

Inspiring and Effective Lessons

by Jenny Macmillan, ESA Piano Teacher Trainer



As Suzuki teachers, we all know what good lessons are, don't we? Or do we? What constitutes the elements of an inspiring and effective lesson? What do we need to include, and what should we not say or do?! In this article I set out the principles I follow when teaching a piece of music to young children.

Listen and watch

We start by listening - and watching - while our pupil plays a piece in its entirety. And this, of course, certainly in early books, will be from memory. The beauty of being a Suzuki teacher is that, if we are teaching our pupils effectively, they always play what they can play very well. If their Twinkle variations have been thoroughly taught, and if they are encouraged to practise them every day through the whole of book 1, and to keep working at them through book 2, they will be developing an excellent technique. If they are listening daily to recordings of their repertoire, they will find it easy to learn new notes and will play the pieces musically.

Praise

After the child has played us their piece, the first thing we say to the child, in a cheerful and positive voice, with a big smile on our faces, is how much we enjoyed a certain aspect of their playing, or that we noticed how much they had improved a certain element (remembering what we had worked at with them in the previous lesson). So children realise we appreciate their efforts. It is really disappointing and demotivating for the child, after playing a piece in a lesson, if the teacher starts off by saying what is wrong, or not good, about the piece. Respect works both ways - we need our pupils to respect us and, in turn, teachers must show their respect for the child (and parent) for what they have achieved between one lesson and the next. Be as specific as possible about the praise - "I loved the way you played the staccato notes in the second bar", or "I could hear the way you shaped the last phrase in the piece", or "Your rhythm is much crisper in the middle section". Just general "That was very nice" doesn't tell the child (or parent) anything - what exactly was nice? And certainly never say "You're very clever". Much quoted research by Carol Dweck^[1] explains the difference in results between saying to children "You must have worked really hard" and "You must be smart at this". Children told they "worked really hard" try harder and achieve more than those told they are "smart at this".

Choose point for improvement

Next is to consider what area to work at improving. There may well be a dozen different elements we would like to improve. However, the important thing is to pick one, and only one, element. It probably doesn't matter too much which element you choose. Ideally it should be the one which you think will most transform the performance of this piece and, consequently, all other pieces. For example, improving the tone on the first note - better tone on the **first** note of the piece will improve the tone of all other notes in the piece; better tone on the first note of **this** piece will improve the tone on the first note of all other pieces. Just as learning how to play, for instance, a convincing echo in one piece will help the child play a convincing echo in other pieces, too.

Work at one point

Having chosen your point, next is to devise the best way of dealing with the point. First is to simplify it - make it a principle which can easily be understood and which can be applied in other places. So, if working at the piano on the sound of slurred notes, demonstrate the sound and the technique of just one slur - one pair of notes. Ensure the child is watching and listening as you demonstrate. Ask the child to do the same. Ask the

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child for their view on the sound and/or the technique. Demonstrate again, commenting on the different sounds produced. Very often, especially in the early books (but often later, too) it will be appropriate to use the Twinkle variations to remind the child how to produce the required sound. When the child is able to play with the correct technique, giving the required sound for the pair of notes, then the notes can be put back into context - add a few notes before the slur.

Can child do it correctly?

We should always ensure the child can do it correctly before leaving the lesson - otherwise how can they practise correctly at home? If playing two notes is too difficult, send them away to practise just one note. If the first note of the slur is good, but not the second note of the slur, try practising the second note alone - in other words, simplify the point further. Keep using the Twinkle variations - progress from the known to the unknown.

Question pupil

Involve even young children by questioning them: “Did you like that sound?”, “What did I do there?”, “How could this look/sound better?”. And then give the child time to reply - don’t be tempted to give the answer yourself without waiting for the child to consider their reply.

Prepare physically and mentally

Some pupils will insist on starting to play before they are ready. With all pupils we need to ensure that, both in lesson and at home, they always wait for their teacher or parent to say “ready and” or “ready go” or similar words of preparation. A child who starts playing before they are physically and mentally ready is almost unteachable, and will make slow and erratic progress. Those who are always expected to get ready with both their bodies and their minds, will learn to play with much more care and much more beautifully. Make it clear to parents that their child should always wait for them to say “ready and” at home before starting to play (and this usually applies all through book 1 and for much of book 2).

Understand what, why and how

Ensure the child (and parent of a young child) understands what has been practised in lesson, why it is to be practised at home, and how it is to be practised at home. Explain to the parent that the technique you have worked on applies to every piece that includes, in this case, slurs. Together, think of other pieces that require the same sound/technique, so the principle can be applied everywhere. It is good to agree with the child how many repetitions of the technique should be practised daily at home.

Plan for working on a piece on music

- 1 Listen to piece
- 2 Praise some aspect
- 3 Pick one point for improvement, for example:
 - TONE on one note or one phrase
 - RHYTHM between two notes, in one bar, or one phrase
 - SHAPING PHRASE, for instance crescendo up scale, or softer end of phrase
 - DYNAMICS
- 4 Show how to work on improving your point:
 - Simplify it
 - Demonstrate
 - Encourage pupil to listen
 - Copycat
 - Use Twinkle variations
 - Put it back into context

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- 5 Agree how many times it will be practised at home
5 Sometimes end by playing piece with pupil in unison or as a duet

Long term progress

Endeavour to keep children focused on playing musically and rhythmically with beautiful tone (through continuous work on their old pieces) rather than concentrating on learning new pieces. Children who are focused on quality rather than quantity will find they need to spend only a few minutes each day on their newest piece, especially if they practise the piece thoroughly in their morning practice and just play through it once in their evening practice, thus touching the new piece 14 times a week (realising the value of distributed practice^[2]) in order to make rapid progress through the repertoire. Those who are fixated on progressing through the pieces and spend perhaps half their practice time on new material, will find they play less musically with less good technique as well as moving through the repertoire less rapidly.

Refresh teaching skills

It's important for us as teachers continually to refresh our teaching skills. We can observe other teachers (it's possible to learn from watching less good lessons as well as well-taught lessons!). Videoing our own teaching and watching the lessons later can be highly illuminating. We can read books and magazines about music and teaching. We can attend conferences and courses. Let's keep learning!

Jenny Macmillan teaches children and runs a Suzuki Piano Teacher Training course in Cambridge, UK.

^[1] Dweck, C.S. (2006) Mindset: The new psychology of success. New York: Random House.

^[2] Adcock, C.J. (1959/1990) Fundamentals of Psychology. London: Penguin.