

MUSIC AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

LITTLE KIDS ROCK PEDAGOGY by David Wish

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

I went into teaching for the same reason that so many people are called to the profession. I believe in kids, in their amazing potential and that the future lies with them. By becoming a teacher, I hoped to make a difference in children's lives and, in so doing, make my own modest contribution to a better world for us all. The ten years I spent in the classroom were richly rewarding and only strengthened these beliefs.

Since the founding of Little Kids Rock, the media has often noted that I developed the pedagogy that guides our teachers while working as a first-grade, ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher. This is true. However, a more informative statement would be that I developed this new methodology precisely because I was an ESL teacher.

In the following article I explain how my formal training as an ESL teacher and the informal musical training I receive as a youth outside of the public school system lead me to the creation of a new, hybrid methodology that I call "Music As A Second Language." As with any pedagogy, "Music As A Second Language" is a tool for your teaching tool-belt, a spice for your instructional skillet. Please season your classes with it to suit your taste. My only hope is that you will find it useful as a means of bringing the transformational gift of music into your students' lives.



With my first ever guitar class at our first ever concert back in 1996.

Little Kids Rock approaches music as if it were a language, a second language. Why a second language? Because no one is born into a family where music is the primary language.

Like spoken language, music can express the full range of human emotions and does so by using its own distinct grammar, meter and vocabulary. Like language, it has a both a 'spoken' and a written form.

There is certainly nothing new about likening music to a language. Poets, writers and authors have been doing so for some time now...

"Music is the universal language of mankind."
~Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"Music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life bringing peace, abolishing strife."
~Kahlil Gibran

"Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent."
~Victor Hugo

"Music is well said to be the speech of angels."
-Thomas Carlyle

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MANY PEOPLE SAY,
'MUSIC IS A LANGUAGE,'
BUT IT IS SELDOM
TAUGHT AS ONE."

– VICTOR WOOTEN,
BASS VIRTUOSO



Victor Wooten at a
Little Kids Rock School

Likening music to language is more than just an artistic flourish. The renowned and brilliant music educator, Dr. Shinichi Suzuki had a language-based epiphany as he lamented the elitist nature of music education in his native Japan and how it prevented so many children from becoming music makers.

Suzuki marveled at the fact that virtually every child in Japan mastered the complex and challenging Japanese language by the tender age of five or six. He considered this commonplace occurrence a seminal cognitive accomplishment. If they could do this, he reasoned, why then couldn't they master the language of music since it was likely even easier to do than learning to speak their native language? He believed this to be true for children the world over. If they could master their native language or mother tongue, they could certainly master the language of music.

Speaking at a festival in 1958, Dr. Suzuki succinctly summarized his feelings about the connection between language and music and how it impacted his methodology which he referred to as "Talent Education." He said that he had:

"...realized that all children in the world show their splendid capacities by speaking and understanding their mother language, thus displaying the original power of the human mind. Is it not probable that this mother language method holds the key to human development? Talent Education has applied this method to the teaching of music: children, taken without previous aptitude or intelligence test of any kind, have almost without exception made great progress. This is not to say that everyone can reach the same level of achievement. However, each individual can certainly achieve the equivalent of his language proficiently in other fields."

Suzuki was moved by the connection between language and music and was convinced that people's ability to master the complexities of speech was proof positive that all people had an innately musical nature. He employed some language-oriented techniques in his methodology (playing by ear, imitation) but did not take the analogy as far as we believe it can be taken.



ART EXISTS FOR THE HUMAN SPECIES. I THINK THAT ALL OF THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE ART, THOSE WHO TEACH ART... ALL OF YOU SHOULD BURN WITH THE OBLIGATION TO SAVE THE WORLD."

– Shinichi Suzuki

TAKING “MUSIC AS A LANGUAGE” FURTHER...

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?” Happily, linguists have studied this extensively and have a clear picture of how it all happens.

HOW WE ACQUIRE LANGUAGE

Do you remember learning to talk as an infant? Probably not. That is because the process of speaking happens naturally and subconsciously for us. Here are the predictable stages that we all go through on the road to speaking:

1) Listening or “Pre-Production” (birth - 8 mos.)

We all begin life as a quivering, raw and inexperienced bundle of nerves. We can make noise to be sure (see figure A at right) and we do so at great volume at times. However, none of these primal wails or random body noises (ever burped a baby?) constitutes a true building block of language. At this point in our development we have only one linguistic skill...we can listen.

Infants spend their time listening to the language going on all around them and begin absorbing its sounds all the while. We typically listen for six to eight months to all the chatter going on around us. Infants begin to speak by simply listening to the people around them.

2) Speech Approximation (8 months - 2 yrs.)

We leave the listening stage when we begin trying to imitate the sounds of the language that we hear all around us. Parents delight as their babies start to babble and to use “baby talk.” This babbling is an approximation of true speech. What sound like “nonsensical” syllables are actually sounds derived from the language that the baby is trying to speak. As babies babble, adults babble back, completing the approximation of a conversation (and making the adults look pretty silly at the same time)!



fig. A – Listening



fig. B – Approximation

3) Speech Emergence (2-3 years)

Many parents can remember the exact day and time that marked their own child's first word. Why? Because it is such an exciting event! We know intuitively that this marks a new stage for the child and also we know where the whole thing is headed.

Upon hearing that earth-shattering utterance (whether it be 'mama' or 'dada' or 'ball' or 'baby'), parents are likely to shout, "Eureka! She/he is talking!" That sounds a lot better than shouting, "She/he just entered the 'Speech emergence' stage of language acquisition!" However, that is precisely what happens when children start using single words.

After a while the single-words are strung together in multiple word strings like, "Mama, milk" or "Me go on." At this point the parents are likely to say "She/he is speaking in sentences!" That sounds better than saying, "Wow!! Sally just crossed the threshold into a new stage of language acquisition know as 'Intermediate Fluency'!"

4) Intermediate Fluency (2.5 - 4 years)

During this stage of language development, children begin stringing words together in increasingly sophisticated ways and use language to communicate an expanding range of ideas, emotions and needs.

Despite the fact that the child's speech may be replete with grammatical errors, adults generally focus on the meaning of the child's speech, recognize them for their communicative value and are likely to offer much direct correction of speech errors. For example, look at the highly unlikely dialog at right (figure D).

Why does the dialog at right feel so "off"? Why do we feel uncomfortable for the child and perhaps feel annoyed by the adult? We understand what the child means and that is the purpose of language: communication. This fictitious adult is belaboring points that are meaningless to the kid. Can't she just give the kid a break and give her some milk?



fig. C - Emergence



fig. D - Intermediate Fluency

5) Fluency (3-5 years)

During this stage of language development, children have developed what is commonly referred to as “native-like” proficiency. Their speech may still be a little rough around the edges and their vocabulary may be more limited than an adult native speaker’s but the vast majority of grammatical rules and constructions have been internalized and the child is fully fluent.

It is important to note that the journey toward acquiring a first language lasts between three to five years and that the entire process is completely unconscious.



fig. E – Fluency

6) Reading and Writing (3-5 years)

The conscious “learning” of a native language begins as children are introduced to reading and writing. This happens for most children at the age of five or six. At this point they have mastered the spoken language and are ready to learn the much more abstract written components, and some years after that they begin to learn grammar. It is important to note that reading and writing are introduced only AFTER a child has achieved fluency in their native tongue.



fig. F– Reading and Writing

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MUSIC MUST NOT BE APPROACHED FROM ITS INTELLECTUAL, RATIONAL SIDE, NOR SHOULD IT BE CONVEYED TO THE CHILD AS A SYSTEM OF ALGEBRAIC SYMBOLS, OR AS THE SECRET WRITING OF A LANGUAGE WITH WHICH HE HAS NO CONNECTION.”

-ZOLTÁN KODÁLY IN 1929

SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND “MUSIC AS A SECOND LANGUAGE” ...

We have covered how people start speaking their first language. However, music isn't anyone's primary language so we need to now turn our attention to how people start speaking a second language.

I spent ten years working as a first and second grade teacher in some rough and tumble, low-income districts in California. I was trained as a bilingual school-teacher. My students were native Spanish speakers and my job was to teach them to read and write in Spanish while at the same time helping them transition into English classes.

As a part of my training to teach non-English speakers, I studied the work of renowned linguist and educational researcher, Stephen Krashen, most notably his “Theory of Second Language Acquisition.” As a bilingual person myself, I was blown away by his theories! They had a profound impact on my teaching and were the pedagogical foundation of my successes teaching early elementary bilingual classes.

Krashen's ideas also inspired me to teach music ... in an entirely new way. To understand this we have to understand Krashen's theories.

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A “KRASH” COURSE ON KRASHEN: THEORY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Allow me to paraphrase Krashen's five big ideas about second language acquisition.

1 Acquisition vs. Learning

There are two, separate ways of for people to become bilingual. The first and most effective is the “acquired system” which is a natural, subconscious process similar to the way people pick up their primary language. It relies upon meaningful usage of the new language and natural communication. Speakers focus not on the “correctness” of their speech, but on the communicative act.



*LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
DOES NOT REQUIRE EXTEN-
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DOES NOT REQUIRE TE-
DIOUS DRILL.”*

-STEPHEN KRASHEN

The second way of processing a second language is the “learned system”. This relies on direct instruction and is a formal, conscious process. This results in academic knowledge ‘about’ the language, for example understanding specific grammar rules. According to Krashen, the ‘learned’ system is far less important and effective than the ‘acquired system’.

2 The 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 use their Monitor to internally scan for errors, and uses the Learned System to make corrections.

Your Monitor is sort of like an internal language cop that gives you a pass or a ticket depending upon your use of grammar. If you have ever tried to speak in a second language and had a thought like, “The second person plural of the verb ‘ir’ is ‘van’ but what would the command form of that be?” then you have had a run in with your own Monitor.

According to Krashen, the role of the monitor should be minor, being used only to correct deviations from ‘normal’ speech and to give speech a more ‘polished’ appearance. Self-correction occurs when the learner uses the Monitor to correct a sentence after it is uttered.

Such self-monitoring and self-correction are the only functions of conscious language learning. Only the acquired system is able to produce spontaneous speech. The learned system is used to check what is being spoken. In other words, you can’t rely on your internal Language Cop or Monitor to enable you to speak a second language.

3 The Natural Order Hypothesis

The acquisition of grammar follows a natural and predictable order. For a given language, certain grammatical rules tend to be acquired early while others late. This order is not independent of the learners’ age. Krashen however points out that the



The Monitor acts like a language cop.

implication of the natural order hypothesis is not that a language program syllabus should be based on the order found in the studies. In fact, he rejects grammatical sequencing as a means of language acquisition.

4 Input Hypothesis

According to Krashen, people acquire language when they receive “comprehensible input” or messages that they can understand. Put simply, if messages in a second language aren’t consistently understandable to the learner, they cannot acquire a new language. Messages are understandable to second language learners when they are just one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence. The input should be easy enough that they can understand it, but just beyond their level of competence. This is often referred to in ESL circles as “input + 1.”

5 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.”

I call the “affective filter” every music teacher’s worst enemy...but more on that later (page 12).

Krashen’s insights and theories form the cornerstone of much English as a Second Language (ESL) programming for immigrant children in the US today. School districts in cities like Los Angeles, New York, Dallas and others provide extensive ESL offerings for the very significant portion of their students who are non-native English learners. Teachers who have been trained to teach ESL in these communities and others like them learn Krashen’s theories and their implications on language instruction.



I HAVE THOROUGHLY ENJOYED WATCHING MY STUDENTS GROW MUSICALLY, BUT JUST AS IMPORTANTLY, IN THEIR OWN PERSONAL LIVES, THROUGH INCREASED SELF-ESTEEM, CONFIDENCE, AND CREATIVITY.”

**-TOBY QUARLES, HERNDON
MAGNET SCHOOL;
SHREVEPORT, LA**

MY ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSES

Back in 1996, I was deeply immersed in “teaching” English as a Second Language. I use quotation marks around the word ‘teaching’ because I had been trained in Krashen’s theories of Second Language Acquisition and my teaching was deeply informed by his ideas.

In my first-grade classroom there was no tedious study of grammar, no drills to elicit speech, no conjugation of irregular verbs and the direct “teaching” of English was a rarity. There was constant and plentiful exposure to comprehensible input in my classroom. There was a boatload of realia, real world objects such as piñatas, toys, coins, tools, etc., that successful second-language teachers use to illustrate and explore everyday living. Along with all the basics, culturally relevant and interesting topics were at the heart of our curriculum and our myriad of conversations.

Here is what I mean by relevant conversations. In my classroom a student might say something like:

“My mam worg Buger Kin”
(misspelling included to emphasize pronunciation)

Translated into standard English this would read:

“My mom works at Burger King.”

What a rich topic of conversation! “What is your mom’s name?” “Which Burger King does she work at, the one nearby or one further away?” “Do you eat there sometimes? Does she like it?”

Other students would pursue these conversations with linguistic abandon, pointing, gesticulating, miming, and using English in ways that might give the folks over at Webster’s Dictionary or Strunk & White a major coronary.



“I Buger Kin me!”

“I like, I like!”

“Me papá too, he go!”

“Me mom she not go. She have baby house. She have another.”

Before you knew it, the kids and I could be fully engaged in conversations about employment, the neighborhood, their families and the like: all from that simple sentence, “My mam worg Buger Kin.” And all thanks to Krashen’s “Acquired System” of language learning.

If I had wanted to focus on the “learned system” of language acquisition with my six-year olds (which would have been very a sadistic thing to do) I would have treated “My mam worg Buger Kin” not as a conversational treasure trove but as a problematic jumble, a tangle of errors and mispronunciations in desperate need of correction. Where would I begin with the “learned system”? My responses might look a little like these:

A LEARNED SYSTEM RESPONSE TO “BUGER KIN:”

“First of all, the word “mom” is pronounced (mäm) and the word ‘work’ ends with a “k” sound. More importantly, ‘work’ is the infinitive verb form and the student needs the second person singular form of the verb which is “works,” as in, “My mom works”. It is ‘Burger’ not ‘Buger’ and it’s ‘King’ not ‘Kin.’ Also, your sentence is missing a preposition after the word “works”. Does your mom work at, for, by or with Burger King?”

Wow. That would be six “corrections” or “interventions” for a sentence that has only five words. What kid learning English for the first time would want to speak next in class after a series of rebukes like these? Also, who would be able to even remember what we were all talking about in the first place? Conversation over!

Krashen once said:

“If the student isn’t motivated, if self-esteem is low, if anxiety is high, if the student is on the defensive, if the student thinks the language class is a place where his weaknesses will be revealed, he may understand the input but it won’t penetrate. It won’t reach those parts of the brain that facilitate language acquisition.”

In the “Learned System Response to “Burger Kin” example above, we would certainly create this kind of negative environment for the student. No self-respecting second language teacher who embraced Krashen’s framework would teach like this because it would raise their students’ Affective Filters. Directly correcting errors too early-on in the process of language acquisition is a serious no-no as the Burger King example illustrates.

If we scrutinize the footnotes in the “Learned System Response to “Burger Kin” paragraph above, we will see that it violates all the basic precepts of second language acquisition theory by emphasizing the conscious, direct teaching of grammatical rules and structures instead of allowing for free communication and the gradual, unconscious acquisition of language skills in the natural context of conversational exchange.

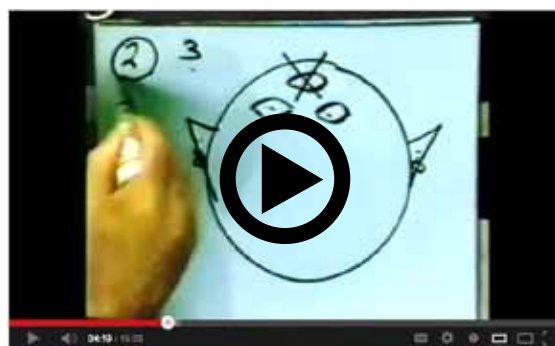
But what does all of this have to do with music?

MUSIC AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: MY GUITAR CLASS AND MY “EUREKA!” MOMENTS

To become an “English as a Second Language” teacher I took all of the required college level coursework, completed my fieldwork and took all the state tests you might expect would be needed for a specialty degree. My training was rigorous, focused, structured and very formal.

My training as a guitar player was anything but!

I grew up playing the guitar in high-school the way most people do: with the help of friends, by reading guitar rags, by trying to copy the sounds coming from my favorite records (yes, records...I’m older), by



Video of Krashen’s Language Acquisition Theory:
<http://www.littlekidsrock.org/language-acquisition/>

learning the names of curious shapes on the guitar fretboard known to musical cognoscenti by the name of “chords” and from lessons from long-haired guitar teachers in music stores. These lessons were highly infrequent and generally consisted of the teacher showing me how to play my favorite songs. I say, “showing me” because it was a physical demonstration of each tune, not a written transmission of the music.

Over time, I became more and more proficient on the guitar. By the time I began teaching my first-grade ESL classes, I had become a competent guitar “noodler” and was playing in rock bands and jazz combos by night. I adored music making and found it to be one of the most fulfilling parts of my life. My other great love was teaching kids. It is a passion that all committed teachers feel and share.

Little Kids Rock was founded when my love for teaching children and my formal schooling in Second Language Learning combined unexpectedly with my love for playing which was born outside of a school setting and was decidedly informal.

It all started one day after school in 1996 when I watched a documentary film called, “Gypsy Guitar and the Legacy of Django Reinhardt.” Django Reinhardt was a French gypsy guitar legend who is considered to be one of the seminal geniuses of the instrument and one who famously never learned to read or write music. In fact, he never really learned to read or write in his native French.

Django is a folk hero to French gypsies and the film featured very young children emulating him. I was amazed at the level of skill these self-taught youngsters displayed. A guitarist myself, I believed my own first-grade students possessed their own untapped musical abilities. I resolved to teach my first-grade students how to play guitar. I called some musician friends to see if they had old beat-up instruments they could donate, and an early incarnation of Little Kids Rock was born.



My school had a vocal music teacher who came in once a week, but he only spent about 20 minutes with the kids and they would spend the time “singing songs like ‘Polly Wolly Doodle’.” My students responded even to this limited program simply because children are naturally inclined to engage with music. But I knew this approach did not take advantage of my students’ deeper interest in music and their capacity to learn more sophisticated material.

FIRST DAY OF GUITAR CLASS, FIRST FRUSTRATION:

After I decided to teach my first-graders to play guitar, I went to the music store to try and find a method book and curriculum that I could use as a basis for my teaching. I was sorely disappointed by what I found. The books all focused on note reading and on theory. The repertoire consisted of tunes like “She’ll Be Coming Around The Mountain” or even worse: inane musical etudes with titles like “The Old Green Turtle” or “Let’s Play on the E String!”

Yuck.

On the first day of our new guitar class, I asked my students to tell me the names of all their favorite songs and all their favorite musicians. Their responses came swiftly and enthusiastically: “Selena! Ricky Martin! Bidi Bidi Bom Bom! Maria Maria! The Backstreet Boys!”

NOW, I HAD OUR REPERTOIRE SO ALL I NEEDED WAS A METHOD. I DECIDED THAT I’D JUST TEACH MY STUDENTS THE WAY I HAD BEEN TAUGHT.

But exactly how had I been taught? Upon reflection my own musical education seemed so haphazard and random. It felt like a gradual, unconscious process. It was more like musical osmosis than straightforward “learning.” I’d pick up a new chord here and there, a new song, a new rhythm, a new technique. “Well,” I reasoned, “that seemed to work for me so we can try that.”



I started by teaching the kids a few, simple chords which I called “shapes” since that was how I had thought of them when I first started. I immediately tied the “shapes” back to songs that they knew and loved. I knew that changing chords would be hard at first so I came up with simple ways of removing or minimizing that obstacle. I would divide the room into chord groups. During our first week of class we played whole songs that way: one chord at a time, round-robin style.

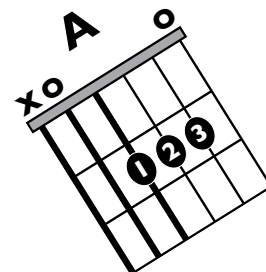
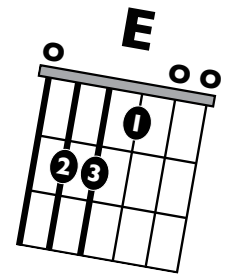
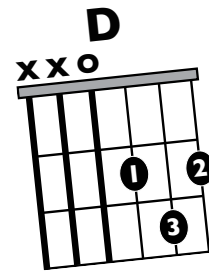
*THE KIDS WERE TRANSFIXED.
SUDDENLY THEY WERE MAKING THE
MUSIC THAT MOVED THEM.*

I used almost no musical lingo. Instead of teaching kids note values, I would clap and stomp and wave my arms. Instead of talking about what a chords were, we would just play them. Instead of learning about melody, we simply sang ones we already knew.

As always happens, some kids progressed more quickly than the others. This proved only to be an asset to the group as a whole. Their increasing proficiency lifted and supported their peers. The kids who played with the greatest facility kept their eyes on me while we played. The other kids kept their eyes on those more advanced kids. It was a virtuous cycle.

If you could only have heard those earliest classes... what a messy, well-meaning mash up of sound it was! Some kids would play a chord one fret above where it should be played. Others would strum extraneous strings. Still others would strum but few of their fretted notes rang out. “Mistakes” were everywhere. But so were the smiles!

I felt intuitively that correcting kids in front of their peers would raise their anxiety levels. Because we would always play as a large group, it was very easy for me to walk around the room and discretely move a kid’s finger up or down a fret, point to a place on



the fretboard they should be heading to or encourage someone to curve their wrist more.

Any corrective cues I used were almost always non-verbal. Hand signals, slight adjustments of positioning and touching strings that needed to be deadened: simple interventions like these would go largely unnoticed by all save the student they were intended for. That's how I wanted it. I never went for 100% perfect from the kids: far from it. My corrections were aimed at small, incremental steps forward.

The kids progressed and their repertoires and proficiency grew. We gave concerts for the rest of the school and the parents and kids loved it. The kids and I were having a ball and the environment in the classes was motivating yet easy and relaxed.

THEN, ONE DAY AFTER CLASS, SOMETHING AMAZING HAPPENED.

A student named Sergio Betancourth came up to me with his mother. I could tell that he wanted to tell me something but was feeling a little bashful. With some gentle prodding from his mom he finally said, "Mr. Wish, I wrote a song. Would you like to hear it?"

"Of course!" I said, not knowing quite what to expect. He sat down and played me a catchy tune that sounded like something the Rolling Stones might have written. It was called "Little Dinosaur" and by the time he was through performing it, *I was floored.*

"You wrote that?" I asked. "It's amazing!"

I was mightily impressed by Sergio's song. and we spent time recording it and getting the rest of the class involved in learning it and performing it. However, I didn't have much time to marvel over Sergio's singular brilliance because many of my other students began 'writing' their own, original songs too. I used quotation marks because there was no actual musical notation involved.



Sergio Betancourth,
Composer at age 8

They'd come to class with lyrics and melodies in their heads and chord progressions and rhythmic figures in their fingers. We would sit around in class and exchange excited ideas about arrangements. "I will do this," one student would say, showing a riff or phrase, "while you do something else at the same time," inferring a bass line or some other part.

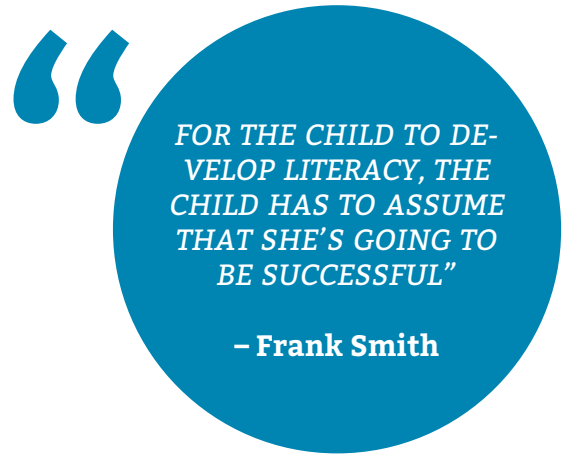
I was floored! These little guys were composing music and improvising but I had never shown them how. I had never asked them to write or to improvise. It just happened. But why?

It hit me like a ton of bricks. I was teaching music to my kids in the same way I was teaching them English as a Second Language. In fact, I was teaching Music as a Second Language. The evidence for this was everywhere. Everything about my quirky little program suddenly made sense when looked at through this lens.

LOOKED AT THROUGH THIS LENS:

Why did I teach kids to "play" music first and not to read it? Because we learn to speak our native language before we learn to read or write it. The same approach is best applied to the acquisition of a second language. Playing music while unencumbered by the conscious knowledge of rules and theory is the equivalent of speaking. Think of Krashen's Monitor hypothesis (pg 8). The student who is acutely aware of the names of the notes they are playing, the written version of what they are rendering and the theory guiding it may be likened to the struggling foreign language student who uses the conscious study of grammar as their gateway to speaking.

Why did I allow for, embrace and even encourage sloppy approximations of the music the kids attempted to play? Because music, like language, is best learned in conversation with others who have already achieved some level of fluency and in such a way as allows for uncorrected "mistake making." I knew that too much direct correction too early in the process of speaking makes a learner feel self-conscious and judged and is sure to raise their affective filter. (pg. 17)



Why did I show kids how to play chords but not how to understand the theory behind them, the degrees of the parent scale, the harmony at work within the notes, the basic musical “grammar” at play? Because, as thinkers such as Krashen and Noam Chomsky note, grammar is not intended to be learned but rather to be acquired unconsciously through usage. The notion of comprehensible input is very much at work when we dole out the least possible amount of info with the greatest possible utility to a learner (pg. 9).



These linguistic insights along with others had all unconsciously informed the way I was teaching my guitar class. I only became consciously aware of what I was doing when the need to train other teachers became a pressing personal need.

Although I had started my guitar class solely for my first-grade students, many other students in the school wished to participate in my class. I opened section after section both before and after school but ultimately the demand outstripped my schedule and I was forced to look to my peers, other musical, committed public school teachers, for help.

I began training other schoolteachers as a means of serving the children that I could not personally reach myself. The trainings forced me to consciously understand and explain the pedagogical underpinnings of my work in a manner that would be useful to other teachers. It also enabled me to share the curriculum I had developed with other educators.

The experiment of training other teachers worked! Soon there were other classes like mine, run by different teachers in different locals. The story of Little Kids Rock is essentially the story of how the Music as a Second Language pedagogy has been propagated across the country and how that has impacted teachers and students alike in their experience of public school music programs.

CONCLUSION:

Like spoken language, music expresses the full range of human emotions and does so by using its own distinct grammar, meter, cadence and phonemes. It has both a spoken and written form. Music, like language, must be learned from others who have already achieved some level of fluency. Finally, both language and music are primarily vehicles for human communication.

Infants learn to speak by listening to the people around them. They begin copying the sounds they hear and in a few years time they are able to communicate. A typical three-year-old child knows how to say hundreds of nouns and verbs but is unable to read anything. Children are usually not formally introduced to written language until they reach the age of five. At this point they have mastered the spoken language and are ready for the much more abstract written component.

Visualize what it would look like if we reversed this process and began teaching children to read and write as a means of learning to speak. We would have to “teach” the child to speak through an abstract symbol system known as the alphabet. We would have to teach a child how to recognize the letters “m” and “a” before they could say and use the word “mama.” Flash cards and grammar drills would have to take the place of natural conversation. Speaking and listening would take a backseat to direct, linguistic instruction. Would that feel strange to you, teaching an infant or very young child to speak through the use of reading and writing?

And yet this is exactly how music is taught to children in much of the West today. Music education often takes an opposite course. When students arrive at school, they usually have not had the opportunity to play with real musical instruments. Instead of first teaching children to produce music on instruments through imitation and approximation, students are immediately taught how to read music *BEFORE* they can play.



“AN ANALOGOUS APPROACH TO LANGUAGE LEARNING WOULD HAVE YOUNG CHILDREN LEARNING HOW TO READ BEFORE THEY WERE COMFORTABLE WITH THE BASICS OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE.”

Consider the following table. It juxtaposes the trajectory of a public school student’s language and music instruction.

| STAGES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION | STAGES OF “MUSIC ACQUISITION” |
|---|---|
| <p>1. Listening Stage (0 To 6 Months) Child is in listening mode only. Sound production is limited to crying, sneezing etc.</p> | <p>1. Listening Stage (0 To 5 Years) Notice how much longer many children can spend without “making noise” on musical instruments.</p> |
| <p>2. Approximation (6 months – 2.5 years) Children start to use “baby talk” and individual words. Point where parents often say, “She/he is talking!”</p> | <p>2. Approximation (5 – 9 years) Music is taught in a cursory manner. Focus is often on singing and clapping out basic rhythms).</p> |
| <p>3. Intermediate Fluency (2.5– 5 years) Child is stringing words together & increasingly uses language to get needs met. Parents hear utterances like “Mama... milk... now” & may say “He/she is speaking in sentences!”</p> | <p>3. Intermediate Fluency (9 years – High school or later) Formal instrumental instruction begins with technique and reading being taught simultaneously. Emphasis is placed upon playing through reading</p> |
| <p>4. Fluency (3-5 years old) Child has achieved “native-like” proficiency in their mother- tongue.</p> | <p>4. Fluency (High school or later) Child is proficient on their instrument and can express themselves musically.</p> |
| <p>5. Reading & Writing (6 years and up) Child begins to read and put own thoughts into writing.</p> | <p>5. Reading & Writing (High school or later, or never) Child begins to read and put own thoughts into writing.</p> |

Notice how much longer it can take a student to acquire the requisite skills necessary for a level of fluency and self-expression on an instrument.

This comparison has implications for how we feel music can be taught. Insofar as it is possible, music instruction should emulate language instruction. Speech is not best learned as a series of discreet skills mastered out of context. Nor is it learned by mastering the alphabet and decoding words. Rather, it is acquired in a meaningful, context-rich environment and with the invaluable assistance of other “speakers.”

The Music as A Second Language approach to music instruction is, at first, deliberately non-notational. By emphasizing performance and composition over reading and writing, students acquire musical skills in a natural way and often times at accelerated pace. This creates a context rich in musical experience for young learners. This is well facilitated in an environment that encourages and allows for Approximation (pg. 4) and that keeps students’ Affective Filters low (pg. 9).

Learning to play exclusively through the use of written music and the explanation of theory is akin to using the Learned System of Language acquisition (pg. 7). However, the research in second-language learning indicates that most people will not successfully acquire a second language using the Learned System. This is one of the reasons why so many people who study a foreign language in school for many years graduate unable to really speak the new language.

I believe that music education in our schools and in private lessons as well can suffer from similar failures. Many students will study music for years and still graduate unable to really play. Attrition becomes a problem as well as students may feel uninspired or dejected by their lack of progress. They may simply elect not to pursue music classes. This is caused, at least in part, by the Learned System that is at work in some more traditional programs.

In no way do I seek to denigrate or belittle notation-based instruction because its value is self-evident and irrefutable. I simply hold that the teaching of reading



TEACH MUSIC AND SINGING AT SCHOOL IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT IS NOT A TORTURE BUT A JOY FOR THE PUPIL; INSTILL A THIRST FOR FINER MUSIC IN HIM, A THIRST WHICH WILL LAST FOR A LIFETIME.”

-ZOLTÁN KODÁLY IN 1929

and writing in music is better taught in a sequence that resembles the sequencing of the teaching of reading and writing that we experience in our native language.

Ideally a child has the opportunity to “speak” or “play” music for a few years before they are introduced to the written system. Once a child can play and feels competent on their instrument they will have established a base from which reading music will have a much more meaningful context.

MUSIC AS A LANGUAGE vs. MUSIC AS MATH

Spoken language has been with us for much longer than written language. Writing, the use of abstract symbols as a means of preserving language and making possible its precise transport through time and space, has only been with us for the past 5,000 years. Written music is newer still.

Written language is not language itself. It is a code for the pronunciation of language. The simple act of reading words will not give you an understanding of their meaning, of their utility. You must come to the task of reading with some degree of linguistic fluency or else reading becomes mere code-breaking. Ask anyone who has learned to read German so that they could sing opera or learned to read Hebrew so that they could have bar or bat mitzvah. Unless they speak those languages, they cannot understand the meaning of what they are reading. Even if their pronunciation is flawless, if you speak to them in German or Hebrew they will be entirely lost.

I call this “The Music As Math” approach to teaching music. Here, music is treated as an abstract code that must be cracked by the learner. It can and does produce virtuosic code-breakers, people who can take a complex, written piece and render it with great emotion and beauty. However, anyone who has spent time with folks who have learned using the “Music As Math” approach exclusively will know that many of the players it produces are completely unaware of the underlying language of music that is at work.



THE WORLD'S MOST
FAMOUS AND POPULAR
LANGUAGE IS MUSIC.”

- PSY



$$\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} e^{-x^2} dx = \sqrt{\pi}$$

$$f(x) = a_0 + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \left(a_n \cos \frac{n\pi x}{L} + b_n \sin \frac{n\pi x}{L} \right)$$

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

Ask a person taught using The Music As Math approach what chord progressions are used in a piece, what scales are employed, what key a soloist would play in and they too are completely lost. They cannot improvise, cannot compose and cannot explain what they are playing. In the most extreme cases, if you remove the sheet music from the stand in front of the musician, you literally remove the person's ability to play anything.

But The Music As Math approach has much more dire consequences than simply limiting the learner's understanding of what they are playing or whether or not they can compose, improvise etc. The Music As Math approach ensures that large numbers of people will never learn to play music at all. Think of the legions of people who have taken music lessons in school or privately and not "stuck with it" but either quit or left the lessons entirely unable to play. This is an almost archetypical outcome for many learners.

I believe that this unintended yet harmful fallout from The Music As Math Approach derives as follows. In basic mathematics, each question has one right answer and an infinite number of wrong answers. Seven times seven is forty-nine. Period. No room for interpretation here. Learning music in an environment that reduces it to math removes the learner's ability to Approximate (pg. 9) and will certainly help raise their Affective Filters.

Remember the "Burger King" example from page 11? Remember how many "corrections" we were able to insert into a conversational sentence? Well, what if I said that before you could touch a note on the piano you needed to know:

- 1) How to read the treble clef
- 2) How to read the bass clef
- 3) How to tell the difference between a sharp and a flat
- 4) How to tell the value of a note (8th, 16th etc.)
- 5) How to tell what key you are in
- 6) How to use correct fingering

Can you see how this environment might raise a learner's anxiety level or Affective Filter? I believe that one of the main reasons that people who ARE exposed to music leave it or deem themselves to be "non-musical," "talentless" or "tone deaf" is simply because they are intimidated by the methodology they are exposed to and they become unable to process the information and learn. This is exactly why Krashen feels that learner's get blocked when they are exposed to a second-language; their Affective Filters kick into gear and they shut down.

Here I will paraphrase Krashen who once during a talk asked his audience to picture the perfect second-language classroom. In this imaginary classroom, he said, if you can't understand what the teacher is saying, it is their fault, not yours. In this class there is no judgement, little "correction" and much meaningful conversation and the conversation consists of Comprehensible Input.

IF WE WISH TO TEACH CHILDREN TO "SPEAK" THE LANGUAGE OF MUSIC, THE PROCESS OF MAKING MUSIC HAS TO BE EMPHASIZED OVER AND ABOVE THE ACT OF RECITING MUSIC.

We as teachers are extremely powerful role models in this regard. If we denigrate or belittle our own musicality (or our own creativity in general) we model an unhealthy attitude that kids will pick up on. Anxiety is a sure by-product of this. If however, we are comfortable with our own creative selves, the children learn from this as well. A comfortable teacher makes for a comfortable class.

MUSIC EDUCATION: STANDING ON ITS OWN TWO FEET

The research regarding the value of music education is ample and conclusive. Children who receive music classes evidence positive growth in a number of areas. Their mathematical and scientific thought processes are enhanced and a general psychosocial gain is experienced. However, focusing on these well-documented



"SO LITTLE KIDS ROCK NOT ONLY BUILDS MUSICIANS, BUT HELPS STUDENTS DEVELOP SELF WORTH AND INCORPORATES FAMILY UNITY."

- BERNARDO MEDINA, JOHN SPRY SCHOOL; CHICAGO, IL



facts might lead you to believe that music education was akin to oat bran: dull but good for you. We at Little Kids Rock know a secret that is often left out of conversations about the value of music education...

PLAYING MUSIC IS FUN!

Just like conversation is fun! This critical fact is much maligned by shortsighted budget cutters and ill-advised policy makers who confuse “fun” with “frivolous.” This has had dire consequences indeed for music programs nationally. Today, a shrinking number of kids in our public schools receive any form of arts education. People who support music education are constantly coming up against the notion that an academic pursuit that is fun must be of little real value to the students.

The “If-it’s-fun-it’s-frivolous” school of thought has had historical parallels in other areas of academia as well. Ellen Goodman of the Detroit Free Press wrote about the impact that Dr. Seuss had on reading programs nationally. “[Forty] years ago, Dr. Seuss... turned out *The Cat in The Hat*, a little volume of absurdity that worked like a karate chop on the weary world of Dick, Jane and Spot.” Today the idea that reading should be fun for children is widely accepted. We’d like to see that same wisdom inform people’s take on music education as well.

TODAY THE IDEA THAT READING SHOULD BE FUN FOR CHILDREN IS WIDELY ACCEPTED. WE’D LIKE TO SEE THAT SAME WISDOM INFORM PEOPLE’S TAKE ON MUSIC EDUCATION AS WELL.



“SEEING KIDS ‘RUN’ INTO MY ROOM BEFORE SCHOOL AND BETWEEN CLASSES TO TALK MUSIC OR SIMPLY TELL ME WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN UP TO IS SUCH A CHANGE IN THE CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL.”
- MARK DAVIS, EMERY SECONDARY SCHOOL; EMERYVILLE, CA

WISDOM

LAUGHING SO HARD WE CRY

As bilingual teachers, my peers and I would frequently marvel at how ineffective Foreign Language programs are in our public schools. Here is a popular joke we used to tell that shines a light on the abysmal outcomes of our nation's foreign language programs:

JOKE #1

What do you call
someone who speaks
two languages?

Bilingual.

What do you call
someone who speaks
three languages?

Trilingual.

What do you call
someone who speaks
just one?

An American?



After all, isn't the kid who takes four years of French or Spanish in high school but graduates barely being able to ask for the bathroom almost an archetype?'

NUGGET

Music programs can have similarly disappointing outcomes. Isn't the adult who studied violin or piano for five years but can't play also a too-familiar archetype? This brings me to...



- Jim Larson

JOKE #2

Why does this second joke resonate so strongly? Judgmental, rules- and theory-oriented music classes are a cultural norm for us. We can relate to the shaming of the adult guitarist and how his feelings of inferiority and insecurity, which may have blossomed in his childhood music class, continue to dog him in his adulthood.