

The Use of Terminology in Grammar Teaching, Part II

by Betty Azar

It's fascinating for me, as a language teacher, to compare the use of terminology in the teaching of music and the teaching of language. The goal in both types of teaching is a kind of automaticity, with labels extraneous to actual performance ability. And both can be "acquired" without a learner knowing any terminology at all.

I'm an adult student of the piano. So why does my piano teacher teach me that a certain configuration of notes is called a *mordent*? Knowing the term has no automatic effect on my ability to play those notes fluently and accurately. Yet it's through shared terminology that my teacher and I are able to communicate easily as I develop my "intermusic" — the music I play before a Bach Invention would, theoretically, become second nature, become fluent, accurate, and unconsciously produced output. (I say "theoretically" because that's still a goal, but I'm getting closer!)

So, again, using *mordent* as an example — now that I know the term, my teacher can say, "Let's work on the timing of the mordent." Our communication is quick and easy. She could, of course, just keep correcting me by showing me how to do it (no labels), or calling the mordent "those little notes there." The labels are not requisite. But in my experience, they are very helpful to me as an adult student and efficient for my teacher to use. There are all sorts of terms that help the two of us pedagogically, from the basic terms (*measure*, *key*, *quarter rest*, *staccato*, etc.) to the more specialized, such as *mordent*.

It is, of course, obvious that knowing the terms does not ever, in and of itself, translate into usage ability. (Exactly the same is true of grammar terminology.) But the terms have value as a communication tool during my "pre-acquisition" (or "interlanguage") phase of gaining "music usage ability" as I engage in repeated practice.

It seems to me there is similar pedagogical value in being able to use grammar terms with adult students in their interlanguage phase — not simply for teacher-student communication, but value in students' cognitive understanding of the concepts (represented by terminology) of singular, plural, subject, verb, sentence, modifier, agreement, clause, subordination, coordination, to name a few examples.

What do you think? Is there a valid analogy in the pedagogical use of terminology in the teaching of music and language? Weigh in on [Teacher Talk](#).