

## MINI ESSAY 7: TEACHING STRATEGIES

By Dr. Julie Knerr

I am currently working on a list of Teaching Strategies that teachers can use to increase their effectiveness in working with students. I currently have 135 Teaching Strategies in my list! Because of my Type A, analytical, logical, concrete personality, I find it very helpful to have a list of concrete strategies to help me analyze my teaching.

To grow as a teacher, I have found it helpful to choose one Teaching Strategy to work on consciously at every lesson. Once that Teaching Strategy has become well integrated into my teaching, I choose another Teaching Strategy to focus on. I have found that this is a good way to grow in my creativity and flexibility as a teacher and to train my pedagogy students to become better teachers.

The Teaching Strategies are bolded when they are used in the Teacher's Guides.

The following is a sampling of some of my favorite Teaching Strategies (in alphabetical order) that I hope will help you teach the pieces in **Piano Safari** more effectively.

- **Coaching:** While the student is playing, before he comes to a transition or problem spot, say, "Here comes the C," or "Now the end part!" to jog his memory.
- **Follow the Leader:** When learning Technique Exercises and Rote Pieces, the teacher plays a small portion. The student copies with correct notes, rhythm, technical motions, and musical inflection. (Thanks to Mary Craig Powell for this Teaching Strategy.)
- **Freeze:** Use **Freeze** to check for relaxed non playing fingers. The student plays until the teacher says, "**Freeze.**" The student stops on that note, with the key depressed. The teacher then checks the thumb for relaxation (by flipping it up from underneath gently to see if it is loose), and the student fixes any hand shape problems or collapsed joints. If the student can feel his relaxed hand while stopped, eventually he will be able to maintain relaxation while playing.
- **Go for a Ride:** The student puts his hand on the teacher's hand, and the teacher plays. This is useful in pieces where there are position changes from octave to octave. In this way, the student can feel position shifts around the keyboard. (Thanks to Mary Craig Powell for this Teaching Strategy.)
- **Insurance:** **Insurance** is scaffolding that prevents the student from making unnecessary mistakes. Using all three types of **Insurance** simultaneously provides the most support for students learning a piece. As the student gains confidence with a piece, the teacher can reduce the **Insurance** until the student is playing the piece on his own.
  - **Playing Insurance:** As the student plays, the teacher plays the Student's part in a different octave.
  - **Singing Insurance:** The teacher sings lyrics or other prompting words to help the student while he plays.

- **Pointing Insurance:** The teacher points to the notes with a pencil (being careful not to cover the notes) as the student plays.
  - **Counting Insurance:** The teacher sings the counts (Ta's). Singing in the long notes (half and whole notes) is especially helpful. It is not usually necessary to sing every quarter note.
- **Mark the Leaps:** In Rote Pieces that require large leaps in one or both hands, put a Fuzzy on the note the student will leap to. This gives the student a visual reference for where the new position is and allows the student to leap in rhythm to the new position. Once confident, the Fuzzy can be removed.
- **One-Handed Duet:** In a two-handed piece, the teacher plays the RH part and the student plays the LH part. Then they switch parts. This allows the student the opportunity to focus on playing one part while hearing the piece as a whole.
- **Playing Over the Student's Hands:** When learning Technique Exercises and Rote Pieces, or for a first experience with a Reading Piece or Folk Song, the student has his hands on the piano in position, and the teacher depresses the keys. In this way, the student can feel the keys going down and sense how it will feel kinesthetically to play a piece.
- **Point to the Keys:** When learning Rote Pieces, as the student plays, the teacher points to the key the student is to play from above the keyboard.
- **Practice in Your Brain:** For learning Reading Pieces and Sightreading Flashcards, the teacher instructs the student, "**Practice in Your Brain** for these two measures, and let me know when you are ready to play it." The student plays silently on the surface of the keys and then says, "Got it!" when ready and plays aloud. This gives him ownership and pride in his reading skills and prevents mistakes.
- **Preemptive Insurance:** After a student has practiced a piece at home and the teacher is hearing it at the lesson, the teacher can head off frustrating and unnecessary mistakes and save time by using **Preemptive Insurance**. This means that instead of saying, "Let's play 'My Dog Fritz,'" and running the risk of the student forgetting which piece that is and making mistakes, you can play the first phrase of "My Dog Fritz" and sing the words. This will jog his memory, focus him on the task at hand, and he will be more successful and confident in his playing. Another use for **Preemptive Insurance** is to remind the student about a correction you gave. For example, if you are working on articulation in a piece, at the next lesson you can say, "Let's play your sonatina. This is the one where we were working on those short articulations, right?" You then play a phrase with the correct articulation. The student has a much better chance of playing the piece correctly the first time due to your reminder. This saves time and allows you to praise the student for his good work rather than saying, "Uh oh. Didn't we talk about this articulation last week? Why didn't you correct that?"
- **Slowly:** Sometimes a student makes unnecessary mistakes because the teacher is setting a tempo that is too fast. It takes an enormous amount of coordination between the eyes, ears, fingers, and brain to read the music and translate it to playing the piano. Playing at a very slow tempo gives the brain time to process all aspects of playing. After the student feels confident at a slow tempo, he can play faster.

- **Steps:** A teacher should carefully plan out a series of steps in presenting each piece. If a student is consistently making mistakes in a first introduction to a new piece, it is likely that the teacher has skipped a step. The steps should eliminate unnecessary mistakes and give the student the feeling that he can confidently master the piece in practice at home. In the Teacher's Guide, steps are provided for each piece.
- **Technical Osmosis:** Play the student's part up an octave from where the student is playing. He can absorb your technical motions out of his peripheral vision without you having to say a word. Similarly, in **Musical Osmosis**, he absorbs your rhythm and phrasing by hearing you play with him.