

Working on the human voice

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Teaching voice skills is central to drama syllabuses in Years K-12. Working with the voice in the early secondary years will assist development in vocal skills for performance in later years.

Working on the human voice is like going on a journey. As with any journey, there is a definite starting point, followed by a logical progression that leads you to your goal. The following steps will take you on that journey of vocal improvement. The aim of good voice work is ensure that you transfer the experience and benefit of the exercise into your presentation work. Just becoming proficient in doing the exercises will not help.

There are definite stages in working on the human voice:

- recognition of your need or desire for vocal improvement and commitment to it;
- observation of your vocal patterns and habitual responses, marked by an ability to move from generalised to specific descriptions of these;
- growing awareness of your vocal patterns and habitual responses;
- “letting go” period, marked by an ability to break vocal patterns and habitual responses. At times, old patterns and habits will still return;
- “fine tuning” period, where, through heightened awareness, newfound vocal freedom and energy will become the norm;
- discovery of the ease and enjoyment in presenting.

Step 1: Finding correct posture

Align your body and find a state of balance so that the voice can release freely. Collapsed spines, ramrod-straight postures and bodies off balance create blocks to the voice.

What is needed is a long spine, where the natural curves are maintained and the head is balanced on top of the spine in a relaxed and easy manner.

Exercise: Spine roll

- Stand with your feet in parallel, about shoulder width apart.
- Check that your knees are unlocked.
- Release your head forward onto your chest.
- Allow the weight of your head to travel down your spine, releasing vertebra by vertebra.
- Check that your knees do not lock and that your arms are free.
- Hang by the tailbone.
- Check that the back of the neck is totally free.
- Sigh out, sensing the breath moving in the body.
- Become aware of your tailbone and slowly roll back up through the spine, until you are a headless torso.
- Imagine someone is pulling a string from the crown of your head and allow the head to float back up into a balanced position.
- Standing in your balance, sense the length in your spine, the width and openness in your back and your head resting easily on top of your spine.

Step 2: Freeing the body of tension

Events in our personal and professional lives can affect the tension levels in our body. Sometimes they're hard to pick because they've become the norm.

Tension quickly spreads, so tension held anywhere in the body will eventually tighten the voice. Tension locks the breath and stops vibrations in the voice. It acts as a roadblock to the free release of sound. Tension is misdirected energy.

Tension is often found in the shoulders and in the neck. Shoulders are often held, pinned back or lifted. Necks become tightened as we push the head forward or tuck the chin down towards the chest. Such tension leads to shortened breath and strangled sound. It becomes increasingly difficult to deliver a speech smoothly in such a state.

Release in the shoulders and freedom in the back of the neck are vitally important.

Exercise: Shoulder release

- Lift your shoulders up to your ears.
- Notice your breathing. Does it become shortened or shallow?
- Ease your shoulders down to midway. Notice how this is still a held position.
- Without anticipating where your shoulders are going to end up, allow them to soften and melt like iccubes.
- Allow them to drop to where they want to be.
- At the same time, sense a lengthening in the back of the neck, like a swan coming up out of feathers.
- Notice your breathing now. Allow it to deepen in your body.

Once tension has been released from the shoulders and neck, it is important to find a state of release throughout the whole body.

I use the word “release”, rather than “relax”. Relaxation often implies low energy, whereas a state of release implies ease and energy in the body, coupled with mental alertness.

Step 3: Freeing and centring the breath

Allowing yourself to breathe is essential to good vocal delivery. The aim here is to develop a breathing method that occurs in the lower chest, not the upper chest, leaving the shoulders, neck and vocal tract free from tension and restriction.

This involves the flattening of the diaphragm and the expansion of the lower ribs, allowing the lungs to expand naturally and efficiently. The diaphragm is a large dome-shaped muscle, which is attached to the floating ribs at the front and to the vertebrae of the spine at the back. When you breathe, you feel an in-out movement in your stomach. This is because the diaphragm is releasing down in the body and the body expands as the breath enters. Your body is being breathed naturally. There is no need ever to take a breath. You just allow the breath. This is unrestricted breathing.

Exercise: breath observation

- Sit in a balanced position.
- Check that the shoulders are released and that the neck is free. As you breathe in and out through the nose, become aware of the movement of the breath in the body.
- Sense the expansion and contraction of the rib cage and the movement in and out of the stomach as the body is allowed to breathe naturally.

Step 4: Jaw release

The jaw is the final gateway through which the voice releases into the outside world. A tense, closed jaw gives little space for the words to come out. Mumbled and flat sounds squeeze their way out through a tight jaw.

The jaw can tighten for all sorts of reasons: stress, fear or even cold weather.

Aim to have a free jaw, that just gets out of the way, so the words have an easy exit.

Exercise: Jaw massage

- Place the fingers on the jaw hinge, where it connects to the skull in front of the ears.
- Open and close your mouth to feel the hinge action.
- Gently massage that point.

Step 5: Freeing the lips and tongue

The lips need to be free to allow for clarity in speech and energy in communication.

As a feature of the Australian accent, we tend to have immobile lips. It has sometimes been described as a slightly smiling position. Lips held in this position tend to pull the sound back into the mouth, broadening and flattening the vowel sounds. The lips need to be released, so that forward movement can occur.

Exercise: Lip release

- Put the little fingers in the corners of the mouth and stretch the lips out, like elastic bands. Release.
- Flutter through the lips, like a horse.
- Sneer the top lip up. Release.
- Drop the bottom lip down. Release.
- Stretch the right corner of the mouth out towards the right ear. Release.
- Stretch the left corner of the mouth out towards the left ear. Release.
- Have a happy grin and a sulky pout.
- Purse the lips together and rotate them in a clockwise direction and then anticlockwise.
- Place the index fingers on either side of the lips. Using the fingers, push the corners of the mouth together, like a goldfish.

Say the sentence: *Billy Buttons bought a big bunch of beautiful bananas.*

Sense the forward movement on the lips.

Take the fingers away and repeat the sentence, finding the energy in the lip movement.

The tongue works to form vowels and consonants. There is a tendency for the tongue to be tight. If so, the vowels and consonants will not be properly shaped. The sound may be pulled back in the mouth rather than being released forward. If the back of the tongue is tight, it will sit high in the back of the mouth, blocking the sound coming up from the throat.

The tongue needs to be free and flexible to work in the gymnasium of the mouth.

Exercise: Tongue release

- Extend the tongue out of the mouth. Stretch it towards the tip of the nose, to the chin, to the right corner of the mouth, to the left corner of the mouth.
- Extend the tongue out of the mouth and draw a large circle with the tip. Keep tracing around the inside of each circle until the circle becomes smaller and smaller.
- With the tongue extended, write your name with the tip.
- Move the tongue rapidly in and out of the mouth.
- Slide the tongue out of the mouth. Think a higher mental energy and speak, pouring the sound over the top of the tongue. Aim for neither tension nor retraction of the tongue. Now allow the tongue back into the mouth and speak. Notice the freer, lighter feeling of the tongue and the sensation of more space in the mouth.

Step 6: Mobilising the face

Tension needs to be released out of the facial muscles. This is important, as once the face is freed up you feel more open, and a greater range of expression is possible.

Exercise

- Place your index fingers underneath your eye sockets.
- Push your cheeks up to the fingers.
- Take the fingers away and continue to do push-ups on the cheeks.
- Lift your right eyebrow. Release.
- Scrunch your right eye. Release.
- Scrunch your left eye. Release.
- Lift your right cheek. Release.
- Lift your left cheek. Release.
- Lift the right side of your face. Release.
- Lift the left side of your face. Release.
- Scrunch your face tightly. Release.
- Make as big a face as possible with your eyes and mouth wide open. Release.
- Pat your face all over lightly with your finger tips.

Step 7: Finding energy in speech

Now that the jaw has been freed and the lips and tongue loosened up, the energy and clarity in speech need to be found.

The playful exploration of the following exercises is to be encouraged.

Exercise: Tongue twisters

Tongue twisters can be used to increase the precision of the articulators in continuous speech. It is important to find the meaning in the tongue twister, rather than practising it mindlessly. This will keep the words alive.

- A pale pink proud peacock pompously preened its pretty plumage.
- A big beetle bit a body in a big black bag.
- Many merry men making music.
- Why whine, whimper and whistle at the white whale, Willy?
- Delilah died in a dull, dark, damp dungeon.
- Lester likes licking long lemon lollipops.
- Ricky the rock and roll rascal rumbles, raps and roars.
- A single solid silver sifter sifts sifted sugar.
- Zack and Zoe zig zagged zany to the zoo.
- Five fine feathers fluttered faintly in front of the fan.
- Violet and Vera viewed violent videos.
- Charming children chanted charming tunes.
- Jaunty Justin jiggled joyously with Joan.
- A shimmy and a shake surely shapes Shelly.
- The sixth sick sheikh's sixth sheep's sick.
- Gabby gardeners gather together to gossip in garrulous groups.
- Careful Kate cut and cooked a crinkly cabbage.
- Hoards of hip hunks happily hum at hundreds of hussies.
- Singing and shaking and rocking and dancing and flirting.

These strategies are starting points for effective and efficient use of the voice. The work should be integrated with your current teaching strategies, so that the voice is developed with the body and the mind and not only as an isolated element of performance.

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