

Voice and the teacher 3



Philip Bliss continues his series on voice by focusing on clarity and effective communication

How we turn our thoughts into language is, to my mind, amazing; we have a thought, and that thought becomes a breath, the breath is vibrated into sound, and we shape that sound into speech.

It's the last element, the shaping of the sound into speech that I'd like to focus on. We shape sound with our tongue and our lips, often interacting with surfaces such as the teeth, the roof of the mouth and inside the lower lip. Each interaction creates a consonant and – generally speaking – it is the consonants that convey the intellect or the thought in the language.

Consonants Communicate Thought

As a rule of thumb, it is widely felt that vowels convey emotion. Vowels are wonderful for showing that you care, or that you are paaaassionate about something. Vowels, therefore, very much have a place in the classroom. Passion and enthusiasm are what makes a good teacher. But as pedagogues, we are also aiming to instruct, to communicate knowledge. In this, the consonant is king.

When teaching, and especially reading, understanding the use of vowels and consonants in the language can elevate your performance, and can help young learners engage more with language.

At the heart of poetry and song are vowels, but their story is told on the consonant.

The Primacy of the Consonant Word-endings

Have you ever wondered how an actor can reach the back of a vast auditorium without the aid of a microphone? Principally, it is by clearly articulated consonant word endings. Those often dropped or swallowed sounds are the difference between an inaudible mumble and clear speech. In spoken English, and particularly when speaking English publicly, it's the T that starts starT, and the P that stops stoP. There is no necessity to exaggerate the sound, but just take care to articulate it. Use this technique in the classroom to clearly convey your thoughts. This will save you from having to repeat, to push, or even to raise your voice. Let the consonant word ending do the work for you.

TOP TIPS

- Don't over-articulate - merely focus on the consonant at the end of the word, if there is one. The aim is not 'push' – just clear.
- If you want to slow the pace of your speech, focus on the consonant word endings - it acts like a break, and slows you down to an appropriate pace.
- As the first strategy to get attention, employ the consonant word endings before resorting to other methods.

Tongue Clamping

It's a curious fact that we often clamp our tongues to the roof of the mouth when we think. By clamping, I don't mean the gentle contact that the tongue tip often has with the area just behind the upper front teeth. I mean the middle and back part of the tongue held high and tense.

We clamp when we think, when something bad happens or is said to us, and certainly we clamp when we type. Pretend to type your name now and you will see.

All this tension in the tongue cuts down on the ability to create deep, rich sound as we need space to resonate sound in our throat and mouth. Habitual tongue clamping can also render the tongue less fit, leading to sloppy articulation. Keep the tongue loose, relaxed and ready to do its work.

Another nasty side effect of tongue clamping is interrupted breath flow - and without breath there is no sound.

Exercises

You could try these with the children.

- 1 Get re-acquainted; it's worth exploring the surfaces of articulation with the tongue and thinking about where, specifically, different consonants are made. This kinaesthetic re-connection is the first step to clearer speech, as it leads to more precise muscular interaction. Simply close your eyes, and use your tongue to explore the mouth and then play with the consonants.
- 2 Notice how some sounds explode. The plosives - as they known - are vital to clear speech. The plosives - P/B T/D K/G - are 3 pairs of consonants, with air or vibration behind them. They are articulated in the front, middle and back of the mouth. If you cup your hand near your mouth you can feel the



difference. Feel the air on P,T,K and the vibration on B,D,G. Invent hand movements to match the sounds as you repeat P,T,K and B,D,G. forward and back, back and forward.

3 A really good workout for the tongue is to 'clean' the teeth, sucking hard with the tongue. Or you could try making 'clock' or 'hoof' sounds using the middle tongue and the hard palate.

4 To get the lips fit, blow through them making a sound like a pretend engine or you could try repeatedly curling the upper lip. Blowing through the lips like a horse (with air) and then with vibration is great fun with children, and helps develop good muscles of speech. ■



Phil Bliss B.A.(hons) lectures voice at Brunel University where he works with undergraduates, lecturers and academics. Through www.etchtraining.co.uk he delivers awayday and inset training.

For more information about Philip Bliss and his work see blissvoicetraining.com

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