

Introduction

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Last October I attended the biannual conference of the Association of Binational Centers of Latin America in Pucon, Chile. At the opening ceremony, which began at 11:30 am, a Chilean jazz quintet played three songs to very enthusiastic applause. As I enjoyed the music, I thought to myself, "This is probably the earliest show this band has ever played!"

Another thought I had while listening to the music was that teaching English is a bit like playing jazz. Both require excellent listening skills and timing; both are usually done in front of other people; and both require the ability to improvise. (You could add that many teachers and musicians grumble about not making enough money, but that isn't germane to this discussion.) Also, the popularity of ESL/EFL classes and jazz grew internationally at roughly the same time, beginning around the end of World War II and continuing today.

It's not a perfect analogy between words and music, or between teaching language and playing music, but others have made a similar comparison. Describing the poems in his 1959 book *Mexico City Blues*, American writer Jack Kerouac said, "I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday."

An American jazz trio was scheduled to perform on the closing night of the ABLA conference, on its tour in South America as Jazz Ambassadors sponsored by the U.S. embassy. That morning the keyboard player had a serious accident, however, and the trio suddenly became a duo. Although the drummer and saxophonist were very worried about their friend's health, they stoically went on with the show. In fact, they played some classic songs by Duke Ellington and other jazz composers mentioned in this issue of the Forum. The audience was restless and rather noisy that night, but the two musicians showed tenacity and discipline, creativity and spontaneity. Despite playing without one-third of their band, they clearly loved making music, even in the face of hardship.

While listening to the duo, I thought about the times I had improvised in front of students because I hadn't prepared adequately for class or because I had been asked at the last minute to substitute for a sick colleague. I had to ask myself, "Did I show the same enthusiasm and discipline while improvising as these two jazz musicians?" As the applause ended and the musicians took their final bows, I resolved that the next time I found myself working under difficult circumstances, I would show the same discipline and enthusiasm as the two jazz musicians showed on stage.

Maybe playing jazz and teaching English isn't such a bad comparison after all!