

The Language Acquisition Blues

Creating a Template for Syntax-based Language Learning

I took Latin and French in high school, and that was the extent of language study for me for a long time. Neither the 2 years of Latin nor the 3 years of French ever took, despite the fact that I was exceptionally good at accents, and had a deep desire to speak another language. My interest did not lead to effective study, and instead I developed a phobia around language acquisition.

I attempted several times to overcome this deficit, studying German from a phrase book before traveling to Europe for my honeymoon, listening to Spanish courses in my long drives to and from work. None of these efforts resulted in any kind of meaningful progress - only a confirmation that I was terrible at languages.

When my family prepared to travel to Italy, I decided to go all in. I did some research on “the best ways” to learn a language, and for a year prior to the trip I studied Italian hard. At the end of that year, I had made it through most of a grammar textbook and had a flashcard collection of several hundred words and phrases.

No, I couldn't speak Italian. Of course I couldn't. But I didn't know why.

I didn't give up, either. I spent the next five years after returning from Italy continuing to study Italian. I worked my way through four complete courses (two audio, two textbook), increased my flashcard collection to 6000 words and phrases, as well as a completely separate deck for grammar rules. I attended an Italian speaking party (utterly terrifying) and started to have weekly online conversation-exchanges with Italians.

I made some progress, but it was slow and not very gratifying. Six years in, I still tripped over myself when I spoke, couldn't remember most of the words or grammar I needed, and understood only a fraction of what I heard. Although my best Italian friend reassured me that I'd probably need to work 10 years to get a ten-year-old's fluency, I wasn't so sure given my ability after six!

All the while I continued to research various (and sometimes conflicting) “best practices on language acquisition.” I learned the difference between language acquisition and language study, a useful distinction. I followed the advice to start listening to lots and lots of spoken Italian by checking out videos and podcasts regularly.

Had I known about linguist and educational researcher Stephen Krashen, I might have saved myself a lot of trouble. One important element of Krashen’s Theory of Second Language Acquisition expresses the idea that acquisition of a language takes place when a learner is exposed to comprehensible input that is one level higher than where the student currently is. In other words, find yourself a knowledgeable speaker/teacher who can adjust their speaking to your current level.

My insistence on going it alone, while impractical, did get me thinking about the problem of language acquisition from my own perspective. This idea of learning at a level just above our current state exists in many areas of study and is, in fact, a paraphrase of the “flow state” as described by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. Learners who are completely engaged in what they are learning are typically at a place where the problem they are solving is difficult enough to engage them, but not so difficult that it discourages them.

I have what Krashen calls a “high affective filter” which keeps me far from that flow state. I am shy and anxious when I speak a second language, and this inhibits my natural learning in that scenario. Lacking the time and money for intense regular tutorial sessions, I am forced to find a solution that will allow me to improve as a result of less frequent, informal conversations.

I have experimented with self-study problems that are just above my current level of competence. While this may not provide me with language acquisition the way a conversation would, it might advance my skills enough to the point where my confidence might increase. As an added advantage, I could do such problems on my own time, rather than rely on a tutor’s schedule.

Designing such problems is trickier than it might seem. An exercise “just above my current level” is a moving target. As I improve I will need new problems to solve.

That got me thinking about how I teach the blues.

Teaching the Blues to Beginners

As a piano teacher, I deal with students who are learning to speak a language of sorts: a particular musical dialect known as the blues. The blues resembles language much more than Classical music, because it is improvised. Just as we create new sentences out of a base of grammatical rules, blues players create new melodies and harmonies out of a foundation of musical ones.

For years I've been teaching children and adults ages 4 and up these skills. I created a method that is effective and accessible to anyone, no matter their age, level or motivation. I've watched this method work over the course of the lives of my students.

Their success is not an accident. I know, as I am teaching them, what to have them focus on, and where to leave them free to explore or ignore their errors. As I consider the means of teaching musical speakers, I am also contemplating to what extent it can be adapted for language.

Here, in brief, is the method.

Students are asked to learn a simple blues bass line in their left hand, a series of 12 notes played slow and steady that outlines the 12-bar blues

Eb	Ab	Eb	Eb
Ab	Ab	Eb	Eb
Bb	Ab	Eb	Eb

Eb, Ab and Bb are called "E-flat," "A-flat" and "B-flat" and represent three of the five black keys on the piano keyboard. You may observe that there are more than five black keys on the keyboard, but they are in a repeating pattern, and as they repeat they each get the same names. Students learn the location and names of these keys, then play them in sequence with their left pinky.

These notes form the basis of a blues in the key of E-flat, chosen because it provides a unique opportunity on the piano. If a student is playing this pattern correctly in the left hand, then they can improvise freely on the rest of the black keys with the right hand at the same time, and it will result in a musically satisfying sound.

The black keys provide so much security for a student that they can go so far as to bang on them, wiggle on them randomly, or even play with their elbow. As long as the left hand maintains a steady tempo and plays the correct notes, even this roguish banging will sound musical. It's a kind of a magic trick, and it works for reasons which we'll explore in a minute.

Over time we add more complicated variations of this bass line pattern, always built upon the same foundational notes. The student can solo exactly the same over any of these more complicated bass lines as they did over the simple one. Because the goal is a clear and accurate left hand, students can play as much or as little as they want in the right hand to the same effect.

The culmination of the first stage of their study is allowing the student to switch from one pre-learned bass line to another in the left hand. They combine the first pattern they learned with the second and the third, essentially improvising a bass line, all while continuing to play randomly on the black keys with the right hand. Magically, they are now improvising in both hands and still making palatable music.

The reason this "works" is because the black keys form something called the "pentatonic scale," a five-note scale containing no half-steps, which eliminates the possibility of so-called "ugly sounds." The relationship of this particular pentatonic (G-flat pentatonic) to the E-flat blues bass line is such that the two hands together create an authentic sounding result that is satisfying without being overly complicated. Students are improvising in the right hand, so they are allowed to be both free and creative, and at the same time they are highly constrained in the left hand and are learning to stick exactly to its requirements.

The magic trick is all in the left hand. Most listeners hear a jazz solo and think it's the improvisation of that melody, the notes and the rhythms, which gives them a thrill. In fact, that solo is only as good as the band that's playing behind it (or the left hand that's playing under it). Just like you only want to dance on a sturdy bridge, and only want to eat in a clean restaurant, the details of your dance and your meal are less important than the structure that supports it. While there are good meals, and there are great meals, even a five-star chef's food will not be palatable at a dirty, smelly table. Similarly, the quality of a student's attempts at improvisation are vastly improved by a solid structure underlying it.

In the case of the blues, the structure of twelve notes is immensely powerful as a music vehicle and as a learning tool. The twelve notes create a pattern that is easily grasped without being simplistic. The fact that Eb occurs seven times and Bb only once highlights the sense of drama inherent in the blues. This is easily felt even by non-musicians when they hear the music played.

The act of combining improvisation with structure is vastly superior to improvisation or drilling of structure by itself. Throughout the activity, students must monitor their right-hand and only play to the extent that they can maintain their left-hand's accuracy and steadiness, which creates the actual music. In other words, students must learn to balance what they want to say (right hand) with what they are capable of expressing at any given moment (left hand), and this is *exactly* what an experience professional is doing at a higher level.

Once a student has mastered the blues in E-flat, they are taken through the same process in the key of D, which results in a new bass line with the same structure on different notes

D G D D
G G D D
A G D D

and a slightly more demanding set of piano-keys in the right hand: FGA CD¹. After mastering this sequence, we repeat the entire activity in the key of G to solidify the learning. Ultimately there are 12 keys to learn, but rather than repeat the activity 9 more times, we guide the student into learning the principles that will allow them to transfer their knowledge of the blues to any key at will.

In each case, what happens in the left hand is the important part. While there are things we can do to improve the elegance and effectiveness of the right-hand solo, at this point we are better served making the left hand as solid as possible, so that the right hand is free to explore. If the structure under the improvisation is solid enough, students can take their solos *in and out of levels of difficulty and strangeness* at will, trying things to

¹ More demanding because now the five notes are all white keys. The black keys are raised above the piano keyboard, forming a distinct pattern that is easily felt. The five white keys in question are mixed in with two others, E and B, that feel and look the same but must be avoided. Students must now make an active distinction between the notes they can play, and the notes to avoid.

see how well they work, all the while never having to worry about bringing the music down in a train-wreck.

Syntax

Is it really possible to make an analogy between the learning of music and of language? Music is often called “the universal language,” but this is ridiculous. There are as many types of music as there are cultures, and each have their own languages of expression. You cannot apply the rules of Bach to the drummers of Ghana and expect a smooth translation. Nevertheless, there is an analogy here. If there are many languages of music, then *musics are languages*.

Are languages musics? Music is an art-form composed of sounds. Language can be used as an art-form, as in poetry, drama and storytelling, but it in itself is not one.

Every musician has the opportunity in a particular genre of music to determine to what extent they wish to follow its rules. Some pianists will play Beethoven’s music just as the score directs, and others will take great liberties with the tempo and phrasing. By contrast, bluegrass musicians have no score, and each player must determine for themselves, with the help perhaps of some irate veteran players, what the implied (or expressed) “boundaries” are to their renditions of tunes and their improvisations on those tunes.

The analogy holds to some extent. Language speakers have the opportunity to bend the rules of language, though like Bluegrass players, they take the risk if they step too far out of the social demands for a given situation. It ain’t everyone who will use slang in more formal situations with impunity. Languages and musics both contain conventions that are seen as “rules” which guide meaningful communication.

In my experience teaching one particular style of music to my students, namely the blues, I taught them some of “the rules²” so that they could create a stable foundation for free exploration. I made it clear which rules were flexible (the rhythms and

² To be clear, there are no rules for the blues, only conventions, and the rules which I teach are highly contrived and designed for familiarity with the music, rather than any claim of mastery. The blues itself is far subtler and more fluid than any 12-bar construct, and all I ever claim in my method of instruction is that we create an “authentic sounding result,” not an authentic blues. The ultimate goal is the study of the blues, jazz and R&B masters who invented and developed it, with this method meant to get us within arm’s reach.

pentatonic note-choices in the right hand can be improvised,) and which were inflexible (the left hand pattern must be learned). By our analogy, I would say that the left hand is the “grammar” and the right hand is the “vocabulary.”

As a test of this analogy, let me throw a bunch of random words at you: *store to from ball order want I a the*. Even though a complete sentence may be represented here, the meaning is difficult to determine by reading, and nearly impossible by listening. What is needed is the correct order of the words, as determined by a syntactical structure.

Contrast this with a sentence like “Zu glak to zoobie a frub from the vreeb.” The all-important nouns and verbs are missing, but the grammar is kept intact by properly placed articles and prepositions. While we do not know exactly what the speaker is saying, we can imagine several possibilities and so have a chance at comprehension. If we understood even one of the nouns, “Zu glak to zoobie a frub from the store,” we would get a lot closer to having the gist of the sentence. Similarly, reordering the random words above, each step we come closer to the actual syntax of the sentence will make its meaning clearer. It is the *syntax* which must serve as the stable platform for the fluid word choices.

I came upon these insights while listening to podcasts on my drive to work. I began to ask myself, “When am I understanding what I’m hearing, and when am I not understanding?” Of course I had to be able to know at least some of the words being spoken, and any unfamiliar term (“quindi”) could potentially derail me. But assuming that I was only going to catch 40% of the words I was hearing, where should my attention be? I found that when I focused on the grammar rather than the vocabulary, my understanding was greatly improved, and my anxiety was lessened to the extent that I could begin to puzzle out the vocabulary I needed.

Prepping for Speaking

So much for listening. What about speaking? Is there a way to prepare a learner to speak using a gradual approach to syntax that mimics my blues-improvisation approach?

To some extent, most self-study language programs employ this approach. They offer graded exercises that move through increasing levels of grammatical complexity. However, these activities, of which I have done countless examples, seem to fall short.

What may be required is the element of creativity and improvisation that occurs in natural speech. When we talk to someone, we do not plan out what we are going to say. Therefore, no exercise that requires pre-fabricated answers can ever adequately prepare us.

In addition, the exercises provide a static level of difficulty that cannot be modified by the student. They cannot make a given exercise easier or harder to put it within their comfort zone. They can only suffer or seek out a different exercise, both of which are time-consuming and frustrating.

How do you plan out exercises that allow the student to modify the difficulty? If you want the student sitting alone with an exercise to improvise, how do you do this with a pre-planned activity? Meeting the challenge of creating a curriculum like this might be a game-changer for a lot of shy learners and speakers like myself.

ESL teachers employ something called “sentence frames” to simplify the task for learners. They consist of sentences with important words missing. Here are some examples:

- The triangle has ___sides/angles.
- The ___are alike/different.
- My name is_____ and I am ___years old.
- ___have _____, while ___have _____.
- Both _____ and _____ are _____.

Sentence frames are helpful because they can be made progressively freer, encouraging the “moving target” we are seeking. Students can target the issue on which they choose to improve, focusing on counting vocabulary, essential conversation, or nouns versus adjectives and so forth. However, the frames are not flexible in and of themselves, making them difficult to use over a long period of time.

I envision a more carefully sequenced series of encounters with a language, one that matches the blues model outlined above. The first level would create the simplest possible syntactical structure, with vocabulary choices that are designed to be more open-ended while remaining meaningful. Far more word choices would be appropriate for each frame.

As a student masters the first level, rather than increase the vocabulary, we would increase the grammatical complexity while maintaining the very limited vocabulary. This would allow the student to master a more useful structure of communication without exposing them to the anxiety of too much word-recall. Ultimately our goal would be that the student could move within several types of grammatical structures at will, creating a number of possible sentence types, and could practice them with the limited vocabulary that they know will keep them safe.

This corresponds to the first level of blues instruction: A simple E-flat bass line, several more complex bass lines, and finally the ability to switch from one bass line to another to create an improvised bass line.

Moving from E-flat to D in a language sense would be to switch to a parallel template that has been shifted slightly, a different tense for instance, but beginning again at a simple grammatical structure. All the while, the student can determine what vocabulary they wish to use on this second go-round. After several repetitions of the sequence, students will have had a lot of experience balancing both the requirements of grammar and their own decisions about what to say, and may be able to begin employing the actual principles of grammar without using a template.

This is fluency.

Such a method of teaching language acquisition would depend upon a carefully designed sequence of grammar options, and also a carefully chosen set of vocabulary words. The blues form is an interesting template for this idea. The structure of the blues provides opportunities for repetition with variation, and its unique structure offers a powerful scaffold for both storytelling and memory.

Combining the Blues with Language Acquisition

The simplest version of this exercise would be something like this:

I am _____ I want _____ I am _____ I am _____
I want _____ I want _____ I am _____ I am _____
I can _____ I want _____ I am _____ I am _____

The word in the blank after “I am” can be a noun, a verb or an adjective. The word or words in the blank after “I want” could be a noun, a verb-adjective combination (“I want to be happy,” or an adjective-noun combination (“I want many things”). “I can” requires a verb, but an ambitious student could elaborate with more words as desired. (“I can see for miles”).

This template allows the student to tell a simple story with verbs, nouns and adjectives of their choosing. The student can make the assignment as difficult or as easy as suits them, so that the problem they are solving fits their skill-level. If desired, students can create a bank of words to reference so that they are ready to input them.

The difference in frequency of each type of statement, and their placement in the blues structure, makes them easier to predict and think about. Because “I am” occurs the most frequently, and “I can” occurs just once per go-round, each of them take on a different flavor in the mind that helps to distinguish them.

We can add complexity onto this template with a little more grammar.

When I _____ then I _____ When I _____ then I _____
If I _____ then I _____ When I _____ then I _____
Because I _____ then I _____ When I _____ then I _____

The form is largely the same, though the dependent clauses make a slight variation necessary here. Students will have the opportunity to practice the clauses several times with whatever words they have prepared or can recall. All the while, they will be thinking ahead to the variations of “if I” and “because I” just as they would in a conversation.

We can continue to increase the complexity while maintaining the basic form.

I _____ because _____ I _____ because _____
I try _____ because _____ I _____ because _____
I _____ but I also _____ I _____ because _____

As I _____, I began _____ As I _____, I was able to _____
After I _____, I began _____ As I _____, I was able to _____
It seems that if I _____, then I can _____ As I _____, I was able to _____

At some point, students can be asked to mix and match these phrases, and a genuine paragraph begins to take shape.

When I _____	then I _____	I am _____	I am _____
After I _____	I began _____	As I _____	I was able to _____
Because I _____	then I _____	when I _____	then I _____

These mix-and-matches can be planned out so that students can improvise on them. At some point, if students are familiar enough with the choices, they can begin to piece them together on the fly. They will then be improvising both grammar and vocabulary.

Of course, students can alter the forms to reflect second- and third-person tenses, singular and plural, and later can mix and match these ideas as well. I suspect that mastering the structure fully in the first-person singular will go a long way towards making other tenses appear as simple variations on a theme, rather than a whole new ball game.

Once students have mastered these ideas in the present tense, the entire activity can be repeated in a new tense, starting again with the most basic structure.

I was _____	I wanted _____	I was _____	I was _____
I wanted _____	I wanted _____	I was _____	I was _____
I was able to _____	I wanted _____	I was _____	I was _____

We can progress through the increasingly complex grammar constructions in the past tense, again culminating in the student's ability to improvise sentences in this tense.

We would then repeat the exercise in a third tense, future for instance. After completing this course of work, students would ideally begin to gain a sense of connection between the ideas in the three chosen tenses, and might be able to more quickly progress through subsequent tenses without having to recreate the wheel each time.

Conclusion

Whether these ideas will work depends largely on the willingness of a student to improvise, to input a measure of creativity into their learning process. In my experience, applying this combination of structure and freedom which allows students

to find their level with more ease. In fact, *the ability to balance structure and freedom* is the skill needed for fluency.

Whether or not the blues is the best format for these activities is open for discussion. I like the blues form because of its interesting and powerful structure. There may be other options which are more condign to the kind of storytelling that excites the learner's desire to speak.

Ultimately the goal is to create a situation where a learner who is either unable or unwilling to engage in regular conversation can practice the necessary skills that the conversation develops. Having this kind of method as an option might bring a vast number of students who want to speak, but who are too shy or lack the means to meet other language speakers, over the hump. Certainly it will serve as a nice addition to the many other means a learner has of developing familiarity with another language.

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