Connecting Jazz Improvisation to Second Language Learning
By Kaitlyn Fay

Whether you are a veteran music educator or a twelve year-old struggling to remember the Eb major scale, approaching the task of learning to improvise can seem intimidating and overwhelming. Where do you start? What do you play? What do you *not* play? How can you make it sound “good”? People have been asking these questions for decades, and those musicians who become great jazz improvisers often credit their skill to countless hours spent practicing and listening to recordings.

The first time I was asked to improvise I was twelve years old, playing alto sax in the school jazz ensemble. I was petrified at the thought of being expected to play without any printed notes and rhythms on which to rely, with the added pressure that I might fail to improvise well in front of my peers. It wasn’t until college that I shed my fears, had several light-bulb moments, and started to improve as an improviser. Upon reflection on the years leading up to college, I realized that many mentors and teachers had shared similar ideas regarding learning to improvise – but one statement caught my attention: *learning to improvise is like learning another language*. What if learning to improvise is so similar to learning a language that sharpening skills in one area benefits the development of those same skills in the other? Could ear training and listening activities in jazz improve the aural comprehension of a student in the first year studying Spanish?

In examining the literature I found that listening, building a vocabulary, and practicing the language are all crucial factors in learning both improvisation and a second language (Reeves, 2001; Mackenzie, 2000; Velleman, 1978). Azzara (1993) said, “…improvisation means that an individual has internalized a music vocabulary and is able to understand and to express musical ideas spontaneously. Just as every culture has its language, every culture has its music. Improvisation is to music what speaking is to language. Individuals improvise daily with language when engaging in conversation.” Further, Dobbins (1980) stated, “Full proficiency in a verbal language must include the ability to command a considerable vocabulary with equal facility at the reading, conversational, and intuitive levels. The development of proficiency in a music ‘language’ involves the same general process.” In the April 2010 issue of *Teaching Music*, Adam Perlmutter’s article “Improv for Everyone” included such statements as: “Improvisation is conversational in nature…” and, “Compare improvisation to talking…” With previous research supporting my idea, and the guidance of Dr. Matthew Buckmaster, I began designing a study to examine more closely the potential connection between learning to improvise and learning a second language.

The study focused on middle school students who were concurrently enrolled in jazz band and Spanish language class. Initially, the hope was to involve around 10-15 students in the study, but due to cuts in foreign language classes, fewer active jazz band programs, and limitations in students’ scheduling, only two students were eligible to participate. As a result, the research became a comparative case study design. The advantages to using this design include increased individual instruction in the jazz improvisation workshops and the opportunity to follow each student’s progress more closely.

Both participating students had taken approximately one year of private lessons on their instrument, but neither was taking lessons at the time of the study. Both students had been playing their instrument for less than two years and were in one of the two school jazz ensembles
as well as the concert band. At the start of the study, the students had been studying Spanish for less than two months.

The students took 2 pre-tests in Spanish language that included a listening and reading comprehension test as well as speaking test, to assess their knowledge prior to the study. The participants were also administered 2 jazz improvisation pre-tests which included a reading and writing test of basic music theory concepts, and an improvisation playing assessment. Student A and Student B scored similarly in all four areas of the pre-test. Student A scored 50% and 55% on the Spanish reading-listening and speaking, respectively, while Student B scored 65% and 55%, respectively. In the areas of reading-writing and playing for jazz improvisation, Student A scored 30% and 68% and Student B scored 31.5% and 56%, respectively. These scores helped to verify that both students were entering the study at a similar level of knowledge in Spanish and jazz improvisation.

Between the pre- and post-tests, over the course of eight weeks, the students participated in a series of 13 half-hour workshops on jazz improvisation, resulting in 6 ½ total hours. Workshops covered such topics as listening to recordings, basic music theory and scales used in improvisation, chord symbols, and improvising over a 12-bar blues. At the conclusion of the workshops, the same tests used prior to the workshops were administered as post-tests to assess student progress. A panel of experts in the fields of Spanish language and jazz was chosen and these experts provided evaluation of the speaking and playing pre- and post-tests, using scoring rubrics and including comments. Interviews were conducted with both students, as well as the Spanish teacher who had the best perspective on their progress in the Spanish class.

In jazz, Student A scored 98.6% on the reading and writing portion of the post-test, and 80% on the playing portion, an average improvement of 40%. Student B had similar improvement, scoring 89.4% on the reading and writing and 60% on the playing portion for an improvement of 31%. In Spanish, Student A scored 70% and 60% in reading/listening and speaking, respectively, while Student B scored 30% and 62.5%, respectively, for improvements of 12% and -13%. According to the Spanish teacher, Student B’s decline in Spanish reading and listening was attributed to the disruption of class time due to North Carolina state testing known as End of Course (EOC) tests. Prior to the administration of the Spanish post-tests both students had been subject to many changes in schedules, interrupted class periods, and losing class time altogether as electives such as Spanish were given lower priority during testing days. Despite this and Student B’s Spanish reading and listening post-test score, both students showed improvement in all areas. That the quantitative data alone illustrates improvement in all areas speaks for the success of the study.

This study incorporated mixed methods, producing qualitative data that further strengthened the results. In speaking with the Spanish teacher regarding Student A, “Between March and May…pronunciation and vocabulary improved. …His progress in vocabulary is ahead the rest of the class,” and “He is one of the strongest students in the class.  He is able to pick things up quickly.” Speaking on the progress of Student B in class, the Spanish teacher stated that “…his vocabulary acquisition has grown at an average rate.  …his speaking skills improved at about an average level of growth for the class.” In my interviews with the students, Student A said that improvising was less intimidating because he was now aware of more options and ideas for what to play (“I think [improvisation is] easier [now] ‘cause I have more things to improvise with…and more ideas and stuff.”); Student B said that he was overwhelmed by the new terms and information at first, but by the end of the workshops he felt that he had a
good understanding and comfort level with the vocabulary (‘‘…At the beginning I was kind of confused because of all the new terms… but I’m fine now.’’).

In comments from the panel of expert evaluators, one Spanish expert commented that Student B’s post-test recording exemplified an improvement in conversational manner and with good pronunciation – essential aspects of speaking a new language which are not always the easiest to grasp. An evaluator also commented that while Student A may have had many grammatical errors in his Spanish responses, he at least managed to consistently formulate relevant and comprehensible statements. One jazz evaluator commented that Student A improved in his use of rhythm and creativity while Student B improved in his use of harmony and creativity.

Both students had extremely positive responses when asked if they learned a lot from the study (Student B: “I learned a lot. …I wouldn’t change anything whatsoever about [the experience].” And Student A: “I felt like I learned a lot. I learned a lot of new forms…and how to make new scales.”). Two constants throughout this study were the students’ enthusiasm and confidence. Each student expressed some degree of interest in continuing to play and listen to jazz, and one parent expressed appreciation for the study because the child spoke positively of the experience at home (“[He] really liked the workshops and thought it helped him with improvisation overall. I think that the experience [he] had has helped develop his creative thinking.”).

Today, when music education advocacy is needed more than ever, research in areas such as this could provide educators with additional support for the importance of music education in relation to other core academic subjects. This study illustrates the need for further development and research in the area of jazz improvisation education and to highlight its potential connections to second language learning. While this study used jazz improvisation as a vehicle for examining students learning to improvise while learning a second language, the ultimate goal of this research is to highlight the importance of improvisation in music and its connections outside of music. Improvisation is a crucial skill that is often neglected; I hope that research in this area will further illustrate the benefits – in both the music and second language classrooms – of learning to spontaneously create music for all students and the importance of including and emphasizing improvisation in the curriculum.

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<tr>
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<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-test 3/15/10</td>
<td>Post-test 5/17/10</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jazz (Reading and Writing)</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>98.6% (+68.6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spanish (Reading and Listening)</strong></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>70% (+20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jazz (Playing; Avg. of evaluator scores)</strong></td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>80% (+12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spanish (Speaking; Avg. of evaluator scores)</strong></td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>60% (+5%)</td>
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