Sternin comprehensive exam: critical feedback

Avital Sternin comprehensive paper has improved since the previous draft. However, with regards to the decision to deem the exam a “pass” or “conditional pass” I have to admit to being conflicted.

As a document, it reflects considerable reading and thinking on the part of the student. That’s great and am prepared to let the student move on. However, I am asked to evaluate it in terms of whether: (a) it makes a substantial and original contribution to knowledge; and (b) whether the paper would be seriously considered for publication. For the following reasons, I don’t feel either statement applies to this document. To avoid, being obstructionist, I am offering a pass. But here are my concerns.

1. Hypotheses on page 4 are of limited scientific value as they are both vague and therefore unfalsifiable. The first states that two inputs will interfere with each other if they share similar brain mechanisms. What are brain mechanisms and what make them “similar” or different from one another? How would one ever evaluate whether two brain mechanisms were similar or different? The second states that the listener’s amount of exposure to the music or the task MAY affect how each is processed. Use of the word “may” in the hypothesis however leaves open the possibility that exposure may not affect how each is processed. As such, this hypothesis will always be true.

2. A central argument in the paper states that the degree to which both the sound and the task involve seriation will dictate how much the sound will interfere with the main task. While this is an interesting idea, consulting with some simple psychological effects raises doubts as to its plausibility. Consider auditory Stroop-like tasks in which participants are presented with words spoken with either incongruent pitch (e.g., the word “up” with falling pitch) or congruent pitch (e.g., the word “up” with rising pitch) and respond to the pitch. The shared seriation argument would predict interference of content on pitch judgments for both stimulus types. In fact, interference is unique to incongruent stimuli; for congruent stimuli, there is facilitation. How would the shared seriation model account for facilitation effects in basic auditory Stroop tasks?

Anyway, I could go on.

So, I give a pass, but this is not a publishable paper that makes a substantive and original contribution to knowledge.