

“I ask them what they can feel”: Proprioception and the Voice Teacher’s Approach

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Background

Proprioception is considered essential to forming an aesthetic vocal experience, particularly musculoskeletal proprioception or the ability to accurately sense position, movement, effort, muscular tension, sensation of posture, and balance when singing. Research into singing reveals that proprioceptive awareness leads to better coordination and enhances the singer’s overall understanding of their vocal function. While proprioception is also considered useful in vocal pedagogy, few studies have examined if/how proprioception contributes to voice teaching in the one-to-one context.

Aims

This project sought to understand in what way proprioception featured in the practices of tertiary classical and music theatre voice teachers. It specifically aimed to: 1) identify ways in which voice teachers demonstrate proprioceptive awareness when discussing their practices; and 2) observe how, and for what purpose, voice teachers engage proprioception when delivering voice lessons.

Method

A multiple-case study design involved interviews with teachers and observations of their lessons. Voice teachers ($N=7$, all working in Australia), selected through purposive sampling, were interviewed face-to-face and each was observed delivering three lessons ($N=21$) to professionally focused singing students. Interview transcripts and observation field notes were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Results

Voice teachers revealed proprioceptive awareness when discussing their practices, such as sensing discomfort when a student sang with vocal tension. They also appeared to utilise proprioception as a diagnostic tool when addressing technical issues for their students. Further, teachers sought to develop proprioceptive awareness in their students through physical touch, verbal feedback, muscle release work, external tools (e.g., resistance bands), and breathwork. This was particularly evident where teachers focused students on how they *felt* when they were singing.

Conclusions

Voice teachers adopted a proprioceptive style of teaching, literally adopting a ‘hands-on’ approach and also asking students to reflect on their own physical sensations rather than on the sounds they were making. Further, voice teachers were shown to be developing proprioceptive awareness in their students to aid in achieving the complex sensorimotor coordination required in singing.

Implications

These findings have implications regarding vocal pedagogy courses training voice teachers to incorporate proprioceptive awareness in their practices.

Keywords: Voice teacher, proprioception, proprioceptive awareness, singing lessons, music psychology