

A Study of Perception Toward an Improvising Learning Management of Piano Teachers in Thailand

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Abstract

Despite substantial scholarly evidence on improvisation's efficacy in cultivating performance aptitude and creative expression in instrumental music education, insights from the researcher's 20+ years of piano teaching, corroborated by this study's data, indicate a significant gap: improvisation remains largely underutilized by many piano teachers in Thailand as an integral pedagogical component. This study therefore investigated Thai piano teachers' perceptions influencing their decision to integrate improvisation techniques. Primary data were gathered from 12 experienced Thai piano teachers (10+ years teaching experience) through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. Findings demonstrate a strong majority of teachers recognize improvisation's pivotal role in fostering students' creativity and enhancing musical skills. Critically, however, teachers' individual attitudes and the value they place on improvisation are intricately linked to their varying educational histories. Furthermore, the institutional context demonstrably impacts the feasibility of implementing improvisation activities, with curriculum flexibility and administrative endorsement being particularly influential. This research highlights a pressing need to develop and promote practical strategies that facilitate seamless integration of improvisation, such as emphasizing process-oriented learning, cultivating psychologically safe spaces for experimentation, and strategically employing technology. Advancing effective improvisation pedagogy fundamentally hinges on a holistic integration of teacher knowledge, musical beliefs, curricular structures, and educational policy, which will collectively empower music education in Thailand to more robustly address the demands of fostering creativity in contemporary learning environments.

Keywords: improvisation, perception, piano teacher in Thailand, music education

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Introduction

For two decades, music educators have emphasized developing learner-centered teaching and learning approaches, empowering students to create their own musical experiences (Scott, 2011). Correspondingly, improvisation is a crucial skill for fostering creativity, as it requires students to make real-time decisions on rhythm, melody, harmony, and structure, leading to novel musical ideas and coherent organization (Coss, 2018). Historically, before 1850, improvisation and composition were central to music. However, post-mid-19th century, piano instruction shifted towards repertoire mastery, reducing improvisation's role (Beckstead, 2013). Consequently, developing students' musical creation through improvisation is a pedagogical technique capable of stimulating creativity and enhancing potential (Santi, 2016), with improvised performance often being a collaborative and interactive act (Sawyer, 2011).

Within institutional curricula, piano improvisation is predominantly taught in a jazz context. At the university level in Thailand, this focus has existed for over two decades. Mahidol University's College of Music launched a Bachelor of Arts in Jazz Music in 1998, producing numerous qualified personnel. For over 20 years, Thai universities have developed proficient jazz musicians, offering training programs and competitions. In contrast, while Thai secondary school core curricula for arts and music mention the importance of musical creation for balanced listening, performance, analysis, and creation skills, improvisation is not explicitly stated. Consequently, improvisation teaching by piano teachers at the secondary level remains uncommon in some areas. In some private piano schools, parents often measure musical ability by note-reading proficiency or international grade exams, rather than by improvisation skills, which are not directly scoreable. This aligns with UK research indicating many piano teachers prioritize note-reading, repertoire, and technique over improvisation and composition (Cathcart, 2013). A 2010 piano survey found 95.6% of respondents frequently taught note-reading, but 41.3% rarely taught improvisation. In summary, although the value of improvisation in Thai higher education is increasing, improvisation in fundamental piano education remains underemphasized due to various factors and limitations.

Given these circumstances, this study aimed to investigate Thai piano teachers' perceptions of teaching improvisation. The objective was to explore how Thai piano teachers perceive the integration of improvisation techniques into their instruction. Data were collected from 12 key informants: Thai piano teachers with over 10 years of experience, comprising 8 males and 4 females aged 30-40, each receiving at least one annual improvisation training. Six had classical piano backgrounds, and six had jazz piano backgrounds. They taught in private (7) and public (5) schools. Key dependent variables examined included: 1) Perceptions of improvisation's importance, focusing on attitudes (Biasutti & Frezza, 2009); 2) Pedagogical approaches to improvisation, exploring understanding of concepts and methods (Gordon, 2003; Kratus, 1994), confidence in teaching (Abril, 2013), and practical application; and 3) Institutional context, examining curriculum flexibility, administrative support, and training opportunities (Cossey, 2024). The study's scope covered various regions in Thailand, considering diverse factors to provide a comprehensive overview of improvisation perceptions and applications in Thai piano classrooms. This research seeks to enhance understanding of factors influencing improvisation use in piano teaching, potentially guiding the development and promotion of more diverse piano pedagogy in Thailand and encouraging teachers to fully recognize improvisation's benefits for student musical development.

Perceptions of Improvisation Pedagogy Among Piano Teachers in Thailand

Factors influencing the perception of improvisation pedagogy can be analyzed into three main issues:

Perception Regarding the Importance of Improvisation

Improvisation is a crucial skill that should be cultivated in students from an early stage, as it fosters creativity, critical listening, and free musical expression. Teachers with a jazz background, in particular, often express positive views, asserting that improvisation is the “*heart of music*.” In contrast, some classical teachers still perceive improvisation as an “*auxiliary*” skill that may not be essential in the context of examinations or academic piano study. This highlights a divergence in conceptual frameworks and teaching cultures, with individual teachers holding varying perspectives and understandings based on their personal experiences and attitudes, as detailed below:

Unprepared Musical Creation

Improvisation is a musical creation that happens in the moment, without prior preparation. It's often viewed as a highly natural form of musical expression, a vital characteristic for making musical performances lively and engaging. Improvisation as creation involves:

1. Creating melodies and harmonies instinctively: Improvisers must generate melodies and harmonies spontaneously, drawing on musical skills and responding to real-time emotions or situations. Melodies stemming from feeling lend uniqueness to each performance.
2. Responding to the environment: Improvisation isn't solely about internal musical generation; it also involves responding to the environment or communicating with listeners and fellow musicians in real-time. Examples include adjusting tempo to match listener mood or responding to musical characteristics played by collaborators.
3. A limitless tool for expression: Improvised music is often “*one-of-a-kind*” with each performance.
4. Engaging interest: A key value teachers see in improvisation is their ability to bring music to life. The spontaneity of improvisation creates intrinsic interest and charm, transforming a performance from mere note-following into a shared experience immediately perceived by both audience and musicians. This style of playing excites and surprises listeners.
5. Practical training: Some teachers emphasize the importance of practical improvisation training. Improvisation isn't just playing by feel; it requires developed musical skills. Students should practice fundamental musical structures, such as using diverse scales or practicing chord changes, to enhance improvisational flexibility and effective expression.

From many teachers' perspectives, improvisation is more than just playing without prior preparation. It's a tool enabling musicians to create fresh, responsive music in the moment. Improvised music is inherently unpredictable and natural, making performances vibrant and highly engaging for audiences.

Promoting Creativity

Improvisation is considered a vital tool for developing student creativity. Many teachers view its benefits as extending beyond musical skill development, enhancing quick and efficient thinking and decision-making. As one classical piano teacher from a government school noted, “Many students are good at reading notes but are afraid to play without them. Improvisation helps them express themselves more boldly. It's not just a technique; it's a

musical language that needs to be practiced from the very beginning.” In improvisation, students face unprepared situations, which encourages creative thinking and adaptability to immediate demands. Key aspects of creativity development through improvisation highlighted by teachers include: 1. Flexible Musical Thinking: Students must adapt their playing to unfolding situations, such as selecting appropriate chords, creating melodies, or playing with different rhythms. 2. Rapid and Effective Decision-Making: A crucial skill is making decisions under time constraints. Students must practice thinking and deciding in the moment, whether selecting a melody fitting the current chord or quickly changing rhythm or playing style. 3. Building Self-Confidence: Creating new music spontaneously instills pride in students’ abilities, boosting their confidence in future musical expression. 4. Free Musical Expression: Students express themselves uniquely, without being confined to pre-written notes or structures. 5. Experimentation and Learning from Mistakes: Improvisation offers direct opportunities for learning from errors. When a musical decision doesn’t meet expectations, students can learn and adjust immediately, fostering a positive attitude towards experimentation and experiential learning. As a jazz piano teacher from a private school commented, “Many students are accustomed to reading notes; they’re afraid of making mistakes when improvising. But I believe we should change their mindset to ‘mistakes can also create.’” 6. Connecting Theory and Practice: Improvisation makes music theory more meaningful by allowing students to apply learned theories in real-time, such as using various scales or selecting chords that suit the musical mood. Theory transforms into a creative tool, not just a textbook concept. 7. Developing Listening and Communication with Others: Improvisation isn’t solitary; it cultivates listening and communication skills with other musicians. Listening to others and responding instantly fosters teamwork in musical performance and enhances creative collaboration.

Improvisation is a powerful tool for developing student creativity. It encourages flexible thinking, rapid decision-making, and unique musical expression, which in turn builds confidence in playing and develops listening and collaborative skills. Thus, improvisation is an essential practice that enables students to fully express their creativity through music.

Improvisation as a Specialized Skill and Its Perceived Necessity for All Students

Some teachers view improvisation as a specialized skill not necessarily required for all students, particularly those lacking fundamental musical knowledge or interest in this type of performance. Teaching improvisation in such cases can be time and effort-intensive. Thus, some educators believe improvisation isn’t universally needed and should only be taught to students with a specific interest or readiness. As one classical piano teacher from a government school stated, “Our curriculum doesn’t have much room for improvisation because students are assessed on written notes. Integrating it must be done within limited time.” Another added, “Many students learn only for exams and aren’t trained to listen or think creatively. So, we rarely have time for them to improvise.” Factors influencing the decision to teach improvisation include: 1. Strong Musical Foundation: Improvisation demands solid foundational musical skills, including understanding music theory, chord structures, scales, and rhythms. A lack of such fundamentals can make learning improvisation challenging. 2. High Time and Dedication Investment: Improvisation is a skill requiring significant practice and development, as it involves real-time thinking and creation. The need to select scales and chords under time pressure means improvisation can be time-consuming and unsuitable for uncommitted students. 3. Interest in Performance: While improvisation is crucial for musical performance, not all students are interested in this specific mode. Some prefer pre-prepared, formal piano playing or ensemble music demanding precision and

structure. 4. Early Piano Learning: In some cases, teachers prioritize essential foundational skills like note-reading, structured playing, or precise performance. Improvisation might not be considered a primary skill during initial training. 5. Reducing Student Stress and Anxiety: Learning improvisation can induce stress and anxiety in some students due to its unprepared expressive nature. This might lead to pressure or fear of making mistakes, potentially diminishing their enjoyment of music and negatively impacting future performance.

From some teachers' perspectives, improvisation is a specific skill not essential for all students, especially those lacking musical fundamentals or interest in this performance style. It's also a time- and effort-intensive skill best taught to students with specific interest and readiness.

The Importance of Improvisation in the Context of Music Education

Conversely, improvisation doesn't always imply full-scale performance. It can manifest flexibly, not limited to creative playing within set compositions or spontaneous melodic expression. This adds variety and prevents music lessons from becoming repetitive or boring. Some teachers recognize improvisation's importance in the teaching and learning process, including:

1. Flexible Improvisation within Song Structures: Students can practice improvisation within a song's established structure, such as creating melodies in a given scale or developing harmonies from pre-arranged chords. This structured approach makes teaching less complex.
2. Using Improvisation for Learning Variety: Improvisation can be a tool to make music lessons more diverse and engaging. Teachers can introduce improvisation tasks related to different genres or ask students to create melodies based on a specific mood. This helps students understand music theory and practice creatively, moving beyond strict note-following.
3. Developing Thinking and Decision-Making Skills: Allowing students to choose their musical path spontaneously helps them practice rapid decision-making in unprepared situations. This training not only enhances theoretical understanding but also fosters adaptability and creative thinking. As a jazz piano teacher from a private school put it, "I see improvisation as the soul of music. If we don't teach improvisation, it's like teaching a language without letting children speak it themselves."
4. Playing According to Current Mood: Improvisation involves creating melodies or harmonies within the current emotional scope, stimulating students to develop emotional expression through music. For instance, tasks might involve playing music that conveys sadness or joy without adhering to fixed compositions.
5. Boosting Confidence: Playing music without prior preparation encourages boldness in expression and helps students learn to cope with performance errors. When students enjoy improvisation without pressure, their confidence in other musical contexts grows.
6. Creating Enjoyable and Engaging Experiences: When students can experiment with diverse and creative musical forms, they become more excited and interested in lessons. Improvisation thus makes teaching more engaging and less boring, transforming music learning into an enjoyable and meaningful experience.

In the teaching context, improvisation plays a crucial role in adding diversity and interest to music education. It doesn't always require full-scale performance and can serve as a tool to develop students' thinking, decision-making, and emotional expression without unnecessary complexity or pressure.

Most teachers possess diverse understandings of improvisation, encompassing its role in developing performance skills, stimulating creativity, applying music theory, and adapting lessons to student needs. While some teachers view improvisation as essential for everyone, others consider it a skill suited for specific student groups with particular interests or strong musical foundations.

Understanding and Pedagogical Approaches to Improvisation Among Piano Teachers in Thailand

Each piano teacher employs diverse approaches to improvisation pedagogy, influenced by their musical background and the student's context.

Piano Teachers' Improvisation Teaching Methods

Many teachers agree that improvisation in the classroom begins with active listening and understanding song structures, starting with simple, accessible melodies before gradually increasing complexity. For beginners, it's advised to practice familiar notes first, then progressively introduce methods for creating new melodies from these notes. This builds confidence and familiarity with improvisation. Subsequently, more challenging tasks can be introduced, such as playing with rhythms different from the original melody or altering familiar song structures, like increasing/decreasing tempo or varying chord usage. A jazz piano teacher from a private school commented, "We try to start by having them change rhythms or add notes to familiar phrases, then gradually develop it. We don't teach strict jazz, but try to provide space for experimentation." Some students might initially fear improvisation due to its lack of rigid rules. Allowing them to experiment in a low-pressure environment fosters a sense of freedom and inspires confidence in musical expression. Another jazz piano teacher from a private school noted, "I start by having students listen to simple loops and then try to improvise on a pentatonic scale. After that, I gradually introduce chord progressions, asking them to imagine they are learning a new language." Many teachers also utilize collaborative improvisation tasks, such as duets or playing with other instruments, to help students practice harmonious playing and develop real-time musical connection.

A prominent artist and university lecturer in Thailand suggests that transcription is an effective method for learning improvisation. Even with limited initial playing ability, this practice builds confidence and encourages musical experimentation. Learning from real experience and listening to music deepens understanding of playing approaches. Transcribing by ear significantly aids development, as consistent listening and imitation enhance aural skills, leading to accurate note prediction and improved technique. This process not only deepens improvisation understanding but also imparts skills not attainable through self-practice alone, extending beyond mere physical technique to the ability to translate learned concepts into actual performance. Discipline in practice is crucial for effective learning, requiring patience and a gradual approach, starting slowly and progressing incrementally. An instructor or coach can provide external perspective, identifying flaws and suggesting developmental pathways. Students should prioritize slow and accurate practice before increasing speed to avoid errors due to technical unpreparedness. Fundamental knowledge of music theory and improvisation teaching approaches directly influences teachers' confidence in leading instruction. Some piano graduates demonstrate systematic teaching abilities, incorporating harmonic structures, voice leading, and various backing tracks for practice. Conversely, other piano graduates offer different pedagogical perspectives. A classical piano teacher from a government school stated, "For teaching improvisation, we start by changing the ending of a phrase or adding ornaments themselves." However, all teachers agree that annual training enhances teaching approaches and introduces new techniques applicable to students.

Learning improvisation should involve clear goals and an understanding of one's limitations. Musical development shouldn't be rushed but should progress systematically and gradually. Performance should remain within the song's context, avoiding excessive display of skills when inappropriate, to maintain balance and musicality.

Challenges and Issues Faced by Teachers in Teaching Improvisation

Teaching improvisation in music classrooms presents several challenges for educators, especially in fostering student confidence in musical expression. This is particularly true when students must play without worrying about making mistakes or falling out of time, as improvisation lacks the clear framework of pre-written notation. Consequently, some students experience anxiety and a lack of confidence, fearing errors or disrupting the song's form. It's crucial to make students feel comfortable and confident by providing a low-pressure environment where they can experiment without fear of mistakes. Moreover, auditory training plays a significant role. Improvisation demands responsiveness to real-time sounds, so training in listening and evaluating musical events is essential for enhancing students' creative playing. Some students are unfamiliar with improvisation because it differs from playing pre-determined sheet music. Instruction must gradually shift students' understanding of music from rule-following to creative expression, making improvisation seem more difficult and challenging. Beyond building student confidence, another issue is the lack of detailed listening skills. Many students cannot discern whether the resulting sounds are correct. Quality listening training is thus vital for improvisation, as it's not merely playing without limits but also responding to sounds in the moment and applying appropriate musical skills at each juncture.

Many teachers also encounter classroom management issues when students have varying abilities. Some possess strong foundational knowledge and improvise fluently, while others require more time to learn. Ensuring appropriate participation for all is a significant challenge. Furthermore, the teachers' own knowledge and skill levels are a concern. Some piano teachers approach improvisation systematically, using scale patterns, chord progressions, backing tracks, and modes. Others integrate it into lessons through supplementary activities, such as changing rhythms in musical phrases, adding notes to melodic fragments, or using guided improvisation. One classical piano teacher from a government school expressed, "I didn't study jazz before, so when teaching improvisation, I had to research more. It feels difficult without a clear framework." Some piano teachers voiced concerns like "not knowing how to start teaching" and "lacking improvisation fundamentals in their own training," necessitating external training or learning. A classical piano teacher confessed, "I'm not confident when having students try to improvise because I don't know how to assess or advise them." Improvisation training in music classrooms not only requires student confidence but also strong listening and responsive skills, along with creative support for effective improvisation. Additionally, managing classrooms with diverse skill levels and addressing teachers' own skill levels are critical considerations for quality improvisation instruction for all students.

Institutional Context Factors

Institutional policies and the broader teaching context significantly influence the opportunities for integrating improvisation activities. Teachers in private schools often have greater flexibility and autonomy in organizing activities. As one jazz piano teacher in a private school noted, "We organize jam sessions every end of the month. Students really

enjoy it, and we also use that to assess their improvisation skills.” Conversely, some classical piano teachers in government schools similarly pointed to limited weekly teaching hours. Teachers often face heavy workloads, including numerous teaching hours, administrative tasks, and extracurricular activities beyond their music responsibilities. A classical piano teacher from a government school stated, “Our teaching hours are limited, the curriculum is packed, and we have to prepare for many exams. There isn’t much opportunity for students to improvise, even if some are interested.” Teachers affiliated with private schools reported curriculum flexibility, allowing them to design activities freely to promote improvisation, such as group jam sessions, solo improvisation performances, non-notated performance assessments, and collaborative music projects. In contrast, most government school teachers indicated adherence to prescribed curricula, limiting their ability to incorporate improvisation. They often face constraints in terms of time, resources, and administrative support. A piano teacher in a government school remarked, “Here, the focus is on clear results and outcomes; we don’t have much room for students to experiment and learn from mistakes.” Furthermore, administrative support within each school and parental understanding are co-factors influencing teachers’ willingness and dedication to promote improvisation in the classroom.

Institutional context factors significantly impact the implementation of improvisation pedagogy. Teachers in private music institutions generally have greater flexibility in curriculum design and can organize more creativity-promoting activities. Conversely, teachers in government schools often face constraints related to curriculum structure, class time, and administrative policies that prioritize preparation for standardized assessments. Some teachers expressed that despite recognizing improvisation’s importance, they cannot fully implement related activities because it doesn’t align with evaluation goals within the governmental system. Additionally, administrative support and parental attitudes profoundly affect the space given to teachers for organizing creativity-focused musical activities.

Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the perceptions of piano teachers in Thailand with over 10 years of teaching experience regarding improvisation pedagogy, analyzing their views, attitudes, understanding, and influencing factors. Several key findings emerged, which can be discussed in conjunction with relevant concepts and theories:

Perception Regarding the Importance of Improvisation: The study found that most teachers are aware of improvisation’s importance, particularly in fostering creativity and developing students’ musical skills. This aligns with Biasutti and Frezza (2009), who state that improvisation develops listening, musical responsiveness, and emotional communication in a fluid manner. However, teacher attitudes differed between classical and jazz backgrounds, impacting the value placed on improvisation. Some classically trained teachers still viewed improvisation as non-essential for piano learning, especially within exam preparation frameworks. This highlights the need for a systematic re-understanding of improvisation’s role in current music curricula.

Teachers’ Knowledge, Understanding, and Ability in Teaching Improvisation: Discussion on this point revealed that teachers’ fundamental knowledge and personal experience directly influence their confidence in teaching improvisation. Some piano teachers demonstrated clear, structured teaching approaches and could systematically analyze improvisation, consistent with Kratus (1994) and Gordon (2003). Conversely, some teachers lacked

confidence and clear teaching methods, despite acknowledging improvisation's importance. This underscores the necessity for continuous training and knowledge development in improvisation, supporting Abril (2013), who suggests that creative music teaching abilities can be enhanced through appropriate training.

Role of Institutional Context and Policies in Pedagogy: Findings indicate that institutional context significantly influences opportunities for improvisation activities. Teachers in private music institutions enjoyed greater flexibility in curriculum design and promoting creative activities than those in government schools. Government school teachers faced constraints from rigid curricula and assessment-focused outcomes. Korošec et al. (2022) reached a similar conclusion, noting that providing improvisational performance experiences for students is often not prioritized due to educational policies demanding "clear and measurable outcomes, consistent with a materialistic attitude." This trend aligns with Burnard (2000), who emphasizes that creative activities in music classrooms require both academic freedom and supportive institutional policies. Without curriculum flexibility or administrative backing, teachers cannot effectively experiment or promote creative ideas in the classroom.

In conclusion, improvisation pedagogy among piano teachers in Thailand is influenced by both individual and systemic factors. Individual factors include attitudes, understanding, confidence, and educational background. Systemic factors encompass curriculum structure, institutional policies, and pedagogical flexibility. This aligns with Biasutti and Frezza (2009), Gordon (2003), Abril (2013), and Burnard (2000), who highlight the significant influence of contextual elements and teacher knowledge on improvisation integration in teaching.

This study demonstrates that "*improvisation pedagogy*" isn't solely about individual teacher capability but also results from multiple interacting components, including the educational system, musical attitudes, and learning environment. These elements pose obstacles to effectively integrating improvisation into teaching. Therefore, there's a need to promote approaches that enable teachers to adapt improvisation knowledge appropriately for students at various levels. Examples include designing practice activities that emphasize the creative process over outcomes, providing safe spaces for experimentation, and using technology to support improvisation practice. Ultimately, developing improvisation pedagogy in Thailand requires fostering teacher awareness and understanding, designing open curricula, and ensuring genuine support from national educational policies.

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