

# Evidence-based Frameworks for Teaching and Learning in Classical Singing Training: A Systematic Review

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**Summary: Objectives/Hypothesis.** The study systematically reviews evidence-based frameworks for teaching and learning of classical singing training.

**Study design.** This is a systematic review.

**Methods.** A systematic literature search of 15 electronic databases following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA) guidelines was conducted. Eligibility criteria included type of publication, participant characteristics, intervention, and report of outcomes. Quality rating scales were applied to support assessment of the included literature. Data analysis was conducted using meta-aggregation.

**Results.** Nine papers met the inclusion criteria. No complete evidence-based teaching and learning framework was found. Thematic content analysis showed that studies either (1) identified teaching practices in one-to-one lessons, (2) identified student learning strategies in one-to-one lessons or personal practice sessions, and (3) implemented a tool to enhance one specific area of teaching and learning in lessons. The included studies showed that research in music education is not always specific to musical genre or instrumental group, with four of the nine studies including participant teachers and students of classical voice training only. The overall methodological quality ratings were low.

**Conclusions.** Research in classical singing training has not yet developed an evidence-based framework for classical singing training. This review has found that introductory information on teaching and learning practices has been provided, and tools have been suggested for use in the evaluation of the teaching-learning process. High-quality methodological research designs are needed.

**Key Words:** Sing–Voice–Teach–Learn–Pedagogy.

## INTRODUCTION

Learning classical singing is a complex, multifaceted process, requiring among other things the teaching and learning of a motor skill.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this review, classical singing training refers to the Bel Canto, German, French, and English (British and American) national schools of singing. Music education and performance literature suggests that there are varying opinions on effective pedagogical methods in classical singing training.<sup>2</sup> Research in disciplines such as education and exercise and sports sciences have evaluated and identified standards of good teaching practices, and use such standards to develop evidence-based frameworks that may assist in the teaching and learning process.<sup>3,4</sup> A framework is defined as one that outlines the main concepts of the phenomenon being studied.<sup>5</sup> Teaching and learning practices in classical singing training must also undergo evaluation to improve the quality of teaching and support effective learning, as do other disciplines in education.<sup>3,4,6</sup> Therefore, this systematic review has specifically searched for evidence-based frameworks for teaching and learning in classical singing training.

## Classical singing training: Skills and learning environment

The phenomenon of teaching practices and learning processes in the one-to-one classical voice lesson remains a popular area of investigation in music performance and education research.<sup>7–9</sup> Classical singing teachers have recorded their teaching practices in books and singing manuals throughout operatic history.<sup>10,11</sup> Education and training for the aspiring classical singer is given at a music conservatorium, music academy, a music department or faculty within a university, or in a private singing studio outside of a tertiary institution.<sup>12,13</sup> The singing student learns specific skills in the areas of vocal technique, musicianship, performance and artistry, vocal health, and language.<sup>10,14</sup> Precise skills to manage the voice are taught so that the student may produce the desired voice quality, and meet the vocal challenges in operatic repertoire.<sup>10,14</sup> Musicianship is developed through learning to perform repertoire in a way that is stylistically appropriate to the compositional era or style,<sup>10,14</sup> while language skills are taught so that they may pronounce and understand the meaning of the text in the music.<sup>10,14</sup> Acting ability, body coordination, and presentation skills are developed, and the singer learns to communicate the emotion and meaning of the music to an audience.<sup>2,14</sup> Knowledge in how to care for the voice and to manage general health and lifestyle is learned because of the busy nature of the profession and the athleticism required in operatic singing.<sup>14,15</sup> Music performance and education research suggests that these skills are taught predominantly in a one-to-one private voice lesson with a singing teacher.<sup>9,16,17</sup> A master-apprentice model has been identified in the literature as the common method for teaching and learning used in one-to-one lesson. Within the model, learning takes place through observation and imitation, as the

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teacher passes on knowledge to the student, which they have acquired through their own voice training.<sup>16,17</sup> The master-apprentice model has remained a popular mode of training across disciplines in higher education,<sup>18</sup> and the one-to-one environment is considered in the literature to be “a core part of the professional education offered to undergraduate and postgraduate music students in a conservatoire.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Reshaping the master-apprentice model*

Research in disciplines such as the creative arts where one-to-one training is the main teaching environment are now looking to reshape the master-apprentice model.<sup>18,19</sup> Education research suggests that although one-to-one training is suitable for the teaching of a complex instrumental skill,<sup>9</sup> learning in this environment may also be contextualized, rather than adaptable to the abilities of the learner.<sup>8</sup> The literature also suggests that the hierarchical nature of the master-apprentice does not permit autonomy of the learner, nor encourage life-long learning in the teacher and student.<sup>17–19</sup>

### **Evidence-based practice and education frameworks**

Research in education has demonstrated a turn towards implementing evidence-based frameworks in education systems as a way of improving the quality of teaching and learning. Evidence-based practice in health care is defined as “the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of the individual patient. It means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research.”<sup>20</sup> Education research aims to meet the high standards of scientific research to provide the best available evidence for teaching methods, and influence the professional skills and competences of teachers.<sup>21</sup> Evidence-based teaching and learning frameworks promote standardized teaching practices and may be adapted by the teacher to suit the learner and environment, while maintaining a structured teaching-learning system that promotes productivity and growth for both the student and the teacher.<sup>4,22</sup>

Research in exercise and sport sciences has established evidence-based frameworks that give structure to the teaching and learning process, outline strategies conducive to performance improvement, and assist the learner to achieve effective motor skill acquisition and functional independence.<sup>23,24</sup> Such frameworks give specific processes and outcomes to be achieved by both the teacher and the student, and provide ways that the trainer may assess the learner’s motivation and competence.<sup>25,26</sup> The optimal task performance of the learner is achieved by defining distinct motor and cognitive components, while autonomy-supportive behaviors are promoted through the development of the trainer-athlete relationship.<sup>27,28</sup> The principles of motor learning are used to structure frameworks in the discipline. Principles outline how the teacher may enable the learner to acquire and retain the desired skill.<sup>24,29</sup> The athlete is required to achieve high performance development of a specific motor activity, as does the vocal performer.<sup>30,31</sup>

If a commonly accepted framework for the teaching and learning of classical singing is to be developed, as in other disciplines, a thorough review of the literature is required to assess the current

state of evidence in teaching and learning in classical singing. A systematic review was conducted to identify whether evidence-based teaching and learning frameworks for classical singing training have been developed. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Are there frameworks for classical singing training?
- (2) Are existing frameworks evidence based?
- (3) What is the methodological quality of the research?

## **METHOD**

This systematic review was conducted using PRISMA guidelines.<sup>32</sup> The PRISMA flowchart is shown in [Figure 1](#).

### **Search strategy**

A literature search was conducted using 15 electronic databases: CINAHL, Cochrane Library, Embase, ERIC, Medline, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Dissertation & Theses, ProQuest Education, International Index to Performing Arts, International Index to Music Periodicals, PsycInfo, PubMed, Scopus, Science Direct, and the Web of Science.

The first author conducted a complete search on March 30, 2015. The searches included a combination of key words (see example of search strategy). Limits to the search were applied, including peer-reviewed scholarly journals, conference proceedings, and masters and doctoral theses. Other limitations included studies published in the English language and full-text availability. No limit to the date of publication was applied. Reliability of the database search was conducted and completed on April 20, 2015. A research associate performed the search on 20% of the databases (three databases). Intra and inter-rater reliability was 100%.

### **Eligibility criteria**

Eligibility criteria were established to identify studies to be included and excluded from the review. Each criterion and subcriterion is described below.

#### *Criterion 1: Publication*

**Place of publication.** Studies that are peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings were considered for inclusion.

**Study design.** All types of research designs were accepted for inclusion in the review. Studies with or without control groups were accepted. Expert opinion papers were excluded.

**Language.** The initial database search was limited to publications written in the English language. The given restriction was chosen because English is the first author’s primary language.

#### *Criterion 2: Participants*

**Classical singing teachers and students.** Teacher and/or student participants of classical singing were included. If the study presented a participant group both of students of classical singing and of professional opera singers, the study was included. If participants were singing teachers and/or students

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