

# The Cultivation of Piano Practice Strategies: Implications for Teachers

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**Abstract:** Practice is the most important part of learning music, and most teachers and students agree that practice is beneficial and necessary for music learning (Kostka, 2002). Cultivating and improving students' practice strategies has always been a priority for many music education scholars and it has been a well-researched topic over the years. For example, the factors affecting practice strategies are studied (Hallam et al., 2017; Hallam et al., 2020), and the use of a small number of individual practice strategies is studied (Pitts & Davidson, 2000; McPherson & Renwick, 2001; McPherson & Davidson, 2002; Bartolome, 2009; Hallam et al., 2012; Pike, 2017). Most of these studies are qualitative analysis, which is common in the field of education. Although the number of subjects in many of the research studies was small, the similarity of the results can be used as a basis for further research. Paying attention to the use and current situation of students' practice strategies not only helps music teachers to understand the quality and effect of students' practice, but also provides some instructional suggestions for teachers to promote teachers to evaluate and improve their teaching methods. Using these previous studies as a basis, this paper will discuss how to develop students' practice strategies to help them succeed. Teachers train the practice strategies of students from three aspects: helping students set reasonable goals, imparting practice strategies and cultivating self-assessment ability.

**Keywords:** Music; Practice; Strategies

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## Implications for teachers: Set reasonable goals

Teachers need to set manageable and reasonable targets for their students to improve their musical skills (McPherson & Davidson, 2002). Teachers need to help students set goals, which helps students to practice effectively. Regarding goal setting, Ericsson and his team considered that each practice must have a clear and accurate goal (Ericsson et al., 1993). Pitts and Davidson pointed out that when children are not clear on why and how they should learn, they will experience boredom and frustration (Pitts & Davidson, 2000); If the goal is clear, students will be more focused on the practice, because they know what they are going to do and thus less ineffective practice.

Nevertheless, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that beginner students have a harder time setting goals independently setting goals than experienced musicians. The research of McPherson and Renwick, which is a longitudinal study of seven children over three years, this shows that students need a period of learning and experience accumulation to master the ability to set goals independently (McPherson & Renwick, 2001). At this stage, teachers need to train and help students to master this ability. Likewise, Ericsson claimed that the use of deliberate training can improve the practice efficiency and help students to achieve a higher level of development, and such deliberate practice is generally designed and arranged by teachers (Ericsson, 2008). Ericsson and his team found through research that the first condition for the realisation of such deliberate practice is to be given a task with a clear goal. All of this evidence points to the importance of teachers helping students to set goals in the early stages.

Moreover, music lessons are always periodic (for example, once a week or once every two weeks), the music teacher didn't have a chance to participate in the students' practice every day. Teachers should instead motivate their students to practice reach their daily reasonable goals, and not just the overarching goal of the whole week (Pike, 2017). In Pike's study of teens who practiced at home, Jeanine, one of the participants, set reasonable and small practice goals for one week. During the eight-week study, she practiced more compositions than any other participant. This is because of the reasonable arrangement of each practice strategy, and there was little overlap in her practice content (Pike, 2017). This demonstrates that teachers need to help beginners set up detailed practice goals so that they can practice efficiently every day.

## Implications for teachers: Imparting practice strategies

Teachers should also help to develop students' ability to choose different practice strategies. If students master a certain skill in the

presence of their teacher, they may be willing to explore it further by themselves in the practice and are more likely to use it at home (Pike, 2017). Teachers should aid students in mastering different practice strategies so that they can use these skills more effectively in the practice process. Practice becomes more targeted only when students have a series of 'task-oriented strategies' (Hallam, 1998, p.140) available to them. However, this point seems not to have been taken seriously, because in Pike's research, it was shown that most students who used practice strategies studied in an orchestra or a band (Pike, 2017). Of course, learning and practicing strategies in a band is beneficial, but it is worth considering whether individual lessons might be more effective. In private classes, teachers can make specific adjustments according to the individual to optimize learning. There are a variety of strategies to use in practice, and what works for one child may not work for another (Pitts & Davidson, 2000). Surprisingly, the study of Bartolome of three highly successful beginners showed that when it came to practice strategies (Bartolome, 2009), all three participants demonstrated the ability to self-adjust their practice strategies and achieved more highly levels of achievement than their peers. Bartolome states that none of the three participants received direct instruction in self-regulation strategies (Bartolome, 2009), suggesting an innate ability to practice strategies, but since there were only three participants who are gifted, the reliability of this research is in question and it is important to consider other outcomes. For most students, they need teachers to teach and train practice strategies in class and achieve the best learning effect.

Teachers need to encourage the students to fully understand the purpose of using practice strategies. For instance, why should practice technology at first, why should repeat the part difficult practice, what kind of results by different strategies of practice get. Practice in which students clearly choose strategies are more rewarding than random and mechanical practice (Pitts & Davidson, 2000). Without understanding why practice strategies are used, it is not helpful to develop students' autonomy and flexibility in practice. As Pike note, due to a lack of experience or a lack of understanding, some students might make mistakes in this choice and result in failure to effectively obtain results, although they would like to consciously choose to use practice strategies in the process of practice (Pike, 2017). Therefore, teachers should not only teach a large number of practice strategies but also teach students to clearly distinguish the use of each practice strategy.

### **Implications for teachers: Cultivating self-assessment ability**

Teachers play an important role in developing self-assessment and adjusting practice strategies for students. Feedbacks from teachers to help students adjust their practice strategies is the most important part of teaching (Pitts & Davidson, 2000). Students cannot evaluate their own performance, even with some practice strategies, if they do not know what they need to improve. Sometimes incorrect rhythms or fingering become ingrained through a week of incorrect, repetitive practice, which can be frustrating for both teachers and students (Pike, 2017). However, teachers admit that due to a lack of time, they rarely record or guide students to conduct self-evaluation activities in class (Pike,2017).

Learning how to self-evaluate in a limited time would be beneficial for students (Bartolome, 2009). For example, by encouraging critical listening and selecting practice strategies in the classroom, the use of appropriate questioning techniques encouraging the evaluation of performance and guides students to identify mistakes and find solutions. It is easier for teachers to point out students' mistakes directly, but students may become dependent on them. If a student relies on the teacher to correct their mistakes, the student may never learn how to practice independently (Pike,2017). As the result, teachers need to recommend students to reflect on whether their practice is enough, whether the strategy is right and especially how they can do better.

In addition to cultivating students' reflective thinking, teachers might recommend students to use tape recorders to conduct a self-assessment. The use of recording a self-assessment is a very convenient method. Puopolo suggests that a possible strategy to support the development of relevant auditory schemas is the use of recording (Puopolo, 1971). This method also enhances the aural accuracy of the learning content. For example, in Bartolome's study (Bartolome, 2009), participants often sang the recorded work they were learning, which not only effectively enhanced the student's aural pattern, but also helped her find errors in subsequent performance. However, there is some evidence that recordings are rarely used (Miksza, 2007), which may be due to the unfamiliarity with this method of feedback or perhaps due to the portable recording devices not being developed to such a high level at the time of Miksza's study. Many students and researchers now using convenient devices for recording, as this strategy is much easier to carry out than it was previously. This type of feedback is very useful for students because it is both visual and auditory (Hallam et al., 2012). Therefore, teachers can call for students to use tools such as recording equipment to self-evaluate.

## Conclusion

This article affirms the importance of teachers in the process of cultivating students' practice strategies, and analyses how to train and improve the practice process for students. Firstly, teachers should both clearly set out students' learning progress in each lesson and cultivate students' ability to set and break down goals independently. Secondly, teachers need to teach different methods of practicing strategies and help students understand which strategy works best for them to maximize learning potential. Finally, teachers have responsibility to cultivate students' ability of self-assessment and self-reflection through the cultivation of reflective thinking and the use of recording tools. Given that there are many ways to help students improve their practice strategies and there are many factors that affect their development, there is room for further study outside the realms of this paper. Teachers need to work together to develop students' ability to practice strategies and help students to achieve their most ambitious goals.

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