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Ear Playing Project (EPP)

<http://earplaying.ioe.ac.uk>

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The EPP concludes



Professor Lucy Green

After a year of funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the main research phase of the Ear Playing Project (EPP) concluded at the end of August 2012.

Our records show that 325 students participated in instrumental lessons, plus a number of students in at least 4 extra-curricular ensembles, 6 guitar groups and 1 choir. However the real number of student participants may well be more. We collected data through: 114 lesson observations involving 95 pupils and 17 teachers, mainly in one-to-one lessons with a few in pairs; observations of 4 band rehearsals and 6 guitar groups; 13 teacher interviews and 42 student interviews; 193 student questionnaires and 54 teacher questionnaires; and various notes, e-mails and blog comments. We collected audio recordings of first attempts at the task, by 75 students, and conducted a matched-pairs experiment with 36 students. In addition, we ran a special day for 9 blind and partially-sighted children. We ran 10 induction days for teachers, 6 at the Institute of Education, one of which was under the auspices of the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB), one at the Royal Northern College of Music, one at Croydon Music Service, and one at Forest Hill School. There were intersecting themes across these various data sources, which produced a very positive portrait of EPP. This illustrated the great value of ear playing from a recording in students' aural development, and just how many teachers considered it an extremely worthwhile avenue.

Teacher and student evaluations of the project

Overall, teachers' confidence was reported to have increased in a range of ways, and teachers stated that they found the project worthwhile and enjoyable. Ninety-one per cent (90.7%) stated that they would continue to use the project strategies in a general way after the project had finished, and eighty-seven per cent (87%) agreed or strongly agreed that the project would influence the way they teach in the future. One instrumental teacher we observed, for example, was creating her own ear playing audio materials for use before introducing notation of the pieces; another created her own materials for her primary school lunch-time ensemble, involving around 24 pupils, many of whom were complete beginners. Eighty-five per cent (85.2%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I have learnt useful teaching skills during the project'. Ninety-two per cent 92.6% of the teachers felt that their students had benefitted from the ear playing; 74.1% stated that the general musicianship of their students had improved; and 79.6% stated that students' general aural development had improved.

In questionnaires, 79.3% of the 193 students who sent us questionnaires reported that they found the project enjoyable or very enjoyable. Seventy-one per cent (71.5%) reported that, prior to the project they had never done ear playing of a similar kind (from an audio recording) before. At the end of the project, 80.3% thought that playing by ear was 'important' or 'very important'; and 79.8% said they would prefer to learn to play by ear as well as by notation rather than by one of those means only. We also observed a large shift in the perceived difficulty level of the task. Prior to experience through the project materials, 55.4% of the students thought ear playing would be 'difficult' or 'very difficult'; however, only 11.9% remarked that it turned out to be 'difficult' or 'very difficult' (with 53.9% deeming it 'medium difficulty' and 32.6% deeming it 'easy' or 'very easy').



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ABRSM tests

In order to look further at the impact of the ear playing, 16 pairs of students, matched by their teachers according to instrumental group, age and standard, were given two types of specially-prepared ABRSM aural test. One required a sung response and the other a played response; the participants were expected to replicate the material they heard. In each matched pair, one student underwent Lucy's ear playing strategies and the other did not for comparison. Each student was given a pre- and a post-test, to coincide with the seven to ten weeks of the project strategies. Anonymous audio files of participants' responses were assessed in random order according to a number of specified criteria, such as 'contour accuracy', 'rhythmic accuracy' and 'closure'. We had the kind assistance of Dr Nigel Scaife (ABRSM Syllabus Director) and John Holmes (ABRSM Head Examiner) with this. Additionally, 18 instrumental teachers completed the exercise with the played tests during end-of-project meetings. We are still analysing the data but can report that the ear players outperformed the other students on every assessment criterion for the played tests.

Learning styles

Altogether 114 lessons were observed by David and Maria; and audio recordings of 75 students' first attempts at copying the Link Up track were collected from 15 teachers, who between them taught the piano, flute, violin, recorder, saxophone and guitar. These lessons were transcribed by three researchers, and the categorisation was undertaken by Maria, David and two independent judges. So far, the learning styles that describe the students' 'spontaneous' responses to copying music by ear, as identified in Lucy's pilot study (2012), seem to be replicated in this study. Seventeen students have currently been categorised as having an 'impulsive learning style, 18 a 'practical' learning style, 25 a 'shot-in-the-dark' learning style and 5 a 'theoretical' learning style. We were also able to identify 10 students who displayed possible 'perfect pitch', cutting across the learning styles, including students who played the first note of the riff correctly

straight away without any trial and error. Some of them used the D as an anchor to find other pitches but some did not. As regards the students' learning strategies during their first lesson, that is, the ways they developed their approaches after the first attempt, the majority tended to: listen to the recording without playing, ask their teachers questions (e.g. Is it a low D or a low C? Do they all start on the same notes? Is it a black note?), play isolated notes, listen and play along with the recording, and progressively develop the piece. Some students experimented with the riffs and tried to get a sense of the piece before finding all the actual notes, some focused on the rhythm first and then on the melody, others focused on finding the start note by moving up and down scales of at least three notes in order to find the correct notes. A minority showed signs of improvisation or sang/hummed the riffs before or whilst playing them.

Throughout the lessons the teachers gave a lot of positive feedback and encouragement. They advised students to listen carefully, find the first note, sing or hum the melody and start at different octaves. A minority suggested students should focus on technique, count the notes or focus on the rhythm. Teachers also asked questions, sang or hummed along both with and without the recording, gave explanations of the task, and sang prolonged notes. On the whole, the teachers tended to have control over the audio recording by stopping and starting the music. Some teachers played the correct version of the riff on their instrument and gave hints about whether the students were getting close to finding the right notes. A minority encouraged the students to practice at home. A few teachers gave more direction over the learning, revealing the notes by naming them and indicating the movement of a scale or interval by hand. (Possibly this was more



Images used with the kind permission of the teacher, school and parents



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than was needed at such an early stage - in the questionnaires, for example, pupils mostly said they felt they learnt more when they had to find the notes without being told or shown them. More work is needed on this!)

Interesting findings are beginning to emerge from the analysis of these observations. We hope they will be able to contribute to continuing research in music psychology on learners' responses to music tasks in one-to-one instrumental lessons, and that they might inform music pedagogy by opening it to a range of pedagogical approaches and repertoire.

Finally...

There are clearly some exciting findings to report, and publications that will arise from the EPP: Lucy is writing a teachers' handbook (for Oxford University Press), Maria is preparing an article on 'learning styles' and David has written a book chapter on the project (for a forthcoming Ashgate publication). In addition, Maria is preparing an article on teaching styles, David and Lucy will prepare an article on the ABRSM tests, and David is taking the work into a study of how blind and partially-sighted musicians learn by ear. Maria and David have also attended conferences this month to report on the research (the Society for Education, Music and Psychology (SEMPRE) 40th anniversary conference; and 'Perspectives on musical improvisation', Faculty of Music, Oxford University respectively). Lucy has just returned from Argentina where she gave a two-day course and a conference keynote presentation incorporating the EPP, and earlier in the year she did the same in Brazil. In February 2013 Lucy will be presenting the learning styles findings to a conference of Musical Futures Champion Schools. Further articles may well arise due to the depth of data we have collected; we will provide further details on the EPP website in due course.

EPP would not have been possible without the considerable and generous support we had from organisations such as ESTA, EPTA, NAME, Musical Futures and the ISM, all of whom advertised the project on their websites or in newsletters, bringing teachers on board. A special 'thank you' goes to Dr Nigel Scaife, who gave considerable personal support throughout the project, and who enabled the recruitment of teachers through facilitating our stalls at ABRSM conferences across England. We also had much valued support and participation from the Royal Northern College of Music, the Oxford Piano Group, Croydon Music Service, and Forest Hill School, a Musical Futures champion school. Particularly fascinating for us was the collaboration with the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB) and the two workshops that were organised through them. We would also like to thank Maria Vraka for her excellent transcription of much of the data, and for her participation as an independent judge in the learning styles grid exercise, and Thuy Hoang for her participation also in that exercise.

Most importantly, we wish to convey our heartfelt gratitude to every participating teacher and student. It has been a real delight to meet you and work with you all during induction days, visits to your schools and teaching practices, and at the end-of-project meetings. Thank you so much for participating with us in this exciting and fruitful year.

Lucy, David and Maria
The EPP Research Team