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A Reflection on Voice Care for Teachers

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A teacher's voice is probably their most valued possession, but most teachers are unaware of the vocal mechanism, voice care and vocal abuse. During the working day teachers place demands on their voices which may result in an increase in the risk of vocal disorders. This paper will describe the symptoms of voice problems, risk factors and strategies for voice care.

教師にとって声は最も大切な財産であると思われる。しかしながら教師たちは発声のメカニズム、声のケア、声の酷使について無関心であることが多い。教師は勤務時間中、声を使い続けなければならないので、その結果発声障害を起こす危険性が増加する。この論文では発声障害の症状、危険要因とその対策について述べる。

Introduction

Teachers are professional voice users and their voice is probably their most important teaching tool. Teachers place demands on their voices that non-professional voice users do not and these demands can lead to voice disorders such as hoarseness, laryngitis and even the development of vocal nodules. Though their voice is their livelihood most language teachers lack a background or training in voice. This lack of training in voice results in a lack of awareness of voice care, which can contribute to voice disorders (Fritzell, 1996, Morton & Watson, 1998).

The prevalence of voice disorders in teachers

Studies on the prevalence of voice disorders in language teachers are difficult to find, but there have been numerous studies on the prevalence of voice disorders affecting teachers, as well as teacher attitudes regarding voice and voice care. Russell, Oates and Greenwood (1988) found that 22% of teachers in South Australian public schools had experienced voice problems during their teaching career. Russell, Oates and Pemberton (2001) site health surveys done in South Australia that indicate that a teacher is five times more likely to suffer from voice problems than the general population. In the U.S.A, Smith, Kirchner, Taylor, Hoffman, and Lemke (1998) interviewed over 500 hundred teachers and found 38% complained that teaching had a negative effect on their voice and that 39% of those teachers had cut back their teaching duties as a result. Smith et al., also found that female teachers were more likely to report a voice problem.

Yiu (2002) surveyed teachers in Hong Kong and found that teachers reported that their emotions, social life, perception of work pressure and communication were negatively affected by voice problems. Voice care is obviously an important issue for all teachers to consider, as a voice disorder does not only affect performance in the classroom but also may result in loss of work, increased health care costs, and affect a teacher's social and emotional well-being.

How normal voice is produced

Voice is produced on outgoing breath. Air leaves the lungs and flows up the trachea to the approximated vocal cords. The air pushes the vocal cords apart causing them to vibrate, the vocal cords come back together and the whole process reoccurs. This vibration produces voice, which is molded into speech by the action of the jaw, lips, tongue and palate. Voice is amplified by passing into the resonating cavities of the head, neck and throat. The production of normal voice requires controlled breathing combined with free easy vibration of the vocal cords and balanced resonance.

What is a voice problem?

A voice problem is not only total loss of voice but it can include a variety of problems. The teacher may have difficulty with voice volume or an intermittent loss of voice. The teacher may also have difficulties with pitch such as a restricted pitch range, pitch breaks or a loss of intonation. Difficulties with pitch and intonation would be of particular concern to the language teacher as meaning is often reliant on intonation and stress. A voice problem is often most evident at the end of a teaching day with the teacher experiencing voice fatigue or breathiness.

Constant throat clearing and the sensation of something being caught in the throat are also indicative of a voice problem.

Symptoms of voice problems

People with a voice problem may experience particular symptoms such as, dryness of the throat, excessive mucus, an increased effort to talk, trouble swallowing or shortness of breath. Even though there are many symptoms a teacher with a voice disorder may feel it is also possible that they may have no discomfort at all. Though many people may feel any one of these symptoms at any one particular time, symptoms continuing over a period of time are a particular cause for concern. There are also many health problems linked with voice disorders and symptoms. Hoarseness and loss of voice may be due to swelling of the larynx such as with laryngitis or may be the result of growths on the vocal cords such as vocal nodules. Other symptoms such as voice fatigue may indicate muscle problems or vocal cord paralysis. As teachers often place demands on their voices, symptoms such as lack of voice or volume may be considered by the individual to be the result of voice overuse. The teacher needs to be aware that any continued vocal change can also indicate pathology with the vocal mechanism, which may need medical investigation.

Causes of voice problems

There are various causes of voice problems and many of the causes are due to the overuse and misuse of the voice. The voice depends on correct and rhythmical breathing so that the vocal cords vibrate smoothly. Sudden pitch change and volume change with incorrect breathing support can damage the vocal cords. Overuse of the vocal cords can result in the vocal cords

becoming inflamed and contact ulcers or nodules can form at the point where the two vocal cords contact. Coughing and clearing the throat regularly causes strain on the vocal cords as does whispering. Using the voice while suffering from colds or laryngitis puts tremendous strain on the vocal cords as the vocal cords are already inflamed due to infection.

The voice is a mirror of our emotions (Livesey, 2001) and when people are angry and uptight it is seen in their voices. Talking while tense and uptight or yelling when angry, tenses the vocal cords and causes much more damage than when the muscles are relaxed. Excessive talking also is a major cause of voice disorders. As professional voice users teachers use their voices everyday in the workplace, but it is also important for the teacher to be aware of other situations outside of work where their voice is used.

Ways to look after your voice—outside of the classroom

The first thing everyone should do in regards to voice care is to think seriously about their voice and to learn more about the correct way to use their voice. As professional voice users, it is important for the teacher to be aware of how their voice and larynx feel normally, under strain and when stressed so that they are aware of changes and variables that affect their voice.

There are several external variables that can affect the voice. Excessive alcohol consumption dries out the vocal cords and makes the cords more susceptible to damage. As dehydration affects the vocal cords it is important to keep up hydration to prevent getting a dry throat. Smoking and being in places where there is a lot of dust or irritants also causes irritation to the vocal

cords. Therefore after a long day of voice use in the classroom, teachers who go to smoky places and consume a lot of alcohol may find their voice weak and sore the following day.

Habitual throat clearing and coughing causes stress on the vocal cords. Swallowing when feeling the urge to throat clear can help avoid adding strain on the vocal cords. The vocal cord muscles are affected by lack of sleep like the rest of the body, regular and adequate sleep is essential for healthy use of the vocal cords. Stress can cause a variety of vocal disorders such as hoarseness or even total voice loss (Livesey, 2001). Many people may consider a cold or throat infection to be responsible for their voice problem but it can often be personnel or work related stress that is affecting the vocal quality. It is important to be aware of how stress can affect your voice and to seek counseling or support when necessary.

After a busy day of speaking in the classroom it is good if a teacher can rest their voice, even if it is only for about 15 minutes at the end of the day. Carrying out activities such as singing or chatting to friends for long periods after a long day of speaking puts added stress on the voice. For a teacher suffering from unexplained voice problems it can be useful to keep a voice use diary. In the diary the total amount of voice use can be calculated and reflected upon. Some people may be unaware of how much time they actually spend using their voice until they start to measure it.

There are various variables that can affect the voice. External variables that affect the voice such as air irritants, alcohol and stress need to be considered by everyone but teachers need to be more aware as their voice may already be under stress due to continued use in the classroom. The environment outside the

classroom can affect the voice but also the voice can affect a teacher's life outside the classroom. If a teacher has spent the day shouting, yelling or talking too much, there may be little voice left after work which can then lead to stress and in turn begin a cycle of poor voice care and result in a voice disorder.

Ways to look after your voice—inside of the classroom

In the classroom the most important thing a teacher can do is be aware of their voice and to continually reflect on their voice use (Russell, et al., 2001). In the classroom teachers should not need to raise their voices, shout or yell. An increase in voice volume can be achieved through correct breathing support and voice projection. It is also important for the teacher to use their voice volume effectively through projection of their voice. Correct voice projection comes from adequate respiratory support by breathing from the diaphragm and fully inflating the lungs. Voice should be projected at an even volume and pitch.

It is important that the vocal cords do not dry out so a teacher should periodic drink water during the lesson. Many teachers may see drinking during the lesson as unprofessional but if explained to the students it can illustrate a model of good voice care. Some teachers may find throat lozenges effective but mentholated sweets should be avoided as these can dry out the vocal cords. When a teacher needs to get the students attention, something other than the voice should be used such as clapping, using a noisemaker or by the use of silence. Using microphones is recommended when talking to large groups, in large rooms or when the voice is feeling strained and the teacher is unable to rest it.

When a teacher's voice is feeling tired or is weak it is best to rest it rather than continue talking. It may be difficult during the day in the language classroom for the teacher to suddenly rest their voice. This problem can be solved by having a few prepared activities or lessons, which require little teacher, talk time readily available that can be used at short notice when the voice needs to be rested. Most importantly a teacher should avoid speaking for prolonged lengths of time and especially when suffering from a cold or sickness

Conclusion

Due to their job teachers are at an increased risk of developing vocal disorders. Without their voices language teachers are unable to work, but many teachers are unaware of how their voice works and the causes and symptoms of voice disorders. Teachers need to think more about their voice and look at the ways they are currently abusing their voice and consider ways of vocal change. Russell et al., (2001) suggest that it is unrealistic to expect teachers never to have voice disorders but by increasing teachers' awareness of what behaviors may be harmful to their voice may help prevent some voice disorders from developing.

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