THE VOICE SKILLS PERCEPTUAL PROFILE

“I see a voice”

Nick Bottom as Pyramus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Introduction

The audience usually laughs at Bottom’s words, but actually, as voice practitioners, we do see voices. We meet the speaker or singer with whom we are to work, and we see the body shape, habitual postures, the facial expression, the struggle or ease with which someone voices, the signs of strain in their neck – and so much more. We use our own ears, hands and eyes – as well as that other power of intuition – to find out all we can before we begin to work with that person.

But there is another meaning to the image of ‘seeing a voice’, and that is the use of some sort of perceptual analysis, which enables us to organize what we hear into a structure to aid understanding and guide action.

The use of a formalized perceptual scheme can also be used to evaluate progress over time, to organize the feedback to clients, to communicate with colleagues and to carry out research.

It is recommended by the British Voice Association (Carding et al 2001) that speech and language therapists in the UK use two main perceptual voice schemes, the GRBAS and VPA schemes. The GRBAS system rates the quality of phonation ie the activity and sound produced by the vocal fold action, and there is no rating of other contributors to the sound of the voice, such as mouth, breath or prosodic effects. It is a vocal deficit scheme, and therefore only useful in cases of voice disorder.

The VPAS is a descriptive system, which was developed in the early 1980s by the phonetician John Laver, together with the speech therapists, Sheila Wirz. and Janet Mackenzie Beck. It enables a trained listener to listen to a tape of any speaker’s connected speech or reading aloud, and from this, to identify and quantify different aspects of normal or abnormal voice quality with a fine degree of perceptual accuracy and high inter-judge reliability. These discriminations are recorded on a protocol form which can then be used to compare different speakers’ voices or to make comparisons in an individual over time. This makes the VPAS an invaluable tool in any research where perceptual voice analysis is part of a battery of assessments, but its use is generally confined to speech and language therapy practitioners.

The ‘whole voice’ approach of the VPAS has been a major inspiration in my work on developing a scheme which might be useful for a wider range of those working in voice.
A Perceptual Scheme for all Voice Practitioners?

There are many different Voice Practitioners who work practically with individuals, to change the quality of a speaker or singer’s voice. For the purposes of this article my focus is on three main groups - voice teachers, speech and language therapists and singing teachers. Their approach varies along the continuum of art and science, experience and analysis.

DeBoer and Shealy (1995) put it well: “Together voice science and voice art form a continuum that is highly technical and medical at one extreme, and aesthetic or abstract at the other, affording a wide range of approaches to vocal transformation’.

Speech and language therapists mainly use explanation and direct instructions. Voice teachers and singing teachers use both imaginative and direct methods, and vary as to how much anatomical explanation they use. But individual practitioners can use whatever methods they feel appropriate in their voice work, and the best will use a mix of art and science, imagination and rational logic.

All practitioners decide how to work with a person’s voice by identifying what is actually happening, based on what they hear. Formal perceptual analysis of voice can help clarify the answer to a question like ‘what on earth is going on in this voice?” but is usually only used in voice therapy. Voice and singing teachers rarely use any kind of formal perceptual voice scheme, though at RADA and LAMDA we are using such a scheme to analyse the young actors’ voices at the beginning and end of training.

A perceptual voice scheme does not have to be a dry and sterile structure - it can accord with our intuitions, and breathe new insights into our holistic understanding of a person’s spoken voice.

Over a period of 10 years of work with voice disordered clients, acting students, speakers developing their vocal and presentation skills, voice workshops and university students, I have come to recognise that the basic parameters of healthy and effective voice are the same whether we work with voice aesthetics or voice disorder.

The Eight Voice Skills

From this recognition has come the idea of EIGHT core functional aspects of voice, which I call The Voice Skills approach. This is NOT a narrow rigid method, but a flexible model through which we can view voice, and organize our thinking.

The eight aspects are: Body, Breath, Channel, Note, Resonance, Pitch, Volume and Articulation. They form the basis of the Voice Skills Perceptual Profile (VSPP)

As part of my interest in the common ground of voice work, I decided to explore a question. Would it be possible to develop a fairly simple perceptual voice assessment tool that would be useful to any voice practitioner? It might also offer a small contribution towards the impossible dream of a shared terminology for us all, which would certainly help communication!!

My aim was to develop a listening tool that would offer insights into the vocal quality and usage along the whole continuum of the spoken voice from severely disordered to well trained. It is would not be deficit based, but a “What have we here?” scheme.
The scheme has been designed to enable a listener to note personal observations under certain ‘sensible’ headings, to give useful qualitative information to guide the direction of appropriate voice work for a client, AND to offer the choice of generating quantitative information.

Many voice practitioners, in all groups, are deterred from doing their own voice research by what they see as a focus on statistical emphasis. They do not want to have to complete a long test that gives them numbers rather than descriptions, or to use what they see as a test assessing only a tiny part of the voice. It was ever thus in research by the practical professions - a clash between what is seen as the art of practice and the science of research.

The Voice Skills Perceptual Profile

The VSPP enables the assessor to utilize the eight core Voice Skills aspects for both quantitative rating scales, and for qualitative descriptive evaluation, to be recorded on one simple form. The Profile thus provides a tool for research and practical guidance in planning appropriate therapeutic action.

Early in 2005 I decided to carry out a simple research project to see whether a group of mixed voice practitioners would find the VSPP scheme to be a useful tool in their work, and whether these practitioners could be trained to ensure good interjudge reliability in the numerical ratings.

A professionally mixed group of 13 voice practitioners (8 speech and language therapists; 3 voice teachers; 1 singing teacher; 1 voice teacher/speech and language therapist) completed a 2-day training in the VSPP.

Two client videos were shown at the start of the course, and two at the end. In each case, one of the pair was a client with a voice disorder, and the other was a client who wanted to improve their vocal style in presentation. The voice practitioners were asked to describe, and to rate, each client on all VSPP parameters, and their totals were compared with that of the author. They were also later asked to complete a questionnaire about the usefulness of the VSPP to their work.

The results of the research do suggest that the VSPP is a useful tool for voice practitioners.

Interjudge reliability is recognised as being problematic in perceptual voice schemes (Kreiman et all 1993) This study makes a cautious suggestion that there is a likelihood of reasonable VSPP rating agreement, for at least the majority of ratings.

The voice practitioners on the course agreed that the VSPP provides a high quality perceptual tool for voice development, and voice remediation. 12/13 rated the VSPP as very useful as an assessment tool with clients and 11/13 rated it as very useful as a tool to plan training/therapy with clients. All 13 approved the use of both quantitative and qualitative sections in the VSPP, intended to continue to use the VSPP in the future if it were published, and to recommend the VSPP to other practitioners.
Subjects’ Personal Comments

Singing Teacher: “It enhanced my listening to the student’s speaking voice and made me think in more specific detail.”

Speech and Language Therapist: “I like the way it gives structure to my assessment, and more importantly my treatment planning. The structure of this tool facilitated my process of working out which areas needed to be addressed, in what order and why. It really prompts the voice practitioner to assess specific areas and then draw this information together within a holistic framework.”

Voice Teacher: “It encourages you to commit to a judgment because the qualitative and quantitative sections encourage more reflection and analysis. It’s so user friendly; the headings/parameters are clear and observe the basic progressions, and the qualitative and quantitative sections complement each other well. It could be used by voice teachers and speech and language therapists with equal success.”

Voice Teacher: As everything is interconnected, all 8 headings are relevant, and as a general assessment, these allow for a consideration of issues that might not have occurred it me or to the client.”

Voice Teacher: I am now using it with clients, and I like that they themselves can get insights through the process - I can’t imagine not using it now... I feel I am continuing my training through the VSPP - it’s like a virtual support system.”

The VOICE SKILLS PERCEPTUAL PROFILE can be taught to practitioners in a two day course. Its ability to offer both descriptive and numerical options in voice description is seen as both unusual and desirable, and it can be considered to be a useful tool in the voice worker’s treasure chest.

References


Hirano, M. 1981. Clinical Examination of Voice. Springer Verlag

