

The Use of Imagery to Alleviate Tension & Train Singers

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Rational.....	3
Impact of Tension on Vocal Performance.....	4
Imagery Defined	4
Cognitive Processes Involved.....	5
The Role of Imagery in Voice Training.....	6
Locus of Attention.....	6
Challenges, Limitations, and Objections.....	8
Conclusion.....	10
References.....	11
Appendices	
Appendix One: Strategies.....	13
Appendix Two: Professional Development Plan.....	18

Introduction

Imagery has long been utilized in vocal pedagogy and since the 1700s has been a point of contention amongst singing practitioners of whether it has a place in voice training or whether a more science-based approach is most beneficial (DeSantis et al., 2022). The sensory experience of singing is exceptionally difficult to find the verbiage to describe through scientific and mathematical terms alone as certain qualities of the voice do not lend themselves to quantification (Nafisi, 2013). Singers need both imaginative and technical understanding of the voice to reach their full potential (Brown, 2023). I believe this is why a debate that has been ongoing for hundreds of years still has no definitive answer and why voice practitioners and singers are still using imagery in their training to this day.

Rational

For my previous paper I wrote about different methods and their effectiveness in hydrating the vocal folds. I learned about how the vocal folds are hydrated and the different ways I can hydrate as a singer and various recommendations I can make to my voice students. This was a very valuable experience, not only because of what I learned but also because I realized that I need to pick paper topics that would give me more practical techniques to use in the voice studio during my students' lessons.

Kolb's Reflective Model is a cycle consisting of experiencing something, reflectively observing it, abstractly conceptualizing around it, and then actively implementing experimentation (Kolb and Kolb, 2018). Using this model I reflected on this experience and decided that moving forward my paper topics need to be directly related to what I will be doing with my students. In the next phase of the reflective cycle I started thinking about topics for my next paper. I thought about the different exercises and activities that helped me in my own vocal studies during my undergraduate degree. I kept coming back to imagery and the huge impact it had on my vocal development. I then took action and started working on my research for this new topic. My goal is to learn about imagery and create a guide of different imagery strategies that I can look back on in my own practice.

Since finishing this paper I have decided that my future paper topics should be about the anatomy of singing. I have come to this conclusion after the concrete experience of researching different strategies and techniques around imagery and finding they are all used for fixing specific vocal issues. I am pleased that I have all these tools to add to my toolbox but after

some reflection I realized that these tools will not be helpful if I am unable to analyze and diagnose what I believe is the anatomical problem that is hindering my students' progress. I then created action steps I will take moving forward which I have outlined in my professional development plan in appendix two.

Impact of Tension on Vocal Performance

Tension is a word that I have heard throughout my voice studies even so far back as my first couple voice lessons in high school. In the field of voice pedagogy tension is something that can have many different causations and is often referred to as potentially dangerous and restricting of the muscles, sound vibrations, or breath and must be eradicated (Lemon-Mcmahon and Hughes, 2018). There are many common causes of tension when singing such as a raised laryngeal position, a soft palate in a lowered position, a clenched jaw, a rigid tongue, an excess of subglottic air pressure caused by either a compression of the chest, or the abdominal muscles excessively over contracting (McCoy, 2019). Tension can have many adverse effects on the voice such as inviting intonation problems (Powell, 1991). However, It should be noted that it is impossible to sing or do any movement without some level of muscular tension and that these problems usually only arise with excess amounts (McCoy, 2019).

Imagery Defined

Imagery is a tool that has been known to have benefits for many different professions such as athletes, dancers, and surgeons (DeSantis et al., 2022). It is a term that refers to the ability to consciously imagine something happening, similar to a real experience, without actually observing or experiencing it (Reed and McPherson, 2021; DeSantis et al., 2021). To create mental images is to create internalized representations of an action derived from experiences (Reed and McPherson, 2021). Imagery can involve metaphor, analogy, and simile though the terms are not interchangeable (DeSantis et al., 2022).

When using imagery the goal that is working towards being achieved is known as the 'target' and the imagery that is used to achieve this goal is referred to as the 'source' (Kar, 2021). I will provide an example from my voice lessons in university. My voice teacher would ask me to imagine a belt of noses around my waist and whenever I took a breath I was to imagine all those noses breathing in at the same time. The source in this example would be the belt of noses and the target would be a deep breath that utilizes the full expansion of the lungs instead of a breath that might be shallow or focused on the chest which could make the shoulders lift.

Voice teachers can help adjust some external physical aspects of the student such as posture and the aperture of the mouth, but are unable to manipulate the internal physical traits such as the position of the larynx; therefore, tools like imagery and sharing personal experience are often utilized in voice training rather than focusing on the physiology (Nikitina, 2004; Reed and McPherson, 2021). Through imagery, voice teachers aim to define and explain uncertain concepts or phenomena, the target, by drawing on information and concepts that the student is already familiar with, the source, as a means to go from the abstract to the concrete (Kar, 2021).

Lakoff and Johnson, experts in the field of linguistics and philosophy, say that metaphors are a representation of the link between the physical and mental, and thus, aid students in understanding one thing in terms of another through the fact that metaphors are rooted in bodily experience (Nikitina, 2004).

Cognitive Processes Involved

Being able to see in the mind's eye or hear with the mind's ear is a complex cognitive process brought about when perceptual information is accessed from the memory to create mental images (Kosslyn et al., 2001; Morales-Villar et al., 2023). More than just recalling previously perceived information, mental images can be created through merging and altering stored perceptual information in new ways (Kosslyn et al., 2001). Using mental imagery to improve vocal technique ties a mental image to the many physical sensations the singer can experience such as phonation, breathing, articulation, the feeling of resonance of the voice and self-perceived sound of their own voice (Reed and McPherson, 2021; Morales-Villar et al., 2023). A mental image can be recalled to bring about those same physical sensations that were felt when it was previously utilized (Kar, 2021). In this way imagery affects the body in a similar way to an actual perceptual experience via the imagination exciting areas of the brain necessary to perform that action (Kosslyn et al., 2001; Reed and McPherson, 2021). It should be noted that the activation of the brain is still stronger during actual perception than during imagery (Kosslyn et al., 2001). Research suggests that this complex system of synchronizing mental images and physical sensations during singing can help improve processing speed and enhance learning by engaging the neural structures that form (Brown, 2024).

The Role of Imagery in Voice Training

Analogies, imagery, and metaphors are created and used by singers and voice instructors to resolve problems such as tension issues in the hopes of training the correct behavior to the muscles so it can become muscle memory and be performed autonomously (Kar, 2021). The use of these tools is more similar to the use of metaphor and simile as teaching aids as opposed to a mental training technique to enhance performance (DeSantis et al., 2022).

Throughout my research I have seen many different specific reasons for using imagery in vocal studies. There has even been research that has shown the effectiveness of choir directors using verbalized imagery with their singers to communicate how to create and modify vocal responses (Morales-Villar et al., 2023). The following points seem to be the most prominent reasons for imagery's implementation in the voice studio; character development, depressing stagefright, performance preparation, kinesthetic awareness, communication, expression, and technique enhancement (DeSantis et al., 2022; Morales-Villar et al., 2023). I am focusing on technique enhancement in this paper as it seems to me to be the most utilized between a voice teacher and student. There is no consensus on a specific program or strategy when using mental imagery with singers as each voice instructor tends to employ imagery that they find useful for their own students (Morales-Villar et al., 2023).

Locus of Attention

Modern research into neuroscience has shown us that often in human experience we do not think and then act but rather the opposite, similar to hearing a car horn honk behind you and jumping out of the way and only after really processing what just happened (Helding, 2015). With the non-conscious mind having much control over our autonomy it becomes important when thinking about where your attention should be pointed towards when singing. Research on motor learning has consistently shown for the past fifteen years that an external focus of attention, such as using imagery while singing, enhances motor performance and learning more than an internal focus of attention, such as trying to manipulate the muscles of the larynx by thinking about them (Kleber et al., 2007; Helding, 2015). In this context motor learning refers to the processes involving practice or experience resulting in permanent changes in the capability for movement learned through inference rather than direct observations (Bergan, 2010; Helding, 2016). In this way mental imagery can be used by singers to focus on their big-picture goals

instead of narrowing their attention to finer actions such as muscles involved with the motor control of voice production (Reed and McPherson, 2021).

Motor learning seems to use cognitive effort in practice but the type of effort being applied is not trying to identify, use, and judge specific information but instead is utilizing the non-conscious mind to solve the motor problems which has a lower likelihood of inviting unwanted muscular tension compared with invoking the explicit memory process, overthinking the situation and causing more tension by trying to meticulously manipulate the muscles involved in singing (Helding, 2015; Helding, 2016). This is why, for example, a voice teacher working with a student who is creating some vowel shapes that sound unnatural or are hindering vocal freedom might have them focus more on conveying the story of their piece they are trying to tell to the audience rather than focusing on fixing each individual vowel shape (Nikitina, 2004).

Linklater (2006) says at the very beginning of her book, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, that though she outlines the physical anatomy of voice production in the second chapter she chooses to continue only describing the voice by its perceivable features in metaphor and in analogy as a means to keep the student from overthinking the fine workings of the anatomical voice. Furthermore, she gives multiple examples of how strict adherence to the precision of what is happening anatomically could potentially hinder the freedom necessary for effective vocal function while providing a set of exercises. The first states that even though the lungs only exist in the space between the collarbone and the bottom of the ribcage, when you imagine that the lungs can extend to the pelvic floor or even lower such as to the legs or feet the actual lungs expand to their capacity. The second example asks the student to imagine the image of the breath filling up every empty space in the pelvic basin, the hip sockets, and the thighs could activate deep involuntary muscles involved with breathing and connect the mind's energy sources in the sacral plexus.

A similar sentiment is shared in Helding's (2015) *Locus of Attention* where she provides a hypothetical scenario in which a voice teacher attempts to aid a student in alleviating extraneous tension by explaining the problem through anatomical technical verbiage and then giving them mechanical directives such as asking them to stand up tall, open their mouth and drop their jaw. This then removes the singer from their sensory awareness also known as their implicit knowledge system, unconscious or intuitive thinking, and places them into an explicit learning mode, conscious or formalized thinking (Helding, 2015). Research in motor learning will tell us that this is not beneficial to the student's vocal education and they would have better

chances of improvement through an external focus of attention (Kleber et al., 2007; Holding, 2015).

I have experienced this phenomenon first hand, most notably when acting on the stage and playing piano. I have had the experience many times when I think too much about what my next line is when I am performing and I completely forget it. The worry that I have about not remembering my next line when it comes time to say it will have me thinking about forgetting the line so much that I will indeed forget the line when it comes time to say it. This does not happen when I am truly immersed in the world of the play and only thinking what my character would be thinking. Also, when I play piano sometimes I become too aware of what my fingers are doing and they stop working. Many times I have accompanied choir performances on the piano and I will be thinking about not messing up a specific fingering or not playing the wrong note. This thinking about playing while doing it often distracts me from performing correctly. After learning about external focuses of attention being so positive for performers I reflected on these concrete experiences using Kolb's reflective model. After much reflection I have formulated that when I find myself in these situations in the future I should look to techniques to take my focus away from the finer details of what I am doing and see if this aids in my performance.

Holding provides a hypothetical solution to a tense abdomen when taking a breath by having the student place their hand on their lower abdomen to feel the breathing. Next, the voice teacher will ask the student to imagine someone is asking them if they would like a free trip to Hawaii and the student responds by saying "Ah, yes!" The excited breath taken right before the imaginary response to this question should be experienced a few times before the instructor will then ask the student to imagine that their palm on their stomach is an oxygen purse in which they can place these breaths. Holding states that besides teaching a low breath this imagery exercise has added advantages such as a release of the throat muscles and a lowered heart rate due to the lessening anxiety level for those more anxious performers (2015).

Challenges, Limitations, and Objections

When I started my research for this paper I was under the impression that imagery was universally thought of as a positive thing. I have had success with it myself and see such success in my students and in master classes that I could not understand how one would think otherwise. I was quick to come upon literature saying the common way voice instructors utilize imagery could be problematic if not harmful to students of singing (Miller, 1996; Freed, 2000;

Brown, 2023; Brown 2024). I was particularly taken aback by the response I received when I posted on the social media forum, Facebook, to a group entitled Professional Voice Teachers. I asked a question about the desired results of certain imagery and though I had many comments answering my question I had several comments stating that the use of assigning imagery to your students is not good practice. Reflecting on this experience I realize that I was flustered by this response because I took it personally and I was concerned all the effort I had put into this paper was for not and my teaching practices were illegitimate. Following Kolb's reflective model I intended to learn from this experience and came to the conclusion that I am not writing this paper to prove that imagery is useful. I am writing this paper to learn all that I could about the subject and to further inform my teaching practices. For the final phase of the cycle I decided to dive deeper into this controversy and learn all I could in hopes of incorporating what I found into this paper.

The longevity of some examples of imagery that have been used for over a hundred years seem to point to their usefulness, regardless of their lack of a scientifically accurate description of singing production (Vurma and Ross, 2003). However, Richard Miller, as well as many other pedagogues, are well documented on their beliefs that imagery is not a practical tool for voice instructors to utilize for building a foundation of technique with students given all the scientific advances in the present day (Freed, 2000). Miller believes it should be used more for things such as artistic realization of text because when looking to control physical aspects of vocal technique most singers require explicit technical information that is unachievable via imagery (Miller, 1996). Some pedagogues believe imagery is partially to blame for a lack of standardized terminology in the field (Freed, 2000). Miller cites W. T. Bartholomew in his paper published in 1935 on the subject where he refers to imagery as extremely dubious, unreliable and false.

Why are these pedagogues so adverse to the use of imagery in the voice studio? One argument is that voice instructors undoubtedly have not experienced all the various vocal obstacles that their students experience and that lack of personal experience makes creating tailored imagery for all their students' specific problems impossible (Miller, 1996). Metaphor and analogy by nature are not precise and even when supported by movement of the body they might lack the clarity for the student to feel confident implementing them into practice (Vurma and Ross, 2003; Kar, 2021). Furthermore, if students lack the life experience required to grasp and be able to form the mental image in their heads they will reap little benefits from its implementation (Miller, 1996; Brown, 2024).

Some believe that imagery is only useful for advanced students who have a strong understanding and ability to properly utilize breath management and proper laryngeal and respiratory responses (Miller, 1996; Holding, 2016). Students might need a foundation of technical skill before any of the imagery a voice teacher is asking the student to visualize even makes sense in the context of their understanding of singing (Miller, 1996; Holding, 2016).

Though imagery has undoubtedly aided singers in improving their vocal technique throughout the years it does not mean that a singer should never be made aware of the physiological truth of their actions (Freed, 2000). Even utilizing an external focus does not mean the performers must be unaware of their own body movements (Holding, 2016). Vocal performers benefit from finding that balance of the conscious control and the freedom from controlled actions (Miller, 1996; Nikitina, 2004; Holding, 2016). If the scientific explanations are failing the student then how can they achieve proper singing technique if that sensation can only be achieved from feeling proper singing technique (Freed, 2000)?

Miller believes that a student's imagination will provide its own necessary imagery associated with what will eventually be an automatic response to singing (Miller, 1996). Jenna Brown proposes a method known as clean language teaching that provides an opportunity for the student to personalize their learning and take ownership of their own mental imagery (Brown, 2024a; Brown, 2024b).

Conclusion

See appendix one for a catalog of the various imagery strategies I have encountered throughout my research along with some that I have utilized in my own personal singing and teaching practices. I have categorized each strategy by its metaphor type, source, and target. Each imagery type is labeled as kinesthetic or verbal. The approach is labeled as being achieved through imagery alone or accompanied by physical movement. They are split into the categories of analogy, metaphor, or imagery. This system of categorization is borrowed from Kar's *Use of Analogy* (2021).

Imagery is a tool that I believe will continue to be used even as scientific advances are made in the field of vocal pedagogy. There have been some very clear points made in the argument for and against its inclusion in the world of voice training. If the scientific research were enough to eliminate the need for imagery I do not believe it would still be so prominent in voice studios across the world today. Research in motor learning has shown that an internal focus of attention

has the potential to harm learning as muscles will not act the way you want them to just because you hear the correct words (Helding, 2015). It might be true that at some point the singer may need to leave the technical concerns of the conscious mind behind and be able to let it go in terms of their focus on their technique (Nikitina, 2004). I believe like most things the answer lies somewhere in the middle of both of these arguments. All students have different needs when it comes to education and therefore the personalization of learning is recognized as a standard of excellence (Brown, 2024).

Some students might take very well to imagery as I have and some may not due to the reasons listed in this paper. I believe a balanced use of imagery when it seems to fit the needs of the student is appropriate. However, the imagery should help the student in learning a physiological principle and the difference of what is anatomical and what is purely imagery should be made known to the student (Freed, 2000). Brown (2023) believes that to achieve a more synthesized understanding of imagination based teaching strategies and how it pertains to voice science that the field would need to first redefine the understanding of the nature of imagination and work on creating a unified language for learning. Unfortunately there have only been a limited number of studies done on imagery in singing (DeSantis et al., 2022). Having learned much about this topic I look forward to continuing to build my toolbox of imagery strategies and doing my own research on the effectiveness of imagery in the voice studio.

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Appendices

Appendix One: Strategies

Belt of Noses			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Verbal	The student should imagine that there is a belt of one hundred noses around their body sitting around their lower abdomen. Then when the student takes a breath to sing they should imagine all one hundred noses breathing in at the same time and filling their lower abdomen.	To help students take a low breath and use the full capacity of their lungs.
Approach	To imagine		
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Personal Experience)

Blowing Leaves			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Kinesthetic	Students should think about the movement of leaves in the wind as they	To sing the passages with agility fluently.

Approach	Simulate Physical Movement	sing a quick moving passage. Move ten fingers quickly, like leaves, with the palms of your hands facing your chest.	
A.I.M.	Analogy		

(Kar, 2021)

Clean Language Technique			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Verbal	Ask the student to create a mental image themselves by asking various questions about the physical sensations and sounds produced. You can use these sample questions to help the student establish a connection between a mental image and a sensation felt while singing. “What did the sensation feel like?” “What did it sound like to you?” “Where did you feel it?” The answer to these questions can begin the student’s metaphor that you both can refer back to as they continue on with their vocal training.	To elicit ideas directly from the students to increase chances of motivation, empower them to action, and give them personal reference for recalling and recreating experienced vocal sensations.
Approach	N/A		
A.I.M.	N/A		

(Brown, 2024)

Filling Up With Air			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Verbal	Ask the student to imagine the image of the breath filling up every empty space in the pelvic basin, the hip sockets, and the thighs	To activate deep involuntary muscles involved with breathing and connect the mind’s energy sources in the sacral plexus.
Approach	To imagine		
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Linklater, 2006)

Float in the Water			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Kinesthetic	Students should imagine that they are swimming in the sea and floating in the water. Only their head is above water and the rest of their body is moving in a coordinated way to keep them afloat. Students can either move their body as if they were swimming or simply picture that act in their head.	To engage the full body in singing and support the sound instead of straining from the throat.
Approach	Simulate Physical Movement		
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Kar, 2021)

Growing the Posture			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Verbal	Student should stand easily with their feet six to eight inches apart. They should be aware of their weight being evenly distributed over both feet; be aware that the weight of their body is balanced equally between the balls of their feet and heels. In their mind's eye, they should picture all their bones growing up and out from one another from the feet bones all the way up to the top most vertebrae positioned between your ears. Lastly, they should feel the skull floating like a balloon off the top of your spine.	To have aligned tall posture with a relaxed body.
Approach	To imagine		
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Linklater, 2006)

Hourglass			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Kinesthetic	Students should take a calm breath, keeping their ribs wide, not tensing their stomach and not collapsing their shoulders. They should think of their breath like	To raise awareness about respiratory muscles and to use breathing economically.

Approach	Simulate Physical Movement	the flowing sand of an hourglass, utilizing their air in a controlled manner. Grains of sand will flow more regularly if they do not accentuate sentences and hard consonants.	
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Kar, 2021)

Legos			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Verbal	Students should imagine that the sung notes are connected together like Lego pieces, right behind one other.	To sing legato.
Approach	To Imagine		
A.I.M.	Analogy		

(Kar, 2021)

Puppet			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Kinesthetic	Students should imagine a rope pulling them up from the crown of the head and a separate rope attached to their hands. It's as if they are a puppet and control of their body is in the hands of the player above. The limbs should feel limb and are only moving because of the strings pulling them up.	To feel the muscles in a relaxed state and have little extraneous tension in the body.
Approach	Simulate Physical Movement		
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Kar, 2021)

Same Pitch			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Verbal	Students should imagine that an entire melodic passage of singing done in	To preserve the color of the voice through the different registers as well

Approach	To Imagine	one breath is all sung on the same pitch.	as maintaining balanced breath.
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Kar, 2021)

Sleepy Body in Space			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Verbal	Students should imagine that their muscles are completely inactive like during sleep. They should imagine what it feels like to have their muscles just as relaxed as when they are unconscious. Next they should imagine that they are floating in outer space with a lethargic limp body.	Used when a student seems to be pushing and straining for notes in the higher register. The aim is for students to feel a relaxed body and quell some of the forcefulness of their effort.
Approach	To Imagine		
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Kar, 2021)

Tell the Story			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Verbal	Have the student imagine there is a small audience right in front of them and they are trying to convey the story to the crowd. Ask them to focus on the storytelling above all.	To help students with irregular vowel shapes in repertoire.
Approach	To Imagine		
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Nikitina, 2004)

Trip to Hawaii			
Metaphorical Genre		Suggestions of the Voice Teacher (Source)	Target Behavior
Type	Kinesthetic	The student should place their hand on their lower abdomen to feel the breathing. Next, the voice teacher will	Holding states that besides teaching a low breath this imagery exercise has added

Approach	Simulate Physical Movement	ask the student to imagine someone is asking them if they would like a free trip to Hawaii and the student responds with "Ah, yes!" The "happy breath" taken right before the imaginary response to this question should be experienced a few times before the instructor will then ask the student to imagine that their palm on their stomach is an "oxygen purse" in which they can place these happy breaths.	advantages such as a release of the throat muscles and a lowered heart rate due to the lessening anxiety level
A.I.M.	Imagery		

(Helding, 2015)

Appendix Two: Personal Development Plan

Vocal Anatomy Research Focus

- Activity:** Turn my research efforts towards a more scientific and anatomical focus.

Objective: Educate myself on the workings of the physiological components of singing production and make myself a specialist in this area.

Action: Devote my following paper topics to this area of research. I will watch videos on this topic for the purposes of researching my paper. Through my research I will learn where my biggest knowledge gaps are and direct my paper topics accordingly.

Timescale: I will begin research in this field on November 1st after the module one paper is submitted and will complete my first paper on this topic for module two.
- Activity:** Use my understanding of the anatomical workings of the voice in my own singing and teaching practice.

Objective: Gain more understanding of the physiological workings of singing through practice.

Action: I will gain a better understanding of the workings of the voice through analyzing my own voice production and the voice production of my students.

Timescale: I will begin once I have picked a topic for my module two research paper.

Utilize The Imagery Strategy Guide

- 1 **Activity:** Familiarize myself with the imagery strategies laid out in this guide.
 Objective: Learn which of these imagery techniques work best for me personally as a singer.
 Action: Incorporate the various imagery strategies in this paper into my personal singing practice in preparation for my performance in February.
 Timescale: I will start implementing these strategies immediately and will reflect on the experience after my performance in February.

- 2 **Activity:** Utilize these various imagery strategies with my students.
 Objective: Find which of these strategies show results in personal practice with the students of my voice studio.
 Action: I will utilize the various strategies in this guide with my voice students and make note of which ones seem to yield results.
 Timescale: I will begin doing this immediately and continue when I begin teaching new students.