

Critical Friend Feedback Report

Sole lesson 5, game of echo patterns, 3'15'' -16'00''

Did I provide clear instructions for the echo patterns game? How could I improve them?

The instructions you gave prior to the game were adequate. The principal aim of your experiment is to enhance the ability to **immediately** transform sounds to actions, which proceeds with little or no conscious/analytical thinking. I notice that Sole has a slight tendency to try to solve the puzzles by analytic/verbal strategies, most notably if her first attempts were not completely correct. This is typical for adult music learners. I think there are two ways for increasing the quick/non-conscious/non-verbal transformation of sounds into actions:

1. The sequence of motifs has frequent range changes, for example: the first motif is in the range above C, the next in the range below C. By staying in one range for a longer while (creating a sequence of motifs out of the same pitch set) you make quick and non-analytic reproduction more feasible for Sole. This suggestion is in line with my previous feedback.
2. To what extent does Sole know what skill you aim to train by these exercises? Perhaps it helps her to understand that you deliberately aim to train quick and non-conscious responses/links. For example, if there is an error in her first try, instead of commenting on this verbally, either by you or her, the most relevant response is to just simply model the motif again and let her replicate it again, until it matches. Perhaps this aligns with the concept of **andragogy**, in which it is assumed that understanding/knowing the purpose of what is learned (and how) enhances learning.

Feedback Experiment Joana

Playing by Ear - Critical Friend

Yulia 6 – 8'30''-14'00''

General questions

1. *What are your thoughts on the sequence of the proposed exercises? Do you believe it effectively fosters a progressive build-up that enhances the students' advancement? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?* – I think you can build up the difficulty of the exercises more gradually. The first fragment introduces the pitch set C-D-Eb. Next, you could present Yulia with more motifs based on this same pitch set. This allows her to get to know this melodic material better. Also, as she already knows the limitations of the pitch range, it is more likely that she can **immediately** transform what she hears into playing, without prior analysis. This immediate transformation of sound into action is relevant, based on what you summarized in your theoretical framework chapter.
2. *How did you find the exercises introduced throughout the classes? Please provide comprehensive feedback on your experience with them.* I will answer this question later on, when I have heard more excerpts.
3. *Do you see value in the exercises presented? What impact do you think developing the skill of playing by ear has on the students' overall development?* In general, I think ear training is highly valuable, as it boosts the development of many other musical skills, such as memorization and sight-reading. [Not very surprising!] In a later stage, perhaps I can take a look at how the ear-training exercises you present Yulia and Sole with are connected with the repertoire they play.

Specific question

I noticed that Yulia found it easier to recognise patterns with which she was already familiar. For example, she found it easier to recognise a pattern in the major scale than in the minor scale. When is it appropriate to label small patterns? – In this lesson excerpt you reviewed the 'labels' of the three types of minor scales. I think this is all right, and it will not lead to the type of problem Chenette describes (too much declarative knowledge, too little perceptual skills). The reason is that you primarily train perceptual skills, with occasional labelling of the introduced elements **after** recognizing them perceptually (this is my answer to the question about the appropriate moment to label patterns). In general, as long as the knowledge of labels does not distract learners from processing what they heard and transforming it into actions, you are all right.

Sequence of melodies

- 8'20" – C D Eb D C
- 9'20" – C D Eb F G F Eb D C G C
- 10'30" – C B C D Eb F Eb D C G C (previously learned pattern)
- 12'00" – Review of three types of minor scales

Feedback CF Joana Riera Grimalt

Question about purpose of theoretical knowledge

At 22'40'', Sole asks a question about the purpose of knowledge of theoretical concepts, such as the names of intervals. More specifically, she notices that when she improvises, it sounds like a child, whereas if other people improvise, it sounds good. She wonders why this is the case. Apparently, in Yulia's lesson 5 something similar happened at 29', but I did not find an audio file of this lesson in SharePoint, so I could not check out this fragment. Related to these events, you asked me the following questions, which I will answer one by one:

How can I balance teaching theory without undermining early musical experiences or the natural internalization of music?

In general, you want to make sure that the development of aural perception skills is not hampered by theoretical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge can interfere with perception, especially in adult and perhaps also in some teenage students. This interference may be brought about by pupils trying to rely on 'rules' and knowledge to find answers to questions or to determine which notes they hear. The result can be that pupils suppress their musical intuition and come up with inaccurate answers or actions, or are unnecessarily slow in responding or acting. Specifically in improvising, students who rely too much on 'knowledge-first' strategies have a tendency to limit themselves to playing the same things over and over; the way they generate melodies can lose its intuitive quality.

In my experience, this situation can be prevented or mitigated by adopting a teaching/training approach in which the introduction of theoretical concepts such as names/labels of intervals, notes (both absolute pitch names and relative solfège syllables) rhythmic values (both their numerical names and rhythmic syllables used in rhythm languages) and names of chords are introduced **after** pupils have familiarized themselves **practically**. This implies that pupils are given plenty of time to first learn new tunes by ear in the most straightforward and intuitive way, namely by learning to sing them and then find them out by ear, without the burden of first completely learning a sequence of pitch names. In short, in my opinion the **timing** of the introduction of labels/names should be carefully considered, and too early introduction could be counterproductive.

The second teaching principle that can help bring about a supportive role of knowledge is to introduce names and labels by means of **association**. One cannot learn how to

recognize the colour blue by explanations, but it can be learned as a result of repeatedly hearing other people calling objects blue. The word blue and the perception of the colour blue become associated over time, so that you can learn to apply the label 'blue' accurately. A similar approach can be used in learning the application of musical labels, such as pitch names (relative or absolute). This entails that pupils learn the names of pitches as a result of them being presented to them simultaneously. The initial stage of the introduction of pitch names is to just simply sing familiar tunes on these names, and invite students to sing along. In intermediate stages, step by step students are invited to 'translate' melodic fragments into the pitch labels. The final stage is that students can independently transform melodies into sequences of pitch labels, but it generally takes a lot of time and effort to develop this level of skill. In short, promote association, and try to avoid explaining.

As for improvisation education, one of the main challenges is to build up the quality and sophistication of improvising while maintaining its intuitive and spontaneous nature. One of the ways in which you can deal with this as a teacher is to apply simple frameworks (limited sets of pitches, rhythms and/or chords, easy left hand patterns). By playing around with the 'boundaries' of these frameworks, you can guide pupils towards discovering new musical possibilities without first having to digest 'a ton of theory'.

One of our colleagues, Ida Vujovic, teaches Music Theory in Education, which is a component of the Educational Skills course in the bachelor program in our conservatory. In her classes she also covers how pitch labels and other components of music theory can be taught through associative exercises. Very inspiring and so different from how these things are taught traditionally! In the future, you could consider contacting her, talking with her and observing some of her classes.

Should I always explain the reasons behind activities (andragogy), or should I focus on creating experiential learning moments?

Since you are teaching adults, explaining the purpose of activities can be helpful. As you have already experienced, sometimes they even explicitly ask you why they have to learn certain things. Sole's question is more focused on how she can learn to improvise in ways that sound 'good' (which is a short question requiring a long answer). Of course you answer these questions. I don't think you should **always** explain reasons behind activities, as this may consume too much of your lesson time. But especially when you notice that students benefit from knowing why they train certain skills, you can just simply tell them.

The big challenge here is how you can effectively convey the purpose of activities in a short amount of time, without going into technical details. I guess that **metaphors** could be effective tools for conveying purpose. In my experience, analogies between language perception and production (listening, understanding, speaking, expressing ones

thoughts, reading writing) can be effective for helping pupils develop ideas about why certain activities (playing by ear, clapping exercises, singing, improvisation, transposition, analysis, composition, sight-reading) may help them. For example, if you learn a new language, the ultimate goal is to be able to express your own thoughts and ideas in this language, not just to be able to read out loud the thoughts and ideas that other people have written down. Similarly, improvisation in music is the expressing of one's own musical ideas, and therefore improvisation trains one's understanding of the musical language (metaphorically speaking).

What strategies can foster a cooperative and engaging learning environment?

That's a broad question. I will focus my answer on the training of aural skills. Some thoughts:

- **Pick tunes pupils like.** Ask them what music/tunes/composers/artists they enjoy and identify useable material from this. Since the piano is such a flexible and versatile instrument, a wide range of repertoire is in principle playable. Even if pupils like pieces that are way too difficult for them to play, usually there are bits and pieces of these pieces that could potentially be used as learning materials. For example, if a student enjoys listening to Rachmaninoff, perhaps you can work on the main melody of his 3rd piano concerto as an ear-training activity. The same applies to pop songs: some fragments of pop songs are perfect material for ear-training purposes, like for example the introduction of 'Faded' by Alan Walker.
- **Deal with mistakes in a healthy way.** I guess you already know a lot about this topic. By means of your behaviour during the lessons, you can convey to pupils that making mistakes is a normal and unavoidable element of learning. Example: if they struggle with something, allow them plenty of time to find the solution, and encourage them to simply carry on searching. If necessary, you narrow down the options to choose from, so that finding the right note becomes feasible. [I guess I am stating the obvious here]
- **The way you gradually build up the difficulty during an activity.** I guess I will look into this a lot when I comment upon your lessons!