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**An Exploration into the Paradox Between
MPA and Vocal Improvisation When
Working with Adolescent Females.**

Module 5
7013F

Word Count:
Part 1: 4,794
Part 2: 4,992

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An Exploration into the Paradox Between MPA and Vocal Improvisation When Working with Adolescent Females.

Part 1

Introduction and Rationale

As a vocal coach, I primarily work with adolescent females in contemporary styles, including jazz and Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM). Musically, I view improvisation as a key skill for vocalists within these genres. Therefore, I regularly try to incorporate this within my teaching practice. Through the development of aural skills, melodic creativity and some theoretical study, I aim to help students navigate trickier chord sequences and unfamiliar musical patterns. Furthermore, improvisation is a required component of both Rock School Limited and Trinity Rock and Pop grade exams, which are very popular amongst my students.

Initially, I intended to use this research to develop strategies for improving my improvisation teaching. However, I quickly found the research more complex than expected. Improvisation emerged as both mitigating and generating MPA, creating a dilemma in my practice. If improvisation triggers MPA, how can I teach it without risking students' emotional well-being? In my experience, students are often nervous, giggle, or refuse to engage—an occurrence widely acknowledged in literature and among pedagogues.

If, therefore, the research suggests that improvisation is also a mitigating factor for MPA, it is likely that teachers (including myself) may begin to question their competency. When analysing the research, it feels likely that there are contexts in which both outcomes

are true, and that valuable insights can be gained from recognising both the negative and positive effects of improvisation. Without this, teachers may either feel inclined to omit the teaching of improvisation, to the detriment of their students' education, or push through, to the detriment of their students' emotional well-being. It is therefore necessary to ensure that the nuances of this paradox are fully understood so that teachers can best support their students emotionally and educationally.

The benefits of vocal improvisation within vocal pedagogy are widely discussed within academic circles. For example, improvisation is celebrated as a tool to combat Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) (Wang & Kim, 2025; Heasman-Cossins *et al.*, 2025) and is widely used in the music therapy context to reduce stress and increase energy (MacDonald & Wilson, 2014). The benefits, therefore, are undeniable. As a practitioner, I feel strongly that there is an emotional factor at every layer of voice production, as my previous research shows. My research has largely focused on how emotional distress can hinder vocal progression, and the negative impact singing can have on mental health for outcome-focused singers. I have explored how emotional distress can lead to voice disorders (Yosunkaya, 2021; Baker, 2002; Aronson, 1990; Siefert & Kollbrunner, 2005), how anxiety surrounding registration can only exacerbate the biomechanical challenges of the phenomenon (Blyskal, 2012), and how outcome focussed singers experience a unique set of stressors (Gross & Musgrave, 2016; Loveday, et al., 2022). On the surface, therefore, it feels that improvisation would be an excellent tool for me to incorporate within my practice due, not only to its musical benefits, but also its potential to enhance a student's wider wellbeing.

However, these are not the results I have seen within my teaching practice. More often than not, I encounter real resistance from students. When asked to improvise, many may awkwardly sing under their breath, giggle or cough, whilst others completely refuse to engage. This resistance can be disheartening, leaving me feeling frustrated or even helpless as I try to encourage them. Personally, I first came to improvisation when studying for my BMus in Jazz Voice. I would happily sing a song in front of anyone, but

when I had to improvise, I would freeze up and experience the common symptoms of MPA. It is only within recent years that I have begun to incorporate improvisation into my performance, I still experience the remnant strands of anxiety when I do. The research cited above, therefore, feels, in some ways, diametrically opposed to my own experience as a vocal coach.

A paradoxical element therefore arises in teaching improvisation. Some authors do acknowledge this, recognising the challenging nature of improvisation on the human psyche (Heasman-Cossins *et al.*, 2025; Root, 2021; Hirschorn, 2011). However, it appears that very few thoroughly analyse this phenomenon, particularly when working with entry-level, outcome-focused improvisers. My preliminary reading indicates that studies examine the psychological processes of improvisation among experienced professional musicians (Mohajer & Zolnikov, 2023). There are also plenty of studies that explore the use of improvisation in a wider, therapeutic context, with the wider population (Pujol Torras, 2020; Burger, 2017; Baker & Uhlig, 2011; Austin, 2008), and, in a more nuanced sense, when working with musicians who experience MPA (Heasman-Cossins *et al.*, 2025). An understanding of these strategies may be very useful in the vocal studio, and I have been compelled to explore how improvisation can be used as a tool to support emotional well-being amongst adolescent, beginner improvisers. However, it is also necessary to understand the psychological processes that may foster resistance to improvisation amongst students, to better support students in overcoming these challenges, so they can fully engage with its benefits.

The Demographic

In the early stages of this study, I had little intention of narrowing down the demographic. However, the topic feels significantly more nuanced than I had originally expected, and it feels necessary to approach this research with my specific context in mind. I largely work with adolescent females. It feels that there is a great demand for CCM and Jazz vocal lessons amongst this demographic specifically (I teach in a mixed school,

and of my 18 pupils, just 2 are cis-male, and within my private practice, all my teenage students are cis-females). Despite this, the voices and experiences of adolescent females are underrepresented within the wider literature (Orton & Pitts, 2019). An unresolved gap therefore exists for practitioners working with this population. A lot of the research I came across in my initial reading did not directly represent the population I work with (predominantly adolescent female singers). For example, when considering the psychological processes underlying improvisation, much of the research focuses on the experiences of professional musicians (Forbes, 2020; Mohajer & Zolnikov, 2023). When the research focuses on or includes teenage participants, it largely considers improvisation within a therapeutic context (Heasman-Cossins et al., 2025; Wang & Kim, 2025; Kim, 2008).

It appears, therefore, that much of my research will require me to triangulate across different aspects of research on improvisation in order to gain a specific understanding of the topic in relation to the demographic I work with. This might include developing a greater understanding of MPA and exploring the psychological processes in improvisation, whilst comparing them with the psychological profile of adolescent females.

Music Performance Anxiety in Improvisation

It appears that the positioning of MPA in improvisation is two-fold. On the one hand, improvisation can be used as a tool for combating the phenomenon (Heasman-Cossins et al., 2025) (Boland et al., 2025). On the other hand, however, it has been acknowledged that vocal improvisation can be the root cause of MPA amongst some beginner improvisers (Heasman-Cossins et al., 2025) (Hirschorn, 2011). It is the latter experience that resonates more closely with my own experience as both a singer and vocal coach. The reasoning behind this phenomenon, however, feels somewhat underexplored within the current literature. When dealing with feelings of anxiety, however, amongst musicians, it is perhaps a fair argument to suggest that “the problem is also the solution” (Trondalen, 2014, p. 6). This also resonates with other researchers, who suggest that musicians may

be more likely to respond positively to improvisation as a therapeutic intervention, given their existing physiological and psychological relationship with music (Kim, 2008). Developing a greater understanding of how improvisation is used as a therapeutic tool may open the door to some significantly relevant strategies when introducing improvisation to a student. Furthermore, thoroughly exploring *what* about improvisation causes apprehension may offer insight into how practitioners can best support students through the process.

Exploring these collective perspectives clarifies the psychological mechanisms behind both the benefits and challenges of improvisation. This clarity directly informs pedagogical strategies that develop confident, creative, and outcome-focused improvisers.

Research Aims and Outcomes

In the long term, the idea would be to develop a staged, pedagogical approach to aid teachers in teaching improvisation. This piece of research can only be considered a step towards that goal. The aims and outcomes, therefore, reflect the fact that this is a foundational rather than a final piece of work.

Research Aims

1. To analyse and explore the paradox that emerges when exploring the links between improvisation and MPA, with specific attention given to adolescent females.
2. To identify the specific conditions in which improvisation can be used as a mitigating factor for MPA.
3. To investigate the possible root causes of apprehension for singers when learning to improvise.

4. To investigate and apply therapeutic improvisation techniques within my teaching practice, and explore the effect this may have on outcome-focused improvisation.

Research Outcomes

1. Develop varied, versatile strategies to support students during the early stages of improvisation.
2. To provide an alternative perspective on the links between improvisation and MPA, grounded within my own experience as a practitioner, in order to best support my current student cohort.
3. To act as an advocate for the somewhat under-researched adolescent female voice, with a specific focus on CCM, in an outcome-focused environment.

My Research and Its Philosophical Underpinnings

As a practitioner-researcher, I am compelled to draw on my own experience when exploring research ideas. The idea that one's research philosophy is "rooted in life itself – a life that was inherently contextual, emotional and social" (Morgan, 2014, p. 1047) strongly resonates with me, particularly in this case. Teaching improvisation and the psychological challenges that arise in that process is a problem I regularly face in my practice. This problem motivates this research. Almost by default, I have begun to follow Dewey's 'Concept of Inquiry' (Dewey, 1938). Here, there is a constant process of reflection, solution-focused questioning, and action that takes place. This concept is regularly linked to the pragmatist paradigm, in which meaning from knowledge is derived from the ability to apply new concepts and ideas through practicable action, which incites change (Riga, 2020). Rooting my research within the pragmatist paradigm appears to be the clearest way to achieve my research aims and outcomes, as I am specifically seeking actionable conclusions that will directly support my students through the improvisation process. Throughout this research, therefore, I will aim to apply considered, active analysis, questioning, and actioning to begin resolving the issues I have identified (Morgan, 2014).

Within the context of Dewey's Concept of Inquiry, using Dewey's Reflective cycle (1910; see **Figure 1**, Miettinen, 2000) as outlined by Greenberger (2020), feels an apt framework for this review.

Figure 1 (Miettinen, 2000)

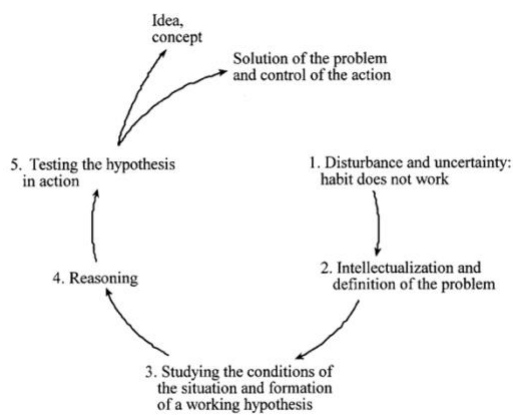


Figure 3. Dewey's model of reflective thought and action.

The identification of this research topic began with the recognition that my current teaching practice was not effective, and, within the early stages of this research process, I began to *intellectualise* the problem. It is through this process that I identified the paradox that appears within the research surrounding MPA and Improvisation, and this has become the

central theme and question for me within my research. I hope that, in resolving this paradox, I may take a step towards resolving the issues that appear when teaching improvisation within my teaching practice. The process of further *hypothesising* and *reasoning* will ultimately result in the following literature review. Furthermore, as I will continue teaching during my research, I will be able to *hypothesise in action*, testing the ideas I learn in this process in a real-life setting. In turn, new problems may arise, and the process starts again. This is a process that has both previously positively impacted my teaching and fosters opportunities for inquisitive and critical thinking.

Pragmatism is often linked to the use of mixed-methods research (Morgan, 2014). Within the world of vocal pedagogy, this holds great relevance, as the field is intrinsically scientific, artistic, performative and psychological in nature (Sell, 2016). This topic, however, differs from my earlier research projects, in which I have explored the links between the physical/biological and psychological/emotional aspects of phonation. When

exploring the paradox between MPA and Improvisation, an interesting dynamic emerges in thinking about the balance and value of quantitative data. In quantitative data, there is value in the generalisability of the knowledge gained (Williamon et al., 2021). Within a teaching context, the ability to translate knowledge to a wider population is highly beneficial. Teachers often work with many students, and having a 'one-size-fits-all' strategy would be, in some ways, ideal. In reality, however, this feels an unlikely outcome. Even within the same demographic, teachers are working with students from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Whilst a standardised approach may be suitable when it comes to *biological* issues (to a certain extent), approaching *psychological* barriers to learning may require more nuance. This is where qualitative data is valuable. Within this approach, value is placed on "experiences, feelings, and attitudes" (Williamon et al., 2021, p. 32). This type of understanding is highly relevant when exploring the psychological aspects of vocal pedagogy. In this context, a concrete and absolute resolution to the problem appears unlikely, if not impossible. However, gaining insight into what *may* be the problem is a suitable outcome that contributes to the wider discussion. Therefore, this paper is likely to lean more heavily on qualitative research and an inductive approach, homing in on specific contexts and experiences to identify potential outcomes (Williamon et al., 2021). This may lead to questions and concepts that require more specific research processes and could yield a possible research question for my final dissertation.

Type of Literature Review

When considering the type of literature review I would undertake, I was forced to consider my position as an insider researcher. I am compelled to approach this research through Hermeneutics; in many ways, my own experience is diametrically opposed to the existing research. It feels impossible, therefore, to set aside my predisposition, as this is the entire foundation upon which this research is built. Within the hermeneutic tradition, the researcher is not required to set aside their bias, but rather to recognise that it is embedded in their interpretation of the data (Winter, 2020). This tradition, therefore, strongly aligns with my approach and gives me the space to deepen my understanding and find relevance for my practice as a vocal coach and vocalist. According to both

Greenhalgh (2018) and Webber *et al.*, (2023) this is also the primary focus of a hermeneutic review.

Within this backdrop, I believe a narrative review would provide the best framework for achieving my research aims and outcomes. I want to understand *why* students display such reticence towards improvisation, and *how*, when improvisation so often appears to be a *cause* of MPA (this is my own observation), it is also believed to be a useful tool in combating it (Heasman-Cossins *et al.*, 2025). A narrative review gives me the space to gather and synthesise the literature around this topic “to demonstrate the value of a particular point of view” (Paré & Kitsiou, 2017, p. 161). It is also possible to see, therefore, that there is a natural link between this type of review and Hermeneutics, as my bias as a researcher is not required to be set aside, as is the case with a systematic review (Tulandi & Suarathana, 2021), but, to an extent, valued.

Whilst this is the case, however, when using this framework, I must take care to ensure my research “is not just well-composed rhetoric of a well-meaning, but **biased**, researcher’s opinion” (Thirsk & Clark, 2017). This can be achieved through maintaining **reflexivity** throughout the research process (Galdas, 2017). One must be conscious of one’s positionality within both the research and the wider world, outlining when experience is relevant to, and may influence, the research at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I will, therefore, keep a research journal in order to hold accountability and reflect upon how I have gained and interpreted knowledge, to maintain credibility and trustworthiness (Watt, 2007).

Literature Selection and Analysis

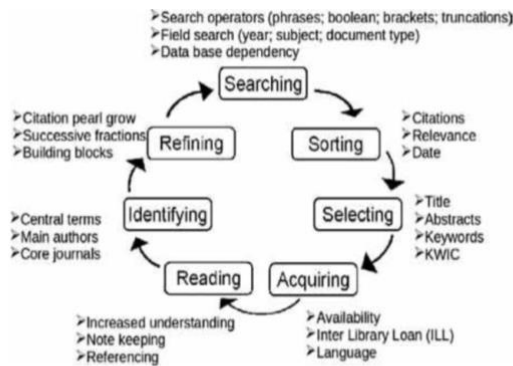


Figure 1: The hermeneutic circle of reviewing literature and techniques associated with different stages of the hermeneutic circle.

Figure 2 (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010)

Given the philosophical foundation upon which this research is built, the use of Hermeneutic Circling (see figure 2) feels an appropriate framework within which to conduct this essay. This process helps to maintain rigour, whilst still recognising the value of the researcher's bias and experience (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). So far, the research surrounding vocal improvisation is dense. Finding papers that answer my specific questions, in relation to my demographic, is rare. I arrived at this research asking *why* improvisation might cause MPA in adolescent, female students. I used the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David's (UWTSD) library search engine and Google Scholar to identify literature that might give insight into this phenomenon. Using Boolean search filters, I initially used "vocal improvisation AND psychology". This search resulted in several papers that specifically explored the psychological processes of professional musicians. Whilst useful to an extent, I did not feel these papers were highly relevant to my own teaching practice, which largely involves working with teenage girls who are beginner improvisers. I narrowed the search, therefore, to include "vocal improvisation AND psychology AND adolescents". It was at this stage that the links between vocal improvisation and the mitigation of MPA became apparent to me, with Heasman-Cossins *et al's* (2025) paper. In the face of the general contradiction in my own experience, numerous questions arose. In some ways, I also gained validation. Whilst the general conclusion of this paper is that improvisation may generally mitigate the effects of MPA, Heasman-Cossins *et al.* (2025) also acknowledged that improvisation may "generate" MPA. This became something of a

pearl within my research, and through *forward* and *backward* chaining, and 'related article' links, I have discovered new resources to explore (Booth, 2008).

Through these articles, I have identified themes and will continue to do so as I sort the papers accordingly. This will guide me to new search terminology (Hirt et al., 2024), thus contributing to the dynamic and continuous nature of this research (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). I will continue this process as I research and write, until I reach 'saturation point', or the point at which I have found all the relevant literature to my topic, within the scope of the word count, and research timeframe (Ferrari, 2015).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain rigour, relevance and thematic focus, I have developed a loose inclusion/exclusion criterion, though it is not a prerequisite of a narrative literature review (Ferrari, 2015). This mostly relates to the use of Grey Literature, as, luckily, much of the research on this topic appears to be "up-to-date", which is generally considered beneficial in the research realm (Pontis et al., 2015). Grey Literature is evidence that is drawn from alternative, non-peer-reviewed sources (Lawrence et al., 2014). This may include writing by influential teachers (including Jeanette LoVetri and Jena Root), which is included in teacher manuals or memoirs and can be a valuable resource for the practitioner-based researcher and vocal coach (Winter, 2021). Dissertations and Conference proceedings are other forms of Grey Literature that will be used within this research (Kepes et al., 2012). Much of the literature on adolescents and improvisation explores its therapeutic benefits. When looking at improvisation within a performance or outcome-focused setting, the research focuses on professional musicians. Therefore, incorporating dissertations and conference proceedings provides greater breadth of enquiry, allowing for thorough triangulation and analysis.

Due to the lack of research that is specifically related to teaching improvisation to adolescent females, I will draw on research that focuses on all types of musical improvisation, regardless of instrument, context or level of experience. Care will be taken, however, to thoroughly analyse and compare findings from these varying contexts, with

consideration for the psychosocial context of adolescent females. For example, it is appropriate to accept literature that focuses solely upon the experiences of instrumentalists. There are valuable insights to be gained into the psychological and pedagogical processes that take place for these musicians, so long as they are analysed within the psychosocial context of adolescent females' lives. I will analyse literature that explores both therapeutic and pedagogical improvisation, and evaluate the research with a consideration for:

- The Performance context
- The intended outcome of the improvisation (musical or therapeutic)
- Emotional/pedagogical demands placed upon participants

Assessing research against these parameters will enable me to successfully synthesise the literature whilst maintaining relevance for the given demographic.

Critical Reflection

I have approached this research as a practitioner researcher; I have been teaching throughout this process and, therefore, have been negotiating the cyclical nature of Dewey's reflective process (1910; see Figure 1, Miettinen, 2000). However, the challenge with the study is that I feel I am left with more questions than answers. No concrete solution has been identified, nor do I feel that I have reached control over the action. This reflection gives me the opportunity to explore my relationship, as both a practitioner and a researcher, with this lack of resolution, and to identify the areas in which this research has impacted my work in both these roles. Therefore, Driscoll's method of reflection (based on Borton's (1970) 'What? So What? Now What?' questions) feels an apt choice, as it encourages researchers to look beyond the catalytic event and to apply reflection within a wider context (Ryder & Downs, 2022).

What?

I have always had a complicated relationship with improvisation. I studied Jazz Vocals at university, but arrived with very little improvising experience. Improvising in class, exams, or performances provoked a visceral reaction in me; the band playing behind me felt like a train careering towards me, and I often left classes in tears. This did not occur in any other context. I sensed that this inhibited my learning process, and it was only towards the end of my four-year degree that I felt I had even a slight grasp of improvisation. Now, as a teacher, I watch my students go through the same thing. It therefore felt important to explore the psychological processes that occur during improvisation learning. It was at this stage that the paradox appeared.

Improvisation is required for exams and is a necessary skill for working vocalists (Wasbotten, 2022), though it frequently provokes anxiety in my students. Discovering the research that suggested improvisation was a mitigating factor for MPA was, therefore, something of a double-edged sword. Objectively, I was intrigued; if there was a solution that enabled me to incorporate improvisation and alleviate MPA, it was imperative to use it in my practice. I began to wonder if this research was a “silver bullet” (Davis, 2007, p. 275) that might provide a quick fix to this pedagogical problem. Though, as Davis points out, no such thing exists, and I was left with a sense of failure. If multiple studies suggest that improvisation can reduce MPA, then what was I doing wrong? Why were so many of my students finding it so psychologically challenging?

So What?

The lack of resolution has distinct consequences for the practical implementation of pedagogical improvisation and, not only student, but teacher wellbeing. When credible research suggests that improvisation could mitigate MPA, it is natural for teachers to feel downhearted. This is perhaps due to the perceived gap between research and practice (Davis, 2007). Whilst the knowledge gained was incredibly valuable, it was often hard to identify how to implement it within the day-to-day workings of the vocal studio.

This process forced me to undertake ‘reflection-on-action’ (Schön, 1983). This was a challenging process, and at times I began to doubt my abilities as a teacher. In this sense, however, was alleviated when I discovered that I was already incorporating many of the suggested pedagogical strategies into my practice. However, I also began to wonder whether I was imposing my own experience on the whole adolescent female demographic, and, more specifically, on my students. Through this reflection, however, I came to understand an important distinction, both within education research and within myself as a practitioner-researcher. Whilst the researcher seeks new knowledge, the practitioner seeks solutions to everyday challenges (Vanderline & van Braak, 2010). I approached this research as a practitioner, viewing the literature (and its authors) as “gurus,” and treating their findings as “a certainty” (Davis, 2007, p. 275). This links to the idea of ‘epistemic authority’, in which one ascribes a level of deference to published research (Jäger, 2025). As an early-career researcher, I am particularly susceptible to this and was left questioning my legitimacy and expertise when critiquing established works. This was compounded by the compelling nature of Kim's (2008) and Heasman-Coussins *et al's* (2025) research. However, I could not shake the feeling that this research did not resonate with my experience as both a student improviser and a teacher. It was only through tutorials and finding validation in the literature by refining my search terminology that I began to recognise the legitimacy of my own experience.

It was through this process that I also began to identify my bias towards an objective truth, which perhaps subconsciously derives from the historic tendency towards positivist assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). At an epistemological level, my logical process, however, naturally leans towards a relativist ontological position, in which there are many truths (Easterby-Smith, 2012). In the early stages of my literature analysis, I failed to adapt these findings to my specific context, a challenge practitioners commonly struggle with (Davis, 2007). This meant my experience and the research sat at polar opposites on the spectrum, and it felt impossible to achieve any level of resolution.

This was initially incredibly uncomfortable, as is common among early-career researchers (Skukauskaite et al., 2018). However, once I began contextual analysis of this research,

my outlook changed. I realised it would be impossible for me to implement the same process adopted by Heasman-Cossins *et al.* (2025) within my vocal studio, due to the time and curriculum constraints of day-to-day teaching. Therefore, it could be the case that Heasman-Cossins' improvisational approach did mitigate symptoms of MPA, and that, within my vocal studio, improvisation was a causal factor in the phenomenon. Both things were true.

This led me to fully explore the relevant literature on the psychosocial context of my demographic and the psychological processes behind improvisation. This enabled me to fully understand how both extremes of this spectrum can emerge as experiences for voice students. However, due to time and word-count constraints, I was unable to fully resolve the paradox at hand. Overall, I certainly generated more questions than answers, which leaves me in a strong position for future research.

Now What?

Despite the challenges of grappling with the somewhat dichotomous relationship between MPA and improvisation, I feel I am aptly positioned to continue this research as I embark upon my final dissertation. It was reassuring to discover that I was already using the commonly suggested strategies for teaching improvisation. They were also the strategies I was taught, and, having now taught them myself, I believe there are possibly more effective tools that are yet to be developed, particularly when working with singers. This would certainly be something I would like to explore moving forward.

I feel perhaps the greatest shift in this research has been in my understanding of my position in qualitative research, and this will positively impact my research moving forward. Not only am I a practitioner, but an insider, which means I “care enough about the practice to challenge its traditions when necessary in order for it to evolve and move forward” (Gregson, 2020, p. 4). In any future research, I will do my best to work as closely as possible with other voice teachers to minimise the gap between research and practice.

Furthermore, my philosophical understanding of knowledge has deepened, meaning I am able to sit comfortably with the cognitive dissonance of two contrasting truths.

In the meantime, within my current teaching practice, I will continue to create a safe learning environment with my students, in which mistakes are celebrated (Theriana, 2023; Root, 2021; Engelsdorfer, 2018). There are two areas in which I will adapt my practice, however. Reframing improvisation as vocal “exploration,” as Kratus (1990) suggests, may reduce the pressure on students, particularly since many of them know it is a formal requirement of their studies. This links to Edwin’s (1997) suggestion of using role-play within teaching practice to remove the pressure from technical exercise. This is an idea I explored in my previous research surrounding registration and have begun to incorporate into my practice with great success. Extending this to improvisation may be a worthy avenue to explore. Secondly, I will begin to incorporate improvisation into my choirs. My experience suggests that singers are more likely to display anxiety when working with instrumentalists. However, when working solely with singers, this is somewhat alleviated. Incorporating improvisation into my group vocal sessions may provide a safe environment for singers to explore it.

Part 2

Introduction

The value of incorporating improvisation within a musical education setting is widely discussed within the literature. Practically, improvisation is a necessary skill for the working vocalist, particularly within Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) (Wasbotten, 2022). Musically, improvisation can be used to reinforce scales and basic musicianship (Root, 2021) and is considered a central component of complete and creative musical expression (Biasutti, 2015). Furthermore, something unique and special occurs during improvisation: a ‘flow state’, in which a state of expression occurs that goes beyond the standard experience of the *self* (Forbes, 2020), and a strong, meaningful connection with

other musicians can be achieved (Landau & Limb, 2017). Improvisation is also often used as a therapeutic tool within music therapy practices (MacDonald & Wilson, 2014; Riabzev et al., 2022; Burger, 2017). Though a thorough exploration of this is not practical within the scope of this research, it is a testament to the positive effects improvisation can have upon an individual's well-being and relationship with the self. More recently, research has suggested that improvisation is a positive intervention within the teaching studio for combating Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) (Heasman-Cossins et al., 2025; Wang & Kim, 2025). This is of relevance to those who work with teenage girls, given the research that suggests young females have reported higher rates of MPA than their male counterparts (Papageorgi, 2021; Thomas & Nettelbeck, 2013). However, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that improvisation is often a *source* of anxiety amongst young musicians (Root, 2021; Hirschorn, 2011; Engelsdorfer, 2018), and female musicians in particular (Alexander, 2012; Wehr-Flowers, 2006). On the surface, something of a dichotomy appears. This essay will explore both aspects of this relationship before questioning whether a dialectical approach can be taken, integrating both perspectives to resolve this complex paradox (Cronenberg & Headley, 2019).

What is Improvisation?

Before going on to explore the relationship between MPA and Improvisation, it feels important to discuss the definition of improvisation. This varies within the literature depending on the context. Pedagogically, there appears to be a consensus that improvisation is spontaneous music creation, within a specific musical framework (Azzara, 1992; Azzara, 2002; Kratus, 1990). There is, therefore, an important distinction that needs to be made between *musical* improvisation and *therapeutic* improvisation. Wigram (2004) and Pavlicevic (2000) both identify that, when using improvisation therapeutically, the meaning of 'improvisation' is rooted in the *intention* for improvising, and that intention is not to "make good music," as in music improvisation, but rather, to create an intimate interpersonal relationship between therapist and client, through the musical event" (Pavlicevic, 2000, p. 272). The idea that, within a purely musical context,

the definition of musical improvisation is connected to the perceived success of the result links back to Azzara (2002; 1992) and Kratus' (1990) concept of the "framework" within which music takes place. It is this idea of the "framework" that distinguishes between the two types of improvisation.

When considering the musical frameworks that shape an improvisation, it is important to consider genre and musical styles. In Western traditions, the term improvisation is often synonymous with the jazz genre (Atkinson, 2020). Within the Free Jazz context, one arrives at the point where the concept of "a framework" is removed. Could there not, therefore, be some crossover between musical and therapeutic improvisation (Pavlicevic, 2000)? The answer to this lies in the intended outcome of the improvisation piece (Brown & Pavlicevic, 1997). In a therapeutic context, the aim is not to make good music but to develop a unique relationship between client and therapist through a therapeutic language meticulously studied and learned by clinicians (Brown & Pavlicevic, 1997). Within musical improvisation, the aim is to create a cohesive piece of music, with the central focus on the communicative and interactive experience of the musicians (Brown & Pavlicevic, 1997; Pavlicevic, 2000; Menezes, 2010). Here, musicians are drawing on a contextual and sociological musical language to engage in communicative interplay and explore boundaries (Atkinson, 2020).

Clarifying this distinction when considering improvisation as an intervention for MPA feels important, particularly given the ethical boundaries of vocal coaching. Most teachers are not qualified psychological professionals and therefore should not attempt to assume a therapeutic role (Scearce, 2016). The boundary, however, perhaps blurs when teachers begin to adopt strategies or spaces that echo the therapeutic principles of improvisation. This may manifest in the creation of 'safe-zones' (Root, 2021) or through exploration of the voice or instrument being used (Kratus, 1990). It is not the *language* here that has changed; without the proper training, vocal coaches are unable to engage in therapeutic improvisational language (Pavlicevic, 2000), but the *intention*. The aim,

when using these strategies, is not to create a rounded piece of music, but to encourage students to learn what is available to them when they improvise (Kratus, 1990).

For this research, the wider, philosophical, sociological, linguistic and intentional understandings of improvisation will be distilled into two improvisational components: the *language* used and the *intention*. Research exploring improvisation as a mitigating and motivating factor for MPA will be analysed against this framework to assess its transferability to the day-to-day vocal studio.

The Psychosocial Backdrop of MPA in Adolescent Females

Before exploring the links between MPA and improvisation, it is necessary to explore the relevance of MPA within the lives of adolescent females. Developing an understanding of *why* teenage girls may experience MPA may give further insight into *how* MPA might both mitigate and trigger the condition. MPA can manifest mentally (experiences of anxiety and cognitive impacts, such as memory failures), physiologically (increased heart rate and sweating), and behaviourally (shaking, poor performance quality) (Irie et al., 2023; Burin & Osório, 2017).

MPA and The Learning Environment

Rather than condense MPA to its extreme, in which a state of fear leads to a performance breakdown, it is important to recognise that MPA sits along a continuum and is experienced in many ways and contexts (Kenny, 2011). There is very little in the wider literature about the experience of MPA in a one-to-one context, which is central to the learning experience of many young musicians (Gaunt, 2006). Therefore, this is an oversight, particularly given the *authority bias* between student and teacher (Matai & Phillips, 2023). This is a recognition of the impact a teacher can have on their students; Matai and Phillips go so far as to suggest that students can “worship” (2023, pg. 11) their teachers. This aligns with Gaunt's (2006) research, which highlights the power dynamics that occur, even in the most outwardly supportive student-teacher relationships. Gaunt

goes on to describe how students would value their teachers' opinions over their peers', and how a fear of failure characterised young students' experiences of learning. This shows how the focus on MPA within a concert context is somewhat diminished. Within the early stages of a musician's career, a great deal of time is spent in a one-to-one setting, and a great deal of performance preparation occurs within this context. If this environment is even partly characterised with anxiety, as Gaunt suggests, then that issue needs to be addressed in terms of what *causes* and *mitigates* that anxiety.

MPA and Teenage Girls

As Kenny (2006) highlights, it is common for MPA to start emerging at the onset of adolescence. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to understand its causes and possible solutions to curb its progression. Teenagers undergo social, emotional, and musical development at this stage (Ananias de Lima et al., 2024), and as their cognitive aptitude and self-awareness develop, adolescence can be a "particularly problematic period" (Papageorgi et al., 2007) regarding the impact of MPA.

Furthermore, the literature widely reports that adolescent females are statistically more susceptible to the effects of MPA (Papageorgi, 2021; Papageorgi, 2022; Ananias de Lima et al., 2024; Thomas & Nettelbeck, 2013; Alexander, 2012; Wehr-Flowers, 2006). Dempsey and Comeau's (2019) research, however, yielded different results, showing no direct correlation between gender and MPA. It seems, however, that this may be an outlier within the wider literature, particularly given the broader psychosocial context of life as a teenage girl. Rates of poor mental health are increasing, nationwide (Proto & Quintana-Domeque, 2021), and in Stentiford *et al's* study (2023), 27.2% of young women (aged 17-22) specifically discussed experiences with poor mental health. This may be due to the negative impact of social media on self-esteem (Perkovich, 2021) and to the academic pressures stemming from familial expectations and competitive school cultures (Stentiford et al., 2023). It is also important to note that this uncertainty is occurring after

a pandemic, which undoubtedly had negative effects on both physical and mental well-being (Jester & Kang, 2021) and psychosocial development (Schiera et al., 2024). Within this context, therefore, it is not surprising that female teenagers demonstrate higher levels of perfectionism (Patston & Osborne, 2016). Both perfectionism and low self-esteem are cited throughout the literature as aetiological aspects for MPA (Mei-Yuk, 2011; Burin & Osório, 2017). Understanding this contextual backdrop may help explain how improvisation, an act that is both unstructured and expressive, may both provoke and alleviate the symptoms of MPA.

Improvisation as a Provoking and Mitigating Factor for MPA

Having garnered further insight into the two components of this research (improvisation and MPA), it is now possible to explore the dynamic relationship between them. As previously discussed, the literature widely reports that the unstructured, freeing nature of improvisation can mitigate MPA in young musicians (Heasman-Cossins et al., 2025; Wang & Kim, 2025; MacDonald & Wilson, 2014; Boland et al., 2025). However, even within this literature, it is recognised that improvisation can elicit the symptoms of MPA (Heasman-Cossins et al., 2025), and it is certainly discussed within literature that explores improvisation within a pedagogical context (Root, 2021; Hirschorn, 2011; Wehr-Flowers, 2006; Alexander, 2012; Engelsdorfer, 2018). This tension perhaps lies in the task's unstructured, exposing nature; improvisation requires students to accept mistakes, "acknowledging discomfort and fear of potential failure" (Robertson, 2023, p. 8). This is both the ultimate benefit and challenge for the adolescent student, and accepting this concept may exceed the maturity and patience of the average teenage learner. This tension forms the crux of this research, and I will go on to explore the dual role of improvisation in relation to MPA.

Improvisation as a Trigger for MPA

As previously discussed, in an outcome-focused setting, successful improvisation requires conformity to a pre-agreed musical framework (Atkinsons, 2020; Barrett, 2000). To do this effectively, musicians must develop their own musical language, composed of

scales (Peckham, 2003) and “licks” (pewritten patterns of notes borrowed from other improvisers) (Barrett, 2000), that enable them to successfully navigate this framework.

If successful improvisation is akin to learning a language (Hargreaves, 2014), it seems appropriate to explore how, and whether, anxiety manifests during Second Language Acquisition (SLA), particularly as research in this area is often focused on a classroom or one-to-one setting (Woodrow, 2006). SLA research shows that language learning is not just a cognitive skill; it is a process directly linked to social context (Norton Peirce, 1995), identity (Morita, 2012), emotions (Ma, 2022), and the sense of self (Mercer, 2012). Direct correspondences can be drawn here, therefore, within vocal pedagogy. At its core, singing is inherently scientific, artistic, performative and psychological (Sell, 2016), and singers often feel there is a direct relationship between their voice and their sense of self (O'Bryan, 2015; Monks, 2003). Given this shared context, it is also necessary to note students' shared responses across both practices. In SLA, researchers highlight the tendency for students to “stop talking because they face psychological barriers” (Ma, 2022, p. 1). Similarly, when learning improvisation, students are likely to “stop[s] almost immediately, or otherwise exhibit behaviours of discomfort, such as laughing or shaking their head” (Engelsdorfer, 2018, p. 41). This is certainly an experience common in my teaching practice; I have had students refuse to engage at all in the past. There are obvious similarities here in the behavioural responses to skill acquisition, and it appears that both MPA and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) manifest in similar ways (Woodrow, 2006). To further explore the psychological underpinnings of vocal improvisation in adolescent females, it is helpful to turn to SLA research, which offers valuable parallels to teaching vocal improvisation.

SLA, Improvisation and the Self-Efficacy

When considering the connection between both SLA and Improvisation, and one's sense of self, it is necessary to look at Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). SCT is a theory of human behaviour, in which actions, outcomes and conduct are intrinsically linked to an individual's preconceived set of self-beliefs (Mills, 2014). This set of self-beliefs is

fundamentally tied to perceived self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in their ability to successfully meet challenging demands within a specific situation (Luszczynska & Schwarzer, 2015). An individual's sense of self-efficacy within an SLA and its wider context is often considered a predictor of motivation (Schunk, 2008). When self-efficacy levels are low, a learner's self-esteem is affected, which can trigger defensive behaviour (Norton Peirce, 1995). This could perhaps explain the reactions to both SLA speaking and vocal improvisation cited by Ma (2022) and Engelsdorfer (2018). Furthermore, within an SLA environment, anxiety is often linked to cognitive intrusions that occur due to low self-efficacy beliefs (Tanveer, 2008). There are also parallels here for vocal improvisers, who suggest that their experience of "flow" (a positive and total absorption in a task) is often disrupted by negative thoughts (Forbes, 2020). This perhaps perpetuates the problem; if negative thoughts are "fatal" (Forbes, 2020, p. 798) to successful improvisation, how can vocal improvisers build self-efficacy? To resolve this cycle, it is necessary to explore what makes students so sensitive to these tasks and to question why students arrive at improvisation with such low levels of self-efficacy.

SLA, Improvisation and a Student's Self-Concept

The answer to this question is incredibly complex and unique to each individual. Once again, there is a great depth of writing on this phenomenon within the SLA oeuvre. In many ways, this writing feels more relevant to the experience of a vocal coach teaching improvisation than the writing on MPA, which tends to focus on concert settings. As Tanveer (2008) astutely highlights, language is used to express one's identity. It goes to prove, therefore, that "our self-image becomes more vulnerable when our expression is reduced to infantilised levels." (Arnold, 2003, p. 3). In Forbes' research (2020), which explored the professional vocalists' experience of improvisation through interviews, the use of improvisation as a tool for communication was a theme for many of the participants. Perhaps early improvisers are intrinsically aware of the power of improvisation, and the inability to adopt cognitive, motor, and musical skills leaves them feeling unable to communicate.

It also feels necessary to explore this dynamic with an understanding of a learner's self-concept. Taylor (2014) suggests that people have distinct ideas of who they want to be or become. An individual will adapt their behaviours, image, and social settings to assimilate this identity, whilst also learning the skills required to fulfil the goal. Within an SLA context, individuals are hindered from achieving this; they have the internal concept and self-desired goal of being a linguist, but, until total fluency is achieved, they are unable to project that image socially. In a vocal pedagogical setting, undertaking structured tasks, where the intended outcome is clear (such as singing a song), affirms an individual's self-concept as "a singer". Singers often come to improvisation later in their learning journeys, and there is a perceived "lag" between vocal and instrumental improvisation (Hargreaves, 2014). This suggests, perhaps, that there is also a disconnect in a singer's general ability and their ability to improvise. This disconnect could also undermine their self-concept as a singer, as singers of any age, their vocal ability is intrinsically linked to their self-concept (Baker *et al.*, 2022; O'Bryan, 2015; Sweet, 2015). Within my own practice, it is usually more advanced singers who are required to improvise. They are used to singing at a high level. I begin teaching them when they are thirteen and onwards, so their self-concept as a "singer" is fully developed. It is possible to see how asking them to undertake a task, in which their skills are so drastically at odds with their usual talent, fosters a sense of vulnerability and exposure. Furthermore, when considering this in the context of adolescent females, who display high levels of perfectionism (Patston & Osborne, 2016), and somewhat sensitive egos (McRoy, 2011), it is possible to see *why singers* arrive at improvisation with such low levels of esteem. Mistakes are an intrinsic part of learning to improvise (Robertson, 2023) but are also likely to negatively impact a student's self-efficacy and self-concept, hence the somewhat defensive reactions cited by Engelsdorfer (2018). This suggests that, for this demographic, the precise process that could enhance progression in improvisation is, initially, at least, a direct cause of anxiety amongst students. Considering this appears to be the more common experience of vocal coaches when introducing improvisation in an educational setting, it feels important to understand how and why improvisation was used as a mitigating factor. This may shed light on new strategies for voice teachers.

Improvisation as a Mitigating Factor for MPA

The use of improvisation as a mitigating factor for MPA is commonly discussed within academic writing. As previously discussed, improvisation requires an inherent ability to be flexible and vulnerable; Robertson uses the mantra “Accept, Adjust, and Adapt” (2023, p. 8) to describe the psychological and cognitive processes students need when learning improvisation. It is possible to see immediately how developing these skills through improvisation might combat MPA. Within research surrounding combative strategies for MPA, both Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Juncos et al., 2017) and Performance Anxiety Training (Osborne et al., 2014) discuss developing acceptance within their students in order to combat the symptoms.

Heasman-Coussins *et al.*, (2025) further illustrate why improvisation can be considered a positive intervention for MPA. In many ways, improvisation and MPA are diametrically opposed when considering psychological processes. Improvisation requires adaptive practices in which improvisers park their self-consciousness, open themselves to freedom of expression, actively communicate with others and their environment, and immerse themselves in a state of total flow (Forbes, 2020; Biasutti, 2015; Kim, 2008; Robertson, 2023; Heasman-Coussins *et al.*, 2025). Heasman-Coussins *et al.* go on to highlight that, conversely, MPA causes self-conscious thinking, fear of judgment, inhibition, and distraction. Performance flow is impeded, which creates further space for self-critique. It therefore feels natural that including improvisation within vocal pedagogy benefits psychological adaptability and emotional expression, consequently building resilience to MPA (Heasman-Coussins, *et al.*, 2025; Wang & Kim, 2025). This is also the case in the world of SLA, where research has encouraged teachers to include linguistic improvisation in the classroom (Kurtz, 2014).

Considering the above, it is necessary to situate the research that presents improvisation as a mitigating factor for MPA within the psychosocial context of adolescent females. Particular attention will be given to the work of Heasman-Coussins *et al.*, (2025)

and Wang & Kim (2025). Both pieces of research feel highly relevant to this study, as the focus is on developing a *musical* improvisational language. If there were a means to both fulfil exam boards' teaching requirements *and* mitigate the symptoms of MPA in adolescent females, there would be a plethora of positive implications for teachers.

However, Wang & Kim's (2025) intervention programme is not purely educational. They recommend that improvisation as a positive intervention (MPA) works best when "uncertainty management training" is included alongside the improvisation work. Participants were offered counselling as part of this programme, and emotional debriefing was included at every level of the process. This was effective, though it raises questions about how practical it is to implement in the teaching studio. When working with adolescents, lessons are often only half an hour long, once a week, and a great deal of material needs to be covered in a very short time. This raises questions about the transferability of this study into the normal teaching context. Furthermore, this study places a gentle emphasis on group improvisation, and participants generally stated that this was a key factor in reducing their anxiety. This appears to be a microcosm of the wider singing for wellbeing discussion, in which group singing has been shown to improve wellbeing (Clift & Morrison, 2011). However, care must be taken not to conflate the benefits of group singing with the singing itself, and perhaps to recognise that "group bonding" may largely underlie the increase in wellbeing (Musgrave, 2023). It would be interesting to explore if this phenomenon was reflected in a more educational, outcome-focused setting. A tentative hypothesis is that improvising in large groups, particularly for females, may be more of a deterrent than a motivating factor (Wehr-Flowers, 2006). This is an area for future study.

It is also important to explore the *intention* of Kim's study. Participants were evaluated for their levels of MPA rather than their improvisational skills. Considering this, it is necessary to explore research on music and wellbeing that places great emphasis on the context and intention of a musical performance (Musgrave, 2023). When music is performed under low-stress scenarios, stress levels decrease; when under pressure, or

in an outcome-focused setting, stress levels increase (Fancourt et al., 2015; Musgrave, 2023). It is important to analyse the success of Wang and Kim's study through this lens. Firstly, it is, once again, impractical for vocal coaches to piece together vocal improvisation groups, unless working in a choral setting. Secondly, the performance observed in the final stage of the process was *simulated*. To fully explore the effects of pedagogical improvisation in mitigating MPA, it feels important to conclude the programme with a performance under high-pressure situations, with an unknown audience, or perhaps under evaluation.

Given that Wang & Kim's work was less pedagogically focused, it feels important to explore the Heasman-Coussins *et al.* (2025) study, which places greater emphasis on the educational approach to improvisation. A thorough, "step-by-step" approach was followed in which participants spent time learning music theory, developing aural skills, transcribing, and, ultimately, improvising on songs from a variety of genres, culminating in a performance. This feels more reflective of what is required from teachers working with outcome-focused students. Following the intervention, participants reported reduced MPA symptoms and generally improved well-being. However, there are key findings that feel highly relevant when situating the research within the adolescent female context. Heasman-Coussins *et al.*, (2025) recognise that "the willingness of the coachee to engage in improvisation learning and practice is fundamental to the success of such a Coach Administered Strategy" (p. 14). This echoes the caveat presented by Wang & Kim (2025), who suggest that pedagogical improvisation is not an effective CAS for students with high levels of perfectionism. Therefore, whilst it appears that improvisation may be a beneficial tool in combating the symptoms of MPA more generally, it is important to recognise that this may not be the case across the pedagogical board. Having identified the limitations of these two studies, it is important to understand the implications for vocal coaches when working with adolescent females.

Implications for Vocal Pedagogy

Considering the hurdles that arise when analysing Heassman-Cossins *et al.*, (2025) and Wang & Kim's (2025) research within the psychosocial context of adolescent females, it feels necessary to understand the implications of these limitations. Hirschorn's (2011) study may shed some light on these implications. Across a 16-week programme of incorporating improvisational pedagogy into his middle school choral class, Hirschorn asked students to complete three Musical Self-Efficacy Surveys (MSES). This study identified performance anxiety as the greatest barrier to the development of improvisational skills. Hirschorn also identified three types of improvisers: non-improvisers, private improvisers (who improvise alone or in small groups), and public improvisers. Non, and private improvisers, both reported more severe improvisation-related MPA at the end of the sixteen-week programme. Hirschorn also identified that MPA bred a "lack of engagement" in participants. It therefore appears that there is a general resistance amongst young people towards improvisation. Whilst it may be a mitigating technique for professional musicians, improvisation alone may not be an effective CAS for MPA amongst adolescents. This is further compounded by the research conducted by Wehr-Flowers (2006), in which females "are significantly less confident, more anxious, and have less self-efficacy (attitude) towards learning jazz improvisation" (p.345). Teenage girls also demonstrate higher levels of perfectionism than their male counterparts (Patston & Osborne, 2016), further highlighting that improvisation may not be a commonly effective intervention among this demographic. Therefore, despite the benefits improvisation may offer the wider population, using it as a tool to mitigate MPA among adolescent females may have negative implications for vocal coaches. If, as has been argued, anxiety and low self-efficacy diminish motivation, how can improvisation be a mitigating factor for MPA when working with a demographic who, by virtue of age and gender, struggle to find confidence with the intervention itself?

Teachers are, therefore, left with a quandary. Improvisation is a requisite factor in both RSL and Trinity Rock and Pop singing exams and is a required skill for professional vocalists (Wasbotten, 2022). It would be negligent, therefore, to omit the use of improvisation from the vocal studio. Academically, more research could certainly be done

to further explore this phenomenon. This may include researching specific strategies, drawing upon SLA teaching techniques in a one-to-one setting, or a hermeneutic or phenomenological study into the lived experience of adolescent females learning to improvise.

Exploring Improvisation

In the meantime, however, teachers might want to focus on developing structured, musical frameworks for improvisation (Marvin, 2012). These might include limiting note choices or offering pre-written rhythms (Root, 2021). Root (2021) suggests including a “safe-zone” for improvisational activity that students can use as a launchpad for more adventurous ideas, and to which they can return at any stage of the practice. It is also possible to draw upon techniques in SLA educational settings. Participants in a study aimed at identifying strategies to alleviate speaking anxiety highlighted the benefits of incremental exposure, in which students initially engage in easier tasks before moving on to more challenging ones (Theriana, 2023). This aligns with Root’s (2021) suggestion that the learning pace should be “*determined by the student*” (p. 403). Kratus defines this early stage as *exploration* in which students, in a low-pressure environment, begin to discover the possible sounds of their instrument (1990). He argues that, at this stage, students are unable to audiate melodies before hearing them. Eventually, this process will flip, and students will begin to predict what they will play. It is possible to see how removing the product, focusing on the process and allowing students to find initial success will increase their sense of self-efficacy, thus improving their motivation (Schunk, 2008). Increased motivation is also beneficial, as research on alleviating anxiety in SLA suggests that practice and preparation go a long way toward acclimatising students to the demands of speaking (Theriana, 2023). This is the case for vocal improvisation, and it has rightly been argued that repetition is a key factor in developing the improvisational language (Weir, 2003). It is certainly true that, once a student begins to see they may be able to “do it”, they are more inclined to practice independently.

A Safe Learning Environment

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, it is imperative that vocal coaches create a safe learning environment for their students (Theriana, 2023; Root, 2021; Engelsdorfer, 2018). Framing mistakes as learning opportunities (Theriana, 2023), and evaluating work based on behaviours as opposed to the creative work as a whole (Kratus, 1990). Particular care must be taken when working within a group setting. Singers often approach improvisation aurally, whilst instrumentalists can grasp theoretical concepts more quickly (Hargreaves, 2014). If, as is often the case in a group or educational setting, improvisation is taught theoretically, vocalists may lag behind their instrumental peers. This would reduce their sense of self-efficacy and increase anxiety. In the right environment, however, as Wang and Kim's (2025) study suggests, group improvisation can be beneficial. It could be an idea to use Bobby McFerrin's 'Circle Singing' concept here (McFerrin, 2023). Here, a group of singers are led through an improvisational piece. The leader creates riffs and short melodies for small groups or individual singers to sing on repeat. Singers can then improvise using their motif, aiming to maintain the piece's overall musicality. This gives singers the opportunity to explore, both publicly and covertly, how improvisation might work for them. This framework links back to Root's concept of 'safe zones', in which the taught motif provides a launchpad for exploring new ideas whilst also offering a home for moments when anxiety might take hold. Overall, teachers cannot entirely avoid improvisation with their students. But through gentle reframing, teachers may be able to develop supplementary improvisational skills through the concept of exploration (Kratus, 1990; Root, 2021).

Conclusion

Overall, the research suggests clear limitations, indicating that improvisation mitigates MPA in adolescent female singers. In practice, teachers frequently encounter resistance when introducing improvisation, and research into SLA helps explain why: learning to improvise can temporarily undermine self-efficacy and self-esteem, reducing motivation and reinforcing students' belief that they "lack talent." Teachers must therefore be cautious about avoiding improvisation in the name of well-being. Despite the challenges of transferability from studies such as Heasman-Cossins et al., (2025) and Kim (2025), the evidence still indicates that improvisation can cultivate skills and cognitive

processes that build resilience to MPA. The aim, then, is not to remove improvisation, but to teach it more sensitively.

Integrating selected therapeutic principles, such as creating safe zones for exploration, while maintaining musical goals may support this. Encouraging students of all ages to experiment with exploratory, pre-improvisational activities (Kratus, 1990) may also equip them with foundational tools that reduce anxiety when more formal improvisation is required.

Looking ahead, further research is needed to investigate how improvisation can be taught in everyday vocal-studio settings without triggering MPA, and whether, within this context, it can genuinely serve as an intervention for adolescent females. Such work will help bridge the gap between theoretical promise and practical pedagogical reality.

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