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Vocal clarity through drama strategy

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Abstract

Theatre based voice training techniques have been associated with actors and singers mostly. However, they can also help benefit second language learners. This paper aims to describe theatre based voice training techniques and investigates the effect of these techniques on learners' vocal skills. Following three theatre based voice training sessions, Turkish learners of L2 English (N=40) were found to score higher in the oral prosody scale (Zutell and Rasisnki, 1991) compared to the pre-test. It is concluded that contributing to freedom in the voice and reducing inhibitions of the learner and enabling the learner to experiment with the prosodic aspects of the target language, theatre based voice training activities can be employed in language teaching.

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1. Introduction

Speaking a language accurately and fluently requires not only a mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of the target language but also a mastery of vocal skills. Wong (1993) points out the importance of teaching vocal skills and states that “the importance of pronunciation takes even a greater significance when we understand the connection between pronunciation and other aspects of language use” (p.1). Focusing on the relationship between pronunciation and listening comprehension, Celce- Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996) also argue that the ability to perceive and produce speech requires the knowledge of sounds, prosodic patterns and organization of the speech. Celce Maurica et al (1996) suggests that there are four processes required for decoding native speaker talk: “discerning intonation units, recognizing stressed elements, interpreting unstressed elements and determining the full forms underlying reduced speech” (p.223). Penny Ur (2006) also describes the three primary patterns of pronunciation as “the sounds of the language of phonology”, “stress and rhythm”, and “intonation” (p.47). It is possible to conclude that developing voice quality cannot be achieved through mastering sound segments alone. However, prosodic elements of language are still considered to be difficult to teach. Roach (1991) explains, “the complexity of the total set of sequential and prosodic components of intonation and of paralinguistic features makes it a very difficult thing to teach” (p.11).

As a method suggesting new ways to teach pronunciation and prosodic patterns in speech, recently theatre based voice training techniques have also started to be employed in developing vocal skills of language learners. Initially, voice training techniques were investigated in terms of actors (Kopf, 2001). However, Smith (1984) proposed that there were parallel between language teaching and theatre. In addition, Miccoli (2003) suggested teaching English

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through drama activities focusing on breathing and body exercises. Hardison and Sonchaeng (2005) also investigated the use of theatre voice training techniques and technology in teaching orals skills. Finally, Wrembel (2007) put forward that vocal warm ups could be used to achieve articulatory control over the target language.

Voice training techniques are especially important and helpful for professional voice users such as singers, actors and broadcast personalities, for occupational voice users such as teachers and sales people, for those with voice problems and for anyone who is preparing to give a presentation or wants to make a good impression with their voice. Theatre voice training techniques consist of mainly two parts: a physical and a vocal warm up. As using the voice effectively requires excellent whole body positioning, physical warm ups are a crucial part of voice training. For a good vocal performance, good posture, proper alignment, balanced and smooth movement are essential. Incorporating physical warm ups into the vocal warm ups may aid to prevent and decrease excessive muscular tension and optimize vocal quality (NY Eye and Ear Infirmary, n.d.). The vocal warm ups focus on warming up, strengthening and improving voice just like other muscles in the body. Aiming at not to change learners' natural voices but rather strengthening and freeing up their existing voices vocal warm ups help learners "speak with more confidence, with better articulation and resonance (quality and volume) and they can increase awareness of how the voice is used to convey different emotions" through the use of prosody (Almond, 2005, p.64). There are various types of vocal warm ups each focusing on a different muscle. Some of the vocal warm ups can be listed as the following: yawn-sigh, using the hmmm, straw vocalizing, working the breath support system with "huh", lip buzzing, low-flow "ha-ha-ha", tongue trills, loosening the jaw, the octave pitch glide, the "lessac" call, buzz, tongue twisters (NY Eye and Ear Infirmary, n.d.).

With an attempt to go beyond traditional classroom techniques, this paper describes a model for applying theatre voice training techniques to achieve in vocal clarity language teaching and investigates the effectiveness of theatre based voice training techniques in developing vocal skills of Turkish learners of L2 English.

2. Method:

In the present study, theatre voice training sessions were held by the researcher in a conference hall. This space was appropriate as it had a large auditorium with good acoustics and a stage in the proscenium resembling that of a real theatre stage. It was hypothesized that if students conducted these sessions in a classroom environment then they would be restricted, and they would be unable to project their voices and move freely around the room. Each of these sessions lasted 50 minutes, and two sessions were held in a row over a period of 3 weeks. The students were divided into two groups randomly, and 20 students participated in each session. Each session followed the same structure outlined as the following:

2.1 *Physical warm-ups*

During the physical warm ups, the researcher focused on learners' posture bringing an awareness to the chest and spine. Learners were asked to imagine a piece of string was attached to the top of their heads, and was pulling them up towards the ceiling whilst at the same time slowly opening the chest and moving the shoulders back. Physical warm ups consisted of three parts: head rolls, hip rotating, and body shake-out. In the head rolls, the head was slightly lowered and then moved from side to side. This action was repeated three times each side followed by three complete head rolls in full circle. Hip rotating followed a similar pattern to head rolls. The learners placed their hands on the hips and gently moved them from side to side three times, and then they rotated the hips in full circle also three times. During the body shake-out, the learners were asked to gently shake out their hands, arms and legs. Then, they flopped forwards resting the top of the hands on the floor with slightly bent legs, and carefully bounced the upper body. After several bouncing motions, the learners slowly straightened the legs and body to a standing position.

2.2 *The Vocal warm-ups*

The vocal warm ups began with a gentle massage applied to the face by a swirling motion with the first and forefingers, concentrating on the forehead, cheeks and jaw. Then students were asked to open their faces as wide as possible and vocally mimic the sound of a lion/tiger. Students repeated these gestures with the opposite action -

tightening their faces into a small ball and making the sound of a smaller animal, ie mouse. The vocal warm ups were divided into four parts: lip buzzing, breathing and sound, tongue twisters and drama activities. Lip Buzzing was practised for only a couple of minutes by pressing the lips together and on an exhalation breathing out through the lips. This exercise aimed at loosening the lips. During breathing and sound exercises, the learners were asked to place the hands on the lower ribs and focus on their breath. Students began by placing their hands on their diaphragms and breathing in on a count of 5, the breath was then held for a count of 3, and exhaled on a count of 5. Finally, to conclude with breathing and sounds, the scale of MA, ME, MÍ, was practised. In the previous exercise the breath was held and exhaled for a count of 5. With the above scale students were asked to breathe in and on an exhalation repeat MA, ME, MI. In the third part, a variety of tongue twisters were printed out and handed to students who then repeated each one together with the researcher. With this exercise particular attention was given to pronunciation and articulation. For the next part of the session, the researcher introduced the use of drama in order to explore the use of prosodic features of English language. The drama activities which were chosen specifically focused on tone, pitch, volume, pace and sentence stress.. During the remaining part of the session, the learners were given a text from a well-known play, film or poem and were asked to vocalise it whilst walking around the auditorium. Working individually they experimented with tone, pitch, pace, volume and sentence stress and had to explore as many different ways of vocalising their texts. Vocalising their texts and focusing on a particular emotion/mood (e.g excited, happy, sad, terrified) enabled the learners to experiment with the prosodic aspects of the target language. At the end of the session, students gave feedback on how this session affected their vocal freedom and confidence.

3. Results

Prior to and following the three voice training sessions, students' vocal skills were assessed based on a slightly adapted version of the oral prosody scale developed by Zutell and Rasisnki (1991). The scale included assessment of pronunciation and clarity, phrasing and expression (voice projection, volume, tone, pitch, intonation and stress), smoothness, pace and competency. The students were given a piece of text from a play and they were asked individually to read the text out loud. All students were rated by two researchers blindly, and then mean scores were calculated for each student. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used to compare the means scores of the pre-test and the post-test. As shown in Table 1.1, the mean and the standard deviation for pre-test scores were 81.46 and 4.14, respectively. In the post-test, mean and standard deviation were found to be 87.92 and 2.35, respectively. There was a statistically important difference between the pre-test and the post-test results ($p < 0,001$).

Table 1. Statistics for oral prosody assessment in the pre-test and the post-test

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	81.4615	4.14758
Post-test	87.9231	2.35511

4. Discussion and Conclusion:

The results of the present study suggested that at the end of the three theatre based voice training sessions there was a significant increase in the vocal skills performance of Turkish learners. In addition, a majority of students responded to these sessions with a positive feedback. Students felt that the sessions definitely helped in freeing them of many inhibitions and challenges which occur when speaking a foreign language. Students also reported that the activities were good fun and a very innovative way of practising English.

Theatre based voice training techniques can improve vocal clarity helping learners speak with more confidence. Through incorporation of the body and mind and lowering the affective filter, the activities may contribute to freedom in the voice and reduce inhibitions of the learner. There is a close relationship between how relaxed the speaker feels and the accuracy and fluency of the second language learner (Celce- Murcia et al, 1996). Often when language students are asked to participate in activities which require them to use the target language, the speaker can

become nervous and often afraid to speak. The tension of the students can be reflected on the voice making it more strained and learners may become unable to speak freely. According to affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1981), low self-confidence and motivation and high anxiety levels in the learner act as a barrier and impede language learning. However, using drama techniques in the language classroom have been reported to lower the affective filter in L2 learning (Dodson, 2000). Brown (1995) reported a direct relationship between pronunciation and students' ego, identity and the level of self-confidence. Reig & Paquette (2009) also argued that drama in language classrooms increased motivation and reduced anxiety.

In addition, theatre based voice training techniques can develop vocal clarity improving the performance of the individual muscles of the thorax, larynx and upper vocal tract as well as the coordination between the subsystems of voice production such as the lungs, larynx and upper airway articulations (NY Eye and Ear Infirmary, n.d.). Although articulation strategies used by Turkish speakers are different than the strategies used by English speakers (Boyce, 1990), theatre based voice training techniques can help learners overcome the differences in articulation. Finally, theatre based voice training techniques can improve vocal clarity increasing an awareness of how the voice is used to convey different emotions through the use of prosodic features of language among learners. Through physical and vocal warm ups the language learner is able to experiment with the prosodic aspects of the target language and achieves a control over the articulatory aspects. (Almond, 2005)

It should be noted that despite the fact that the focus of this paper is the contribution of theatre based voice training techniques on the vocal skills of language learners, these techniques can be useful not only for language learners but also for language teachers themselves. Although voice is crucial for teachers, it is taken for granted sometimes. However, language teachers should also be sensitised to their own voices. As suggested by Tauber and Mester (1994), use of breath, volume, pace, tone and pitch “contributes to a teacher’s credibility and control of the classroom situation, thus enhancing learning in long term” (p.49).

As a useful technique both for teachers and students, physical and vocal warm ups have several types. Based on the needs of the target group, each language teacher may develop his or her own routine of physical and vocal warm ups. It is hoped that theatre voice training techniques will not be limited to the use of actors and singers only, but be investigated and employed in language teaching more.

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