitch relationships and melodic contour, which are essential for successful instrumental learning (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001).

For beginner learners, instrumental study can be technically demanding when introduced without prior sound experience, particularly when the instrument requires coordinated breath control and finger movement. The *sompoton* may present additional challenges due to airflow control and fingering coordination demands that must be managed simultaneously (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). When learners first become familiar with melodies through singing, they are better prepared to recognize pitch direction and musical structure, thereby reducing cognitive and technical demands during the initial stages of instrumental playing (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001).

Within indigenous music traditions, learning commonly occurs through listening and imitation rather than formal notation (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). Singing therefore provides a pedagogically appropriate bridge between traditional oral practices and structured classroom learning, especially when combined with gradual sequencing and preparatory activities (Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). Comparable approaches have been observed in the development of beginner instrumental materials that utilize children's folk songs, where singing and internalization of melody precede instrumental performance (Ayderova & Wong, 2017). By grounding *sompoton* instruction in singing activities, learners are able to approach the instrument with an established sense of pitch and melody rather than relying solely on trial and error during performance (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001).

2.2 Kodály Inspired Sequencing and the Use of Stick Notation

The pedagogical design of the *sompoton* learning materials draws inspiration from Kodály based principles, particularly the emphasis on sound before symbol. In this approach, musical understanding is developed through active music making, with notation introduced only after learners have internalized musical concepts aurally and kinesthetically (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001).

For beginner learners, conventional staff notation can be visually complex and cognitively demanding. To address this issue, the present study employs stick notation as an intermediate visual representation of pitch movement and relative duration. Stick notation allows learners to associate visual symbols with sounds they already know through singing, without the abstraction required by staff notation (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). Simplified visual representations such as this have been widely used in early music education to support the transition from aural learning to symbolic understanding (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008; Choksy et al., 2001).

The use of stick notation is particularly suitable for *sompoton* instruction, as the instrument does not traditionally employ a standardized notation or fingering system (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). Rather than imposing Western staff notation at an early stage, stick notation functions as a flexible pedagogical tool that supports melodic understanding while remaining compatible with the instrument's oral tradition (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008; Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). This approach enables a gradual transition from singing to playing while preserving accessibility and cultural relevance in beginner *sompoton* learning (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, fieldwork based approach to develop and conduct preliminary trials of beginner level *sompoton* learning materials for children. The methodological focus was on pedagogical design, instructional sequencing, and learner suitability rather than experimental measurement of learning outcomes. This approach was considered appropriate

given the exploratory nature of adapting a traditionally oral instrument for structured educational use (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020; Wong & Chiu, 2017).

3.1 Research Design

The research followed a qualitative design process informed by fieldwork, teaching observations, and iterative refinement of learning materials. Fieldwork and classroom oriented exploration guided decisions related to pitch selection, rhythmic preparation, repertoire choice, and the transition from singing to instrumental playing, consistent with sound before symbol principles commonly emphasized in Kodály informed learning sequences (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001). The instructional materials were revised progressively based on observed learning responses during trial sessions.

3.2 Fieldwork and Repertoire Selection

Fieldwork was undertaken to document fundamental *sompoton* performance techniques, with particular attention to breath control involving both blowing and sucking. Observations of traditional playing practices informed technical considerations relevant to beginner learners, particularly those related to airflow control and finger coordination (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004; Pugh-Kitingan, 2020).

In addition to fieldwork informed materials, Kodály inspired pedagogical principles guided the selection of supplementary learning materials from published children's song resources. These repertoires were selected based on melodic simplicity, limited pitch range, repetitive rhythmic patterns, and suitability for singing based instruction, supporting a gradual transition from vocal learning to instrumental playing (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

3.3 Participants and Research Context

The learning materials were designed primarily for beginner learners at the child level. Prior to classroom implementation with children, preliminary trials were conducted with undergraduate music students at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. These participants functioned as trial learners and facilitators, enabling evaluation of instructional clarity, playability, and pedagogical sequencing within a controlled learning environment, which is particularly relevant in contexts where access to instruments and specialized teaching resources can constrain implementation (Wong & Chiu, 2017).

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through teaching observations during trial sessions, informal participant feedback, and researcher reflective notes. Observations focused on learners' ability to transition from singing to playing, their understanding of rhythmic and melodic preparation activities, and the suitability of pitch range and repertoire for beginner instruction. Data were analyzed qualitatively through thematic categorization to identify recurring patterns related to instructional clarity, ease of learning, and instrumental playability.

4. Design of the Beginner Level *Sompoton* Learning Materials

4.1 Pitch and Rhythm Sequencing

The learning materials were designed around a restricted pentatonic tone set consisting of low sol, low la, do, re, mi, sol, and la. This limitation ensured vocal comfort and technical accessibility for beginner learners while aligning with the tuning characteristics of the *sompoton*, which commonly employs pentatonic pitch organization and variable tuning

practices (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004; Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). In the initial stages, selected songs were further limited to smaller tone sets such as mi, sol, and la to allow focused learning and gradual pitch expansion consistent with sequential early music learning principles (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001).

Rhythmic instruction followed a preparatory sequence aligned with sound before symbol principles. Before the introduction of rhythmic syllables, learners were guided to distinguish between long and short sounds through singing and movement. Only after learners demonstrated familiarity with these contrasts were the rhythmic syllables ta and ti ti introduced (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

4.2 Finger Play Rhymes and Fingering Songs

To support embodied learning, the researchers composed simple finger play rhymes and fingering songs that linked melodic movement with physical gestures. One such fingering song, entitled "123, 好朋友", was designed specifically to introduce basic *sompoton* fingering patterns. The song incorporated numerical cues and friendly lyrical content to reinforce finger placement and coordination in a playful and accessible manner, consistent with early childhood music practices that integrate movement and vocalization to support musical understanding (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

Gestures used in the fingering song were aligned directly with *sompoton* fingering actions, enabling learners to associate sound, movement, and instrumental technique. This approach supported memory, coordination, and confidence before instrumental execution, which is especially relevant for an instrument that does not rely on standardized written systems in its traditional learning context (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020).

4.3 Teaching Example Using *Huang Si Mama*

To illustrate the instructional sequence, the children's song *Huang Si Mama* was used as a teaching example. Learners first engaged with the song through singing accompanied by gestures, learning the melody phrase by phrase. Repetition was emphasized to support melodic internalization and pitch stability (Kodály, 1974; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). The melodic content of the song was limited to the tone set mi, sol, and la, allowing learners to focus on rhythmic and expressive elements while maintaining manageable pitch demands for beginners (Choksy et al., 2001).

The rhythmic structure of *Huang Si Mama* prominently features the ta ti ti pattern. Prior to labeling these rhythmic values, learners experienced the contrast between long and short sounds through singing and movement activities. Once familiarity was established, the rhythmic syllables ta and ti ti were introduced (Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

4.4 Transition from Singing to *Sompoton* Playing

After learners demonstrated familiarity with the sung melodies, selected pitch patterns were transferred to *sompoton* playing. Initial instrumental activities focused on simple repeated pitch patterns such as so so in bars two, four, and eight, enabling learners to concentrate on breath control and finger placement with reduced cognitive load (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). Stick notation was then introduced to represent short melodic figures, including so so and mi mi patterns in bars three and four. This gradual progression supported a clear connection between singing, visual representation, and instrumental performance, consistent with sound before symbol sequencing and the use of simplified visual representations in early music learning (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

5. Findings and Observations

This section presents key observations from the preliminary trials of the beginner level *sompoton* learning materials. The findings are descriptive in nature and focus on learners' responses to the singing to playing instructional sequence, rhythmic preparation activities, and the use of simplified notation and embodied learning strategies (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

5.1 Singing and Pitch Internalization

Observations from trial sessions indicated that singing activities supported learners' pitch recognition and melodic memory prior to instrumental playing (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001). Learners who engaged in repeated phrase by phrase singing, accompanied by gestures, demonstrated increased confidence when later transferring melodies to the *sompoton* (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). Limiting the pitch material to small tone sets such as mi, sol, and la enabled learners to focus on pitch accuracy without being overwhelmed by excessive melodic complexity, consistent with sequential approaches that expand pitch content gradually (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001).

The use of familiar children's songs further supported melodic internalization, allowing learners to rely on auditory memory rather than visual cues during the early stages of learning (Kodály, 1974; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

5.2 Rhythmic Preparation and Understanding

The preparatory approach to rhythm learning proved effective in supporting rhythmic understanding. Learners were able to distinguish between long and short sounds through movement and vocal activities before the introduction of rhythmic syllables, reflecting sound before symbol principles in early music learning (Kodály, 1974; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). This experiential stage facilitated smoother recognition of the ta ti ti pattern when rhythm names were later introduced (Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

In the teaching example using *Huang Si Mama*, learners demonstrated improved rhythmic stability after repeated exposure to long and short contrasts within the song. Introducing rhythmic syllables after this preparatory phase reduced confusion and supported clearer rhythmic execution during both singing and instrumental playing (Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

5.3 Finger Play and Fingering Coordination

The use of finger play rhymes and the fingering song "123, 好朋友" supported coordination between vocal sound, physical gesture, and instrumental technique. Learners were observed to recall fingering patterns more easily when numerical cues and gestures were incorporated into the learning process, which aligns with embodied strategies commonly used to reinforce musical concepts and motor coordination in early learning (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008). This approach reduced hesitation during early *sompoton* playing and supported smoother transitions between pitches, which is particularly relevant given the airflow and fingering coordination demands of the instrument (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020).

Finger play activities also appeared to increase learner engagement and enjoyment, particularly during the initial stages of instrumental exploration (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

5.4 Transition from Singing to *Sompoton* Playing

The gradual transition from singing to *sompoton* playing supported learners' technical readiness. Beginning with simple repeated pitch patterns such as so so enabled learners to focus on breath control and finger placement without excessive cognitive load, which is important for instruments requiring coordinated airflow and finger movement (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020). The subsequent introduction of stick notation provided a clear visual reference that reinforced melodic patterns already familiar through singing, supporting the transition from aural learning to symbolic representation (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008; Choksy et al., 2001).

Learners demonstrated greater accuracy and confidence when instrumental activities were introduced only after vocal and rhythmic familiarity had been established (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001). This observation suggests that the singing to playing sequence supported a smoother and more accessible entry into *sompoton* performance (Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

6. Discussion

The findings from the preliminary trials indicate that learning the *sompoton* through a singing to playing sequence offers a pedagogically appropriate approach that aligns closely with traditional modes of instrumental transmission. In indigenous music practices, instrumental learning commonly occurs through listening, imitation, and repeated embodied engagement rather than through formal notation. Singing functions as a primary means through which melodic contour, pitch relationships, and rhythmic patterns are internalized before being transferred to instrumental performance. This process reflects oral learning traditions in which sound precedes technique and musical understanding develops through experience rather than verbal explanation (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004; Pugh-Kitingan, 2020; Schippers, 2010).

Positioning singing as the entry point to *sompoton* learning allowed beginner learners to approach the instrument with an established sense of pitch and rhythm. Observations suggested that learners demonstrated greater confidence and accuracy when instrumental playing followed repeated vocal engagement. This finding is consistent with music education literature that emphasizes the role of singing in developing internal hearing and melodic awareness prior to instrumental study (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001).

The preparatory approach to rhythm learning further supported this process. By experiencing rhythmic contrast through long and short sounds before the introduction of rhythmic syllables, learners were able to internalize rhythmic structure aurally and kinesthetically. The subsequent introduction of rhythm names served to label concepts that were already familiar through sound and movement. This sequence reflects pedagogical principles that prioritize sound before symbol and supports clearer rhythmic understanding among beginner learners (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

Restricting melodic content to pentatonic and limited tone sets also contributed to learner accessibility. Small pitch sets such as mi, sol, and la reduced cognitive load and allowed learners to focus on coordination, breath control, and rhythmic stability. Similar strategies have been reported in the development of beginner instrumental materials that draw on folk song repertoires, where melodic familiarity and technical simplicity support early instrumental learning (Ayderova & Wong, 2017; Koning et al., 2020).

Finger play rhymes and fingering songs, including "123, 好朋友," played an important role in reinforcing embodied learning. By linking sound, movement, and fingering actions, learners were able to associate melodic patterns with physical gestures that directly supported *sompoton* technique. Movement based learning has been widely recognized as an effective means of supporting musical understanding and motor coordination in early music education (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

Importantly, the introduction of simplified visual representations, such as stick notation, did not replace oral learning but functioned as a supportive scaffold. Stick notation provided a visual reference that reinforced patterns already internalized through singing and movement, allowing learners to bridge oral transmission and classroom learning without undermining the culturally rooted learning process (Houlahan & Tacka, 2008; Choksy et al., 2001). In this way, the singing to playing approach maintains the oral foundations of *sompoton* learning while adapting it for structured educational contexts (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020; Schippers, 2010).

Overall, the discussion suggests that integrating singing based pedagogy with fieldwork informed instrumental knowledge offers a culturally responsive pathway for introducing the *sompoton* to beginner learners (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). Rather than imposing fully standardized instructional systems, this approach emphasizes accessibility, gradual progression, and respect for traditional learning practices. Such an approach may have broader relevance for the teaching of other traditionally oral instruments within multicultural music education settings (Schippers, 2010; Campbell, 2004).

7. Conclusion

This paper reported the design and preliminary trial of beginner level *sompoton* learning materials for children, structured around a singing to playing pedagogical sequence. Responding to the limited availability of developmentally sequenced resources for *sompoton*, the materials were designed to support a gradual transfer from vocal exploration to instrumental performance through (a) a restricted pentatonic tone set aligned with vocal comfort and *sompoton* tuning, (b) a preparatory approach to rhythm learning that moves from experiential contrasts to rhythmic syllables, and (c) embodied strategies, including finger play rhymes, fingering songs, and simplified stick notation, to connect sound, movement, and technique (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008; Pugh-Kitingan, 2020).

Observations from preliminary trials suggest that the sequence was feasible and pedagogically supportive. Singing activities promoted pitch recognition and melodic memory before instrumental playing, while limiting early pitch content to small tone sets (e.g., mi, sol, la) helped learners focus on accuracy. Rhythm preparation through movement and long short contrasts appeared to facilitate clearer recognition and execution of patterns such as ta ti ti. In addition, finger play and numerical and gesture cues supported early fingering coordination and reduced hesitation during initial *sompoton* exploration. When instrumental playing was introduced only after vocal and rhythmic familiarity had been established, learners demonstrated greater accuracy and confidence. This suggests that the singing to playing progression offered an accessible entry into *sompoton* performance (Kodály, 1974; Choksy et al., 2001; Houlahan & Tacka, 2008).

The study contributes a practical design framework for culturally grounded, child appropriate *sompoton* instruction that bridges oral traditional learning with structured classroom pedagogy. Future work should extend trials with child participants in authentic classroom settings,

document learning outcomes more systematically, and refine the repertoire and sequencing based on longer term implementation. Further development may also explore teacher training supports and adaptations for tuning variability across instruments to strengthen scalability and sustainability of *sompoton* education (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020; Schippers, 2010; Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017).

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Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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