



Exploring Approaches to Listening and Applied Listening Practices in Voice Teaching

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Session Overview



- Background & Justification
- Aims & Objectives
- Literature Review Key Points
- Research Methods
- Ethics & Insider Research
- Findings
 - Results
 - Discussion
- Conclusions & Recommendations
- Reflection
- Q&A

Background & Justification



- Functional Listening as part of my Somatic Voicework™ training (White, 2017)
- Listening as a key competency in voice teaching (Nix, 2002; Gill and Herbst, 2016)
- Move toward models of ‘science-informed’, ‘fact-based’, ‘evidence-based’ pedagogy (Ragan, 2018; AATS, 2014)
- What does this look like in practice? What is the current state of play?

Brief Study Overview



- Engaged with voice teachers through a questionnaire.
- Participants described what they listen for when assessing singers.
- Participants watched videos of two singers and described what they noticed when listening and what meaning they made from what they heard.
- Follow-up semi-structured interviews with small number of participants explored the teaching strategies they would use.

Aims & Objectives



- Outline best practice for listening in voice teaching informed by the current body of literature and associated research.
- Explain what fact-based and evidence-based voice pedagogies are and how they relate to listening practices.
- Identify and consider the listening approaches and applied listening practices of singing teachers in New Zealand.
- Determine how those listening practices inform and influence subsequent action and pedagogical decision-making.
- Assess whether and how singing teachers in New Zealand are employing models of evidence-based or fact-based voice pedagogy in relation to their listening practices and associated pedagogical strategies.

Literature Review Key Points



- Importance of identifying underlying vocal function in a way that is grounded in voice science (Nix, 2002; Miller, 2017; Gill and Herbst, 2016).
- Lack of literature on how this is achieved in practice.
- No standardised or regulated voice teacher training (Rollings Bigler *et al.*, 2021) suggests there may be variance in how teachers listen.
- Ability to identify vocal behaviours and apply appropriate strategies or interventions likened to a doctor's ability to diagnose illness and prescribe treatment (Santelli, 2023).

Literature Review Key Points



- Fact-based voice pedagogy informed by scientific domains such as anatomy, physiology, acoustics and psychoacoustics (Gill and Herbst, 2016; Miller, 2017; Rollings Bigler *et al.*, 2021).
- Mainstreaming of fact-based pedagogy is not yet established (Kayes and Bartlett, 2024).
- American Academy of Teachers of Singing “In Support of Fact-Based Voice Pedagogy and Terminology” (2014)
- Perceived tensions between fact-based pedagogy and artistic and creative elements of singing and voice teaching (Kayes and Bartlett, 2024).

Literature Review Key Points

- Evidence-Based Voice Pedagogy (EBVP) Framework (Ragan, 2018)
 - Voice Science and Research
 - Voice Teacher Expertise & Experience
 - Student Goals and Perspectives
- Aim “to honor traditions while simultaneously leading to the integration of fact-based principles of voice production” (Ragan, 2018, p157)
- No research on what this looks like in practice

Research Methods



Paradigm

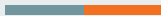
Pragmatic paradigm: Considers objectivity, subjectivity and a mixture of the two (Feilzer, 2010)

Practitioner-led inquiry: Driven by professional curiosity and the opportunity to reflect on and potentially improve my own practice. (Costley, 2006; Winter, 2021; Scott, 2024).

Methodology

Embedded mixed-methods design: Primarily qualitative, with supplementary quantitative data for context (Almeida, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Research Methods



Methods

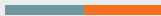
Sampling: Purposive sampling (Denscombe, 2003; Patton, 2015). Members of NEWZATS.

Questionnaire: Included open-ended and closed questions. Videos of two singers in different styles. Participants were asked about their approach to listening and what they heard.

Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with a small, stratified sample of participants (Lemm, 2010). Explored what teaching strategies they would use and why. Considered the EBVP framework (Ragan, 2018) and participants' engagement with voice science and research.

Coding & Analysis: Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2021; Naeem *et al.*, 2023) to generate themes from coded questionnaire responses. Interview themes were more apparent and were explored abductively (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). *In vivo* coding was used extensively to ground the analysis in participant perspectives (Saldana, 2016)

Research Methods



Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent: Ongoing informed consent obtained from all research participants, including the singers in the videos.

Anonymity: Questionnaire responses were anonymous by default, and all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts.

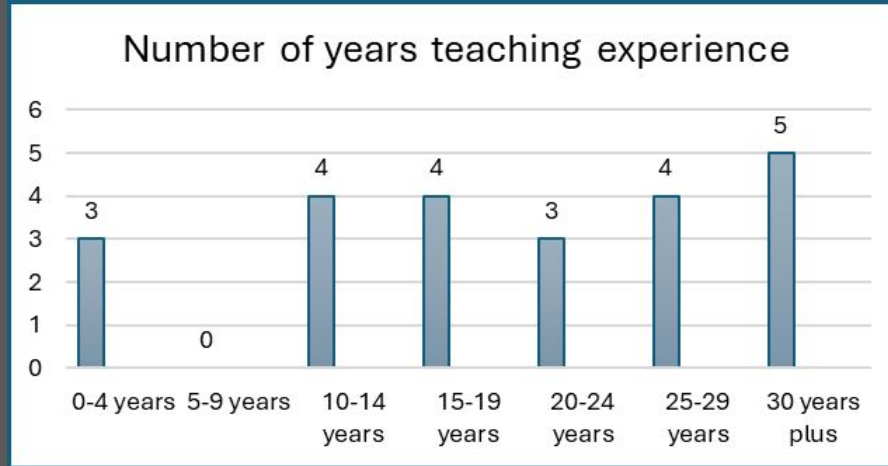
Insider Researcher Impact

- As both a voice teacher and a member of NEWZATS, I was situated as an 'insider researcher' (Breen, 2007; Saidin & Yaacob, 2016).
- Efforts to remain objective and unbiased. Emphasis on the phenomenon of 'listening' rather than evaluation of participants.

Findings - Quantitative Results

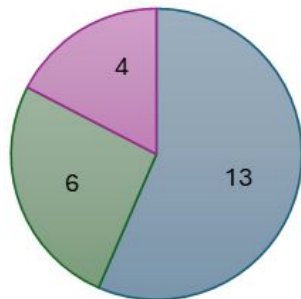


- 23 respondents ($n=23$)
- Number of years teaching experience
- Genre primarily sung by respondents
- Genre primarily taught by respondents
- Perceived importance of, and confidence in identifying underlying vocal function
- Voice pedagogy training that influences listening practices



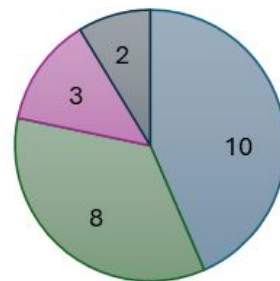
- 10+ years - 87%
- 20+ years - 52%
- Due to more recent evolution of CCM pedagogy (Fisher, Kayes and Popeil, 2019; Hoch, 2019), their own vocal training is more likely to have been classically oriented.

Genre primarily sung by respondents

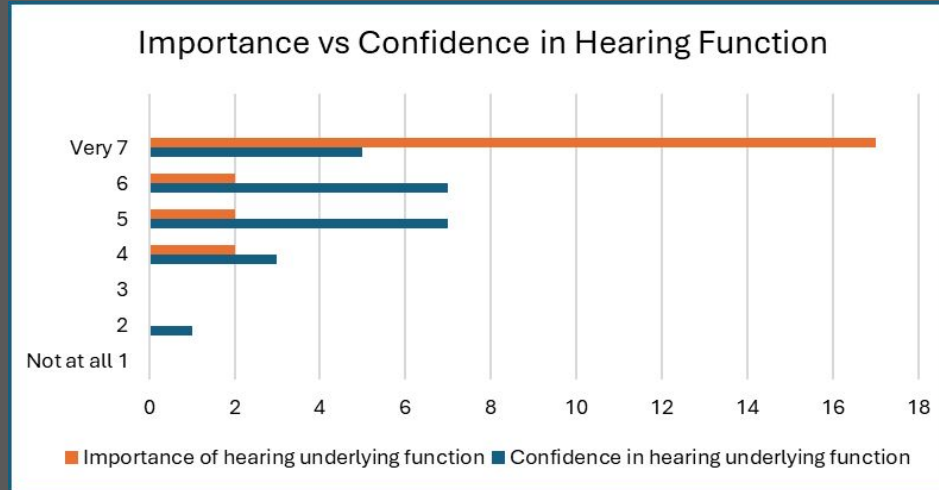


■ Classical ■ Contemporary ■ Musical Theatre

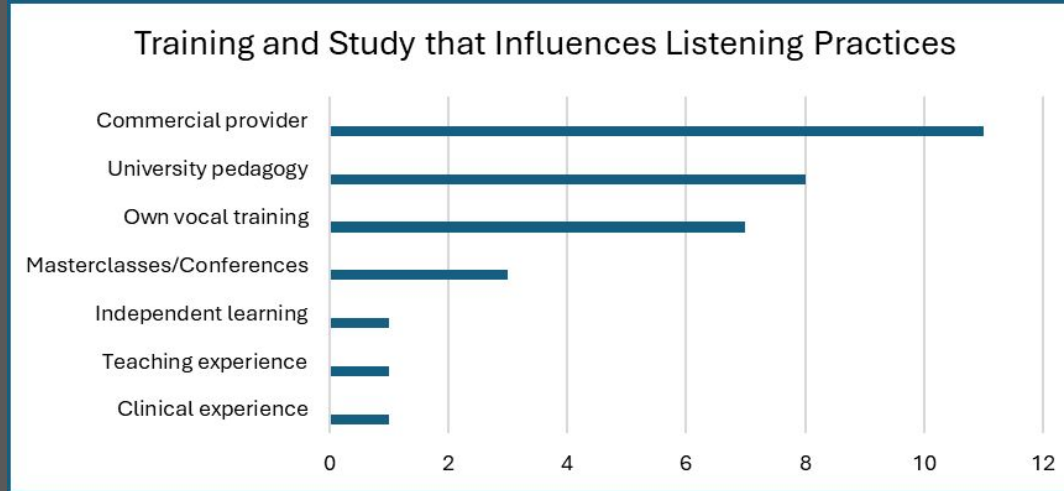
Genre primarily taught by respondents



■ Classical ■ Contemporary ■ Musical Theatre ■ All styles equally



- Respondents unanimously believed that listening is very important in voice teaching.
- Majority believed it is very important to be able to identify underlying vocal function.
- Confidence was lower, but overall still reasonably high.



- 20 of 23 respondents had received training or had engaged in learning that influenced their listening practices
- Commercial providers included Estill Voice Training®, Somatic Voicework™, Complete Vocal Technique and The Voice Lab NZ.

Findings - Qualitative Results



- Listening Approaches: What voice teachers listen for
- Applied Listening Practices: What voice teachers heard
 - Primary Themes
 - Secondary Themes
- Interview Results
 - Teaching strategies and action
 - The EBVP framework - participant perspectives
 - Relating practice to the EBVP framework

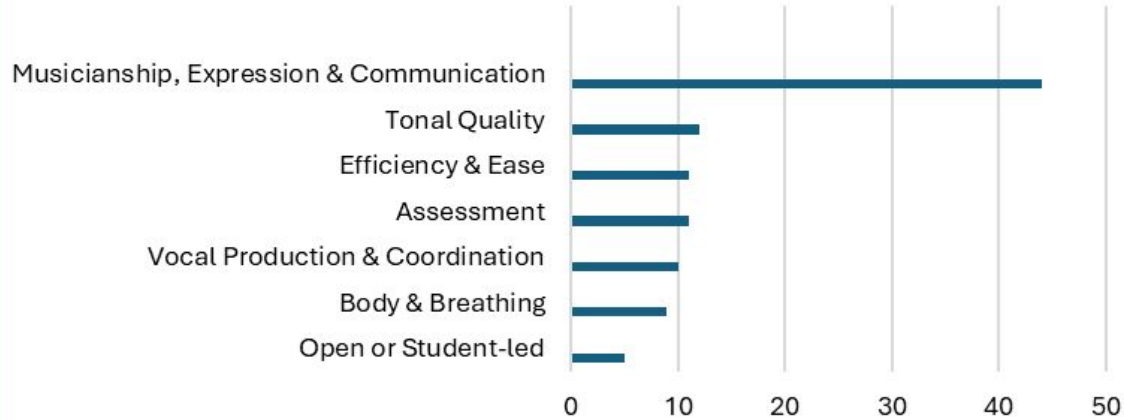




Listening Approaches: What voice teachers listen for

- 1) **Musicianship, Expression & Communication:** Communication/storytelling, musicality, pitch, diction, and genre/style
- 2) **Tonal Quality:** Consistency and quality of tone, resonance, placement
- 3) **Efficiency & Ease:** Safety, freedom, ease, tension, strain
- 4) **Assessment:** Technique, development level, range, problems and areas for improvement
- 5) **Vocal Production & Coordination:** Register, soft palate, tongue/jaw, onsets/offsets, vowels (vocal tract configuration)
- 6) **Body & Breathing:** Breathing, breath control, support, misalignment
- 7) **Open or Student-Led:** No predefined expectations, ask the singer what they want to work on

Frequency: What teachers listen for



- Musicianship, expression & communication by far the most common.
- At odds with reported beliefs about the importance of identifying underlying vocal function.



Applied Listening Practices: What voice teachers heard

Primary Themes

- Musicianship, Communication & Expression
- Tonal Quality
- Efficiency & Ease
- Assessment
- Vocal Production & Coordination
- Body & Breathing
- Open or Student-Led

Secondary Themes

- Subjective Impressions
- Action as Assessment
- Negative Framing
- Stylistic Factors

Musicianship, Communication & Expression

"Excellent use of face"

"Authentic, engaged singer"

"Difficult to understand words"

"Not keen on vocal emphasis"

"The singer sounded pitchy"

"Suitable sound for style"

Tonal Quality

"Nice warm tone"

"There was an ok sound"

"They fell off the sound"

"Very little resonance"

"Resonant and 'complex'"

"Has a good deal of twang"

Efficiency & Ease

"The high note is really tight"

"Sounded a bit pushed"

"Might get tiring"

"The voice sounds healthy"

"It doesn't sound effortless"

"Didn't feel free"

Assessment

"No evidence of a technique"

"Good basic technique"

Vocal Production & Coordination

"Voice is in a light position"

"Natural 'chesty' sound"

"Nice mix in the tone"

"Very 'speechy'"

"Needs work to even out their vowels"

"Vowels very bright"

Body & Breathing

"More support from the diaphragm"

"No easy depth of breath"

*"More body connection for better
breath flow"*

*"Air pressure isn't always
optimal"*

Open or Student-Led

*"Some of the vowels are distorted
but this could be a choice"*

"Could be a stylistic choice"

Secondary Themes

1

Subjective Impressions

Personal tastes and feelings (Shapin, 2012)

Description-based
Opinion-based

Contradictions

2

Action as Assessment

Teacher action or 'what the singer should do'

No description of sound or how it was made

Teacher-centred (Sherwood, 2023)

3

Negative Framing

What is missing or undesirable

Teacher beliefs and expectations

Linked to lower educational outcomes (Santana-Monagas *et al.*, 2024)

4

Stylistic Factors

More positive assessment of MT than Pop/Rock

Classical voice pedagogy lens (Cox, 2020)

Stylistic bias (Fisher, Kayes and Popeil, 2019)



Interview Results

Teaching Strategies and Action

- Alignment & Breathing
 - Applied to both singers
 - Linked to hearing lack of ease and visual observation
 - Foundational element
 - Different levels of consideration of underlying function
 - Different levels of anatomical and physiological specificity
- Character & Authenticity
 - MT singer specific
 - Visualisation, monologue, neutral sound-making
 - Strategies often based in teacher experience as a performer

The Missing Piece

- Not a lot of consideration given to underlying vocal function
- 'Low-hanging fruit' pedagogically speaking
- Potential limitations in study design



EBVP Framework: Participant Perspectives

- The three elements - voice science & research, teacher expertise & experience, and student goals and perspectives - were considered by most to be equally important.
- Some felt student goals and perspectives were the most important.
- Imbalances may exist related to generational and style/genre factors.

Relating practice to the EBVP framework

- Engagement with voice science and research was mostly indirect and could more accurately be considered as teacher expertise and experience.
- Teacher expertise and experience had a strong influence on pedagogical perspective and was the dominant influence in reported practices.
- All three elements of EBVP were identifiable, but were not equally weighted as stipulated in the framework.

Findings - Discussion

- **Identifying underlying vocal behaviours**
 - Listening practices did not generally reflect the theoretical ideals identified in the literature review that advocated identifying underlying vocal behaviours.
 - Artistic factors, qualitative description, subjective impression, observed outcomes all featured strongly.
 - Gap between reported beliefs and actual listening practices.
- **Individual teacher perspectives**
 - Overriding lack of agreement or consistency, no systematic approach.
 - Systemic factors affecting how voice pedagogy training is both provided and accessed.

- **Listening Practices and Fact-based Voice Pedagogy**
 - Using fact-based pedagogy as a model to assess listening practices was problematic.
 - No external ultimate authority.
 - Gap between what is known about voice production and how that translates to what is heard (Howell, 2025).
 - 'Facts' are not absolute and may be conflated with opinions and beliefs (Hutchins and Kelley, 2023).
- **Listening Practices and the EBVP model**
 - Intentional inclusion of 'teacher expertise and experience' makes it even more difficult to identify what might be considered 'evidence-based', or to exclude or discount anything.
 - Limited application to practice.



Conclusion

Identified the primary elements of current Listening Practices.

Identified attitudes and tendencies within Listening Practices.

Identified a gap between theoretical ideals and applied practice.

Limitations

Relatively small sample size ($n=23$). Low generalisability but high relevance.

Study design did not directly address identifying underlying vocal behaviours.



Recommendations

More research to define the practice and application of 'functional listening',

Further research into linking vocal function to auditory perception.

Advocacy for fact-based pedagogy and rigorous, high-quality educational models.

Reflection



- **Objectivity vs Subjectivity**
 - Fact-based voice pedagogy not black and white.
 - Areas of grey and inherent complexity of working with voices and human experience.
 - Progress towards theories of best practice can be made.
- **Meeting my Aims & Objectives**
 - Limitations in the current literature.
 - Challenges applying theory to practice.
 - Provided a comprehensive profile of current listening practices.
 - Revealed a gap between current listening practices and pedagogical ideals.

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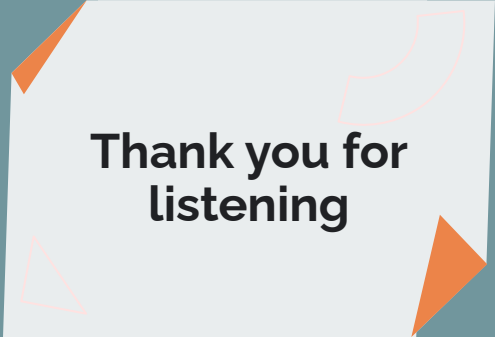
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**Thank you for
listening**