Fiddle

A Different View of Literacy: "Music as a Second Language"

by Aaron Lohmeyer

The skills required by contemporary musical practices are rapidly diversifying. As curricular reforms aim to keep pace with the forms of music our communities seek out as either patron or performer, we see increasing calls to diversify both our programs and our pedagogical approaches. Indeed, the musical lives our students wish to live are as varied as our communities. While this may represent a challenge to music teachers today, the task of diversification may be narrowed by viewing music as a kind of language acquisition. With this perspective applied toward "music literacy,"[1] we may be encouraged to consider what a contemporary literacy might look like. While the language metaphor is not new to string teachers familiar with the Suzuki method, the "Music as a Second Language" (MSL) pedagogy seen in Modern Band approaches extends the metaphor and invites a more inclusive view of literacy.[2]

Modern Band is an approach to music instruction which starts with student interests; encourages approximations of sound models; employs learning by ear; embraces notations beyond the five-line staff; and provides ample space for improvisation, arranging, and composition. While Suzuki's Talent Education bears some similarities, the intellectual author of MSL, David Wish, believes a deeper examination of language learning can take Suzuki inspired ideas beyond their historical applications. The ends of this approach may not just be students who can replicate another's ideas with artistry and precision, but rather possess an ability to express their own musical perspective to their own community: students who can speak music. Herein lies one of the most fundamental challenges to historical notions of music literacy currently being debated in the field of music education.[3] As our new national standards embrace Create, Perform, and Respond, a musical literacy for today's diverse digital media landscape necessitates a turn away from mono-cultural notions of literacy and toward one which embraces agency, choice, and diverse interests. MSL provides one model for centering voice and choice as literacy is explored through the interests of the student.

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Music as a Second Language (MSL)

David Wish started as an English as a Second Language teacher. When he started to teach elementary guitar and songwriting, he knew little about the music education methods most teachers are trained in today. As a result, he wound up teaching using principles of ESL rather than any established music pedagogy. This oriented his music instruction towards language acquisition. His methods have since formed the backbone of the popular music pedagogy movement. This article will examine three ideas from Wish's article "Music as a Second Language" (MSL): the stages of language development, the monitor hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis.

1. Stages of language development

> "To explore how learning music might be akin to learning language it is worth asking a simple question: 'How is it that we all learn our native language in the first place?'"[4]

When a baby is born, they listen a lot, taking in all the sounds around them. This is known as pre-production (birth-8 mos). As they discover their own voice, early experimentation comes out as "babble" (speech approximation 8 mos–2 yrs). While lacking any recognizable relationship to language, it is interesting to note the very musical aspect of this early communication as tone, rhythm, and dynamics are used to communicate expressive intent through prosodic features alone. Eventually, this babble turns into speech emergence (2–3 years) as single words for needs and wishes come out as "mama," "dada," or "hungee." Next, in intermediate fluency (2.5–4 yrs) short sentences are generated with subjects, objects, verbs, and lots of grammatical errors. At this stage, the caretaker is generally so excited about the ability to

1 Quotations used to signify a more expansive view of music literacy than reading notes from staff notation. A broader view of music literacy is to know what music means through its grammatical principles (syntax), expressive devices (prosody), and how it is situated by a social context (audience/performer dynamic).

2 Wish, D., Speicher, C., Zellner, R., & Hejna, K. (2015). Music as a second language & the modern band movement. *Vernona, NJ: Little Kids Rock*.

3 Campbell, P. S., Myers, D. E., & Sarath, E. W. (2016). Transforming music study from its foundations: A manifesto for progressive change in the undergraduate preparation of music majors. In *Redefining music studies in an age of change* (pp. 59-99). Routledge.

4 Wish (2015, 6)

communicate with the child that all speech is met with excited approval rather than correction. This is key as the child develops a sense of linguistic efficacy and is rewarded by connecting with the people they care most about. Finally, fluency (3–5 yrs) demonstrates not just ability to express essential needs, but also uses language in ways that are responsive to others. Sentences come out as fluent expressions of thought rather than laborious addition problems of one word or grammar rule after the next. All of this happens at the oral/aural level before much serious attention is paid to reading and writing. Language is first an expression of need and social connection before it is abstracted through symbol systems.

While none of this may surprise a Suzuki-inspired teacher, MSL interprets the above as an invitation to encourage musical versions of babbling, use of simple words, and forming very simple sentences without much attention to technical or musical correction at the earliest stages of music learning regardless of age. Modern Band takes the language acquisition metaphor one additional step further than Suzuki by encouraging students to develop their own musical sentences rather than starting first with replicating the sentences of another. This makes MSL similar to Orff-inspired pedagogy as it centers student creation through elemental music. In this way, musical syntax is "acquired" rather than "learned." Grammar (musical syntax) is introduced as a tool for more effective communication, not just as a rule that must be obeyed.

In the classroom, this may mean a teacher looking away from intonation errors or even technique mistakes during *certain activities* which are designed to encourage improvisation and composition (*italics* stress "certain activities;" correction is perfectly appropriate for other technique-oriented tasks). Additionally, playing with limited pitch sets over a backing track is not only a great tool to learn a scale while embedding student agency and choice, but such exploration is also an opportunity for students to develop their own melodic vocabulary. Finally, letting go of perfectionism at the early stages is not just a teacher survival strategy, but may also be encouraging students to seek out their own musical voice.[1]

2. Monitor Hypothesis

> "The 'Learned System' is the one that consciously grapples with grammar and rules. It does so by means of what Krashen refers to as a 'Monitor.' While a second-language learner attempts to speak, or even before opening their mouth, he/she uses their Monitor to internally scan for errors, and uses the Learned System to make corrections."[2]

When we *learn*, rather than *acquire* a language, we may have lots of rules in our head about what is right or wrong. While it is good that we know the rules as we mature, if we are loaded with too many rules before we have had adequate time to acquire basic fluency, this can make us overly self-conscious about our own musical ideas and lead us into a fluency inhibiting self-consciousness. Wish calls this monitor a "cop." Wish says that "only the acquired system is able to produce spontaneous speech" primarily because the learned approach stops us in our tracks with a hyperactive internal monitor. We effectively over-police our speech and then lose touch with our reflex for authentic self-expression.

Music education seems to be unique within arts education areas as it does not tend to produce fluent creators, but rather fluent re-creators; the monitor hypothesis may offer perspective to this phenomenon. Could it be that the conceptual framework we introduce very early in development like measurable pitch, strict metronomic approaches to pulse, metered rhythm, and tonality all generate various forms of monitors telling us we are about to get it wrong? Other musical traditions, particularly oral traditions where musical participation and creation at the adult stages are more prevalent do seem to have less rigid views of correct sound production and organization; consequently, these traditions also produce more composing and improvising musicians.[3] As the current music standards aim to bring Create into common practice, our beginning students may benefit from classrooms where simple improvisation and playing by ear activities are encouraged. In such early production activities, grammatical correction may be minimized in concept exploration activities wherein mistakes are highly likely and are actually a key part of the learning process.

3. Affective Filter Hypothesis

> "Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. A student's debilitating anxiety, low motivation and low self-esteem can and often do combine to form a mental block that prevents successful second-language acquisition. Krashen calls this mental block the affective filter."[4]

The affective filter is essentially a learning block that arises when students feel judged, incompetent, or unmotivated. Despite the quality inputs which may be a part of the lesson, this wall essentially filters out these inputs and prevents learning from occurring. In second language acquisition, the affective filter arises when the social learning environment does not create sufficient space for student voice and choice or when that voice or choice is met with immediate disapproval. Authoritarian classrooms where achievement is generally rooted in compliance with very narrow rules for student expression create a high affective filter. In contrast, classrooms where students can be themselves with their friends create a very low affective filter. Students who have opportunities to practice speaking with friends in low-stress settings will receive more practice with grammar and vocabulary. In language learning classrooms, it is a general rule that only students who dare to speak *with mistakes* actually learn to speak.

Translated to the music classroom, lowering the affective filter may involve a number of strategies. It could be lowered through small group work on technical passages rather than repetitive teacher-led drill in front of their peers. Allowing multiple groups to work simultaneously in one room may feel chaotic for a few minutes, but students will get back on task as they are called back to full ensemble work. They are accustomed to this contrast between student-led and teacher-led work in their other classrooms. Repertoire reflecting their own community or identity may also lower the affective filter. Encouraging more trial and error learning through ear-playing is a

1 Dobos, B., Piko, B. F., & Kenny, D. T. (2019). Music performance anxiety and its relationship with social phobia and dimensions of perfectionism. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 41(3), 310-326.

2 Wish (2015, 10)

3 Hill, J. (2018). *Becoming creative: Insights from musicians in a diverse world.* Oxford University Press.

4 Wish (2015, 11).

great way to acquire a "fail forward" mentality. Finally, the affective filter hypothesis suggests that our definition of excellence needs to be more expansive than perfectionism. Students will not play perfectly. Insisting on perfection is to raise the affective filter so high that anxiety-induced burnout becomes a long-term hazard.

Principle to Practice

Our school started an old-time string ensemble this year. We started with teacher-selected "canonical" works like *Bile Them Cabbage, Wagon Wheel, Blue Ridge Cabin Home* and *I'll Fly Away*. We generally practiced by playing along with the recording, playing past our mistakes. Students could choose to use tablature or staff notation. Students were encouraged to sing the melodies if they wished, but there was no formal instruction or direction to do so. Once we had a few songs memorized, the class was invited to find other contemporary bluegrass style music they wanted to play or pop song covers they would like to translate into a bluegrass style.

As students began to select the repertoire, I was stunned by the motivational shift. They started to rehearse after class. They learned how to sing the harmony parts without any classroom instruction. They took pictures and videos of their playing posted to social media. They learned solos from the recordings or other resources online. Suddenly, we had more material than we could fit onto an end of semester program.

Applying MSL was a challenge for me as I had to let go of my correction reflex and also allow time for the class to just socialize over their musical preferences. As a jazz band director, I was already comfortable with the improvisation piece of MSL instruction; but I'm still a rehearsal minute counter. Yet, once I could relax and just let the classroom be an informal space where my students could *play* music (not just *do* the teacher's music), they did not want to stop. This displayed how student agency indeed fosters intrinsic motivation.

Lessons I Learned:

1. Reframe "warmup" as either skill builders or concept exploration. This provides greater clarity for class time as either of technical or creative focus.
2. Use lyric chord sheets as notation. This is an increasingly common form of notation for any contemporary musician. Play the recording while the class either focuses on harmonic accompaniment ideas or picking out the melody by ear as the lyrics function as rhythmic notation.
3. Let students collaborate in the creation of simple arrangements. Learn a way to successfully play through chords, a bass line, and the melody. Decide how these pieces can be assembled in various instrumental combinations to make a short tune into a performance length song.
4. Students should first know the kinds of technical and cognitive challenges involved in learning through an MSL approach before they take on the responsibility of repertoire selection. This will help students select music that is within their reach.

Conclusion

MSL offers a new perspective to teaching a 21st century music literacy for our diverse communities. As digital media spaces are dominated by user-generated content, the need to provide students with the skills and knowledge to participate in these creative spaces is a critical mission for any literacy program. Yo-Yo Ma was an early supporter of the MSL movement through *Music Will* (formerly *Little Kids Rock*, founded by David Wish). While it is exciting to see icons like Ma participate in the reformation of music literacy for a diverse and digitally connected world, the real work is to be done as teachers seek out new pedagogies which may more directly reach the musical needs of their communities. MSL provides one such approach which may lead students to effectively "speak music" by finding their own voice in their music.

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