

“Are You Speaking Comfortably?”

A Consideration of the Risk Factors, Implications and Prevention of Muscle Tension Dysphonia in Teachers

Phyllida Furse, Birmingham City University

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Muscle Tension Dysphonia in Teachers

Phyllida Furse MA (Professional Voice Practice), PGCE, BA Hons, ALAM

The emotional and physical energy it takes to sustain good vocal quality, audibility and clarity in full time teaching and lecturing, *whatever the discipline*, is often underestimated by anyone who has not had experience of it themselves. Delivering specific information to time and to targets, and differentiating it according to learner's needs, requires skill and imagination as well as the ability to work under pressure. English Language Teachers will appreciate the 'performance' element of rehearsing structures and concepts in a memorable engaging manner and of the need to keep learners motivated. Whilst there are many non verbal ways of communicating a message, it is through the voice that this work is principally done. Balanced posture, easy breathing, clear articulation and tension release strategies are key contributors to healthy voice production and the success of the task. If the main tool of a teacher's communication (the voice) becomes compromised through overuse or damage, through lack of understanding, or unwitting vocal abuse, there is the long term risk of job loss and poor retention of teachers to the profession.

This study discussed one aspect of vocal dysfunction, namely Muscle Tension Dysphonia, (MTD) which previous research shows to be a more widespread problem across the teaching profession than is commonly understood. It explored a possible approach to vocal health education, prevention, and the *sustainability* of good practice. Focusing on one particular group, the author developed a 'pilot' CD, designed to assist with embedding good practice after participants had experienced some specially tailored 'direct' voice training, via a workshop for both trial and control groups. This was delivered to staff in a Birmingham secondary school, (N=81) to explore its possible impact on their perceived vocal comfort and delivery skills over time (in this case, owing to the time constraints of the MA, 6 weeks).

What is MTD?

MTD can be described as 'a long term version of temporary voice strain' (Shewell 2009), or 'voice loss'. Commonly considered something that just 'comes with teaching' it is a condition in which the speaker begins the day with some voice, which then weakens as the day wears on, often resulting in sore throat, excessive throat tension and severe diminution in vocal quality, sometimes to the point of loss. As their voice fades, the speaker 'pushes' the voice ever harder, treading a well worn path to hyperfunction, whereby the intrinsic and extrinsic muscles of the larynx work in opposition, locking the speaker's larynx into an elevated position, rendering speech ever more effortful and painful because normal vocal fold [cord] vibration is no longer possible. With rest, the muscles release and the problem eases, but will recur once heavy voice use is resumed. Often the anxiety of the person to whom this is happening only exacerbates the problem, setting up a physical and emotional tension cycle, which begins with job stress, leading to muscle tension, followed by muscle misuse, giving rise to a voice disorder and yet more stress. Since causes for this condition are multifactorial, (i.e. any combination of psychogenic, physiological, environmental) a holistic approach to re-education and prevention of the problem is required (Greene and Mathieson, 1995).

Results

Whilst there was found to be a slight improvement in the Vocal Comfort Index for the the CD User Group, there was a more significant improvement reported in their Vocal Skills (i.e. users felt they could communicate more effectively in the class room). The CD Users found the CD clear, helpful and easy to use, but difficult to fit in to their busy lives. 50% said they would use it again. The detailed Voice Logs were returned incomplete or not used due to teachers' time constraints, but both groups found that the direct voice training workshop useful and **90% would recommend it to others**. For future research, the project was designed for ease of expansion across a larger number of institutions. This would increase sample size, and permit some objective instrumental measures to be implemented in order to quantify changes in vocal stamina. Recommendations to modify the CD for use in mp3 format, would also be followed.

Effect of dysphonia on teaching and learning

A teacher relies on their voice to deliver instruction; explain; clarify; encourage; console; motivate, admonish where appropriate and manage classroom dynamics in order to achieve good learning outcomes. A quavery or squeaky voice, poor pitch variation, lack of clarity or harshness of tone resulting from dysphonia can potentially ruin the learning atmosphere, antagonise students (negative behaviours) and demoralise the teacher who loses class control. When listening to a dysphonic teacher, students spend more time trying to process the *sound* rather than the information, leading to demonstrably impaired learning outcomes (Rogerson and Dodd 2005). Eventually, the teacher may decide this is no longer for them, and seek employment elsewhere.

Cost versus value

The population of teachers is around 500,000 at the time of writing. At £5.00, a CD for each teacher would amount to a cost of £2.5m. If group training is priced at £20.00 per head, then the total cost of training the teacher population is £10m. Assuming the cost of teaching cover is £100/day, then the total cost of preventive training (workshop plus CD) amounts to £12.5m against a potential cost of £150m for an average absence of three days a year due to voice related issues. Prevention is cheaper than cure.

Challenges

In the author's experience, whilst awareness of the issues has been easy to raise, and training has proved popular, there needs to be a culture change at government level, to recognise officially the significance and value of voice training; both educationally, (improved standards in teaching and learning) and from the perspective of employers fulfilling their duty of care towards employees' health and safety. Barriers to this include evidence, i.e. the difficulty in 'measuring' the difference it can make (which is subjective, unless objective measures are conducted) and concerns for cost. The challenge is to 1) to convince organisations to instigate training and 2) offer easy cost effective ways to embed the good practice discussed. Based on the previous experience and research outlined in the dissertation, the author looked at one way of doing that and found that with some future modifications and refinements, this could be eminently possible.

Potential impact of Voice Training and Embedding Good Practice for ELT and all teachers

- ★reduced absenteeism (lower costs associated with cover)
- ★increased teacher retention (lower costs of recruitment)
- ★clearer spoken English (improves student learning)
- ★motivated schools workforce and teaching population