Deliberate Practice as a Component of Language Learning Systems

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Language is the most complex of all Human Behaviors.

- For instance, what do the following expressions "really" mean?
  - "**Nothing…**"
  - "**That's OK.**"
  - "**Fine!**"

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- What do the following expressions mean?
  - "**Nothing…**"
    - If you really care, you will ask for more information about what is bothering me.

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- What do the following expressions mean?
  - "**Nothing…**"
    - If you really care, you will ask for more information.
  - "**That's OK.**"
    - I don't want to talk about what you did, but I'll remember you did it.

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- What do the following expressions mean?
  - "**Nothing…**"
    - If you really care, you will ask for more information.
  - "**That's OK.**"
    - I don't want to talk about it, but I'll remember you did this.
  - "**Fine!**"
    - I know that I am right, but I am tired of arguing.

“Method” is another word that has multiple meanings.

Have you ever been asked:

Which method of language teaching is most effective?

This has been a recurring question during the history of language teaching in the United States.

Which method of language teaching is most effective?

Fortunately, there have been large research studies on this topic.

International Research on Learning French

- John B. Carroll, *The Teaching of French in Eight Countries* (International Studies in Evaluation V) John Wiley & Sons, New York (1975).
  - This massive study tested over 30,000 language learners.
  - The study tested for the effect of various teaching methods, but it found that "… the primary factor in the attainment of proficiency in French (and presumably, any foreign language) is the amount of instructional time provided." [Page 276]

International Research on Learning English

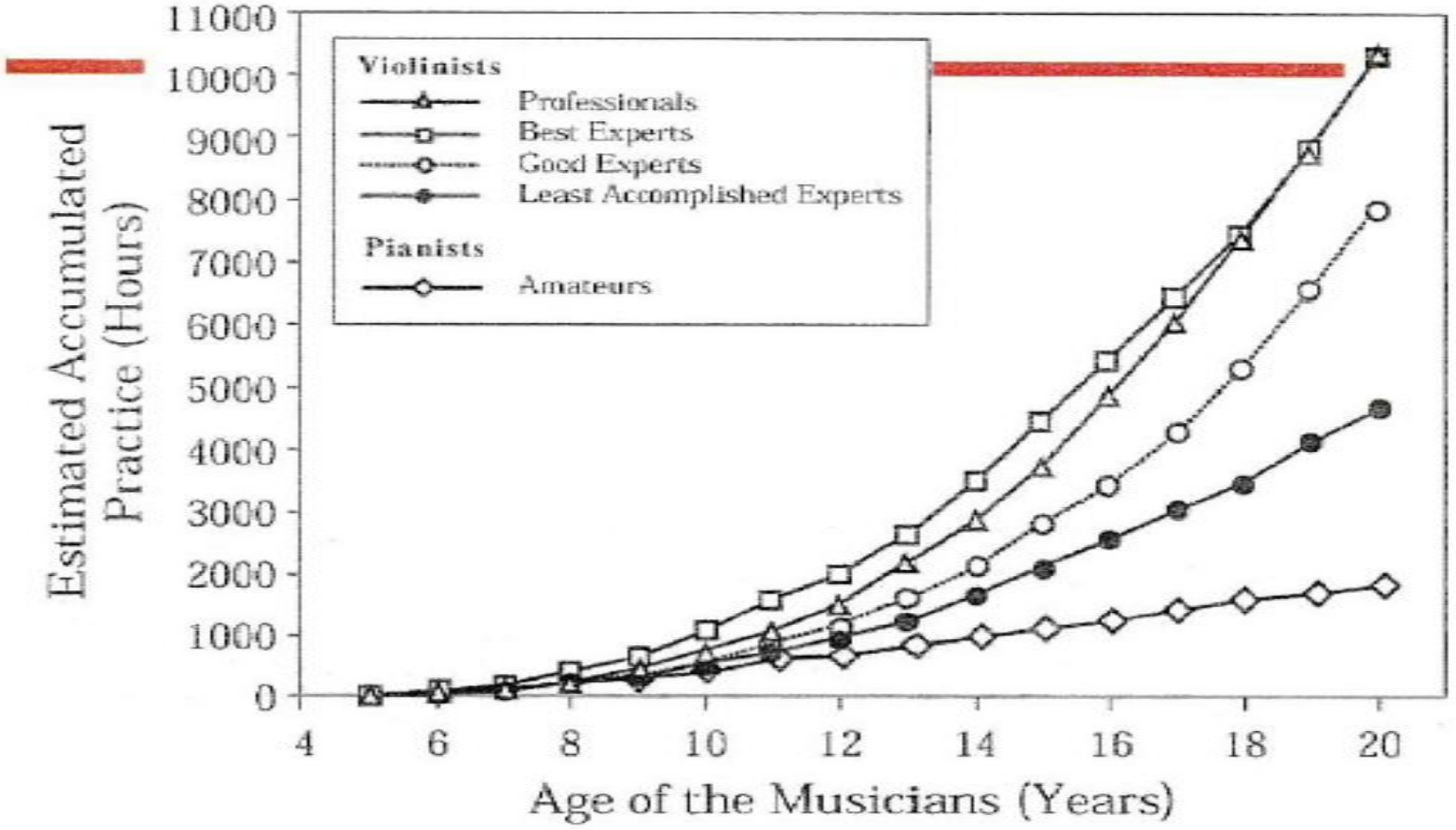
- G. Bonnet, et al. *The Assessment of Pupils' skills in English in Eight European Countries: 2002.* European Network of Policy makers for the Evaluation of Education Systems (2004).
  - Students from those nations with mandatory English instruction, where there is more contact with (and more time spent using) English have higher levels of competence in English.
  - When classroom instruction is combined with a language-rich environment, time spent using the language in and out of the classroom is more important than the teaching methods used in the classroom.

Research has repeatedly shown that the time devoted to learning has the greatest impact on language learning.

And this relationship between time and outcomes is also seen in other skill areas.

Practice Hours: Amateurs vs Experts

K. Anders Ericson, 14 December 2016, presentation to the Elite Sport Department and Olympic Committee, Israel



But is spending time "practicing the language" all that is required?

- Devoting time is required, but spending time doing the wrong things doesn't help.
- Ericson's 10,000-hour rule (that was popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in his 2008 book *Outliers*) does not guarantee success.
- Ericson's original research revealed the learning conditions that are required to develop advanced levels of ability.

PEAK: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise

Anders Ericsson (and Robert Pool), 2016.

- Anders Ericsson's spent 30 years researching how people learn.
- His research shows that:
  - Time on task is required, AND how that time is used is crucial.
  - "**Deliberate Practice**", which is different from other sorts of purposeful practice, **is essential**.

Deliberate Practice…

1. can only take place in a field that has "objective criteria for superior performance."
2. "requires a teacher who can provide [individualized] practice activities … that are both purposeful and *informed."*
3. should have a practice regimen "designed by and overseen by a teacher or coach who is familiar with the abilities of expert performers and how those abilities can be developed."

Deliberate Practice… (Continued)

4. “takes place outside of one’s comfort zone and requires a student to constantly try things that are just beyond his or her current abilities.”
5. “involves well-defined, specific goals and often involves improving some aspect of the target performance; it is not aimed at some vague overall improvement.”
6. “requires a person’s [the learner’s] full attention and conscious actions.”

Deliberate Practice… (Continued)

7. “involves feedback [from the teacher] and modification of [the learner’s] efforts in response to that feedback.”
8. “produces and depends on effective mental representations. Improving performance goes hand in hand with improving mental representations…[because they] make it possible to monitor how one is doing….”

Deliberate Practice… (Continued)

9. "nearly always involves building on or modifying previously acquired skills by focusing on particular aspects of those skills and working to improve them specifically."
10. emphasizes that "it is important for teachers to provide beginners with the correct fundamental skills in order to minimize the chances that the student will have to relearn those fundamental skills later when [s/he is] at a more advanced level."

A Three-Part Summary of Peak's 10 Conditions

I. **The Discipline.** The learning domain must be mature and have defined outcomes criteria.
   - 1. STANAG 6001 defines levels of success, and each level provides an Operational Construct that specifies the communication tasks, content, and accuracy expectations required at that proficiency level.

A Three-Part Summary of Peak's 10 Conditions

II. The Teachers. Professional language teachers must be able to:

- 3. Recognize expert performance.
- 2. Individualize instruction.
- 5. Set well-defined, specific goals for learners.
- 7. Provide beneficial feedback.
- 10. Help learners develop fundamental skills.
- 9. Guide learners as they build on previously acquired skills.

A Three-Part Summary of Peak's 10 Conditions

III. The Learners. Learners must be willing to:

- 4. Tolerate working outside of their comfort zone.
- 5. Constantly try things that are just beyond his or her current abilities.
- 6. Give their full attention and conscious responses.
- 7. Modify their efforts in response to feedback.
- 8. Develop mental representations of expert performance and monitor their own efforts.
- 9. Work to improve specific aspects of their skills.

Despite the research, there is continuing pressure to reduce instructional time.

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- Managers are often motivated by a desire to save time and money.
  - **And there is nothing that can't be done faster and cheaper – if it is done worse.**
- Teachers are often motivated to teach better and help learners progress faster.
  - **And there is no upper limit to "better".**

In the U.S., pressure to save time has led to many shortcut methods.

- Grammar Translation
- Audio-Lingual
- Cognitive Code
- Silent Way
- Total Physical Response
- Direct Method
- Suggestopedia

All of those shortcuts ignored some of Ericson's 10 conditions.

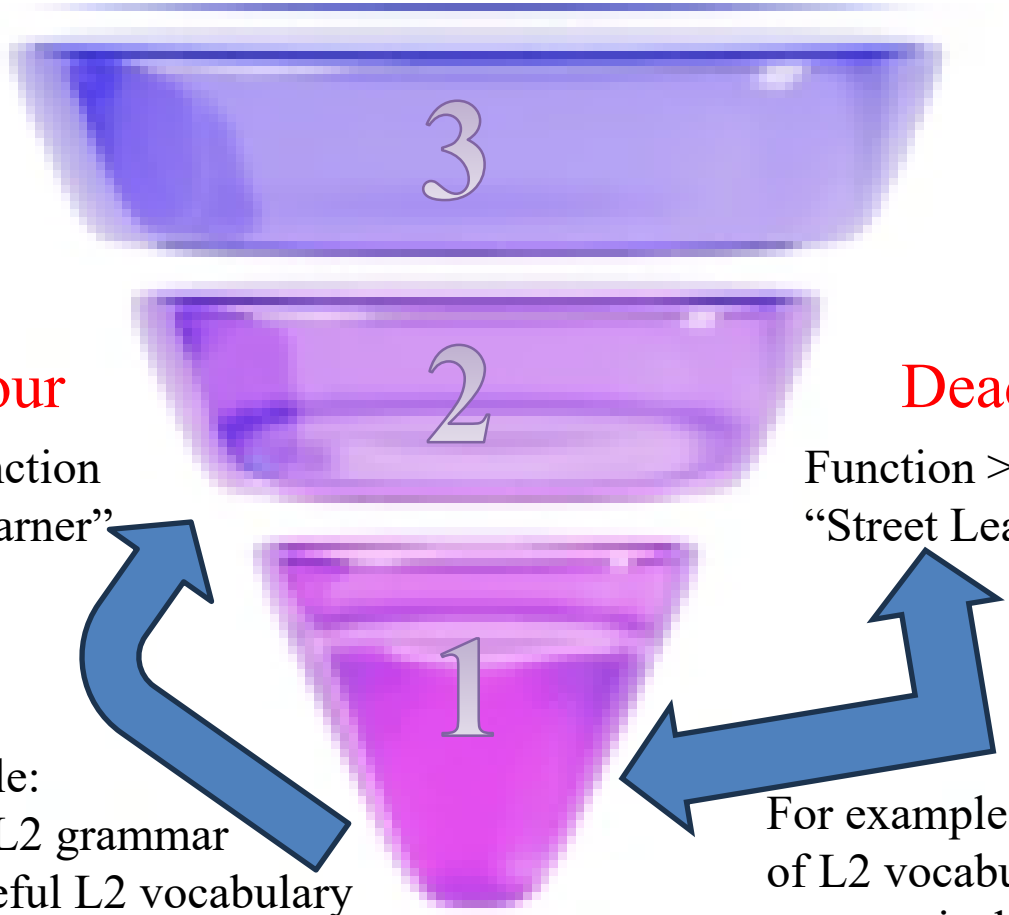
- Grammar Translation (Eventually lost its gloss)
- Audio-Lingual (Had the motto: Parrot or Perish)
- Cognitive Code (Not understood by teachers)
- Silent Way (No volunteers spoke up)
- Total Physical Response (Taught only action verbs)
- Direct Method (Some use of the L_1 was more efficient)
- Suggestopedia (Known by: If it isn't baroque, don't fix it)

Interlanguage Mistakes versus Fossilized Errors

- Mistakes are a natural part of learning.
- When an L2 task exceeds one's L2 competence, the learner resorts to L1 patterns.
- The result is interlanguage.
- Interlanguage is closer to the L1 than is the L2, and it is more easily acquired than the L2.
- If interlanguage is rewarded, repeated mistakes can become persistent errors that must be unlearned before further progress is possible.

Shortcuts are Detours or Dead Ends

Deliberate Practice with Integrated Function and Form



Detour

Form > Function
"School Learner"

For example:
practicing L2 grammar
without useful L2 vocabulary

Dead End

Function > Form
"Street Learner"

For example: extensive practice of L2 vocabulary without L2 grammatical accuracy

Concluding Observations

Taking the time needed to do the right things the right way is the most efficient use of instructional time.

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Taking "shortcuts" is inefficient, because learners are devoting their time to doing the wrong things.

Thank you !