



Voice care

Teachers are paying increasing attention to the issue of voice care. BRIGID FITZGERALD investigates.

Teaching is an occupation that relies heavily on vocal communication and often requires that the voice be used for continuous and long periods of time. As such, a teacher's voice is a valuable asset, but one that can be put under a lot of strain during the working day. The number of teachers expressing interest in recent ASTI vocal fitness seminars indicates that voice care is an issue of increasing concern to teachers. This is a positive trend, as a lack of awareness and training, coupled with the nature of the job, means that teachers are at a high risk of developing voice disorders at some point in their careers. Voice problems generally manifest themselves in symptoms such as hoarseness or broken voice, inability to raise the voice, lowered pitch and vocal tract discomfort.

Prevention is better than cure

Teachers use their voices more every day than most professions – cumulatively about 75 minutes each day, according to VHI. Additionally, they have little time for vocal rest or recovery, and are exposed to sore throats, viruses and other illnesses throughout the working day. These illnesses and their secondary symptoms have an effect on the voice. Any infection should be taken seriously and treated medically to lessen the duration and avoid further infection. Dry or cold air can often contribute to throat or vocal irritation, and it is important to drink plenty of water if speaking for long periods.

Teachers who teach large classes or in large classrooms may struggle to make themselves heard over classroom noise. When managing your class, consider practical aspects that may conserve your voice, such as location, grouping, concise phrasing and visual communication. Where possible, avoiding speaking over noise, reduce unnecessary noise and bring students closer to you rather than trying to make your voice

stretch – vocal strain is a chief cause of vocal damage. John Daly runs voice training seminars for teachers, giving practical advice on how to use the voice without damaging it. John says that voice fitness is a big issue for teachers and training is vital to ensure that teachers can avoid developing voice problems. He believes that this should be an integral part of teacher training: "A one-hour lecture is not enough. It should be every week so that teachers know what to do at the end of it. It should be ongoing". According to John, the amount of time spent talking each day, together with stress and a lack of training, leads to misuse of the voice. He breaks this misuse into a number of categories: speaking at the wrong pitch, shouting, bad posture and improper breathing.

John has found that many teachers speak in a monotone voice and their pitch is often too low, which puts strain on the voice. Every person has an optimum pitch level at which their voice is most efficient, and which requires the least amount of effort. Many of the voice disorders encountered by teachers occur as a result of excessive effort during speech and John advises teachers to do exercises to determine their correct pitch. Vocal training reinforces and develops the natural range of voice skills and this is of benefit to teachers, not only from a health perspective, but also in improving their communication skills. According to John: "Breath is the fuel for the voice. Teachers need to learn to breathe properly, improve their posture and become relaxed. If you are not relaxed in the classroom your voice will be affected, your whole body will be affected". Breathing should be rhythmic and relaxed and it is important to pause during speech to allow time to breathe. Any imbalance in posture can affect breathing and increase levels of tension. Teachers should aim for easy alignment of the head, neck and upper body.



Illustration by John Brennan.

Recognising the problem

According to one teacher currently experiencing chronic voice problems, including pain and voice loss: "The voice is delicate and it is important to recognise that voice problems are serious and cannot be ignored". This teacher identifies her initial failure to recognise her symptoms as a significant contributor to her current condition. At first attributing her repeated sore throats and voice loss to infection or tiredness, she continued to work despite her discomfort. Speaking while suffering from a sore throat or hoarseness can cause irreparable damage to the voice and diminish vocal range and flexibility. This teacher stresses that: "One of the important things is not to ignore the symptoms, rest your voice, attend a speech therapist and get information on what to do and what not to do".

Young teachers in particular may feel obliged to talk more than is necessary during lessons.

If you are consistently hoarse or have sore throats, you should consult your GP and, if necessary, arrange a consultation with a specialist. Voice problems are usually curable but certain voice conditions can only be alleviated through voice/speech therapy.

Silence is golden

Vocal rest is vital for both prevention and recovery. John Daly urges teachers to have a period of silence after class, or to take an hour in the evening when they don't speak at all. He has noticed that a lot of young teachers are attending seminars and is concerned that young teachers in particular may feel obliged to talk more than is necessary during lessons. He

encourages teachers to "mix the lessons; have some talk, some written work and some practical work. Experienced teachers may know this, but younger ones have to learn it". Rest and relaxation is also vital for recovery and it is important that this vocal rest is true rest, as forced whispering can cause damage and should be avoided.

Vocal fitness must be taken seriously by teachers and their employers. The ASTI hopes that the occupational health service for teachers, currently in development, will offer assistance and advice relating to vocal health. Management should ensure that risks to the voice are minimised. To this end, voice care in-service seminars on the subject should be considered because, while awareness is important, practical training in breathing and vocal techniques is vital. It is important to find out what measures will help to prevent problems developing and, if a problem does develop, it is key that it is recognised, taken seriously and treated. Your voice is your tool; you cannot afford to lose it!

Further information

ASTI runs a 'Vocal fitness for teachers' course as part of our professional development in-service programme. Look out for notices in ASTIR and Nuacht, and on our website – www.asti.ie.

VHI have practical voice care advice for teachers on their website – www.vhi.ie.

The Voice Care Network UK offers advice for teachers and other occupational voice users, and has a number of publications available for purchase at www.vcnmembers.co.uk.

If you would like to respond to this article, email feedback@asti.ie.