

Enhancing Achievement Motivation among Economically Disadvantaged University Students through SFBT-Informed Vocal Music Education

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Abstract: Grounded in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), this study explores how vocal music education may support the enhancement of achievement motivation among economically disadvantaged university students. In the context of Chinese higher education, student financial aid has gradually shifted from material assistance alone toward development-oriented support. However, economically disadvantaged students may still experience what Chinese educational discourse often calls “psychological poverty,” referring to low self-efficacy, weakened self-identity, emotional inhibition, and limited motivation for self-development^[1]. Taking the course “*Vocal Music Appreciation and Training*” under the “Zhuming Program” at South China Agricultural University as the practical context, this study constructs an integrated framework connecting SFBT, achievement motivation, and the therapeutic functions of music education. Based on classroom observation and teaching reflection, the study proposes a progressive intervention mechanism of “physiological regulation—emotional buffering—cognitive reconstruction—action construction—behavioral reinforcement.” SFBT techniques, including normalization, exception questions, scaling questions, relationship questions, miracle questions, and the EARS model, are translated into concrete pedagogical strategies within vocal training. Preliminary teaching observations suggest that this integrated approach may help students reduce anxiety, recognize existing resources, accumulate small successful experiences, and gradually strengthen their motivation to pursue success. The study contributes a classroom-based pathway for integrating mental health education with disciplinary teaching and for supporting economically disadvantaged students in becoming active agents of personal development.

Keywords: Solution-focused brief therapy; Vocal music education; Economically disadvantaged university students; Achievement motivation; Self-efficacy

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1. Introduction: From financial aid to development-oriented support

Economically disadvantaged university students are students who, due to family financial hardship, face difficulties in covering educational and daily living expenses. In China, the expansion of higher education has made this group increasingly visible within universities. According to the “*2024 China Student Financial Aid Development Report*,” released in 2025, 44.9561 million instances of financial assistance were provided to students in regular higher education institutions in 2024^[2]. This indicates that financial aid remains an important part of higher education governance.

At present, China has established a multi-dimensional aid system that includes scholarships, grants, student loans, work-study programs, subsidies, and tuition reductions. These measures have effectively reduced students' financial pressure. Nevertheless, material assistance does not fully address students' deeper developmental needs. Under long-term financial pressure and social comparison, some students may experience low self-esteem, emotional sensitivity, avoidance of competition, and weak developmental motivation. In this study, "psychological poverty" refers not to a fixed personal defect, but to a developmental difficulty in which material disadvantage becomes internalized as low self-worth, limited agency, and reduced confidence in future achievement ^[3].

From the perspective of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, once basic physiological and safety needs are met, individuals are expected to move toward belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. However, economically disadvantaged students may encounter obstacles at the levels of belonging and esteem. These obstacles can weaken their achievement motivation, especially their motivation to pursue success. Therefore, support for this group should not remain at the level of financial assistance or short-term emotional counseling. It should further develop into a continuous educational process that strengthens self-efficacy, participation, and developmental agency ^[4].

Music education provides a valuable context for such support. Vocal music training involves breathing, bodily control, emotional expression, interpersonal attention, and performance experience. These features make it possible to connect musical learning with psychological growth. However, music courses often emphasize technical training while paying insufficient attention to students' emotional experience and inner motivation. To respond to this limitation, this study introduces SFBT into vocal music education and explores a classroom-based pathway for enhancing achievement motivation.

2. Literature review and theoretical basis

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy was developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. Unlike problem-oriented approaches, SFBT focuses on resources, exceptions, goals, and small achievable changes. Its central assumption is that individuals already possess useful experiences and capacities that can be activated through appropriate questioning and feedback. In educational settings, SFBT has been widely used to improve classroom behavior, learning engagement, self-confidence, and adolescent adjustment ^[5].

Chinese scholars have also explored the application of SFBT in student affairs and psychological counseling. Liang examined the SFBT intervention for economically disadvantaged university students from the perspective of social work. Liu, Cao, and Zhou introduced SFBT into psychological support for disadvantaged students through assessment tools such as SCL-90, PEI, SSRS, and ASLEC. Xu and Duan discussed the issue of "dual poverty," extending the application of SFBT to the combined difficulties of material and psychological disadvantage. These studies suggest that SFBT is compatible with the needs of economically disadvantaged students because it avoids labeling students as passive problem-bearers and instead emphasizes their strengths, coping strategies, and potential for change.

Achievement motivation is another key concept in this study. For economically disadvantaged students, the central issue is not necessarily a complete lack of motivation, but an imbalance between the motivation to avoid failure and the motivation to pursue success ^[6]. When students are highly sensitive to failure and external evaluation, they may reduce participation to protect self-esteem. Reduced participation then leads to fewer successful experiences and less positive feedback, which further weakens motivation. This produces a negative cycle of "low motivation—low participation—low feedback." The systemic interactions of these variables and the integrated framework are illustrated in **Figure 1**.

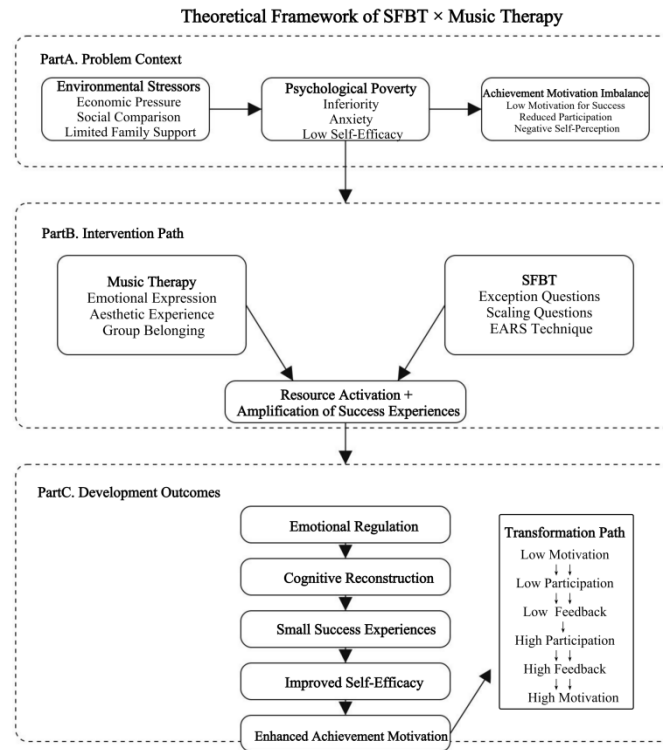


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of SFBT × Music Therapy.

Vocal music education can interrupt this cycle by providing repeated opportunities for embodied experience, emotional release, peer interaction, and small achievements. When guided by SFBT, vocal training can move beyond technical correction and become a process of activating resources and reconstructing motivation^[7]. Therefore, this study presents an integrated perspective on SFBT and vocal music education, rather than treating music as clinical therapy in a strict sense. The focus is on the therapeutic and developmental functions of music education within an ordinary classroom context. The conceptual model for breaking this negative loop and achieving a positive transition is shown in **Figure 2**.

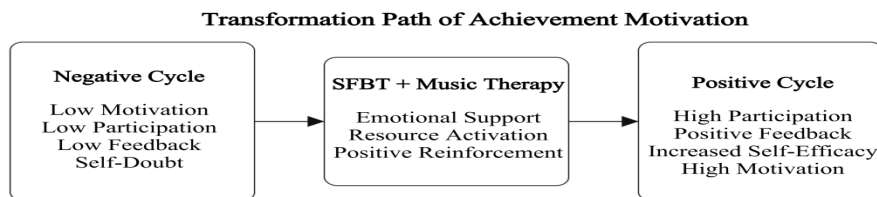


Figure 2. Transformation Path of Achievement Motivation.

3. Research context and method

The practical basis of this study is the course *Vocal Music Appreciation and Training* under the “Zhuming Program” at South China Agricultural University. Since 2017, the author has participated in this course as a teaching assistant^[8]. The

“Zhuming Program” is a development-oriented support program for students from economically disadvantaged families. It moves beyond financial aid alone and integrates financial support, competency training, psychological development, and cultural-artistic participation.

This study adopts a qualitative and practice-based research approach. The main sources of analysis include long-term classroom observation, teaching reflection, and the author’s experience of assisting vocal music instruction in the program. The study does not claim to provide a large-scale quantitative evaluation. Instead, it aims to summarize a pedagogical mechanism derived from classroom practice and to offer a theoretical model that can be further tested in future empirical research.

In the vocal classroom, economically disadvantaged students often show several typical responses: nervous breathing, fear of high notes, avoidance of eye contact, reluctance to sing alone, and self-denying comments after minor mistakes ^[9]. These responses are not simply technical problems. They reflect the interaction between physiological tension, emotional insecurity, negative self-evaluation, and avoidance behavior. Therefore, the intervention pathway must address multiple levels rather than focusing only on vocal technique.

4. An integrated SFBT model in vocal music education

4.1. Physiological regulation

The first level of intervention is physiological regulation. Vocal training begins with breathing, posture, resonance, and bodily awareness. In classroom practice, the teacher used long “hissing” sounds, diaphragmatic breathing, and rhythmic breath control to help students reduce physiological arousal and experience a sense of bodily controllability.

SFBT can be embedded into this process through normalization, pre-session change questions, and coping questions ^[10]. For example, when students feel nervous before singing, the teacher may explain that stage tension and unstable breathing are common experiences rather than personal failures. After breathing practice, the teacher may ask, “Do you feel slightly more relaxed than at the beginning?” This helps students notice small changes that have already occurred. If a student completes a phrase despite nervousness, the teacher may ask, “How did you manage to finish it even though you were still nervous?” Such questions shift attention from failure to coping ability.

Through this process, bodily relaxation is gradually transformed into psychological awareness. Students begin to realize that their physical state can be adjusted and that change is possible. This provides the foundation for emotional regulation and later cognitive reconstruction.

4.2. Emotional buffering

The second level is emotional buffering. Many economically disadvantaged students are highly sensitive to evaluation. In vocal classrooms, this sensitivity may appear as avoiding eye contact, nervous laughter, low vocal volume, or reluctance to perform individually ^[11]. Therefore, the teacher should first create a psychologically safe environment before requiring expressive performance.

Classroom activities such as small-group singing, eye-contact exercises, and peer listening can help students gradually adapt to being heard and seen. SFBT techniques such as relationship questions, compliments, and cheerleading are useful in this stage. For instance, the teacher may ask, “Where do you think your classmates noticed improvement in your singing?” This allows the student to view their performance from a less self-critical perspective. The teacher may also give specific compliments, such as “Your emotional expression was fuller in this phrase,” rather than general praise.

In this way, vocal expression becomes a non-verbal channel for emotional release. Singing allows students to express feelings through resonance, breath, and sound before they can fully verbalize them. As students experience expression as bearable and even rewarding, their defensive responses decrease, and their willingness to participate increases.

4.3. Cognitive reconstruction

After emotional stabilization, the intervention moves to cognitive reconstruction ^[12]. The goal is to change students' interpretation of their ability and performance. When students make mistakes, they often generalize a single problem into a negative judgment, such as "I cannot sing this piece at all." SFBT helps interrupt this pattern by identifying exceptions and successful moments.

For example, when a student sings a passage with unstable large melodic leaps, the teacher may avoid focusing only on the mistake and instead ask, "Which measure felt more stable just now?" Follow-up questions such as "What else was better?" help the student recognize that the performance was not entirely unsuccessful. Relationship questions may then bring in the perspective of others: "If your classmates heard that phrase, where would they think you improved?"

The teacher can further guide students to compare stable and unstable passages from the perspectives of breath support, bodily relaxation, and psychological state. Presuppositional questions and questions about the first sign of change may also be used, such as "From which exercise did the high note begin to feel easier?" Through these questions, students learn how success was produced, not merely that success occurred.

This process encourages a shift from problem-oriented thinking to resource-oriented thinking. Students gradually move from "I cannot sing well" to "I can control certain parts, and I know what helped me do so." Such cognitive change strengthens self-efficacy and prepares students for action.

4.4. Action construction

The fourth level is action construction. Positive cognition must be translated into specific and achievable tasks. In vocal instruction, teachers should avoid setting overly difficult goals at the beginning. Instead, miracle questions, outcome questions, and scaling questions can help students construct concrete action pathways.

For example, the teacher may ask, "If your throat position stayed closer to the feeling of yawning, what would change in your singing?" This transforms the vague goal of "singing better" into concrete bodily indicators, such as laryngeal position, tongue relaxation, and breath flow. A scaling question may then be used: "On a scale from 0 to 10, what score would you give your current relaxation? What would help you move up by one point?"

Based on students' responses, the teacher can break down the task. Instead of requiring a complete song, the student may first practice one phrase or one short section. For students who avoid individual performance, participation can begin in small groups and gradually move toward solo expression. Each small task creates an opportunity for success with reduced pressure.

Through repeated small achievements, the belief "I can do it" becomes connected to actual behavior. Students move from observation and avoidance to active attempts, and classroom participation becomes more stable.

4.5. Behavioral reinforcement

The final level is behavioral reinforcement. A single successful attempt is not enough to form stable motivation. Students need repeated practice, structured feedback, and visible progress. In vocal training, the teacher may divide learning into steps such as breath control, vocal stability, phrase completion, and emotional expression. Each session should include a clear and achievable goal.

The EARS model—eliciting, amplifying, reinforcing, and starting again—can be used after each practice. The teacher first elicits success by asking, "Which part felt more relaxed?" Then the teacher amplifies it: "How did you manage to make that part more stable?" Next, the teacher reinforces the student's effort through specific feedback. Finally, the teacher starts again by asking what small adjustment can be tried next.

Group singing and choral practice further support reinforcement by increasing belonging and reducing performance pressure. Through repeated cycles of action and feedback, students gradually form a positive loop of "behavior—feedback—reinforcement." Their participation changes from occasional involvement to regular engagement, and their self-identity shifts from dependence on external encouragement to more active persistence. The pedagogical translation and

motivational functions of these specific SFBT techniques are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Application of SFBT techniques in vocal music teaching

SFBT Technique	Teaching Practice	Psychological Function	Motivational Outcome
Exception Questions	Successful Segments	Resource Awareness	Confidence
Scaling Questions	Emotional Evaluation	Self-Awareness	Goal Engagement
Relationship Questions	Peer Perspective	Reduced Self-Denial	Participation
Compliments & Cheerleading	Positive Feedback	Emotional Security	Motivation
EARS Technique	Progress Reinforcement	Success Consolidation	Behavioral Persistence
Task Assignment	Goal Decomposition	Anxiety Reduction	Continuous Participation

5. Discussion: A motivational enhancement loop

The integrated model proposed in this study is not a linear procedure but a dynamic loop. Physiological regulation reduces bodily tension; emotional buffering lowers fear of evaluation; cognitive reconstruction helps students identify resources; action construction transforms positive cognition into manageable tasks; behavioral reinforcement stabilizes motivation through repeated feedback. Together, these stages form a classroom-based pathway of “experience—adjustment—practice—feedback.” This forms the multi-level intervention mechanism shown in **Figure 3**.

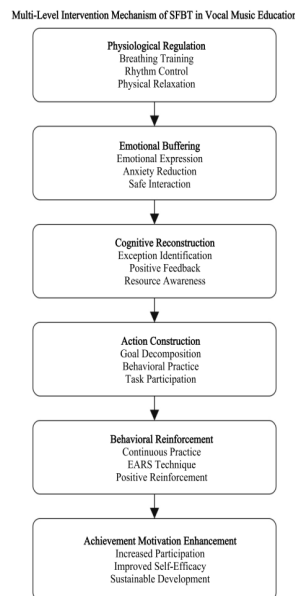


Figure 3. Multi-level intervention mechanism of SFBT in vocal music education.

From the perspective of achievement motivation, this model works in two directions. First, it reduces the motivation to avoid failure by lowering anxiety and defensive responses. Second, it enhances the motivation to pursue success by helping students accumulate small, concrete achievements. As a result, the negative cycle of “low motivation—low participation—low feedback” may gradually shift toward a more positive cycle of “participation—feedback—confidence—motivation.”

This model also expands the function of music education. Vocal music teaching is no longer limited to skill transmission. It becomes a developmental space in which students can experience bodily control, emotional expression, social connection, and self-efficacy. At the same time, SFBT is not applied as an external counseling technique but is translated into everyday classroom language and teaching strategies. This makes psychological support more accessible, less stigmatizing, and more continuous.

6. Conclusion

This study explored pathways for enhancing achievement motivation among economically disadvantaged university students through an integrated perspective of SFBT and vocal music education. Based on classroom practice in the “Zhuming Program,” the study proposed a multi-level mechanism involving physiological regulation, emotional buffering, cognitive reconstruction, action construction, and behavioral reinforcement.

Preliminary teaching observations suggest that SFBT-informed vocal music education may help students reduce anxiety, recognize their strengths, accumulate small successes, and strengthen their motivation to pursue success. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to move psychological support from the counseling room into the classroom and to connect mental health education with disciplinary instruction.

However, the study has limitations. Its conclusions are mainly based on classroom observation and teaching reflection, and the sample scope is limited. Future research should include clearer participant information, longer intervention cycles, pre- and post-test data, interviews, and cross-context comparison. With further empirical verification, the proposed model may provide a more systematic reference for development-oriented support for economically disadvantaged university students.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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