

# Language Beyond Words: Jazz Improvisation as An Alternative Mode of Communication in Education

Rizal Ezuan Zulkifly Tony, Siti Nur Hajarul Aswad Shakeeb Arsalaan Bajunid

Faculty of Music, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.925ILEIID000064>

Received: 23 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 06 November 2025

## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces music performance as an innovative form of communication that extends beyond verbal and textual language, positioning it as a valuable pedagogical tool in education. While conventional teaching methods often prioritise spoken and written expression, music offers a non-verbal system of semiosis through rhythm, phrasing and dynamics. By drawing parallels between musical and linguistic structures, this paper proposes music as language, embodied in a framework for enhancing creativity, empathy and intercultural understanding. The key innovation lies in reframing performance as a communicative practice that develops learner sensitivity to nuance and their capacity for non-verbal literacy. This approach highlights how improvisation and interactive choices in piano and jazz guitar performance are presented as models for reflective and adaptive learning. The contribution to education is twofold: First, it broadens the concept of language to include artistic and embodied forms; second, it offers educators a strategy for cultivating more inclusive or culturally responsive classrooms. By positioning performance as “language beyond words”, the paper underscores its potential to transform communication, enrich interdisciplinary learning and advance education innovation in globalised learning environments.

**Keywords:** performative pedagogy, non-verbal literacy, music as communication, semiosis in music

## INTRODUCTION

Education is often realised by verbal and textual communication, with the focus on speech and writing as the primary means of knowledge transfer. Effective as it can be, this emphasis risks neglecting alternative literacies that promote creativity, embodiment and intercultural sensitivity (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009). As classrooms increasingly prepare students for globalized contexts, there is value in exploring non-verbal systems of communication that foster adaptability and inclusion.

Music, both art and social practice, offers the same system but with different perspectives. Scholars have long noted structural and functional parallels between music and language (Patel, 2008; Small, 1998), suggesting that performance may operate as a communicative practice in its own parallel, beyond its aesthetic value. Music carries the capacity to express intent, negotiate meaning and mediate relationships that function typically to the attribution of language (Berliner, 1994)

## Problem Statement

Despite growing emphasis on learner-centered and creative education, lecture-based approaches remain common in tertiary settings, privileging linear information transfer (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994). Such models often restrict students' opportunities to explore and experience embodied, non-verbal and intercultural forms of expression. On the brighter side, music education is the potential to bridge this gap, even when performance is often framed exclusively as artistry or technical skill rather than as communication. Consequently, students may miss the opportunity to develop non-verbal literacies, such as sensitivity to nuance, collaborative listening and intercultural dialogue. Therefore, there is a need to reframe performance practices across instruments in this

case, piano and jazz guitar as communicative modes that extend beyond words. This emphasis could position education as a performative and interactive process, cultivating skills that are transferable across disciplines and professional contexts.

## Objectives

1. Propose a framework for understanding music performance as a communicative mode in education
2. Explore the potential application of jazz guitar improvisation and piano interpretation as illustrative examples of non-verbal communication in learning

## PRODUCT DESCRIPTION & METHODOLOGY

The central idea of this paper is to position performance as a framework for communicative practice. Music, like language, features syntax, prosody and dialogue (Patel, 2008). However, it conveys meaning through sound, embodiment and interaction rather than words. Example: Jazz guitar improvisation resembles conversational dialogue, and this is realised when a guitarist responds to another phrase with a complementary idea, it mirrors turn-taking and negotiation in spoken conversation (Berliner, 1994; Seddon, 2005). A pianist highlights intonational nuance, where dynamics, voicings, and rubato would parallel shifts in tone or as emphasis in speech, shaping meaning and emotion (Juslin and Sloboda, 2010). Together, these examples illustrate the performance potential as a dialogic system, cultivating learners' capacity for non-verbal literacy and intercultural sensitivity.

Although report of pilot workshops, participant feedback, or measurable outcomes is not stated, the methodology is pre-conceptualised and framed as proposed future work, with a practice-led and conceptual approach that may guide development (Candy, 2006) of comparative analyses that theorise parallels between linguistic and musical structures; syntax versus phrasing, and prosody versus dynamics. Guitar and piano performance serve as the required medium, exemplifying communication and action, and proposing workshops in tertiary settings as pedagogical pilots where students engage in improvisation and interpretive exercises, journaling reflections on communicative processes. This design allows performance to be positioned as a communicative practice in tandem with semantic nuance while remaining adaptable for interdisciplinary practices.

## POTENTIAL FINDINGS AND COMMERCIALISATION

### Enhanced Communication Skills Towards Intercultural Sensitivity and Reflective Learning

Students may become more attuned to non-verbal nuance and responsive dialogue, echoing real-world communication demands (Kramersch, 2006). This may be achieved by using improvisation and interpretation that requires listening across differences, potentially cultivating intercultural competence in diverse classrooms. By positioning education as performance, it may potentially encourage learners to see knowledge as co-creation, promoting adaptability and empathy

### Commercialisation Framework

In higher education, this framework could be commercially developed into a structured curriculum through its potential adaptability across educational and professional sectors, utilising workshops and masterclasses that integrate performance-based communication into music, language and intercultural studies. Beyond academia, the model lends itself to digital learning platforms and interactive training modules, aimed at fostering creativity, leadership, teamwork and non-verbal literacy in corporate and community contexts. Its interdisciplinary appeal, where improvisation and interpretive piano performance can be translated into strategies for collaboration, adaptability and innovation and creatively positions music performance as a transferable communicative skill, not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a marketable product in

professional corporate development, cultural exchange programs and global education innovation. Table 1 shows the parallels between musical performance and linguistic communication.

**Table 1** Parallels Between Musical Performance and Linguistic Communication

| Linguistic Mode | Musical Parallel               | Illustrative Remarks   | Proposed Application   |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Syntax          | Musical phrasing and harmony   | Chord voicing and phrase grouping create coherence, similar to sentence structure.                             | Encourage students to compose sentences through short musical motifs, developing structural awareness of communication.    |
| Prosody         | Dynamics, articulation, rubato | Dynamic contrast and rubato, mirroring tonal emphasis in speech  | Use performance to highlight how subtle shifts in tone or dynamic alter meaning, fostering sensitivity to nuance           |
| Dialogue        | Improvisational Exchange       | Jazz Guitarist responds to motifs, like conversational back-and-forth  | Improvisation as a dialogic practice, where listening and collaborative communication skills                               |
| Semantic nuance | Expressive interpretation      | Pianist alters voicings to highlight different harmonic colour, comparable to changing word choice or emphasis | Train learners to make interpretive choices that parallel linguistic precision, enhancing clarity in both music and speech |

## NOVELTY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The novelty of this proposed concept lies in its reimagining of music performance not merely as aesthetic output but as a communicative practice that parallels language. This approach positions performance as an alternative mode of practising communication where meaning is conveyed through rhythm, phrasing, and interpretive choices. The framework encourages learners to engage in active listening, where every musical gesture becomes an act of expression, dialogue and semiosis.

Future development of this research should conduct pilot workshops in tertiary classrooms, collecting both qualitative reflections and quantitative measures of student outcomes. From a commercialisation perspective, this framework could be translated into workshop modules, digital learning platforms or intercultural training packages for education, offering value for language learning, leadership training and globalised workplace preparation. Also, commercialization could be balanced with a candid discussion of limitations such as costs, teacher training, and adaptability across contexts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A sincere appreciation to Dr. Siti Nur Hajarul Aswad Shakeeb Arsalaan Bajunid for her invaluable guidance, encouragement and intellectual support in the development of this concept paper. Her insights and expertise have been instrumental in shaping the theoretical framing and academic direction of this research initiative.

## REFERENCES

- Berliner, P. (1994). *Thinking in jazz: The infinite art of improvisation*. University of Chicago Press.
- Candy, L. (2006). *Practice based research: A guide*. Creativity and Cognition Studios Report.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2009). "Multiliteracies": New literacies, new learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 4(3), 164–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15544800903076044>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

6. Juslin, P. N., & Sloboda, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Handbook of music and emotion: Theory, research, applications*. Oxford University Press
7. Kramsch, C. (2006). From communicative competence to symbolic competence. *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(2), 249–252. [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2006.00395\\_3.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2006.00395_3.x)
8. New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60–92. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.66.1.17370n67v22j160u>
9. Patel, A. D. (2008). *Music, language, and the brain*. Oxford University Press.
10. Seddon, F. (2005). Modes of communication during jazz improvisation. *British Journal of Music Education*, 22(1), 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051704005984>
11. Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Wesleyan University Press.