

A Linguistics-Informed Approach to Music Pedagogy

Teaching involves talking. Imagine walking into a music lesson to be taught without words – aside from the usual playing demonstration, the teacher might use gesture, photos and images, humming or non-syllabic singing, maybe even employ a poke or squeeze on the wrist to assess grip tension on an instrument, but no words. It's an interesting thought to consider, and would certainly provide some informative value for students, but in a long term learning situation, might it fail to provide instruction around the deeper issues we face with music regarding the philosophical whys and physiological hows? It is a difficult scenario to imagine, since classical music continues to be taught in a very traditional way, but with technological advancements, perhaps we will soon discover new ways that are not so language heavy. (see Peterson) For now, let's consider the current methods we use to teach, and examine the underutilized potential of language to support and encourage our students to achieve their full potential.

Humans are incredibly well adapted to learn and understand language, seeing that it is our primary means for social interaction. (Pinker) Studying the patterns of "teacher talk" can reveal where linguistic choices are helpful or hurtful to our cause as we attempt to build knowledge and skill sets in our students. Linguistic study is useful in the realm of music pedagogy in three major ways: it can be used to improve accuracy of student understanding, it can be used to support teaching philosophy, and finally it can provide useful tools for improving student-teacher relationships. It is imperative that we not forget that teachers are in a power position when they are tasked to instruct young people. This level of influence should not be underestimated. We can all remember teachers that have had immensely positive and negative effects on our lives. Teachers are closely involved in shaping student experiences and beliefs; the younger the student, the more pronounced the impact. (Green, "brain")

The words that we use are coded pieces of information that contain attachments and judgements based on our own beliefs, hopes and sometimes fears – may they be founded or unfounded. What students remember from their training can be strongly attributed to the teaching strategy that was employed. Effective teachers are able to communicate concepts in ways that promote lasting memory.

Language is a strong signifier of how the mind handles organizing and mapping concepts to one another; it also may reveal teacher bias, underlying value systems, and even an agenda. The role of language is not to merely label static thoughts and things; it actually has the ability to change the nature of the object by persuading beliefs and altering perspective. (Ahearn, 8) “Linguistic expressions can subtly change meanings and redefine our attitudes towards concepts referred to.” (Beatty, 59) Metaphor and other forms of figurative language are examples of this in action. (See Wolfe) Words can also have a remarkable ability to affirm, delete or rewrite our reality based on how we discuss the past. (Ahearn, 17) On a technical level, awareness of syntactic prominence, strategic co-articulation and semantic differentials could add value to our teaching skill sets so that we can communicate with more accuracy and effectively transmit our most inspired ideas.

Semantic Accuracy: Teaching for Understanding

Words are coded pieces of information that contain multiple meanings as well as connotative meanings. (Beattie, 59) To understand the full complexity of this, it’s important to note that meaning is not determined by the speaker, but through the interpretive moves of the listener. (Ahearn 7) This may attempt to explain why we are so often surprised that “students don’t learn what we think we teach”. (Duke) We make many assumptions in our interactions with others that we are not aware of the wide variety of interpretations of what we say. After a long explanation, we might ask “Do you know what I mean?” or “Do you understand” but so often students will simply nod yes habitually without stopping to think and answer truthfully. (Psathas, 16) Bob Duke’s belief that students come to us with different

experiences and knowledge indicates that we need to provide a variety of ways for students to integrate new ideas. (Duke) Scaffolding works when we have assessed the students' existing knowledge and then engineer the next steps in ways that relate to the previous experiences. Learning likely won't be meaningful unless it is able to be made personally relevant to a student – they may learn something by rote, but if that is the case, they will not have engaged in deep processing for long term retention.

We can start to be more vigilant by intentionally using words with semantic accuracy. This suggestion may prompt some eye rolls from those who would consider me a stickler for grammar, but the fact remains that the words and labels we use change the nature of the objects of our attention. (Ahearn, 8) For example, by labelling a “task” as a “problem”, we have attached a negative feeling (or charge) to the activity rather than applying a neutral label to something that merely requires action. Wording may change the positive or negative charge that we have towards that activity. If we aim to teach in a way that is student-centered and removes teacher bias, then we need to be aware of any positive or negative charge that we have applied. (TSEP) If you give special attention to the negative or positive charges that are used in teaching, the values of the teacher will become very apparent and it is very likely your students are picking up on this too – consciously or not.

Another way that we assert semantic meaning is through syntactical prominence - the location of words within sentences. (Ng, Bradak, 157) This can be used to lay blame, or to strategically distance a subject from an action or effect it has produced. “Sally broke her reed” and “the reed broke when it nicked Sally's teeth” lays the responsibility in two distinct ways – is the issue that Sally is careless, or that the reed is fragile? The subject at the beginning of the sentence is normally where the responsibility is attributed, and the further apart the subject is from the consequence, the weaker the connection between the two becomes. (Ng, Bradak, 157) In a teaching context, knowledge of this norm allows us to adjust our strategy so that we might avoid a block in learning. This happens when a student feels

blamed for poor performance and becomes reactive or defensive. “Sally, your entrance was late” rather than “the note is not speaking on time for the entrance here” communicate the same idea but with different attributional prominence as well as the sense that the teacher is unhappy with Sally. Again, by removing Sally as the subject, it may be perceived as less of a personal attack and more of a neutrally charged and informative comment. It also provides information for how to correct the behaviour.

An interesting angle to explore while investigating the power of words is that of the Semantic Differential developed by Osgood, May and Miron in 1975. This is a scale that has been derived to measure and compare the “connotative meanings” of words. (Beattie, 59) In the book *All Talk*, Beattie explains how words can infer qualities to accompany their meaning. The example he uses is the word “girl”. He suggests the connotative qualities that are inferred with “girl” are small, pretty, good, nice, innocent etc. and uses the example of a courtroom lawyer using this term in reference to a young woman in order to absolve her of responsibility. (Beattie , 57) This scale rates words based on three dimensions: evaluative (good/bad, positive/negative), potency (severity, soft/hard) and activity (intensity, fast/slow). When considering the feedback that we as teachers use for our students, it may be useful to consider this sort of scale when in a teaching scenario. Overstating or understating the importance of a concept may be exacerbated by using a word that is either too severe or lacklustre. This is where word choices can create an impact in learning; potent words might leave a sting, whereas high activity words have the potential to increase excitement and motivation.

Lasting Learning

“Memory is learning that has persisted over time, information that has been stored, and, in many cases, can be recalled.” (Green, “Cognition”) To fully understand learning and effective teaching models, it was apparent to me that I needed to consider the role of cognition and language processing as critical integrative steps to learning. The most interesting components to me were considering

organization and system consolidation. Organization occurs in a straight-forward manner, humans tend to categorize objects and experiences based on concepts, and prototypes. A preference for speed over accuracy leads the brain to look for pre-existing prototype with which to match the new experience.

(Green) System consolidation refers to the process by which a memory that is initially “detail-rich and context-specific” is adapted into a more generalized version when recorded to the semantic memory.

(Mantismundi) In other words: long term memory records gist. (Pinker) These concepts are relevant to teaching strategy assuming teachers aim for long term retention of the lessons they are teaching.

Teachers can help facilitate the cognitive process by providing context, and by scaffolding the material for students. New concepts are mapped in relation to pre-existing knowledge (or prototypes) and by the attributed meanings that accompany the concepts. One common linguistic technique that is used to assist music training is the use of metaphor. By relating abstract concepts to extra-musical experiences, a student is able to map a relationship from the imagined experience to the desired musical outcome.

(Wolfe) “The staccato needs to be more dry”, “add more weight to the accents”, “this phrase should float”. The words “dry” “weight” and “float” represent our associations to sound that we relate to texture, and familiar physical characteristics that we have experiences with on a daily basis. Turning sound from intangible to tangible changes the students’ conception of how they will produce the new sound. Metaphor can also create a lasting impression based on the potency of the comparison. If there is a degree of shock value, it may leave a more dramatic imprint. Often the use of taboo words or words with lude connotation will stand out in someone’s mind for the reaction that it elicits. There are a variety of ways that teachers can constructively engage deep memory processing to improve long term retention. Some consideration should be given to the idea of how mnemonic devices work for memorizing musical foundations, but to examine language processing is outside the scope of this paper.

Supporting Your Teaching Philosophy

When we look at matching language to pedagogy, in order to encourage curiosity and openness in learning, we must be careful in our framing. Framing refers here to how an issue is presented, (Green) and it is shown to have a great effect on how we think about new things we encounter; “it also affects the actions we prescribe to deal with it”. (Beattie, 33) Say the aim is to encourage the “Growth Mindset” thinking, one framing method would be to remark on a student as being “hardworking”, “persistent”, “resourceful” rather than “talented”, “smart” or “gifted”. (Dweck) While all of these words would have what I consider a positive charge, some are in line with the “Growth” pedagogy, and some are not. A look at their semantic definitions reveal the assumptions that go along with the latter words as being yes-or-no, either you have it or you don’t, and that the skills are “god-given” and not self-given.

Consider applying linguistic concepts to the example of an autonomy-supportive philosophy. This is an approach that is generally geared toward fostering intrinsic motivation. (Pink) Rather than providing directives, teachers may wish to speak in terms of suggestions or invitations to their students. In this way the students are offered choice in regards to their participation in an activity – they are more likely to be self-motivated in the activity if they feel that they have had some choice in the process. (Pink) Teachers should be careful, however, to recognize that, due to their power position, often questions are understood formulaically by students as directives. “Can you play this again with more energy?” should be followed by the appropriate student behaviour. (Heath) In many ways, our students are already conditioned to respond in certain ways when asked certain questions, and we should consider whether our conversations are thoughtful enough to break through the predictable sequence of responses. (Psathas, 17)

Strategic questioning is an approach that attempts to step outside of linear thinking and get closer to more meaningful discourse. Using a student-centered philosophy, the teacher poses a question and allows the students to engage with the problem resulting in the construction of knowledge. (TSEP)

This strategy has a basis in the Socratic Method, which is considered a “control-oriented teaching style” where students are led through a line of questioning towards accepting “the ‘correct’ view”. (Goody, 42) While teachers may adapt strategic questioning to be more open-ended, without a specific outcome in mind, it does seem that there is an inherent potential to “maneuver” a student towards a specific way of thinking. (Goody, 42) Detectives are known to use this in order to elicit confessions during interrogation. Lawyers use this when questioning witnesses during a trial. Framing here becomes very important in regards to how the teacher may wish to steer the conversation. Any inflection of judgement or preference towards underlying values may affect the answers that a student will feel safe expressing.

Developing the Student-Teacher Relationship

How much we care about students comes across through in our verbal language and body language as we interact with them. How do we show that we care? In the content of what we say, and the topics that we engage in, we can encourage students to speak about themselves through lines of questioning. Showing interest can be in simply asking “how are you” and inquiring about extra-musical activities in their lives. Another form of caring is in using words and strategies that are customized to the student. Gentle words for students who may be self-conscious and in need of positive reinforcement, bluntness or humor for students who are able to laugh at themselves. It is important to get to know your students to be able to determine what kind of feedback they are receptive to. For more sensitive students, hearing the words “failure”, “bad”, or other judgements of their playing may be taken personally, to mean that *they* are “bad”. In choosing to be more specific in your feedback, rather than making generalized statements, a student can learn where they need to improve and how to achieve it. By saying “the articulation here can be more defined” rather than “it sounds muddy” not only focuses on a positive constructive action to be taken, it avoids language that infers a judgement. The idea of “better” and “worse”, two words that are commonly used by teachers, indicate an act of judgement that

a student is likely to participate in with us. Perhaps a more conducive way to assess improvement is to ask “how did your sound change when...?” or “did you feel that you were more or less able to...?” “how did the level of challenge or ease change when...?”. (MUS6400 journal, Oct. 22)

Another way to show care is to check in. Show concern for any physical adjustments a student is making and to check how comfortable they are will improve rapport and show that the students' experience is important in going forward with the process. How students feel about their teachers has been determined to be an important factor in their ability to learn. (Heath, 3) When their safety feels threatened, their brain is not in a state that is most receptive to new learning, and coping mechanisms may become the primary source of the behavioral adaptations. That is why providing a judgement-free learning environment will be so beneficial towards providing a safe climate where students can be themselves. (Deci) Politeness and friendly gestures are other forms of relationship building that are based in linguistic norms which will need to be explore in more depth in future research. (see Goody)

Final Thoughts

Since the prevailing method of teaching in the western art music school is through one-on-one mentorship, much of the way that musical thought is transferred to students is through talk. Demonstration and imitation play only a small part in how we, in North America, have come to learn our instruments. The ability to coach, provide pointers, and make corrections to our students' technique, is what allows us to speed up the learning process, and why private coaching is seen as necessary for achieving mastery. Considering the power of words, it is incredibly important that teachers make linguistic choices that match their pedagogy, support student-centered learning when possible, engage in meaningful and informative conversation with their students, and recognize that any teaching agenda is highly value-based. In a teaching context, instructors should be aware of the affects that words have on students. After all, young adults are highly perceptive and adept at using the information around

them when building their sense of self in relation to the world at large. Applying a linguistic understanding to the teaching of music can help clarify the meaning of abstract concepts, enhance the effectiveness of teaching philosophy and can help to develop positive student-teacher relationships. This paper has merely skimmed the surface of the possible application of linguistics to music pedagogy. The complex nature of language is sure to provide many more clues about how our students cognitively respond to instruction and how we as teachers may continue to adapt our teaching to match the diverse needs of students.

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