

A Training Model for Improving Journalists' Voice

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Summary: Voice education is a crucial aspect for professionals (journalists, teachers, politicians, actors, etc.) who use their voices as a working tool. The main concerns about such education are that, first, there is little awareness of the importance of voice education, and second there is little research devoted to it. The consequences of this lack of training are indeed visible in professionals who suffer voice pathologies or work with little effectiveness. This study seeks to overcome this deficiency by proposing a training model tested with a control group and a pilot study. Speech samples from a group of experimental participants—journalism students—were collected before and after a training course designed to improve their main vocal and prosodic features. These samples were contrasted with a control group without training. Results indicated significant differences in all tested voice elements (breathing, articulation, loudness, pitch, jitter, speech rate, pauses, and stress) except for shimmer and harmonics. The participants were able to enhance their main vocal and prosodic elements, and therefore their expressiveness maintaining optimal vocal hygiene.

Key Words: Voice–Training–Voice production–Prosody–Vocal hygiene.

Voice is the main instrument that humans use to communicate with each other. It conveys experiences, emotions, information, and moods. Our voice announces, describes, or betrays us in every moment of our lives. Consequently, vocal education is essential in general but especially crucial for those professions such as journalists, voice-over artists, teachers, lawyers, or politicians, who use voice as the main tool to work. Few professionals are aware of the significance of voice training; as a consequence, few of them devote time to improving their voices. This behavior can provoke two consequences. First, if these professionals have to use their voice for long periods of time, they risk suffering certain vocal pathologies. Second, as they are not able to recognize the expressive possibilities of their voices, they cannot fully use them in an effective way. In professions where public speaking is part of a job, and an expressive and dynamic discourse is necessary (such as education, journalism or policy), voice training becomes an important aspect.¹ According to this idea, Wingate et al² conducted a study about voice training being justified given that in the United States between 25% and 35% of the population are professionals that require their voice to work. Vocal disorders can be a serious problem and incur large labor costs for companies. A study by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery³ on dysphonia suggested that vocal changes and deficiencies are the results of communication problems that lead to social isolation, depression, and professional difficulties. Thus, vocal therapy is recommended as a preventive measure. The cost derived from teachers with disorders involves an annual expense of \$2.67 million in the United States.⁴ Regarding vocal hygiene, Warhurst et al⁵ conducted a study that asked media voice trainers which vocal qualities are appropriate for professionals working on radio. They suggested that these professionals require a healthy voice. However, the study⁵ found

that most professionals do not have a healthy voice. Many suffered vocal problems and used too low pitch. Some studies have concluded that vocal training positively affects the prevention of vocal disorders.⁶⁻¹² These studies emphasized the importance of voice training for professionals not only because the industry demands a high level of vocal ability, but particularly for health reasons. However, voice training remains a pending issue. Voice is largely unknown, even to those who use it professionally every day. For example, the study by Martin¹³ showed that only half of a group of teachers had a vocal quality considered to be within normal limits. The majority of teachers reported problems such as a hoarse, dry throat, physical tiredness, or a feeling of tightness. As teachers, journalists use voice for prolonged periods of time. Therefore, without a voice training, they are likely to experience voice problems.¹⁴ This concern and the results of the noted studies led us to conduct a study with the goal of designing a precise vocal training program based on an experimental research that could improve the work and the health of these professionals.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ABOUT VOICE TRAINING PROGRAMS

In the theoretical review, several works have suggested the need for adequate training in voice. Barnett¹⁵ conducted several experiments to show how professional vocal training should test specific ear and phonic training in oral reading. He concluded that the experimental groups improved their speech in all measured elements over the control group that received no training. Warhurst⁵ conducted a study in which media voice trainers proposed what vocal qualities were required for radio professionals. These participants described the ideal speaker as someone who sounds real and natural, is easy to hear, versatile, and with the ability to read. The speaker also should have a voice that matched the radio station's persona and the program. In addition, speakers need to accommodate their communication style to match the demographic and cultural norms of their listeners. Regarding vocal characteristics, entrepreneurs and educators preferred a warm voice, low-pitched, clear, with presence, lively, dynamic, and with a correct articulation. They also considered that the personality was perceived by the qualities of the speaker's voice. For example, a dynamic voice indicated an outgoing speaker,

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whereas a clear voice suggested a competent speaker. The warmth of a voice reflected a confident and honest person.

Simberg et al¹⁶ also showed the importance of voice education. These authors concluded that group training offered more benefits than single voice training. Other authors^{17,18} defend direct training as more effective than an indirect one. Timmermans et al¹⁹ established that a long training achieved an improvement in voice quality. Regarding vocal hygiene, these authors found that, in spite of offering recommendations, participants showed no significant change in their habits. Stemple et al²⁰ suggested that a set of voice exercises could positively affect voice production. The results of the study indicated that 30% of subjects experienced an improvement after the training period—improvement was not observed in the placebo group. The participants significantly increased the volume of phonation at all scales of pitch, with the largest increases in high and low pitch. The results indicated that these speakers easily reached maximum phonation time in high pitches and that pitch range was significantly expanded.

Regarding vocal hygiene, Van Lierde et al²¹ tried to determine whether the presence, frequency, and intensity of pain during the speech were different in professionals usually using their voices over nonprofessionals and whether or not the pain was related to the professional use of voice. The study was conducted through questionnaires. The results showed that 55% of nonprofessionals and 84% of voice professionals confessed the presence of one or more symptoms of pain during the speech. The common pain in both groups was a sore throat. However, the professional speakers experienced pain in a greater proportion in the neck, shoulders, headache, ears, and back. This study found that these professionals were not sufficiently trained for using their voice. Ventura et al²² conducted a study through magnetic resonance imaging tests. These authors concluded that the volume of the oral cavity was larger in singers, whereas actors have more volume in the pharynx. These results indicated the need for a different training in each profession. Hazlett et al (2011) reviewed a set of experiments conducted since 2000 by different researchers in the professional voice field. The main conclusion reached is that there was no evidence that voice training improved vocal efficiency. In spite of this, they argued some methodological limitations to explain it and concluded that further investigations were necessary to empirically confirm specific results.

Another set of studies focused on the method to be employed for vocal training and the most effective methodology and duration. Collet et al (2015)²³ reported changes in voice perception after training of adult French speakers. Borrego et al²⁴ tested whether there were differences in the speech of the same news pieces before and after attending training in radio speaking. The data from the perceptual analysis showed that 80% of the voices obtained positive results, particularly in emphasis, voice quality, and pitch. The acoustic analysis indicated that there was a pitch range expansion, and consequently a better voice modulation. This is a quality that Medrado et al²⁵ described in their study. These authors analyzed the professionals' voice, using tonal extension, speech rate, and pauses to emphasize the information. This study showed that voice quality was not only necessary,

but these professionals had to achieve unique vocal characteristics developed with practice. Intonation, cadence, and rhythm were especially important in this training. Timmermans et al²⁶ conducted an experiment to determine if 6 hours of voice training could be sufficient for future teachers. The authors clearly explained to these teachers what was a good and a bad habit for their voices or how to use them. The conclusion was that this training had a strong impact on the teachers' voices. Feudo et al²⁷ analyzed the need to find a suitable method for measuring and training actors' voices. A specific exercise program was designed to work with important aspects for these professionals, such as cold reading, improvisation, and monologues. After working with 44 actors for 2 years, the authors found significant changes occurred in 9 of the 18 elements studied, such as the maximum expiration and maximum phonation time, which were substantially increased. Frequency was slightly expanded during reading, as well as pitch range.

Once these studies have been reviewed, the conclusion is that voice training has a positive impact on professionals' voices, although in different levels depending upon the methods used. Therefore, this study has been designed with the following objectives: (1) to detect the main deficiencies of a group of untrained journalism students; and (2) to compare voice, speech, and prosody before and after a specific training. Thus, the contribution of this study is to implement a voice training program for these future professionals. To do this, we first conducted a pretest with journalism students to determine the main deficiencies and designed a specific course to reduce voice problems for them. We then tested voice samples of 56 future journalists who were recorded before and after receiving vocal technique and prosody training. This was the experimental group. At the same time, a control group, formed by 20 participants, all students of journalism with no training, recorded the same texts. The samples of both groups, experimental group and control group, were then compared. All the recordings were analyzed acoustically to test whether or not there were significant differences. The next step was to perform a pretest to detect the main deficiencies of students of journalism and then to design the specific training.

MAIN DEFICIENCIES OF UNTRAINED SPEAKERS: A PRETEST

We performed a pretest to detect the main deficiencies of untrained speakers.⁴⁸ Fifteen students of journalism (nine women) were recorded reading the two types of texts (informative and poetic) that we would later test during the main experiment. Participants were recorded with the same conditions explained in the Methods section for the main experiment. We then analyzed the results. The most important problems found were as follows: lack of breathing coordination and shortness of breath, notable salivation, repetitive intonation patterns, monotone voice, fast speech rate, and incorrect articulation (eg, to enunciate a different phoneme). Some of these problems have been previously identified in other studies applied to journalism.¹ These deficiencies can be classified into three main areas.^{28,29} The first part is related to the production of voice and is composed of breathing and articulation. The second part analyzed voice acoustic properties such as loudness, pitch, and voice quality. Finally,

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