

Language-aware choir practice triggering multilevel transformations in music education

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Abstract

Choirs are often based on well-established musical principles, repertoires, and habits of action aiming at musical quality. This narrative-oriented practitioner inquiry focuses on a distinct choir that aims to respond to the real-life needs of the participants, who are newcomers to Finnish society, by integrating Finnish-as-a-second-language learning into meaningful music-making. In language-aware choirs, the practice is continuously co-created anew by drawing from music education, the intercultural negotiation with and between the participants, and the transprofessional co-construction between the choir conductor and the Finnish language teacher. The study asks: What meanings do the participants give to language-aware choirs? The narrative analysis includes interviews of five choir participants, from which stories, each depicting various transformative meanings, were composed. Leveraging Maxine Greene's concepts of wide-awakeness and social imagination, and seen through the lens of activity theory, the study shows how choir participants, including the choir conductor and language teacher, illustrate various processes of transformation in their personal or professional lives. These individual transformations highlight how the transdisciplinarity of the choir practice not only opens up novel opportunities for social and cultural participation, but also challenges the learned mental models of teaching and learning for both music and a second language. By proposing an emerging theorisation for transdisciplinary language-aware choirs, the study encourages further transdisciplinary practices in music education as it faces the interconnected challenges of contemporary societies.

Keywords

activity system, choir, music education, second language, transdisciplinary, transformation, wide-awakeness

Beginning(s)

I will always remember this specific situation. It was the first time that I would teach music for adults with linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. I remember being very excited and filled with enthusiasm to start making 'global music' with these intercultural groups, who I thought were equally fascinated to share their musical experiences from all over the world. In the beginning of the first music lesson, however, an elderly person posed a question that fundamentally challenged my plans: "Can you tell us what music has to do with learning Finnish?" The person also forcefully continued that learning Finnish was the one and only reason they were attending this training. By "they" the person referred to ten others (aged 20–70) who sat with arms folded at the back of the classroom. This elderly person was the only one who could speak English—the language we shared at that time. The question caught me so completely by surprise that I remember answering in a vague manner something that, in hindsight, was more like a desperate suggestion of music being "a-common-universal-language," only to realize afterwards that I hadn't even answered the question. This unexpected question, which I wrote behind a sheet of music at that moment, nevertheless started to provoke my imagination towards untapped possibilities to approach Finnish-as-a-second-language in and through music education.

This "shocking moment" (Greene, 1995, p. 27) took place in 2009, when I participated in a pilot project where arts and crafts were, for the first time, combined with integration training for immigrants¹ at an Adult Education Centre in Finland. This moment pushed me to reconsider my professional mental models as a music teacher and choir conductor, and ultimately, to explore language awareness in choir practice. The unexpected question initiated a process in me akin to *wide-awakeness*, to use educational philosopher Maxime Greene's (1978) term. While *wide-awakeness* originally derives from philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schütz's (1962) work, referring to "an alternate mode of existence that transcends the passive attitude so easily assumed in relation to one's surroundings" (Williams, 2017, p. 3), according to Greene (1995), *wide-awakeness* is a kind of heightened consciousness related to the process of breaking loose from "the habitual, the taking-for-granted, the unquestioned" (p. 23). Expanding one's knowledge and knowing towards unfamiliar and "as if" perspectives, *wide-awakeness* highlights expanding one's "awareness of polyphony" (Allsup, 2020, p. 33; see also Scarlato, 2022). Facing this unexpected question within the context of my daily work triggered an awareness of polyphony, beginning to transform my learned ways of thinking and acting and to heighten my "moral reflexivity and moral imagination" with regard to how my "professional work relates to wider societal issues" (Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021, p. xxiv). It awoke in me to reflect self-critically on "what I think of as a dialectic relation with the forces around that determine and condition and (every now and then) manipulate" (Greene, 1995, p. 107)—the external (the changing social reality) and internal (my deep disciplinary commitment to music and music education) forces related to music teaching and learning. I could no longer enter into intercultural musical contexts without having the unexpected question in mind, while at the same time having to ask myself a series of new questions: how can I embed the Finnish language, including Finnish music, in choir activities without subordinating meaningful music making to alien goals or a nationalistic purpose, or, even worse, would such merging be uncritical colonialism? The more I unveiled my fixed mental models and taken-for-granted certainties as "an outcome of the career path" (Väkevä et al., 2017, p. 138), the more I became aware of the multilayered hindrances I had to cope with when expanding the disciplinary boundaries of music education towards such complex transdisciplinarity that could holistically integrate choir practice and Finnish language learning. Consequently, the movement towards *wide-awakening* signified what could be called "a

nodal situation,” a turning point that radically changed the future course of my professional actions (Westerlund, 2020, p. 16; see also Bode, 2013).

This narrative-oriented practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) aims to develop new understandings of the transformative potential of a transdisciplinary choir practice by exploring the experiences of choir participants in two language-aware choirs.² These choirs take the real-life social needs and desires of the choir participants as the starting point for integrating Finnish language use and learning into choir practice. In music education scholarship, linking music with social and societal issues have previously been approached, for instance, through structural-level social innovations in music education institutions (e.g., Väkevä et al., 2017; Westerlund et al., 2019, 2021) and the activist stances of individual music educators (e.g., Barrett & Westerlund, 2024; Hess, 2019; Karlsen, 2019; Laes, 2017). By connecting individual actions and structural-level changes, the present study draws from “a theoretical meeting” (Pedersen & Bang, 2016) between Greene’s concepts of wide-awakeness and social imagination (Greene, 1978, 1995, 2001) on the one hand, and the activity systems framework (Engeström, 1999, 2001, 2014) on the other. To approach this nexus of individual and wider structural transformation, this study asks:

What meanings³ do choir participants, including the Finnish-as-a-second-language teacher, give to their participation in the language-aware choir?

The context of language-aware choirs

The first language-aware choir, which I founded together with a second-language teacher, aimed to provide a new social context for adults with immigrant backgrounds to practice active and holistic language use through musical activity in a relaxed and mistake-tolerant atmosphere, at a time when immigration to Finland was starting to increase. More than 10 years later, in 2024, the number of immigrants has risen to a record high, and according to the latest statistics the largest group of immigrants comprises working-age adults (Tilastot [Statistics], 2024). Adult immigrants typically lack social contexts where they can actively use their second language, practice spoken Finnish in collaboration with others, and address-related challenges, such as phonetics and pronunciation, within a motivating social environment (Lehtinen-Schnabel & Levänen, 2024). Due to lack of second-language skills, newly arrived residents are therefore easily excluded from various social contexts (e.g., Leinonen, 2020), including arts and cultural services, and Finnish-as-a-second-language competence also directly affects their employability (e.g., Könönen & Himanen, 2019; Larja, 2019; Lehmuskunnas et al., 2020; Tarnanen & Pöyhönen, 2011). Consequently, diverse language-integrated musical activities, such as those in choirs, have gradually increased across different educational levels, including adult, basic, and higher education.

This study uses empirical material from two language-aware choirs that I conducted (and still do) as part of my work in the field of liberal adult education and municipal cultural services in the Helsinki metropolitan region. The choir participants, aged 21 to 70, had diverse social and educational backgrounds, some of whom were newly arrived residents and some having been living in Finland for up to 16 years. The fee-free choirs had open access, with no requirements for musical or Finnish-as-a-second-language skills and musical and linguistic skills varied among the participants. While most of them had previously taken Finnish-as-a-second-language classes, not all had. Similarly, musical experiences varied, with some participants having never had any music lessons, while others were advanced musicians. The

weekly rehearsals lasted 1.5 hr, and the choirs had public concerts and other performances regularly in various venues. The Finnish-as-a-second-language teacher attended every other choir rehearsal, integrating her professional perspective⁴ to the development of choir activities as a resourceful practitioner (Edwards, 2010). At the same time, she also was a full choir participant, enjoying music-making and getting new ideas and inspirations for her own work as a second-language teacher.

The underlying pedagogical principles of the choir practice can be divided into six “fields of action” (see Table 1; see also Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2023), which together encompass multiple approaches to the entanglements of music and language with experimental and

Table 1. Six fields of action in the language-aware choir practice.

Six fields of action	Focus
1. <i>Warm-ups</i>	Addresses the holistic opening of voice, body, and mind for singing and active language use by creatively and playfully approaching challenging sounds, words, and sayings of the Finnish language (as experienced by choir participants) as parts of vocalisations, vocal, and breathing exercises.
2. <i>Collaborative choir improvisations</i>	Approaches music and language production with a relaxed, playful, and “mistake-is-a-gift” mindset by focusing on interaction, collaboration, and communication through various ways and modes of expression (vocal, verbal, embodied, material, spatial).
3. <i>Singing songs in different genres and themes</i>	Focuses on a dynamic, multisensory, and embodied (holistic) approach to language use through singing in collaboration with others (in one to four voice parts) and addressing the interfaces of music and language (rhythm, durations, melody, expression, hearing and listening, articulation and pronunciation, phrase and sentence structure, and cultural content), as well as becoming familiar with diverse music genres and sub-languages, such as spoken language and different dialects. Repertoire consists of a wide range of songs from canons, circle songs, children’s songs, folk tunes, pop songs (including rap) and evergreens, to songs improvised and sometimes collaboratively composed. Songs are chosen by the choir community and arranged based on ideas collaboratively created in the choir rehearsals. They are sung a cappella or with accompaniment by the choir conductor (piano) or by the choir participants (e.g., strings, guitar, percussion). Using accompaniment is important to support singing and music learning, which is approached without sheet music in order to acknowledge the diversity of cultural backgrounds and to emphasise the focus on “sensitised hearing,” not only in music but also in language expression.
4. <i>Creating new lyrics</i>	Highlights the creation and re-creation of song lyrics while encouraging the expression of individual thoughts, intercultural dialogue, and the use of spoken utterances that nurture language production and ownership in both oral and written forms, as well as in creative approaches.
5. <i>Becoming immersed in the stumbling blocks of Finnish with “funny language songs”</i>	Supports memorising and recalling the most difficult phonemic, phonetic, and grammatical aspects of the Finnish language with the help of memorable melodies and rhythms of the spoken language, as created by the second-language teacher (lyrics) and choir conductor (music).
6. <i>Becoming familiar with songs brought by the choir participants and translated into Finnish</i>	Affirms the dialogue between the musical, cultural, and linguistic features in songs as well as between the choir participants’ native languages and Finnish.

creative mindsets. The fields of action, which can also be interwoven, are incorporated in diverse ways in every choir rehearsal, reflecting the emerging needs, wishes, and real-life experiences of the choir participants. Hence, the choir practice is a result of an ongoing process of co-construction based on intercultural exchange and transdisciplinary, transprofessional collaboration between the choir participants, choir conductor, and Finnish-as-a-second-language teacher (see Lehtinen-Schnabel & Levänen, 2024). This co-construction underlines the equal, reciprocal, and nonhierarchical nature of the choir practice and the wide-ranging diversity within the choirs.

Research approach

Integrated activity systems

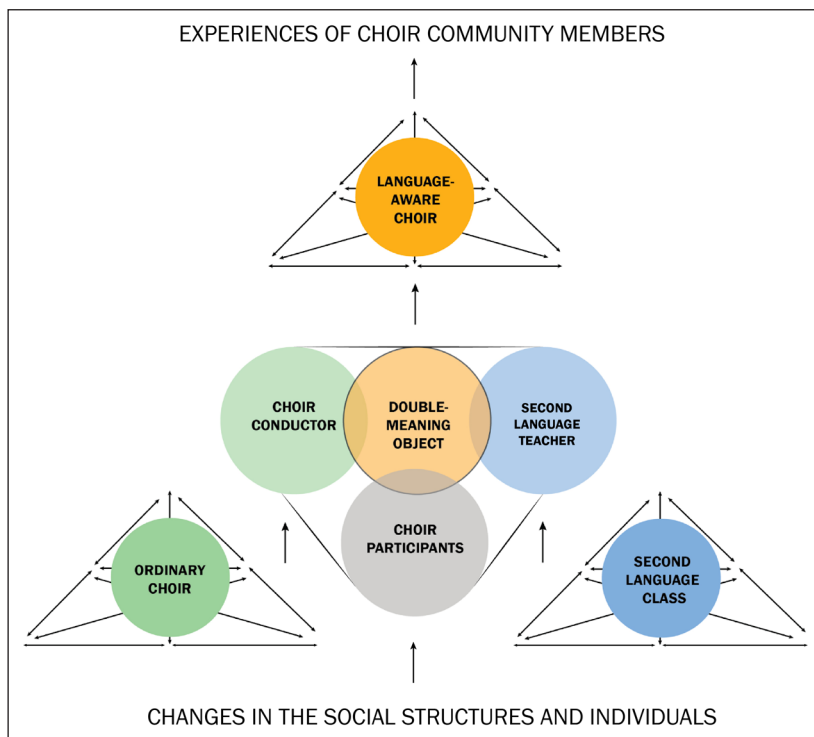
The *double meaning* of the language-aware choir practice denotes the integration of two activity systems (Engeström, 2001)—an ordinary choir and a second-language class—which together engender a new activity system (a language-aware choir) and dismantle and blur the boundaries between music and language education (Figure 1; see also Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2023, p. 483). The boundary between activity systems creates a space “where understandings are negotiated” (Daniels & Edwards, 2010, p. 2). This space (presented in the middle of Figure 1) takes place between the choir participants, the Finnish-as-a-second-language teacher, and the choir conductor, addressing the ongoing process of co-construction. A framework of interacting activity systems is typically used when focusing on practices that seek to generate and mobilise knowledge from different settings (see Daniels & Edwards, 2010; Edwards, 2010), as is also the case in language-aware choirs. An activity theoretical lens therefore relates to what Yrjö Engeström (1987) calls *expansive learning*, starting with “individual subjects questioning the accepted practice” and gradually expanding “into collective movement or institution” (Engeström, 2014, p. xx).

Figure 1 depicts one key principle of activity theory, that is, the historicity (Engeström, 1999, p. 25) of language-aware choirs stemming from two separate disciplines (music and language education) and reflecting changes in the social structures and individuals due to the diversifying reality in Finland. According to Engeström (2005), social structures are dialectically linked to “the actions of the individual” (p. 17). In this study, attention is given to the experiences of choir community members (Figure 1), while also being reflected upon in light of the past and present forms of the boundary-crossing choir activity.

Research material

The research material encompasses 13 individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with four choir participants (three interviews per person, approximately 60–90 min each) and the Finnish-as-a-second-language teacher (one interview, 150 min). The interviews were first conducted with 11 volunteer choir participants, of which the information-rich data of four were selected according to theoretical sampling that highlights “purposeful selection of samples to inform the emerging theory in the study” (Coyne, 1997, p. 626; see also Becker, 1993; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The selection acknowledged diverse perspectives, rich descriptions, and their relevance to the needs of the emerging theory. The interviewee’s language competence was not a criterion, but it may have influenced on the richness of the interview data. The study employed an adaptable sampling strategy to be

Figure 1. Language-Aware Choir Integrating Activity Systems (Adapted From Lehtinen-Schnabel & Levänen, 2024, p. 3).



“responsive to real-world conditions” and to “meet the information needs of the study” (Coyne, 1997, p. 630). The three interviews with the participants took place between September 2019 and May 2020. The first and second interviews were conducted before and after choir rehearsals, within the same building for convenience. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the choir rehearsals and the third interviews took place online. In line with the theoretical sampling, the interview with the second-language teacher was conducted afterwards, in January 2024, “according to the needs of the study” (Morse, 1991, p. 129).

The interviews with the choir participants were conducted in English, as all interviewees were able to speak it at an adequate level, which is typical for the majority of choir participants. If needed, the interviews also employed holistic communication in line with translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2018), such as bodily and vocal expression (e.g., gestures, singing), to support and complement the verbal expression. Although English proficiency was not a criterion for participation in interviews, it may have influenced volunteering as interviewees. The interview with the second-language teacher was conducted in Finnish and the cited parts were translated into English by the researcher.

The interviews encompassed a variety of themes related to earlier experiences of learning music and Finnish-as-a-second-language, reasons for joining the language-aware choir, personal learning aims, as well as choir experiences. All interviews were first audio-recorded and

then transcribed verbatim, three by the researcher and all others by a company specialising in audio-recorded research transcription.

Ethics

All participants voluntarily joined the study and provided their written informed consent. The study was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Arts Helsinki and received research permissions from the related organisations according to their research integrity guidelines.

The narrative approach

I approached the research material through narrative inquiry, understood as “the study of experience as story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479) and “a form of social action” (Lal et al., 2012, p. 6; see also Clandinin, 2006; Riessman, 2008) in which narration is “not only presenting but also constituting reality” (Bruner, 1991, p. 5). The study is located between the distinction of narrative methodologies where stories are either “told” or “living” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 482). As the choir conductor, I have an “inside” perspective upon the “*living* out of stories” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47) alongside the participants. In turn, the interviews drew upon these lived experiences, stressing “life as lived in the past” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 482). Although I constructed the stories retrospectively (Freeman, 2015), they strive towards meaning-making in the future as forward-looking agencies of change (Westerlund, 2020, p. 7), highlighting the capacity of imagination and allowing us to view things “as if they could be otherwise” (Greene, 1995, p. 15; see also Dewey, 1938). The construction of stories aimed to move beyond the simple “telling of stories” (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 11) by working “towards deeper understanding of the varying and complex meanings and interpretations” (p. 11) for the purpose of this study—in this case, to develop a new understanding of transdisciplinary choir practice.

The analysis was a composite of the paradigmatic and narrative modes of reasoning (Polkinghorne, 1995) focusing on the interview material from five choir participants, selected in accordance with purposeful theoretical sampling (Coyne, 1997). The first phase, highlighting the paradigmatic mode of thought (Bruner, 1985), started with mapping and coding (e.g., Leavy, 2017, p. 151) the interview material from the five interviewees horizontally, through the lens of the research question. In other words, I approached the transcribed interview texts (pre-, middle-, and postinterviews of four choir singers and one interview with the language teacher) and coded the parts where various meanings of participation in the language-aware choir emerged. The coded parts encompassed choir experiences related to music and second-language learning, participation in the social context of the choir community, and linking the choir experiences to life events and surrounding society, addressing “alternative perspectives of the ways” in which language-aware choirs were “understood, enacted, and lived out” (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 11). When looking at these parts through the concept of wide-awakeness (Greene, 1978, 1995) and activity theoretical lens (Engeström, 1999, 2001), a common theme among them became apparent: a kind of “transformative force” they provided for the lives of the interviewees. The first phase of analysis thereby engaged in thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006) using an abductive approach (see Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2009, pp. 3–4).

In the second phase of the analysis, aligning with the narrative mode of thinking (Bruner, 1985), the parts including the “transformative force” in each individual interview were vertically organised into a story form. I focused on the interview material of each single interviewee

and constructed a story of the parts depicting aspects of personal transformation that participation in the choir had triggered. This process required continuous consideration of what to include or exclude (cf. narrative smoothing, Spence, 1986) as well as synthesising and relating “events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot” (p. 16). All in all, the two-phase analysis acknowledged that “each story told and lived is situated and understood within larger cultural, social, and institutional narratives” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 542), thereby reinforcing or balancing “the big picture” (Stroh, 2015, p. 43)—the broader systems framework with which they were engaged.

Towards wide-awakening individual transformations

As an outcome of the two-phase analysis, the five stories presented below depict the meanings that joining and co-constructing a language-aware choir practice provided for the participants. These meanings show various transformations in (a) self-image as a second-language user (Sasha’s story); (b) musical identity (Sofia’s story); (c) the integration process (Rami’s story); (d) a sense of social and cultural participation (Roosa’s story); and (e) understanding second-language learning (language teacher’s story). The meanings will also be discussed in dialogue with Greene’s and Engeström’s theoretical insights.

Choir activity transforming second-language use and learning into a positive and holistic experience: Sasha’s story

Sasha moved to Finland with her family more than 10 years ago. She can no longer return to her homeland, where she used to work as a journalist and editor, and where she “really lived through the language.” For her, singing and musical activity in the language-aware choir opened up not only a new relationship with Finnish-as-a-second-language, but was holistically connected with her process of identity change, shaping her self-image related to her acculturation process. Surprisingly, music and singing had enabled emotions and “a way of grasping through feeling” (Greene, 2001, p. 86) within her language use, rather than seeing language merely as a system of structures with which she was accustomed. In other words, through musical activity, for Sasha, language use had become a holistic experience and action, fuelled by the diverse choir community with which she could identify. Although Sasha’s story was of a very personal process, it was also part of “manifestations of an evolving systemic contradiction in the activity they stem from” (Engeström, 2016, p. 5), illuminating disruptions in the activity system of a traditional second-language class in Sasha’s past experience:

I think it is really challenging, stressful, and even traumatic to change your culture and language, and everyday life context. I think that the people who have changed their life context might not do it on purpose. I belong to those ones. Even if you are at home, the home is leaving you, maybe gradually. I think that if you want to learn a language deeply—not just for reading some special documents—but really to speak with people in everyday life, it requires you to change your personality in general. You just feel, “I’m not me.” I can say that I was in despair. That kind of feeling for several years. I’m the kind of person who always relies on logical things and ordering systems. I need to process it all the time. In the choir, suddenly, I needed to cancel all those brain functions and I started having fun and joy, and pleasure. It changes my relationship with language. I really get pleasure from learning. I can’t say that it’s something logical. It’s just a feeling and emotion. The choir supports my speaking, not being so shy about looking stupid. I just feel more relaxed. It is also the group which is very diverse. I believe that this diversity is healing.

From language learner to singing enthusiast: Sofia's story

Joining a language-aware choir allowed Sofia to create a new relationship with music and singing as the musical world opened up to her through language awareness in the choir context. Surprisingly, entering the choir as a language learner started a process of becoming an enthusiastic singer, a new musical identity that she had not earlier been encouraged to pursue. This process was strengthened when she became aware of the positive effects of singing on her well-being, both psychological and physiological (see also Heydon et al., 2020). Moreover, combining her native language within Finnish language learning through singing helped her in this process. Sofia's story uncovered the differences between "the central components of the activity system" (Engeström, 2005, p. 29)—namely, of an ordinary and a language-aware choir. These components were related, for instance, to rules (e.g., access requirements) and tools (e.g., pedagogical principles) that could easily exclude adults like Sofia, who would not have dared to join a normal choir:

I first thought we will have grammar classes or something and then there is a song. But it was not like that. Suddenly I was in the middle of a real choir. I think we are all surprised. Actually, we can sing. And with all these different voices, the final result, everything together. I thought this was only possible in a professional setting where people do this for living. We do this even though we didn't know we could.

I had a big experience when you asked me to make my native language version of that Finnish song. That was very special to me, and also the fact that I could do it. That I even could sing it alone in a large public concert at the Helsinki Music Centre as a soloist when others were humming in the background. That was a huge step in my self-confidence. I could also speak Finnish a little in front of the audience. I would never have thought I could. Even though it was a small thing for the others, for me it was a huge thing on a personal level. It is this self-confidence. And it is not only that. It is also this happiness when we are singing together. It is some kind of big positive energy that stays.

I have never sung before in a choir. I have a twin sister and she sang a lot, but I was always the shy one. Now I am singing every day. I started because of the choir. Especially if I am down or miss something. It's a way to express whatever is inside. It is also part of the confidence that comes from knowing what is happening in the body.

Songs opening intercultural dialogues in daily life: Rami's story

Rami's story was about sharing and radiating around what he had learned in the choir. The story referred to the opening of social imagination (Greene, 1995), in the sense that through musical encounters in the choir—and singing the choir's songs with his daughter—he began to reflect on his own integration process in Finland and to better understand his daughter's life situation, "from the vantage point of the person whose world it is" (p. 4). As Greene (1995) argued, encounters with art can nurture becoming wide-awake to the world by arousing imagination to see alternative realities that prompt us to attend to and express regard for "empty spaces" (p. 3) between ourselves and others. By finding a shared musical space through the choir songs they both enjoyed, it also became possible for Rami and his daughter to expand this space to include other songs and languages, as well as to start creating their own songs that combined and mixed these ingredients according to different situations. In line with Sofia's story, Rami's story shows that although language learning was the reason for joining the choir, it was the songs and music that finally became meaningful to him. In this way the language-awareness in musical activity (the double-meaning object of the choir activity) could expand "a horizon of possibilities" (Engeström, 2005, p. 10) for wider participation in music education:

Usually when I have sung, for some reason my five-year-old daughter has not wanted to hear. She somehow used to feel sad. These were mostly slow songs in my native tongue. Now, when our music class is over, I often keep on singing in the evening. And my daughter allows me to sing. She even likes the songs. Every day she says: “Let’s sing the songs from your music class,” and then we sing them together. Indeed, she knows more or less all the tunes.⁵ And now there are no objections to me singing anymore. We have also started to talk using the tunes from our class. But we use other words and make up new melodies. We are talking about, let’s say, going to eat or doing something. We sometimes use Finnish, sometimes my native language, and sometimes English.

I signed up for this class because of language, but I think I now care even more about music. I think the songs of the choir provide me with some kind of common thing outside. Sometimes I mention these songs at work to my friends. Some of them know them. For me personally it is like integration. And probably it is just the same thing in a different way with my daughter. I feel that knowing these Finnish songs aligns with her childhood now. I guess she is learning her Finnish self, and I won’t become completely foreign to it, ignoring the fact.

A language-aware choir community cultivating and forging a sense of social participation: Roosa’s story

Roosa’s story raised the meaning of a choir as a social ecosystem where experiences not only in singing with others, but also in language use and production, could be shared, including becoming familiar with the cultural and social contexts embedded in songs. This social ecosystem had awakened Roosa’s social imagination (Greene, 1995) towards a sense of participation and belonging in her new home country, while also creating opportunities for positive identification with Finnish culture. As Greene (1995) emphasised, “the more we imagine, the more possibilities will open for us—possibilities of meaning, of vision, of alternative realities” (p. 75). Roosa also showed the need for more possibilities where a second language could be used and produced in an authentic (real-world, out-of-language-class; see also Lilja et al., 2020) environment, which she had found in the choir. Her story demonstrated how the educational needs in a diversifying society have themselves become much more varied, reflecting how “the fundamental societal relations and contradictions of the given socio-economic formation—and thus potentials for qualitative change—are present in each and every local activity of that society” (Engeström, 2005, p. 36). Consequently, the new needs created “internal tensions and contradictions” (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 9) in the activity systems of a second-language class and an ordinary choir, thus encompassing “a driving force of change” (Engeström, 2001, p. 135) and the potential for “radical transformations of entire activity systems” (Engeström, 2014, p. xviii):

I really enjoy singing with other people. I was hoping to find a choir where I feel welcome. In my neighbourhood there is a choir, but I might not feel welcome. I think that everybody in our choir—it doesn’t matter why you came to Finland or whatever reasons you have to stay in Finland—want to learn the language. There is this common experience that Finnish is a very hard language. I think that one of the problems is that Finnish-as-a-second-language is taught as a foreign language and not as a communication language. For me, the choir is like filling this void. In the choir, we work on aspects that you don’t work on in a Finnish class or elsewhere. Like pronunciation is not practiced in the other contexts, and the sounds in order to improve the phonetics. And then we are actively using the language. The way we are working also helps us to comprehend, because we are not separating things. One important thing is the spoken language, that is good because you start to get sentences. In a song you sing and hear the same word several times, even if you don’t understand it. It stays, and there’s some kind of link. There is the melody, there is the rhythm, and there is also the fact that you are

hearing and repeating. I think this sort of combining the language with something else is really good. I can see a change in society, there are many foreigners. So that would be very good in other activities, too.

For me, one of the main things in the choir is, however, the social link, this emotional connection of knowing songs that people know. I don't have this strong sense of nationalism, but I do have a sense of unity. And I think that music has this strong cultural component that is not the national anthem. I will be in tears when we do the performance. All these crazy people from all over the world singing in Finnish. It's just like this understanding that we are all the same.

Expanding the understanding of second-language learning: The second-language teacher's story

For the second language teacher, joining the choirs in Autumn 2015 and co-constructing the choirs' practice awakened "such a big and holistic thing that it is difficult to specify":

Participating in the choirs regularly already for years, and being part of developing the practice, must have transformed my original teaching. I have forgotten what the reasons were and why I ended up there. But I can say that the choir has had a huge impact. In particular, I continually consider how this joy could be transferred into a second-language classroom and applied to my own teaching. Something that has such a positive and encouraging atmosphere. As we know, Finnish-as-a-second-language learners describe Finnish learning in terms of "it's impossible," "I don't want to," and so on. But the choir provides simultaneous aesthetic experiences. It encompasses collaboration, doing together, and active learning. Another big difference is that in the choir there are no language levels. I think you cannot bring this kind of holistic embodiment into the second-language classroom without integrating it with such planned vocal instruction. It's difficult to create something so holistic in a language class. For some groups, it can be embarrassing or difficult. But I try to introduce this into my classrooms. I have also taken songs, to the extent I have been able to. I adopt the playful and creative approaches of the choir, for example, when we focus on a text. I have also liked other activities where arts have been integrated into second-language teaching, but in my opinion there is something about singing that captures the language best. I think it is great how singing in the choir teaches about society and culture, too. And the spoken language. So you get language skills, knowledge, and then something that is perhaps even more important. At the professional level, I recognise that it has been a big thing, that I have been in the choir. It is about learning, to understand more about it.

The second language teacher underscored joy, playfulness, embodiment, and aesthetic experiences that encounters with music and musical activity "brought into being" (Greene, 2001, p. 5) in relation to language learning in the choir, aligning with earlier research that stresses the connection between enjoyment and language learning (e.g., Fonseca-Mora & Machancoses, 2016; Lehtinen-Schnabel & Levänen, 2024). Overall, the second-language teacher highlighted the embodied (holistic) approach to language learning (e.g., Jusslin et al., 2022), which differed significantly from orientations typical in second-language classrooms but was central to the choir practice.

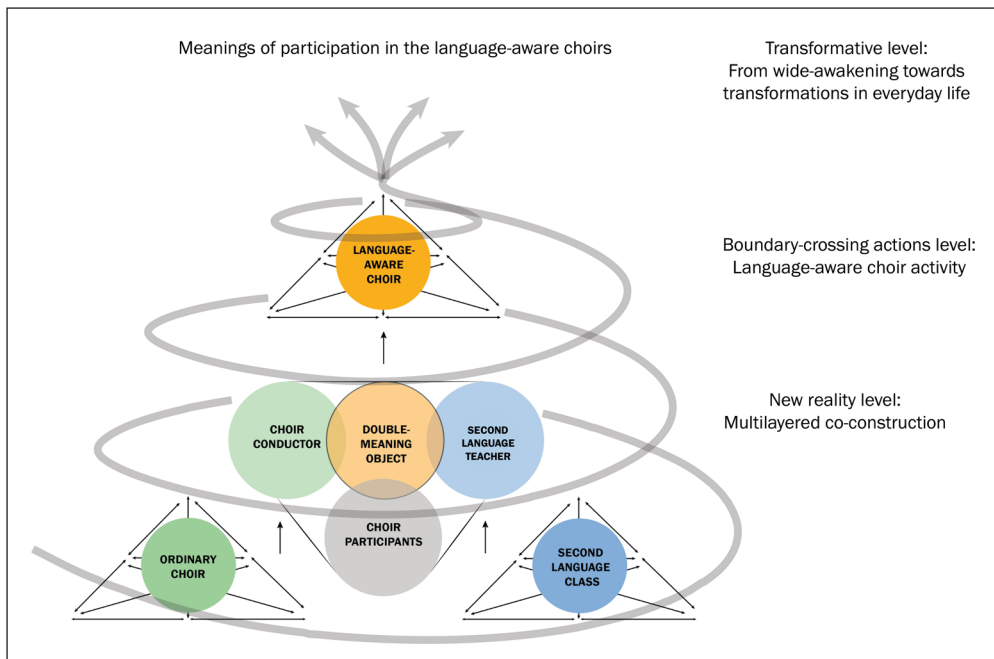
At the activity systems level, the second-language teacher highlighted the significant differences between a second-language class and a language-aware choir, such as the object of the activity related to music and language learning (single-meaning vs. double-meaning), the rules (e.g., language proficiency requirements vs. open access and heterogeneity), and the available tools (e.g., pedagogical approaches). For her, a language-aware choir created an additional context, expanding second-language learning with new professional horizons and focal points that allowed her to choose in her daily work "whether to stay in the familiar comfort zone or to break

away into something new and risky” that reaches towards “the zone of proximal development” (Engeström, 2016, p. 6; see also Vygotsky & Rieber, 1998, p. 202). As Engeström (2001) emphasised, contradictions that convey “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” can “generate disturbances and conflicts, but also innovative attempts to change the activity” (p. 137).

Discussion

To develop an emerging theorisation of a transdisciplinary choir practice that merges music and language education in nonhierarchical ways (Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2023), this narrative practitioner inquiry explored the meanings that choir participants gave to a new, integrated activity system. These meanings were refracted through Greene’s (1978, 1995, 2001) concepts of wide-awakeness and social imagination, thus focusing on the individual transformations that extended beyond mere teaching and learning of skills and competencies, and towards meaning-making. The composed stories illustrated how a choir activity, relying on continuous, multilayered intercultural, transprofessional, and transdisciplinary co-construction (Lehtinen-Schnabel & Levänen, 2024), could create a new reality that was not predetermined but reflected the emerging real-life needs of its adult immigrant participants. This new choir reality enabled boundary-crossing choir actions (see Figure 2) by disrupting well-established norms and accustomed habits of action associated with disciplinary traditions in music education, as well as those related to language education.

Figure 2. An Emerging Theorisation of a Transdisciplinary Choir Practice: From the Co-Construction of a New Reality Towards Various Individual Transformations.



The concept of wide-awakeness (Greene, 1978) and its enlarged form of social imagination (Greene, 1995, 2001) enabled me as the choir conductor and developer of the practice to reflect upon my own process of breaking loose from the unquestioned habits of music teaching and learning I had adopted during my studies and career. To put it simply, and as the Beginning(s) section showed, I started reflecting on music education and my work from the widest possible vantage points of others. The conceptual framework also helped me in identifying the meanings of other choir community members as “a kind of metaphor for the awakenings, the unexpected disclosures” (Greene, 2001, p. 177) towards a heightened understanding of their personal, professional, and social lives. The multiplicity of meanings described by the stories demonstrated the language-aware choir practice as a critical music education “praxis” (e.g., Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Mahon et al., 2020), referring not just to any musical action or community practice that follows musical principles, but to a transformed and transformative practice that responds to the needs of the people involved (Westerlund & Partti, 2018). This kind of praxis is “morally-politically informed and oriented, reflective, agentic, context-specific, and transformative . . . working towards positive change” (Mahon et al., 2020, p. 17).

At the level of integrated activity systems (Engeström, 2001, 2005), the meanings made by the participants manifested how the activities of an ordinary choir or a second-language class differ from the activity of a language-aware choir, which cannot be reduced to the sum of the two activity systems (Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2023). In the integrated activity system music and language education are not merely interacting, but are merged in novel ways, thereby creating a new activity system. This structural level of examination also allows one to address the tensions between the individual actions of choir community members and the stable social structures in music and second language education “as sources of change” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136); hence, it uncovers the disruptions in disciplinary-focused activities to reflect on the varied social needs of newly arrived residents. The new needs, in this case, led to engendering a new double-meaning professional activity aimed at holistically integrating language learning into meaningful musical experiences within a social context of a choir, supported by two professionals representing distinct disciplines of music and language education. In terms of activity theory, this emerging choir activity can be seen as “a collective journey through the zone of proximal development of the activity” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). In this study, the activity theoretical lens was used for its potential to connect systemic thinking at a manageable level (activity level) with the exploration of a language-aware choir practice and individual actions within it. The theory has been criticised, however, for “oversocialising” the individual and omitting the subjective perspective (e.g., Billett, 2006; Larkin, 2009, 2019; Murphy, 2022; Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000), but, by contrast, subjective aspects were addressed here through Greene’s (1978, 1995, 2001) concepts of wide-awakeness and social imagination.

All in all, the present study suggests a new transdisciplinarity and transprofessionalism for approaching not just music education theory, but also practice: a logic that could rely on “more than one rationality, be able to cope with tensions and insecurities, and reconcile conflicting professional expectations” (Laes et al., 2024, p. 4; see also Vogd, 2017). Through transdisciplinarity, music education could better tackle “complex problems that affect society and individuals” (Rezaei, 2022, p. 6). Moreover, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on expanding professionalism in music education (e.g., Barrett & Westerlund, 2024; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021) in which the transdisciplinary approach integrates “knowledge and experience from various scientific and social partners to solve real-life situations” (Rezaei, 2022, p. xii). Overall, the study’s emerging theorisation provides an example of the transition towards a complex transdisciplinary transformation in music education as a response to the emerging needs in contemporary societies.

Conclusion

This study promotes novel transdisciplinary approaches to music education in the midst of the interconnected challenges of contemporary societies. Through the emerging theorization of a language-aware choir practice, the study communicates the transformative power of trans-professional practices and encourages further use of complex transdisciplinarity in music education research. The theorisation also sets thinking with activity systems (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001) in dialogue with the concepts of wide-awakeness and social imagination (Greene, 1978, 1995, 2001). This emphasises the continual creation of a new reality that is not predetermined by established disciplinary traditions or habits of action, but allows an open horizon for boundary-crossing activities and fosters a creative mindset and boldness in experimentation when merging different disciplines nonhierarchically. In the language-aware choirs the creation of a new reality is an ongoing process of co-construction that draws on the real-life needs of its participants with immigrant backgrounds. This coevolving process holds transformative potential not only for the choir practice and the personal and professional lives of the choir community members, but also for expanding socially engaged and responsible music education.

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Author contributions

Johanna Lehtinen-Schnabel: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing—original draft.

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Ethical approval and informed consent statements

The ethics committee of the University of the Arts Helsinki approved this study. The construction and handling of unpublished data for this research adhered to the Ethical Instructions of the University of the Arts (UNIARTS 2015), the code of ethics of the European Commission (EC 2010), and the Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2012). The study has received research permissions from the related organisations according to their research integrity guidelines. In addition, DPIA (Data Processing Impact Assessment) has been processed and approved by the Data Protection Officer at the University of the Arts Helsinki. All the participants of this study have provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Data availability statement

Owing to its sensitive nature the research material of this study cannot be shared.

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Notes

1. Integration training aims to give better possibilities for some immigrants (unemployed, at least 17 years old, having lived in Finland for fewer than 3 years) to integrate into Finnish society. The requirement to participate concerns both labour market and independence training, funded by unemployment benefits.
2. I use the notion of language-aware choir, which I have created, to foster a sensitised and responsive approach to engagements with language in a choir context, which can include language learning. Language awareness in a choir also acknowledges the concept of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2018), in which all possible linguistic resources (e.g., participants' first languages) and other resources (e.g., embodied, material, and spatial) are harnessed to support communication and to overcome the monolingual bias in teaching and learning (Hua et al., 2020).
3. The understanding of meaning here stems from pragmatist thinking and John Dewey's holistic ideas—which also provide frames of reference to activity theoretical thinking (Miettinen, 2006) and Greene's (1978, 1995, 2001) concepts underpinning this study. As Dewey emphasised, “an event can have an infinite number of meanings and selection involves beliefs, values, and ideology” (Westerlund, 2002, p. 42). Importantly, experience is about “doing, trying out deliberately meanings in life and undergoing” (p. 47). As Westerlund denotes, in the Deweyan sense, “it is this undergoing and doing that gives us meaning” (p. 47). Musical meanings “actualise themselves in a musical event [. . .] where meaning is experienced as a meaning of the whole situation” (pp. 44–45). Meanings “are not in the things, but rather produced by social interaction” (p. 41). Meanings are thus both individual and social, situational and contextual, and deeply relational.
4. The language teacher, for instance, suggested new songs, helped choir participants with the creation and re-creation of song lyrics, clarified specific second-language issues related to song lyrics when needed, helped with translating lyrics and other things that came up during the rehearsals, and created “funny language songs” in collaboration with the music teacher.
5. Rami also shared beautiful videos of his daughter singing the choir's songs.

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