

Teacher's Voice: Problems and remedies

“Your voice is your ambassador to the outside world,” contends Norman Hogikyan. “It portrays your personality and emotions. People make assessments about you based on your voice, so it is very important when you’re speaking ... to think about what people are really hearing. Problems with your voice also can have a tremendous impact on your life.”

As for teachers, the voice is the most effective tool of their trade.

In classrooms, teachers need to speak frequently, and often loudly, risking occupational damage to their voices. However, unlike singers or actors, teachers can not cancel their performance (i.e class) because of vocal fatigue, thus; they must continue to use their voice in high-demand situations.

Picture a classroom full of 30 to 35 teenagers, their suppressed whispers; the noise in the corridors and the din of traffic outside – all building up an ambiance which forces any teacher to almost shout to be heard above it all. Add to this the chalk dust which rises every time he / she uses the duster to clear the black-board and you have an environment which assaults the vocal system of every teacher day in day out.

“After a day in the classroom, a lot of teachers will come home with a voice that’s fatigued” says R .Titze, the director of the National Center for Voice and Speech at the University of Iowa. They’ll spend the week-end resting up, only to return to work on Monday and spend

the entire week bashing their voice once more. But how many teachers could teach effectively without their voice?

Before answering this question and dealing with the problems of the voice, the different remedies and preventive measures, let's find out what the voice is and how it works.

A-The Voice:

The vocal cords, situated in the larynx (or voice-box) are two bands of elastic tissue which vibrate when air is exhaled through them. Most speech is produced as we breathe out. As air from the lungs passes between the two vocal cords, sound is produced. This sound (voice) is then modulated into speech by the precise movements of the tongue and lips. The quality of the voice produced is dependent upon the ease (or effort) with which the vocal cords move. If they vibrate in synchrony, they produce a pleasing voice; However, if they are forced into moving in a stressful manner; if they are under constant operative strain, not only will they produce an unpleasant or even abnormal tone but they may also damage themselves permanently.

B-The Voice Problems:

Teachers face many a problem, among them we can mention:

1- Teachers have to use their voice almost all day, whether speaking to the whole class, small groups or individuals; However, it's not just the amount of talking that the job demands that puts a strain on the voice. Instead, the main problem is the rapid changes in volume that a teacher has to utilise throughout the day.

2-There aren't many professions that demand a person to go, on a regular basis and within a split second, from talking at a normal level to shouting across the classroom. It's the sudden change that wreaks havoc with vocal cords.

3-"Trying to 'push' the voice when it is tired or poorly lubricated or frequent throat-clearing can set up a vicious circle with excessive mucus production, muscle fatigue and discomfort," explains Linda Preston, a Speech and Language Therapist working in Brighton.

4-Other bad vocal habits include:

- throat-clearing which bashes the vocal cords together.
- failure to lubricate the throat and mouth .
- talking too quickly which leads to inadequate breathing which causes tension in the chest and strain on the voice.
- speaking in too high or deep a pitch or using a forced whisper.

Despite all these hazards, teachers keep on struggling to use a strained voice which exacerbates the situation further."

According to Titze, Hunter and Svec (2007), many voice problems stemming from vocal fatigue in teachers may come from the way teachers use their voices (e.g, teaching primarily in a monologue style, which allows little vocal rest in a typical class period.)

"Some teachers," Titze says, "compensate by encouraging their students to carry more of the discussion in class." Nonetheless, this may work only for some time, that's why some researchers and speech therapists have come up with some practical steps that teachers can take to protect their voice.

C-The Voice protection:**I-Avoid :**

- 1-smoking and smoky atmospheres as well as dry and dusty ones – use a humidifier if possible.
- 2-chemical fumes – make sure the classroom is well-ventilated.
- 3-breathing continually through your mouth.
- 4-hot, spicy foods and very hot drinks.
- 5-milk and dairy foods – they can produce thicker mucus.
- 6-eating late at night – it can cause reflux.
- 7-drinking alcohol or caffeinated drinks which can be dehydrating.

II- Try to:

- 1-reduce background noise where possible.
- 2-stand or sit upright, don't slouch.
- 3-open your mouth for clarity and volume.
- 4-talk slowly and pause for breath often.
- 5-keep your throat and mouth hydrated with frequent sips of water (not coffee or tea).
- 6-for a dry mouth and no prospect of water, gently rub the sides of your tongue against your teeth to produce saliva.
- 7-allow yourself several "vocal naps" every day, especially during periods of extended use. For instance, avoid speaking during the breaks between classes and find quiet ways to spend them (i.e the breaks) rather than talking in a noisy staffroom with colleagues.

The most vulnerable teachers are the newly qualified ones who have had little or no training in voice awareness, or those teachers who have been doing the job for 15 or 20 years and who suddenly find their voice wearing out.

They may suffer from a periodic loss of voice, if this happens often enough, the cords develop small boils (not surprisingly called “teacher’s nodules”). Treated early, such nodules may well disappear. But, as often is the case, the vocal abuse continues and brings in the prospect of surgical intervention which does not really solve the problem completely as vocal-cord surgery itself can cause an irreversible scarring of the delicate vocal tissue, leading to permanent hoarseness of voice. That’s why surgeons resort to it only as a last option and instead they refer the case to a speech therapist who will attempt to help the person alter his or her “vocal” manner.

What is the situation like in Tunisia? How can Tunisian educationalists help teachers avoid losing their voices periodically and teach them easier manners of speaking?

A logical answer would be to arrange courses during which teachers are to be taken on a journey of vocal awareness similar to the project already launched by the West Sussex Healthy School programme and run by VCN (Voice Care Network) member Lesley Hendy.

During this six-week programme, teachers were taught how to use their voices correctly and effectively. At the end of the course they reported a marked improvement in their voices and absence of sore throats.

Mrs Cobb, co-ordinator of VCN explains “It gave us the skills we needed to protect our voices and protect the weaknesses that we had.”

So, why don't we work, here in Tunisia as well, to put the voice higher up on the profession's agenda and to ensure that, in the long run, teachers know how to protect their voices before they start work.

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