

INDEPENDENT STUDY

BMPF7013

Module - 3
Voice Study Centre
University of Wales Trinity Saint David

(total word count: 8,928)

Dani Wisnu Dumadi
ID: 2246858
Cohort M

Movement-Based Voice Training towards Embodied Singing: A Literature Review

PART I - PORTFOLIO

I. Rationale

Overthinking singers

Over the past 10 years of teaching in Jakarta, Indonesia, I have noticed a common problem among new students or those I met in group settings, such as members of choirs or group classes: singing with upper body tensions, which include stiff neck, jaw tension, protruding chin, and even locked knees. Many of these tensions are symptoms of performance anxiety, which includes muscle stiffness, shallow breathing and restricted phonation (Driskill, 2012; Allan, 2014). Such anxiety could disturb the breath coordination, vocal resonance, and free phonation (Lecuona et al., 2023). This kind of tension can also cause singers to shift their focus away from communication and toward self-monitoring, which often increases physical strain and blocks vocal spontaneity (Allan, 2014).

This experience also happened when I was recently involved as one of the voice teachers for a three-term musical theatre training program. In the first term of this programme, my teaching partner and I usually set our vocal class in a studio class format, where students sing in front of their peers, and we had class discussions after each student performed, and my teaching partner and I often gave exercises to the person performing in front of the class. During such time, more than half of the class usually receives the same feedback from me and my teaching partner. Such feedback includes “Relax your upper body”, “you were standing like a soldier”, “we need to send you to the wall to help you with alignment”, etc. Such feedback occurs because we often see stiff or lifted shoulders (and sometimes, on the contrary, slouching), stiff neck, jaw tension, protruding chin, and even locked knees.

In the class discussion that followed, most of the students mentioned that they worry so much about the sound they were making, which made them overthink whether they were or were not applying the proper technique they were learning. This kind of overthinking is common in singing training and is often connected to performance anxiety (Lecuona et al., 2023; Allan, 2014). As someone who used to be a student and went through training in classical singing myself, I understand the nerves and anxiety of performing in front of the

teacher and classmates. Although these class performances were in a different genre, which is musical theatre, the pressure to do well is the same. There would always be the need to showcase the technique learnt as best as possible. In this kind of setting, students often shift their focus away from communicating through the song and instead focus too much on applying vocal technique (Allan, 2014; Meyer and Helling, 2021). This mental overload can cause tension and reduce vocal and emotional freedom (Meyer and Helling, 2021).

This overthinking of the singing technique is understandable, and in some ways, expected. Not all students in this musical theatre programme had a strong singing background. Several students mentioned that they were new to formal singing training. From the résumés they submitted during the application process, it was clear that many of them had a stronger background in either dance or acting, rather than in singing. For students who are not confident in singing, the pressure to perform can increase anxiety and self-doubt (Allan, 2014). At the same time, the stakes for students in this programme were quite high. Currently, no university in Indonesia offers musical theatre as a major. While there are degree programmes in dance, singing, and acting across major cities, there is still no formal musical theatre major that focuses on triple-threat training. The programme we were running was the only one of its kind in Indonesia, especially in terms of its structure and duration. Most of the other available training options were short-term, such as two-week intensives or, at most, twelve-session workshops. Having the opportunity to be in the program is indeed a “huge thing” for them.

In addition, this programme is the only one in the country that is a scholarship initiative. All participants were carefully selected through an audition process and received the training at no cost. It is held every two years and managed by an institution under one of Indonesia's major corporations, as part of its corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative. This institution also provides regular financial support for community theatres and professional musical theatre productions across the country. At the end of the programme, the top fifteen students are awarded a fully-funded short course overseas, this time to London, UK, which will be happening toward the end of 2025. Because of these opportunities, many students considered this programme extremely important, especially those who were already active in the performing arts, building a career, or considering transitioning from a 9-to-5 job into a full-time artistic career. These conditions created pressure and competition among the students, as they all wanted to perform well during their participation in this program and leave a good impression. Unfortunately, this ‘performance anxiety’ and ‘mental tension’ very often showed up physically in their singing (Lecuona et al., 2023; Allan, 2014).

While this is an understandable situation, overthinking the singing technique and dealing with nervousness are issues that we, as pedagogues, need to help our students manage. These overthinking and anxiety situations often lead to physical tension, which limits vocal sound, disrupts breathing, and blocks emotional expression. This repeated pattern made me start to think that if this is such a common problem, there must be a better way to approach it. One possible direction is through a somatic or embodied approach to learning, where students develop their voice and expression by engaging the whole body, not just the technical mind (Okan, 2022). In a musical theatre setting, where singing, acting, and movement are all part of the training, we cannot allow our students to stay stuck in their upper body tension, or to worry of their singing technique. At the same time, we face limitations in the training structure. This programme is not a three-year university degree. We only meet the students once a week, and we do not have the luxury of time or resources to run separate movement classes beyond what is already scheduled in singing, acting, and dance classes. Meanwhile, each department also has its own priorities and key materials to cover. For us, the seven teachers of all these three departments, this programme feels like our best chance to support and educate the future of Indonesia's musical theatre performers, who we hope will become the backbone of the country's currently growing musical theatre industry. There is also a sense of responsibility that we, as teachers, carry. We understand that this teaching opportunity is rare, and we want to give our best to the students and to the future of this field.

I, myself, did not have the opportunity to attend a formal musical theatre programme. My background comes from non-formal training in classical singing and extensive experiences in performing and directing choir and vocal ensembles. Because of that, I have always been wondering and curious about what could be added to my relatively standard singing or voice conditioning approach for group classes (standard vocalisation, SOVTs, and breath work); additions that could help singers release physical tension and sing with greater ease and freedom.

Exploration into integrative, cross-training exercises

In the first term of our musical theatre training programme, the focus was mainly on building each skill area separately. Singing, dancing, and acting were taught as individual disciplines. In the second term, we began encouraging the students to combine more than one skill at a time. We also introduced integration classes that brought together different departments and

allowed teachers to co-teach across disciplines. During warm-ups, we explored cross-training exercises that combined singing with acting, or dance-based physical warm-ups with an add-on of vocalisation along with it.

This idea also came from our awareness of the limited time we had with the students. Our meeting is only one day per week, and in that one day, we only have two hours per department in rotation, or four hours if we collaborate two departments' classes. We felt that we needed to combine elements during our conditioning exercises prior to working on showcase or performing materials to make the best use of time.

The exploration of these exercises gradually evolved into what we called a 'triple-threat conditioning' practice. It developed organically through collaboration and shared instincts among the co-teaching faculty. In these sessions, we guided students to vocalise while moving their bodies through exercises such as windmills, jumping jacks, animal work, and acting-based emotional prompts, such as the "will-think-feel" exercise. What stood out was how much more expressive, open, and coordinated their voices became when movement and imagination were brought into the vocal warm-up process. This reflects what Driskill (2012) suggested as a practical approach: using integrated, physical, and expressive strategies to reduce anxiety and vocal tension, as well as Meyer and Holding (2021) who propose that low-tech, body-based interventions are effective for singers struggling with tension or performance-related stress.

Around the same period, I also had the opportunity to attend an introductory Fitzmaurice Voicework class, invited by my fellow acting teacher who is in a Fitzmaurice certification process. This method is still very new in Indonesia, and it was my first direct experience with it. In the class, we practised one of the Deconstructing tremor exercises, where we lay on our backs and lifted our legs until they began to shake naturally. After the session, I could feel how much physical tension had been released, especially around my lower ribs and hips. When I sang later that day, I noticed that my voice felt freer, and I did not have to push or overthink as much. That experience stayed with me and encouraged me to explore more movement-based methods that could support vocal freedom, embodiment, and expression.

Module 4 MA Voice Pedagogy assignment

As I progressed into Module 4 of this MA Voice Pedagogy programme, which focuses on developing a literature review based on an individually chosen area of interest, I decided to

use this opportunity to explore movement-based approaches more deeply. That is why I chose this topic for my assignment. I wanted to explore how singing might improve when we do not focus only on vocal technique, but also involve the whole body and mind in the process. This line of inquiry led me to look into a range of movement-based methods, building on my initial experience with Fitzmaurice Voicework. I chose to examine four additional approaches: the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Laban Movement Analysis, and the Linklater Voice Method. My goal was to understand what core principles they share and how they could support voice training in integrated performance environments such as the one I have been involved in.

For the long run, I intend to keep refining our triple-threat curriculum and conditioning sessions by integrating the principles of these movement-based methods. We are anticipating the next student intake sometime next year, and I personally want to be better equipped when I sit down again with my fellow teachers to review and improve our integrated training curriculum.