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An exploratory study into the effectiveness of the use of imagery in vocal pedagogy: How effective is the use of verbal imagery in vocal pedagogy?

- Imagery Definition: “a language that produces pictures in the minds of people reading or listening.” (Oxford Learners Dictionaries, 2024).**

WHY AM I DOING THIS?



- ▶ RJ Academy of Singing and Dramatic Arts Principal of 15 years .
- ▶ Imagery - Semiotic System
- ▶ Historical Context - Garcia's invention.
- ▶ Imagery Role in learning
- ▶ Imagery and Science based learning
- ▶ Therefore I felt this was the best focus point for me !

MAIN AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Intended Impact

- Develop a practical **imagery toolkit** for vocal instruction.
- Identify **common imagery** used by teachers.
- Understand **student preferences** for imagery.
- Test and refine imagery in real-world teaching settings.
- Create a **comprehensive resource** for diverse vocal techniques.



Learning Outcomes

- Evaluate **imagery's benefits** in vocal pedagogy.
- Explore its role in **cognition and technique acquisition**.
- Assess imagery's impact on **vocal performance and teaching**.
- Develop and test an **imagery-based teaching framework**.
- Provide **guidelines for integrating imagery** effectively.
- Use **empirical research** to assess its effectiveness.
- Contribute to **scientifically informed vocal pedagogy**.

The Role of Imagery in Vocal Pedagogy

- Singing instruction differs from instrumental training due to the internal nature of the voice—no direct visual feedback (McCoy, 2012; Miller, 1996).
- Historically, imagery and metaphor have been key teaching tools (Steinhauer et al., 2017).
- Phrases like “sing into the mask” help singers intuitively grasp technique (Reid, 1983; Stark, 2003).
- While imagery aids learning, it can also lead to misinterpretation (Paton, 2008; Velarde, 2013).
- Advances in vocal science (laryngoscopy, MRI, biofeedback) have integrated anatomical approaches into teaching (Sundberg, 1987; Howard & Welch, 2017).
- Debate exists between science-based and imagery-based instruction (Appelman, 1986; Doscher, 1999; Estill, 2017; Hoch, 2020).
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LITERATURE REVIEW

Cognitive & Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Imagery

- Theoretical frameworks explain imagery's effectiveness:
 - Vygotsky's theory: Metaphor scaffolds abstract learning (Vygotsky, 1978).
 - Schema Theory: Motor learning relies on mental rehearsal (Schmidt, 1975).
 - Embodied cognition: Imagery must connect to physical sensation (Wilson, 2002)
- Imagery supports vocal learning through:
 - Auditory imagery – internal hearing of pitch aids accuracy (Brodsky et al., 2008).
 - Kinesthetic feedback – sensing muscle movement refines technique (Nix, 2016).
- Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) highlights the need for clear, relevant imagery to avoid confusion (Mayer, 2009).
- Cross-disciplinary insights: Sports psychology, dance, and instrumental music reinforce imagery's role in motor learning (Guillot & Collet, 2008; Blasing et al., 2009).

Ontology, Methodology & Research Design

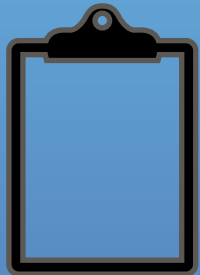
- **Constructivist Perspective** – Reality is shaped by experiences & interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).
- **Inductive Approach** – Insights emerge from participant experiences rather than testing a fixed hypothesis.
- **Mixed-Methods Research** – Combines qualitative (interviews, focus groups, journaling) and quantitative (self-assessment surveys) data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).
- **Phenomenology of Practice** – Explores personal experiences in vocal pedagogy (Van Manen, 2007).
- **Theoretical Foundations:**
 - **Imagery as a Semiotic System** (Peirce, 1991; Issajeva, 2015) – Shapes cognitive and emotional responses.
 - **Motor Imagery & Dual Coding Theory** (Jeannerod, 1995; Paivio, 1986) – Verbal + visual metaphors enhance memory and skill retention.

METHODOLOGY

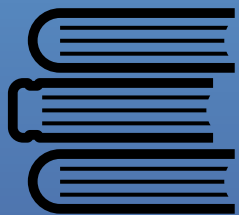
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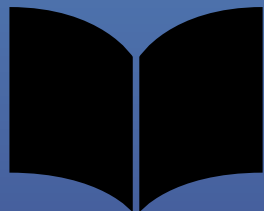
- ▶ **Focus Group:** Pre Tool Kit, Semi structured, audio recorded , transcribed, data analysed Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic framework.



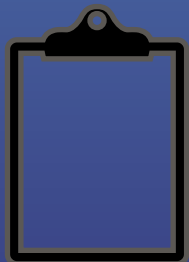
Questionnaires : Pre Tool Kit, Likert Scale questions, data analysed using descriptive statistics (field 2003), thematic coding .



Toolkit Implementation: 6 week period - further info on coming slides.



Reflective Diaries : focussing on three core areas, 4-6 entries each , thematic analysis , key trends



Questionnaires : Post Tool Kit, Likert Scale questions, data analysed using descriptive statistics (field 2003), thematic coding .



Removal of semi - structured interviews and post tool kit focus groups , mentioned for research transparency

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS , INSIDER RESEARCHER IMPLICATIONS & PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Participant Selection:

- **12 students (ages 7–17, mixed levels)** from The RJ Academy of Singing and Dramatic Arts. (10 followed through)
- **5 experienced vocal teachers** familiar with imagery-based pedagogy.
- **Selection Criteria:**
 - Students must not currently receive lessons from the researcher (to minimise bias).
 - Teachers must have prior experience with imagery-based instruction.

Ethical Considerations:

- Voluntary participation, anonymised data collection, and right to withdraw at any time.
- Measures taken to avoid **power dynamics** due to the researcher's role as academy principal.
- Participants with high anxiety or scheduling conflicts were excluded to ensure well-being & data reliability

Insider Researcher

Opportunities

- **Established rapport** fostered open and honest participant reflections (Herr & Anderson, 2015).
- **Familiarity with teaching methods** provided deeper insights into student and teacher experiences.

Challenges & Mitigation

- Potential **biases & influence** due to my dual role (Mercer, 2007).
- **Mitigation strategies:**
 - **Anonymised data collection & independent reflections** (Unluer, 2012).
 - **Structured focus groups** to encourage unbiased discussion.
 - **External validation of findings** to enhance research integrity (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

Design & Implementation of the Imagery Toolkit

What is the Imagery Toolkit?



- ✓ A structured set of exercises integrating verbal imagery into vocal instruction.
- ✓ Helps students visualize & execute vocal techniques more effectively.
- ✓ Based on Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986) & Motor Imagery (Jeannerod, 1995).

- ◆ Weekly modules – Incremental progression targeting common vocal challenges.
- ◆ Three types of imagery used:
 - Visual Imagery – “Imagine your voice as a beam of light.”
 - Kinaesthetic Imagery – “Feel your breath rise like a balloon.”
 - Metaphorical Imagery – “Sing as if balancing a feather on your breath.”

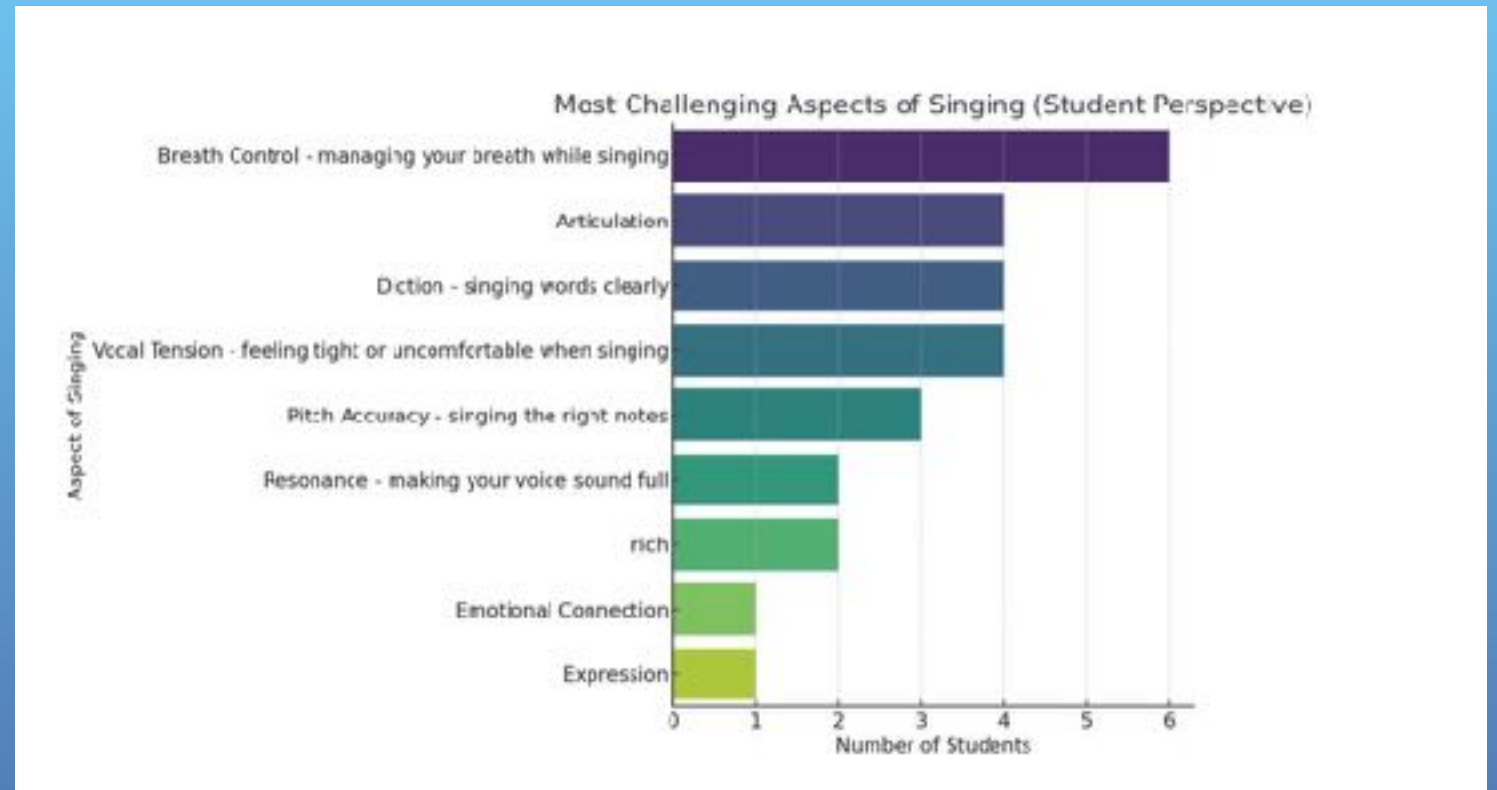
Structure of the Toolkit .



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Pre - Toolkit Student Survey - Key Findings

Vocal Challenges - Most Common Difficulties



► Imagery Use & Confidence Levels

- 📌 only 22% had always and often used imagery.
- ♦ Confidence in using imagery:
 - **Confident/Very Confident** – 37.5%
 - **Neutral** – 25%
 - **Unconfident/Very Unconfident** – 37.5%

► Perceived Usefulness of Imagery

- While over 50% of students saw value in imagery, many remained unsure, reinforcing the need for structured guidance.

KEY INSIGHTS AND CROSS ANALYSIS

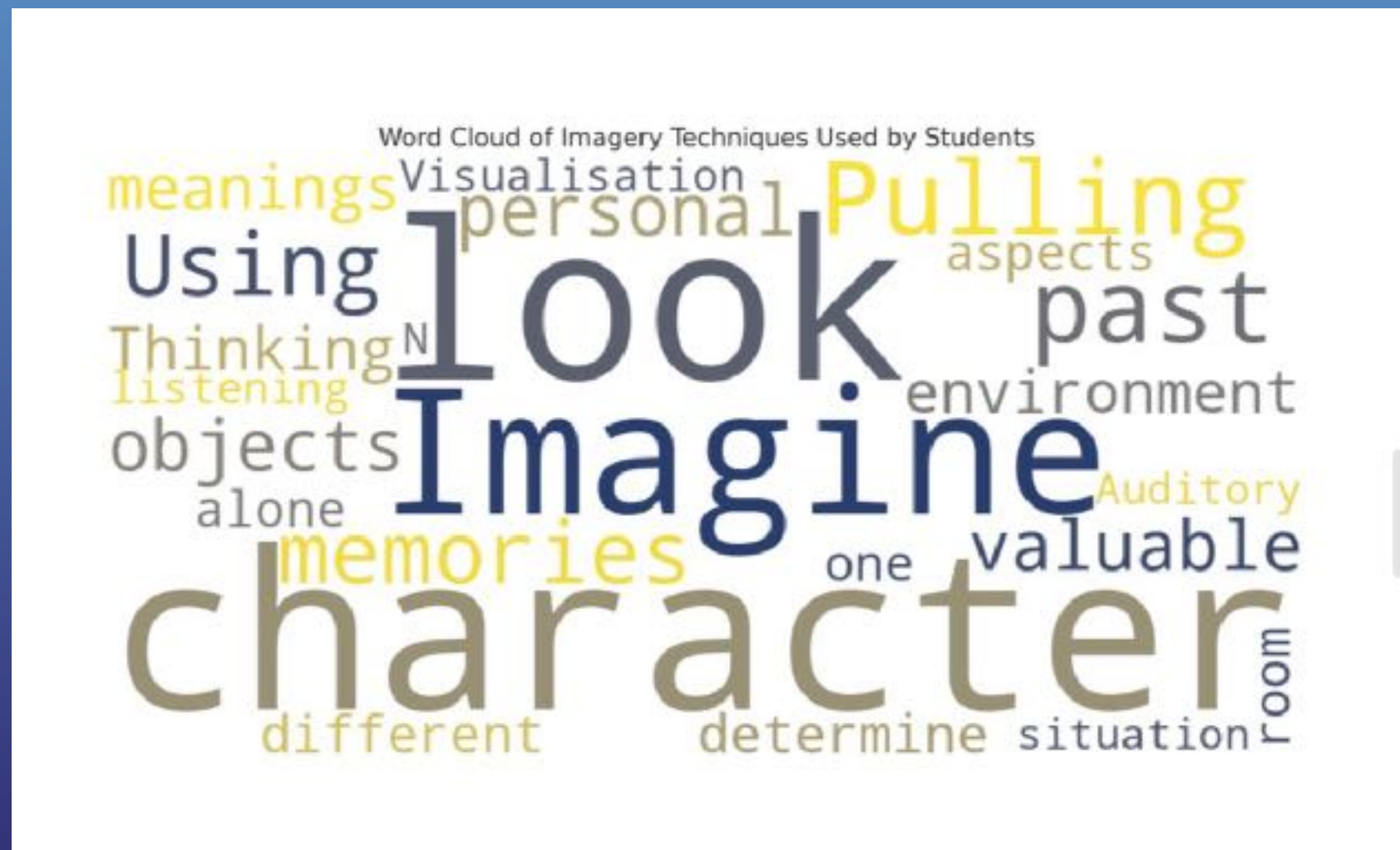
► Patterns in Survey Findings

📊 Students who identified Breath Control, Articulation & Diction, and Resonance as key challenges also tended to report low confidence in using imagery techniques.

📈 Students who had more experience with imagery (reporting use as “Sometimes,” “Often,” or “Always”) were more likely to describe themselves as confident and to perceive imagery as a helpful tool for vocal improvement.

💡 Despite this, all students agreed or strongly agreed (or remained neutral) with the statement: “Imagery is or could be useful in helping me reach my singing goals.” Notably, none of the students disagreed. This reflects an openness to learning through imagery, even if confidence and experience are currently low.

• Most Helpful Imagery Techniques (students)



Pre-Toolkit Survey – Teacher Perspectives

1. Imagery Use in Teaching

- ✓ **100%** use imagery sometimes, always or often
- ✓ **83%** of teachers expressed moderate to high confidence, indicating they felt comfortable applying imagery techniques in their pedagogy.

2. Common Student Challenges (Teacher View)

 **Breath Control and Vocal Tension** (tied for most frequent)

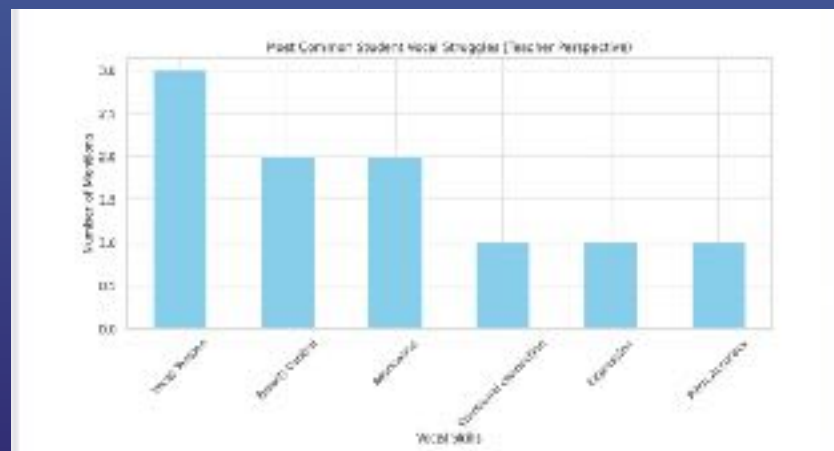
- **Resonance**
- **Pitch Accuracy**
- **Articulation & Expression**

This highlights areas where targeted imagery could be especially beneficial.

3. Effective Imagery Techniques (Teacher Input)

“Imagining an elastic band to elongate vowel sounds.”

- **“Biting down on an apple to create space.”**
- **“Singing as if balancing a feather on the breath.”**
- **“Pulling toffee to achieve smooth legato.”**



4. Teachers believe imagery:

- Helps visual learners and clarifies concepts.
- Offers individualised instruction tailored to different learning styles.
- Facilitates physical sensation awareness when direct observation isn't possible.

As one teacher noted:

"It helps to communicate a technique which would otherwise be hard to demonstrate or verbalise."

5. Challenges or Hesitations

Some instructors expressed minor concerns:

- Students not understanding the imagery used.
- Struggles thinking of effective metaphors.
- Worry about doing "more harm than good" if imagery is unclear or misinterpreted.

Despite this, most teachers reported few hesitations, showing openness to expanding their toolkit.

6. Expectations of the Toolkit

Teachers expressed a desire for:

- **New ideas** tailored to different age groups.
 - **Fresh tools** to support lesson planning.
 - **Better understanding** of effective imagery techniques.
- "I'm hoping to improve my teaching ability by learning more tools to suit different learners."***
- "More ideas of what to use — especially with younger singers."***

Student vs. Teacher Perspectives – Key Comparisons

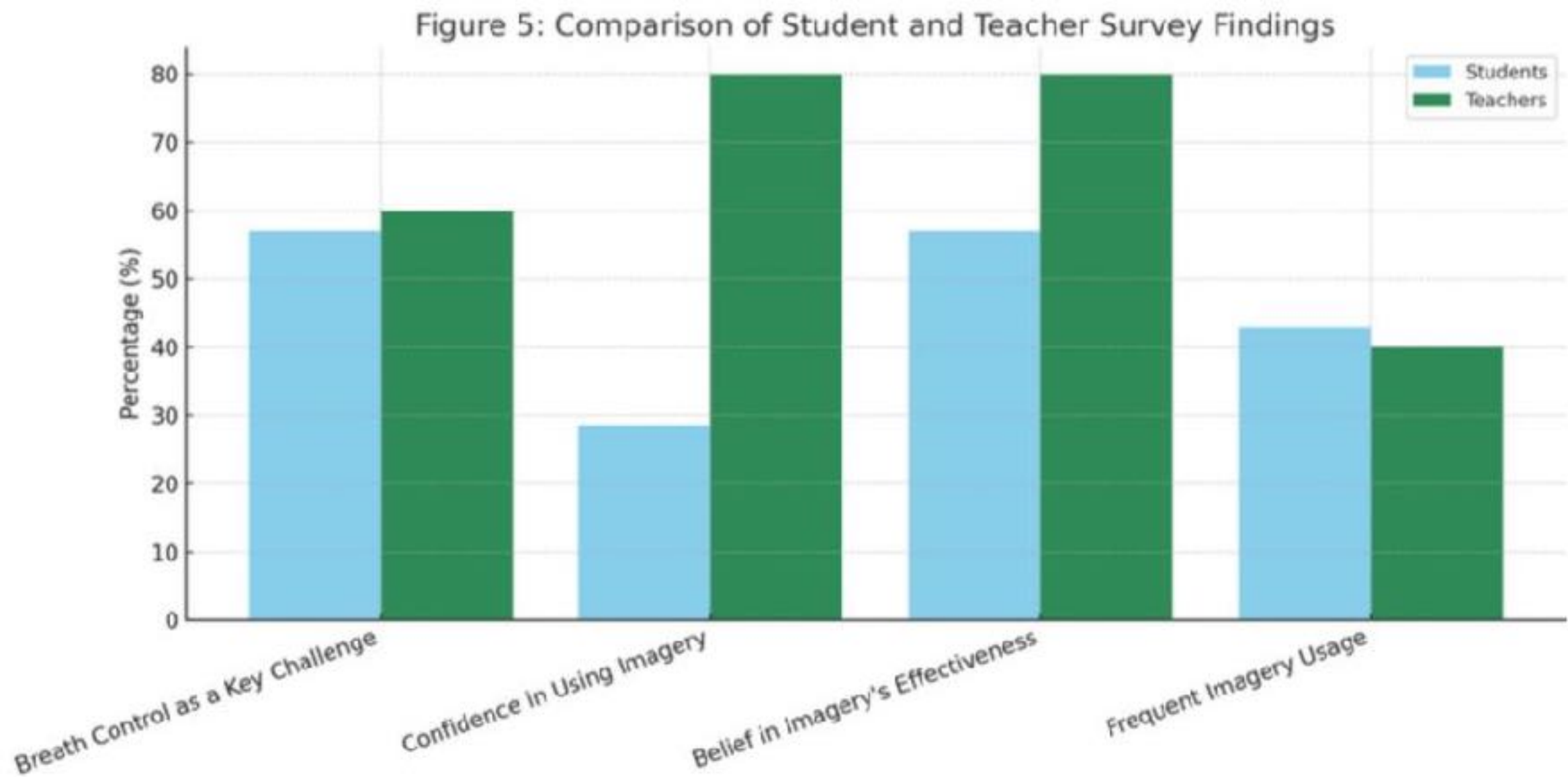


Figure 6: Comparing Student and Teacher Findings.

FOCUS GROUP - KEY INSIGHTS

Theme	Description	Example Quotes
Warm-Ups as a Gateway	Warm-up activities were widely cited as key areas where students benefit vocally and are introduced to new techniques, including imagery.	"Warmups really help...they prep my voice." "There's loads of variety in the warmups, not just Ra-Re-Ri."
Imagery Without Realising	Many students initially said they hadn't used imagery, but later described metaphor-based instruction—indicating subconscious use.	"I didn't think I had, but actually, yeah, blowing the feather." – "The banana voice thing!"
Emotional Connection Through Imagery	Emotional or feeling-based imagery resonated particularly with older students and was cited as enhancing both performance and vocal delivery.	"It helped me connect with the character." "If I feel good, I sing better."
Performance vs Technique Imagery	Older students reflected that imagery is often used more in performance than technical work, with some suggesting a shift as they aged.	"We used more metaphors when I was younger." – "I use emotion imagery more now."
Individual Preferences	A wide range of preferences emerged, from colours and shapes to feelings, stories, and physical objects.	"I prefer feelings – I've felt them before." "Objects, like opening a banana."
Age & Understanding	A pattern emerged showing younger students are more responsive to playful or object-based imagery, while older ones favour narrative or emotional context.	"Younger kids like more imaginative stuff." "Older ones need more logic."
Trust & Teacher Relationship	Trust in the teacher enhanced the effectiveness of imagery, particularly when personalised.	"My teacher knows how I think." "She knows when I'm having a bad day."

Figure B: Thematic Chart.

1. Emotional Imagery and Mindset

“If I'm thinking less about the singing and more about the emotion, the notes just come out better.”

2. Warm-Ups and Imagery Integration

“I like how there’s loads of different warmups — it makes it more interesting, not just boring vowels.”

3. Imagery by Age Group

-Younger students (8–11) responded best to playful, concrete imagery involving animals, food, and games (e.g., *“open a banana with your voice”* or *“stretch like bubblegum”*).

- Older students (12–16) favoured emotional or story-based imagery, drawing on past experiences or narrative content from songs.

4. Performance vs. Technique

Performance-focused: Visualising a stage or imagining a character’s feelings.

- **Technique-focused:** Using metaphors for placement, support, or airflow (e.g., singing over a rainbow” or “voice growing like a tree”).

5. Trust and Teacher Relationships

“If I know the teacher well and they know how I think, they can give me an image that works.”

6. Preferences in Imagery Types

When asked what kind of images or metaphors they preferred:

- **Feelings** and **emotions** were the top choice.
- Some favoured **objects** (e.g., a flower, string, tree).
- Abstract or animal-based metaphors were less popular with older students, who found them harder to connect with unless clearly explained.

Reflective Diaries – Insights from Toolkit Implementation

Key Themes Identified

✓ Increased Self-Awareness – Students gained clearer vocal awareness

“When I used the rainbow picture in my mind, it helped me think about where the sound was going. I felt like I was controlling my voice better because I had a picture to guide me.”

- ✓ Emotional Engagement – Motivated students & improved focus.

- *“We talked about feelings and imagined being proud during one song. That helped me perform better because I connected to the words.”*

✓ Challenges in Application – Some struggled with how imagery worked

- *““I wasn’t sure at first if it really helped... but after doing it a few times, my sound felt smoother and lighter.”*

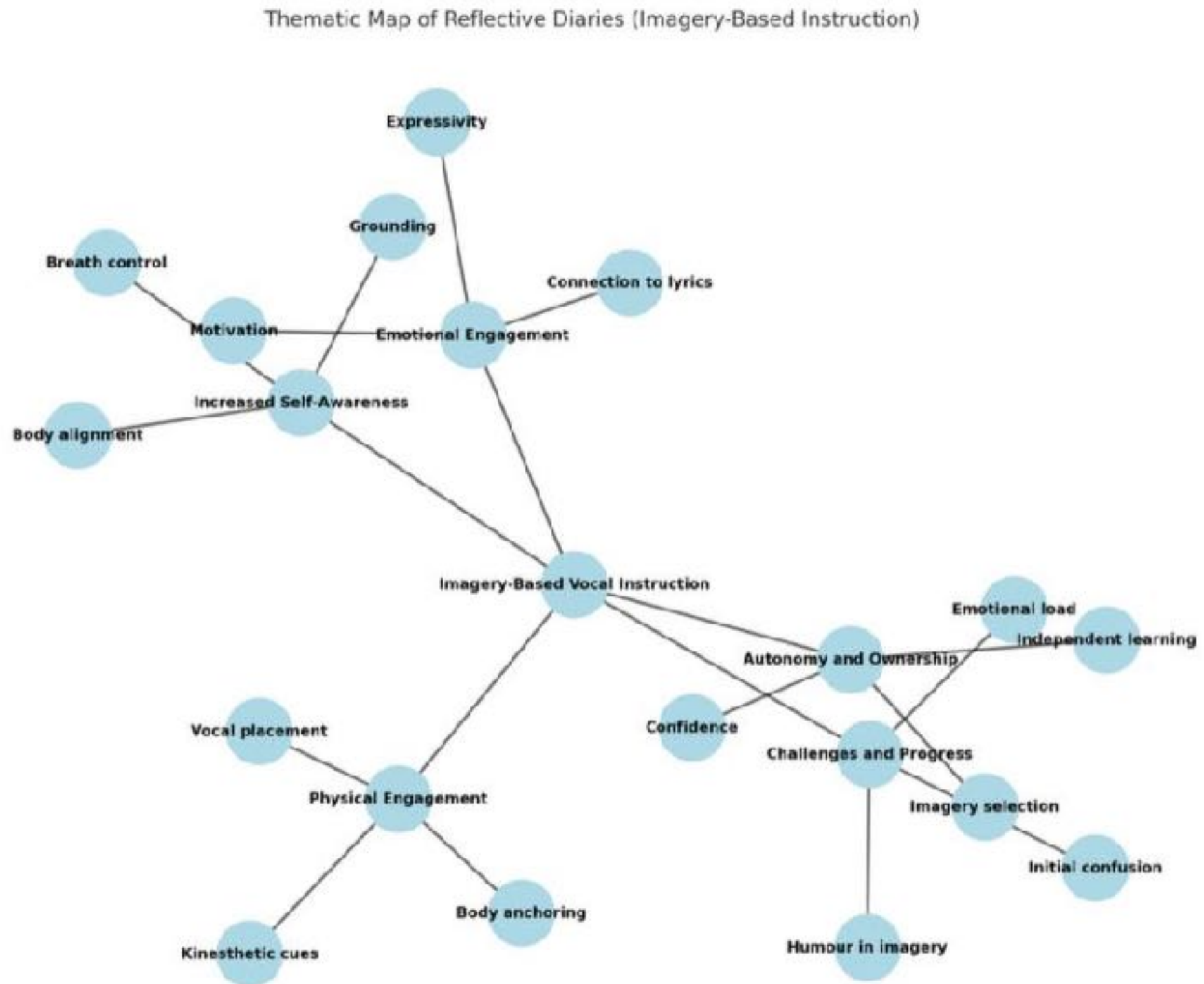
- ✓ Physical Engagement - Students engaged well

- *“I tried the ‘oranges under your arms’ anchoring image. It really helped me engage my body – I felt more physically connected to my sound.”*

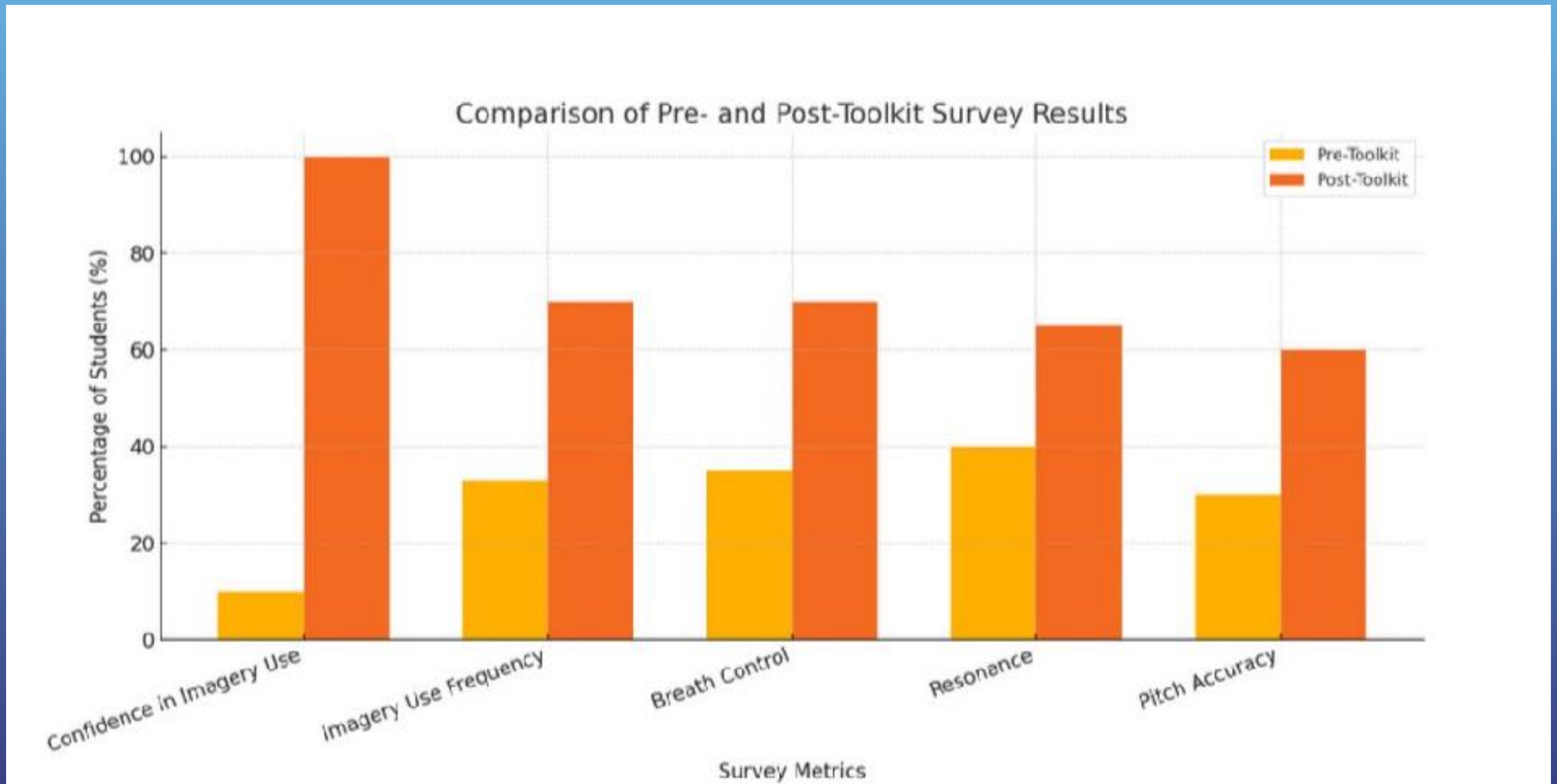
✓ Autonomy & Ownership – Students started **choosing imagery techniques** independently.

I used the ‘football final yay!’ image for belting. It made the note come out with more energy. I didn’t overthink it and just did it.”

THEMATIC MAP – HIGHLIGHTS FREQUENTLY USED IMAGERY TERMS



Post-Toolkit Student Survey – Key Findings



Post Tool Kit Student Questionnaire :Key Findings

Confidence Boost

-  100% now feel **Confident or Very Confident**
-  Up from only **10% confident** pre-toolkit
-  40% previously reported low confidence

Imagery Use Increased

- 70% use imagery **Always/Often**
- Up from just **33% with any prior use**

Vocal Improvements

- **Breath Control:** 70% (vs. 35% pre)
- **Resonance:** 65% (vs. 40%)
- **Pitch Accuracy:** 60% (vs. 30%)
-

Favourite Techniques

- Flower-sniffing for anchoring
- Feather-blowing for breath control
- Duck beak placement for tone

Student Highlights

“I got the best belt ever!”

“Silky and warm—like hot chocolate!”

“Rainbows made me smile and sing!”

Feedback

- Loved: working with teachers, imagery games
- Suggested: add diagrams, shorten sessions, more group work

Conclusion

Students showed **strong technical gains**, emotional connection, and a shift toward **long-term imagery use**.

Teacher Reflections: Post-Toolkit Survey Summary

Confidence & Use

- 100 100% felt *Confident or Very Confident* using imagery
- Most used it *Often or Always* in sessions

Most Effective Techniques

- *Balloon Belly* – breath support
- *Laser Quest* – projection/focus
- *Emotional Mirror* – emotional expression
- *Raindrops on Notes* – soft onset
- *Singing into the Beak* – tone placement
- *Painting Brush* – articulation & musicality
-

Vocal Improvements Observed

- Breath Control, Onset, Resonance, Range
- Articulation, Phrasing, Musicality, Confidence
(See bar chart: Fig. 11)

Student Engagement

- All teachers reported increased engagement
- Students were more *invested, expressive, and responsive*

Long-Term Use

- 100% *Likely* or *Very Likely* to continue using the toolkit

Key Reflections

- Build imagery gradually
- Helps explain the *felt* sense of singing
- Particularly powerful for *younger learners*

Suggestions

- Minor: Add more *visual/diagram support*
- Overall: Toolkit seen as *complete, creative, and impactful*
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ANALYSIS

LINKING FINDINGS TO EXISTING LITERATURE

Key Findings from the Study

-  **Increased confidence** and **technical skill** post-toolkit
-  **Younger students** responded best to playful, physical imagery
-  **Older students** benefited from scaffolded, outcome-linked metaphors
-  Imagery enabled both **technical precision** and **emotional expression**

Aligned with & Extends Existing Literature

-  Supports **Reid (1983)** – Imagery deepens vocal engagement
-  Expands **Estill (2017)** – Sensory imagery + anatomical knowledge = vocal control
-  Reinforces **Doscher (1999)** – Blended approaches work best
-  Echoes **Piaget (1952)** – Concrete play-based learning for younger children
-  Reflects **Vygotsky (1978)** – Older students need scaffolded guidance
-  Confirms **Davidson & Faulkner (2010)** – Emotional engagement enhances performance

Practical Implications

- Tailor imagery to age and developmental stage
- Combine metaphor with technical instruction
- Promote cognitive + emotional engagement in lessons

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Insights

-  **Bandura (1986)** – Improved self-efficacy through visible vocal progress
-  **Jeannerod (1995)** – Mental imagery triggered motor learning and vocal coordination
-  Emotional imagery enhanced technical outcomes (via thematic analysis)
-  Emotional connection reinforced vocal expression and engagement

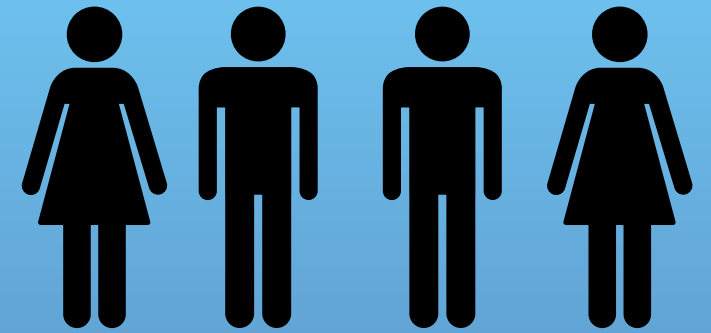
Practical Applications for Vocal Pedagogy

- **Curriculum Design:** Embed imagery into core training modules
- **Teacher Training:** Equip instructors to blend **anatomy + metaphor** (Estill, 2017)
- **Personalised Learning:** Tailor imagery by **age, experience, and learning style**

LIMITATIONS

⚠ Study Limitations

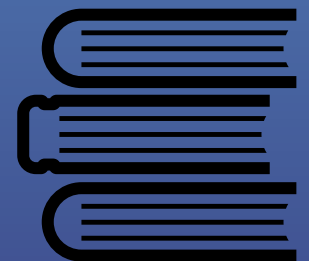
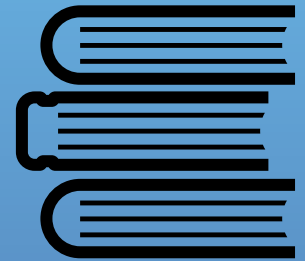
- 📊 Small sample size (single institution)
- ⌚ Short 6-week timeframe
- 🔄 Post-toolkit focus groups replaced by open-ended surveys
- 🧑 Personal injury limited full data collection
- 📋 Incomplete participation from some students
-



FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future Research Opportunities

- Expand to **larger, multi-site studies** for greater generalisability
- Conduct **longitudinal research** to assess lasting impact
- Explore use of **imagery in instrumental training**
- Integrate **real-time focus groups** post-intervention
- Examine how **age, learning style, and imagery type** interact over time
-



REFLECTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

✓ What Worked Well

- **Playful, Kinaesthetic Imagery** (e.g. “*rainbows*,” “*bubbles*,” “*feathers*”) → Highly effective with younger students (Velarde, 2013)
- **Imagery + Technical Explanation** → Older students engaged more when links to outcomes were explicit (Estill, 2017)
- **Reflective Practice via Diaries** → Enabled self-awareness and “click” moments (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

⚙ What Needs Refinement

- **6-Week Duration:** Too short for lasting change
- **Inconsistent Participation:** Gaps in data from incomplete diaries/surveys
- **Age-Specific Needs:**
 - Younger = playful concrete imagery
 - Older = scaffolded, outcome-linked metaphors (Vygotsky, 1978)



FINAL THOUGHTS

★ Key Achievements

- **Imagery + Traditional Pedagogy**
→ Boosted technique, confidence, and emotional connection
- **Toolkit Design**
→ Evidence-based, adaptable, and age-responsive
- **Student Mindset Shift**
→ Imagery seen as *practical*, not just playful
→ Students gained autonomy and ownership over vocal technique

🧒🎓 Age-Specific Impact

- **Younger Students:** Thrived on *playful, physical imagery* (e.g. bubbles, feathers)
- **Older Students:** Needed *technical linkage* and scaffolding

🧑🏫 Teacher Growth

- Observed greater student **confidence, autonomy, and self-directed learning**
- Toolkit enabled a shift toward *long-term vocal independence*

🚀 Future Directions

- Larger, more diverse studies across institutions
- Explore genre-specific and age-specific applications
- Embed *peer activities* and *longer-term use*
- Add *visual aids* and *collaborative tools*
-

THANK YOU

- ▶ Many thanks for listening to me today .
- ▶ Open the floor for questions .



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