Practical Personal Voice Experience in Speech and Language Therapy Training

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Introduction

In the United Kingdom there are three main professions whose specific aim it is to work practically with individuals to change the quality of that personís voice - singing teachers, voice teachers and speech and language therapists specialising in voice (from now on referred to as SLTs).

An essential part of the training of any singing or voice teacher will be work on their own voices, but most therapists in the UK will now leave their university courses with no personal experiential voice work. Once working in voice therapy whether with clients with an ENT diagnosis, or those with a neuromuscular problem, much of their work will be in designing and executing practical vocal activities. Yet most therapists themselves will not have experienced the interest, pleasure nor self-consciousness that is inherent in taking the risks needed for vocal and speech exploration.

Practical ideas can be found in the wealth of voice books which provide information on aspects of voice work to all those working in the field of voice change. Sataloffís ëProfessional Voiceí (1997) addresses issues common to all voice groups from primarily the medical angle. Boone (1991), Berry (1994) and Rodenburg (1992) are three of the better known ëvoice self-developmentí books whose approach and exercises are relevant to voice therapy. So too are the more specialised texts about technique for singers in Miller (1986), and in actors of Berry (1973), Linklater (1976) and Rodenburg (1998). Martin and Darnley (1992) provide an unusual and valuable synthesis of practical exercises from both voice therapy and voice training.

Nonetheless many will recognise that in learning a skill, there is no substitute for personal experiential practice. There are many ways an SLT with a particular interest in voice can continue to work on his/her own voice - including British
Voice Association courses, individual singing lessons or a selection of exploratory voice workshops offered by a variety of practitioners.

But issues of the human voice are relevant to all of the communication disorders we treat. Over the last seven years, I have been invited by numerous trusts to run training days in practical voice for both generalist and specialist SLTs. The model of voice work aspects, and the synthesis of ideas and techniques, incorporate aspects of both my voice therapy and theatre voice teaching experience and can be applied to both the restoration and training of voices ie along the abnormal-normal continuum. The term **Voice Skills** has been to given to the approach since it is not a rigid method - its aim is to offer a structured 'container' model for the description of voice and the wide range of techniques available for working the voice.

**The Need for Experiential Voice Work in SLT Training**

As part of the last six Voice Skills courses, in Birmingham, Northumberland, Essex, Glasgow, Harrogate and London, a total of 110 participants were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire. This included questions about their personal experience of practical voice work in their speech and language therapy training. Although having chosen to do the Voice Skills course they are obviously not a random group of therapists, their responses to do suggest that adequate practical voice work is lacking in most undergraduate courses in voice disorders.

**Amount of personal practical/experiential voice work done during speech and language therapy training:**

- 48 participants - None
- 39 participants - Minimal amount (1-6 hours)
- 16 participants - Moderate amount (7-15 hours)
- 7 participants - Extensive amount (16 or more hours)

**Numbers of participants stating that they should have done more:**

- 102 participants - Yes
- 8 participants - No

Many comments on the relevance of experiential voice training stated the need to work on one’s own voice in order to work that of another voices, and one therapist commented: ‘So many therapists work on others’ voices but do not have free voices themselves’. One suggestion was that a short period of intensive voice training for students would give them an opportunity to realise their own voice potential and confidence to experiment and to use a wide range of techniques. Effective voice use was seen not only as a professional therapy
tool, but as relevant to confidence and communicative skill in giving presentations, extending work variety and in both professional and personal relationships.

The Free Voice and the Voice Skills

Neither voice therapy nor voice teaching believes in some ideal of the “voice beautiful. However, though rarely defined, implicit in most practical instruction books is some sort of common view about what constitutes a desirable, healthy, and free (as opposed to restricted and constricted) voice.

The definition of the Free Voice has been developed with specific reference to the qualities on which the teacher or therapist will turn the power of his/her perceptual analysis and techniques, and which can then act as an underlying chronology and guide for training or therapy. There are eight core aspects of the Free Voice.

1 It is based in a **Body** that is as free as possible from excess tension or awkward postures.
2 It is supported by **Breath** that flows from low in the body so that both breathing and sound can be centred and sustained.
3 It has a passage through a **Vocal Tract (channel)** with no unnecessary constriction in the muscles of larynx, pharynx, tongue, jaw or face.
4 **Phonation** is not excessively harsh, whispery, creaky or strained.
5 It has an appropriate balance of **Resonance** in head, oral and chest cavities.
6 It has an appropriate centre **Pitch** and a flexible intonation range that responds to thought, needs and mood.
7 It has a flexibility of **Volume** for different situations.
8 It is shaped into sounds and words by precise, energetic **Articulation** with appropriate use of **pace, pause and emphasis**.

Practical voice work can then be planned around these areas, so that the approach can act as a pattern for perceptual assessment and then as a map for the chronology of practical work. The training days offer numerous practical voice exercises from a wide range of sources designed to “open up” participants’ own voices. This exploration falls into four aspects, work on body, technique, imagination and text. Each participant is given a booklet of suggestions grouped under the eight key headings, to avoid the need for scribbling whilst experiencing - and is encouraged to add his/her own exercises and ideas. Applications can then be made from the personal experience to client centred voice therapy.
This kind of model:

1 allows a voice practitioner to listen to and describe a speakerís voice in a way that is economical, exhaustive and consistent.
2 can suggest an order of priorities for assessment and action in voice teaching or therapy.
3 reflects an underlying theory of desirable voice.
4 is supported by existing knowledge of anatomy and physiology and speech sciences.
5 is flexible and non-dogmatic enough to include ideas from a variety of experienced and skilled voice workers.
6 recognises that spontaneous creativity and issues around the personality of client and practitioner will then come in to shape an actual session.

Applications of the Voice Skills Approach

1 Perceptual description and analysis in the linked VSPAP (Voice Skills Perceptual Assessment Protocol).
2 Planning of voice work with clients.
3 Teaching a basic descriptive framework for voice to speech and language therapy students.
4 Practical postgraduate voice training of speech and language therapists.
5 Explanation of voice to clients.
6 ëUser friendlyí terms for report writing to non SLT colleagues.
7 Applicable in voice training for professional voice users.

Conclusions

This general and yet structured approach to personal and client based voice work has been well received. Having completed the Voice Skills one or two day course, the 110 SLTs were asked to rate the usefulness of the model in voice assessment and therapy, and the results were as follows:

0 participants - Not Useful
0 participants - Minimally useful
5 participants - Moderately Useful
105 participants - Very Useful

One commented that ë it is a very useful way of structuring voice work when working with others, as it is helpful to be able to pull information out at appropriate times and in a graded sequence moving towards a final goalí.
General comments about the experience of working oneís own voice included: ëit was liberating to hear the range of quality and pitch in my own voice, and confidence building to be able to demonstrate and model techniques.í Another felt ëinitially felt self-conscious but amazed how this feeling faded over the course. It was excellent to step out of speech and language therapy for a while and feel what it is like to be on the receiving end, as well as to learn the technical side in more detail. í ëThe imaginative work, text work and singing enable me to be more of myself - to tap into areas that make me a more interesting and useful therapist.í

The increasing emphasis in SLT university courses on academic and research aspects is welcome - up to a point. But we are a profession who will always work 1:1 with other people, and it is vitally important that we do not abandon training in the practical, êdoingí skills as well. The focus on êprofessional developmentí is meaningless if we are not prepared to look at aspects of our personal development. An increase in the amount of experiential training in both inter-personal skills and voice would enrich both clients and therapists.

References