Situation strategy use
at the crossroads of two disciplines: language and music

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aim & means

- there are insights that learning to play a musical instrument can bring to language learning and perhaps to SBI
  - the comparison: its strengths and limits
  - some theory
    - cognitive & social psychology, SLA studies
  - personal experience as a musician and "linguist"
  - some examples of strategy use
  - a peek into how I personally practice "at the crossroads"
  - a heuristic representation of this work
basic commonalities

• a fundamental part of who we are as humans
  – "We humans are a musical species no less than a linguistic one" (O. Sacks)
• a common origin?
• music = the universal language?
basic differences

- language as a universal human potential
- "species-specific" behavior
- human beings universally learn to speak their mother tongues
- learning a non-native language

- music
  - despite our shared human propensity to appreciate music, music potential needs specific forms of stimulation to develop fully
  - a culturally specific, learned behavior
- more like learning to write in one's mother tongue
- conditional on belonging to a society that values the activity and usually requires instruction

what Stephen Krashen calls the "good war"
basic differences

- language learning

- learning to "improvise" in the L2
  - deal with unpredictability

- status of error
  - encourage learners to get by (well) in the L2 and not worry too much about mistakes

- learning to play a musical instrument (classical piano)

- "let the composer's voice speak through me"
  - like a creative recitation

- a quest to avoid error as much as possible
  - strongly influences how musicians practice (strategically)
a musician's relationship to practice
(see wonderful talk given by Jeremy Harmer)

• an evolving relationship
  – dependent on willingness to reinvest and skilled strategy use
  – makes a critical contribution to the development of expertise

• not a question of "how much" one practices, but of "how" one practices
  – it's about being able to perform under pressure (automatically?)
  – creation of good habits (and not reinforcement of bad ones)
  – importance of focus & concentration (to solve specific problems)
  – knowing how to break "problems" down into component parts
  – listening to and monitoring not only one's production but one's manner of producing (physical sensation, listening to one's body)
  – frustration makes challenge worth it (if you know what you want)
language acquisition = sequence learning

• instrumentalists have to find ways of getting from one hand position to another fluently and accurately

in fact, pianists do a lot more than that...

the very slippery problem of consciousness and its role (or lack thereof) in human functioning...
Examples of how little we are conscious of our everyday behavior can be multiplied almost anywhere we look.

Playing the piano is a really extraordinary example. Here a complex array of various tasks is accomplished all at once with scarcely any consciousness of them whatever: two different lines of near hieroglyphics to be read at once, the right hand guided to one and the left to the other; ten fingers assigned to various tasks, the fingering solving various motor problems without any awareness, and the mind interpreting sharps and flats and naturals into black & white keys, obeying the timing of whole or quarter or sixteenth notes and rests and trills, one hand perhaps in three beats to a measure while the other plays four, while the feet are softening or slurring or holding various other notes.

And all this time the performer, the conscious performer, is in a seventh heaven of artistic rapture at the results of all this tremendous business, or perchance lost in contemplation of the individual who turns the leaves of the music book, justly persuaded he is showing her his very soul! Of course consciousness usually has a role in the learning of such complex activities, but not necessarily in their performance, and that is the only point I am trying to make here.

Julian Jaynes (1976)

*The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*
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- expert speakers of a language master its syntagmatic relationships
  - the sound sequences in words and the words in lexical items and sentences
  - these relationships are often governed by strict rules such as spelling and grammar

- speech acts and musical performances involve planning that is continuous and simultaneous in respect to all the functions of their respective domains

- both language & music are hierarchically organized
Hierarchical organization of language:

- Discourse
  - Larger phrases
    - Small groups
      - Words
        - Syllables
          - Individual sounds
            - Lexical chunks
hierarchical organization of music

musical discourse

sections

whole phrases

small phrases

slurs

pitches / notes

melody / themes / motives
skills development

- similarly, behavior operates largely under hierarchical levels of control
- cognitive guidance is important in early and intermediate phases of competency development
- as proficient modes of behavior become routinized, they are regulated largely by lower sensorimotor systems and no longer require higher cognitive control
  - e.g. learning how to change gears when driving; how to pronounce certain sounds or sequences of sounds; how to execute passages of a piece or specific micro-movements contained therein
- however, when routinized behavior patterns fail to produce desired results, cognitive control again comes into play in search of better solutions
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smooth, effective "operating" in the world involves a lot of 'combinatorial skill'

(doing more than one thing – usually many things – at the same time or 'in concert')
memory & prediction

- memorized (routinized) operations allow us to make every more refined predictions about everything we see, feel and hear

- predictions are so pervasive in our mental lives that what we "perceive" – i.e., how the world appears to us – does not come solely from our senses, but rather from a combination of what we sense and of our brains' memory-derived predictions

- the neocortex is an organ of prediction: if we want to understand what intelligence is and how we learn (and become expert in various domaines and disciplines), we need to understand the nature of these predictions and how the cortex makes them (Hawkins & Blakeslee, 2005)

- when highly predictable relations exist between situations & the actions they require, eventually the situation rather than prior judgment prescribes action

- a double-edged sword (just like the trap of thinking too much!)
engaging in the "process"

- not merely about exercising control, but also, critically, about knowing how to let go
- focused both on processes of differentiation and integration
- not merely about drawing on cognitive resources (i.e., in the head), but about thinking with the whole body
- not merely anchored in the phenomenological self, but in that part of the environment that the situating-situated person transforms into a "spielraum" (Heidegger, 1927)
  - i.e., a unique spatiotemporal field of action that is brought forth via the dialectical relationship between the person and his or her physical & social environment (Masciotra et al., 2007)
some examples of strategies

• more physical
  – monitored, focused repetition (with goal in mind)
  – "oiling" in and around sequences (at different levels)
  – grouping, sensing/feeling the silence-in-between
  – "plunging" into mini-performances with gusto (recorded)

• more cognitive
  – being aware, relaxed concentration (Green & Gallwey, 1986)
  – making connections to theoretical knowledge, analyzing
  – imagining what it's to sound and feel like before doing it
  – trusting the process, not trying too hard
  – "finding one's path" into a kind of "hypo-egoic" state
situating strategy use

our power (as people) to make things happen

**personological**
level of functioning:
cognitive (thinking)
affective (feeling)
conative (wanting)

processes that happen largely by us (exercise of *agency*)

*learn* (in Krashen's terms)
goal-directed actions (often deliberate, intentional)

reflective awareness as a motivational process
top-down

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acquiring a foreign language by solving the problem of *sequence learning*

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the **neurophysiological** mechanisms that are "at our disposal" and "faithfully" subserve our actions and endeavors

processes that happen within us, through us

**acquire** (in Krashen's terms)
actions & operations largely not (or no longer) under conscious control

bottom-up

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... **undifferentiated** novice "performance"
**differentiated** learner performance
**integrated** expert performance
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References


Thank you for your attention!

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