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TEACHING BREATH, ARTICULATION, AND VOICE EXERCISES IN STAGE SPEECH THROUGH AN INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH

Sh. T. Yusupov

Acting Professor, Department of Stage Speech,

The Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture.

Abstract: This article examines the importance of an individualized approach to teaching breath, articulation, and voice technique in stage speech. Group-based exercise programs often leave students unable to apply what they have learned independently and consistently once the course has ended. The article describes an individualized pedagogical approach designed to address this problem, together with its concrete methodological tools.

Keywords: actor training, stage speech, breath technique, articulation, voice culture, individualized approach, transfer of learning

Introduction

Human speech is a complex physiological and psychological process that requires the coordinated work of numerous organs of the vocal apparatus. The clarity, fluency, and expressiveness of speech depend largely on the proper functioning of the articulatory apparatus, correct breathing, and a well-developed voice culture. Every student pursuing theatre arts, regardless of specialization, goes through this stage of training. In practice, however, a serious problem is often observed: it remains unclear whether, once the stage speech course has ended, students are able to apply the skills they acquired independently and consistently in their creative work and performances. In many cases, breath, articulation, and voice technique remain confined to the classroom; students do not know how to use them on stage, under emotional strain. One of the main reasons for this is that group-based exercise programs do not sufficiently account for each student's individual physiological characteristics (breath capacity, mobility of the articulatory apparatus, structure of the vocal apparatus, degree of muscular tension, and so on).

The importance of an individualized approach to voice training is emphasized in the international literature. Drawing on her many years of pedagogical experience, Marina Marković (2002) argues that although all students go through the same system of exercises, each student must adapt the exercises to their own needs and vocal capabilities, since forcing a uniform, one-size-fits-all set of exercises on every student can halt the natural development of their voice or even cause harm. Marina Marković is a professor at the Academy of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade, Serbia. She graduated from that Academy and holds an MFA from the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade. She currently teaches Voice Technique there as a full professor and also teaches at the School of Public Relations and the Academy of Music in Belgrade. She is the author of four books.

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A similar view is expressed by Cicely Berry (1973): in order to bridge the gap between an actor's "present" voice and their "potential" voice, it is necessary to start from each actor's individual capabilities. According to the "theory of individualized instruction" proposed by Bloom (1968), nearly all learners can achieve mastery of a subject if given methods and time suited to their needs; the problem lies in standardized, one-size-fits-all approaches that fail to account for learners' initial differences.

Cicely Berry (1926–2018) was a British theatre director and voice coach. She trained under Elsie Fogerty at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London. From 1969 to 2014 she served as Voice Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company while also teaching at the Central School of Speech and Drama. She is the author of the internationally renowned book Voice and the Actor (1973), from which this article draws. She worked with actors such as Judi Dench, Ian McKellen, and Kenneth Branagh, and developed an influential approach to actor voice training that is recognized worldwide.

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined above, an approach grounded in years of practical experience and based on three interrelated principles can be developed. First, each student is worked with individually, taking their physiological characteristics into account: the student's breath capacity, the mobility of the articulatory apparatus (the strength of the tongue, lip, and jaw muscles), and the condition of the vocal apparatus are assessed, and the intensity and sequence of exercises are adjusted accordingly. Second, an inner need for and conscious engagement with the exercises is cultivated in the student: the student is shown why a given exercise matters and how it will directly affect their future professional work (for example, preventing vocal fatigue in a large auditorium, maintaining breath control in emotional scenes, or preserving articulatory precision in fast-paced roles). Third, the skills learned are explicitly demonstrated and monitored in real creative and life situations beyond the classroom—etudes, stage rehearsals, and creative work—so that the student moves from performing an exercise "correctly" in the classroom to applying it under the stress and emotional strain of a real creative situation.

David N. Perkins is a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Gavriel Salomon (1938–2016) was an Israeli educational psychologist, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Education at the University of Haifa, and a former Editor-in-Chief of Educational Psychologist. Together they conducted extensive research on the theory of transfer of learning and are recognized worldwide as leading authorities in this field (Perkins and Salomon 1992; Salomon 2007).

The theory of transfer of learning, according to the scholars named above, provides the theoretical grounding for this third principle: according to their classification, the transfer of a skill occurs along two paths—the "reflexive" (low) road, in which a well-practiced skill is triggered automatically in a similar situation, and the "mindful" (high) road, in which transfer occurs through the conscious search for similarities in a new situation. From this perspective, teaching breath-articulation-voice exercises solely in the classroom, without explicit guidance on how to apply them during a performance or an etude—that is, without activating the "mindful road"—does not guarantee the long-term retention of the skill. Marković (2002) also describes the phenomenon of "muscle memory": when exercises are practiced regularly, the speech organs automatically "remember" the

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corresponding movements, allowing the actor to apply the technique without consciously attending to each individual element.

Overall, an individualized program may consist of exercises from four broad categories, and within each category several exercise types can be selected according to the student's needs.

The first category comprises breathing exercises. In the diaphragmatic breathing exercise, the student places a hand on the abdomen and observes that the abdomen rises on inhalation and falls on exhalation—this prevents the habit of shallow chest breathing. In the sustained exhalation exercise, breath is released as slowly and evenly as possible on a sound such as "s-s-s-s" or "sh-sh-sh-sh," with the duration gradually increased each time—this strengthens breath control. In the segmented exhalation exercise, breath is released in short bursts, such as "f!-f!-f!-f!", training the diaphragm's short, precise movements. In the candle-blowing exercise, the student blows steadily enough to make a candle flame flicker without extinguishing it, developing very fine control of the breath stream.

The second category comprises exercises for freeing the articulation. The yawning exercise fully opens the throat, relaxing the throat muscles and allowing sound to flow freely. Trilling the lips ("brrrr") and the tongue ("rrrr") releases tension that has built up in these organs. In the "pencil-biting" technique, the student speaks while holding a horizontal pencil between the teeth—this forces the lip and tongue muscles to work harder, sharpening articulation. Sound-discrimination exercises involve contrasting pairs of similar Uzbek phonemes (such as k–q, g–g‘, u–o‘, x–h), which improves clarity of speech. This type of articulatory exercise system also has deep roots in the Uzbek school of stage speech: Bobonazarova (2004) provides a detailed description of separate exercise sequences for the lips, tongue, and jaw, as well as methods for correct pronunciation, drawing in turn on the work of the scholar Inomxo‘jayev (1973) on the fundamentals of expressive reading.

The third category comprises exercises for the vocal folds and the resonators. Humming on "m" and "n" warms up the vocal folds and softens the sound. In the siren exercise, the pitch on "m-m-m" is slid slowly from low to high and back, expanding the vocal range. In the chest- and head-resonator exercises, the student speaks on a low pitch and then a high pitch respectively, feeling the vibration in the corresponding area, which gives the voice power and brightness.

The fourth category comprises tongue-twister and intonation exercises. Tongue twisters practiced slowly at first and then gradually sped up (for example, Uzbek tongue twisters built on alliteration) develop speech tempo and muscle–speech coordination while preserving articulatory precision. Reading the same text with different intonations (question, exclamation, command) and different emotional colorings (joy, anger, sorrow) develops vocal expressiveness and prepares the student for a range of stage situations. Importantly, these four categories of exercises are not meant to form a single, uniform program for every student; rather, they should be selected, and their intensity and sequence adapted, according to each individual student's needs.

It can be noted that students trained through the individualized approach continued to apply their breath, articulation, and voice exercises independently in their subsequent creative work even after the course had formally ended. This was especially evident in comparison with students trained through a standardized group method: the latter often remembered an exercise only as something to be

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performed "correctly" in the classroom, but struggled to apply it on stage, under emotional strain. The most significant outcome of the individualized approach was that the skill shifted to an "unconscious," self-sustaining level: without any special reminder, students began to apply breath-articulation-voice technique naturally, as part of the creative process itself. Likewise, among students who received particular attention aimed at cultivating interest in the exercises, attitudes toward the exercises changed markedly—they began to regard the exercises not as a compulsory task but as a necessary part of their professional growth.

Conclusion

Long-term observation shows that working with each student individually, taking their particular physical characteristics into account, cultivating inner interest, and teaching the transfer of learned skills into creative activity together constitute an effective way of ensuring the long-term, stable retention of breath, articulation, and voice skills. In practical terms, it is advisable to enrich group exercise programs in the classroom with individualized assessment of each student and the cultivation of their interest. In the future, it would be worthwhile to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach using concrete measures, and to compare individualized and group methods against one another.

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