



# Apply Vocal Techniques to Surmount English Speaking Obstacles

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**Abstract.** With the development of cognitive science, the correlation between musical aptitude and second language acquisition has been proved by many researchers. Using songs and singing in classes have become a new aspect in creative pedagogy of teaching English. Also, with globalization, students' eagerness to improve their English speaking skills is increasing. However, they tend to have some difficulties in English pronunciation due to the negative impacts of mother tongue, which also causes their negative emotions like anxiety and lack of confidence when speaking English. On this basis, the thesis makes three suggestions from the perspective of applying vocal techniques to surmount English speaking obstacles: 1) apply basic vocal techniques like proper sitting posture and breathing exercise to better prepare for English pronunciation practice; 2) apply singing staccato to practice voiceless consonant sounds in English by strengthening the abdominal muscles effectively; 3) apply singing to reduce learners' negative emotions when speaking English. Accordingly, this thesis can be a good supplement to the current studies about the relationship between music and language acquisition. Also, it can be inspiring and enlightening for English teachers or other researchers to carry out pilot studies and make improvements to the above three suggestions.

**Keywords:** vocal techniques · teaching English pronunciation · English speaking anxiety · creative pedagogy

## 1 Introduction

As music integrates into life, people become increasingly interested in singing. Especially for the young, it is not only a good way of relaxation, but also a universal social interaction. Besides the pleasure and relaxation brought by music, the relationship between singing and language development is demonstrated by many brain studies like Brain Organization for Music Processing by I. Peretz and R. Zatorre, Music, Language and the Brain by A. D. Patel and The Singing Neanderthals by S. Mithen. Meanwhile, based on the similar characteristics such as pitch, intensity, duration, and pauses between language and music [1], both domestic and international researchers have begun to study the relationship between this non-verbal factor—musical aptitude and English phonological skills. Nowadays, the study of the relationship between musical aptitude and

second language acquisition has become a new perspective with the development of cognitive science.

At the end of the last century, Vanechoutte and Skoyles put forward the hypothesis that language originated from the music [2]. They believed that singing ability had laid a foundation for the emergence and development of human language. The neural control with the combination of breath and pronunciation brought by singing, which is necessary for the conscious control and manipulation of vocal organs, made it possible for human beings to own language. They also believed that the acquisition of mother tongue mainly depended on music-acquiring device instead of language acquisition device. In addition, singing ability has a lot to do with vocal imitation. It is not only the key to singing beautifully, but also one of the main means to learn pronunciation. A survey conducted by Purcell and Suter showed that the ability of vocal imitation could predict L2 phonological skills [3]. And the reason was found by Bever and Chiarello that intensive musical training could modify hemispheric lateralization in cerebral dominance during listening to music and singing process [4]. At home, Duan once claimed that the perfect pronunciation made by Chinese singers when singing foreign songs could be attributed to their keen hearing and great capacity for vocal imitation acquired by regular vocal training [5]. In the study carried by Pastuszek-Lipinska, the effect of vocal imitation on learning phonetics was verified as well [6]. The people after singing training became more able to repeat sentences and word sequences with fewer errors. After that, Chinese researchers continued the study with the combination of English teaching practice. Among them, Pei and Ding took Chinese college students as subjects for the first time to investigate the effect of musical aptitude on English phonological skills systematically and analyzed the causes of strong musical aptitude. Eventually, they found out that strong musical aptitude had positive impacts on Chinese college students' English phonological skills: the students who sing well generally have better English pronunciation [7]. Accordingly, these studies are both educational and inspirational for language teaching: music training could be applied to English learning and teaching.

Nowadays, with the vigorous development of export-oriented economy, many college students are eager for improving their oral English. The cultivation of speaking skills plays an increasingly essential role in English teaching and learning. In China, college students commonly have phonetic problems in regards to pronunciation and intonation. And the deficient knowledge of English pronunciation accounts for 55% among the subjective and objective factors affecting college students' oral proficiency in English [8]. Due to the negative impacts of mother tongue, many Chinese students have difficulties in pronouncing some English words correctly. For instance, some Chinese students tend to replace the short voiceless consonant sounds with prolonged voiced sounds in pinyin [9]. And these pronunciation problems hinder them to achieve communicative competence in many aspects. One of them may be the negative feelings of anxiety or shyness caused by unauthentic pronunciations when speaking English. Some others may be the misunderstandings between people when practicing oral English or using English for real communicative purposes. Wang and other researchers also pointed out that the way of developing Chinese college students' oral English ability is relatively monotonous [10]. Imitation and repetition are the main methods. Useful as they are in some aspects, they are not very efficient in comprehensively improving students' speaking skills or building

up their confidence when speaking English. Thus, more creative teaching methods are needed.

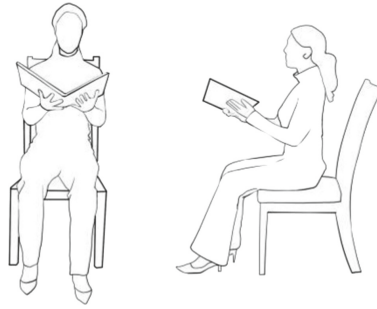
In view of the fact that one of the most practical and effective ways to improve musical aptitude in school is singing training, this thesis is going to make some suggestions and assumptions on applying the singing pedagogy to improve English speaking skills from three aspects: 1) apply basic vocal techniques to better prepare for English pronunciation practice; 2) apply singing staccato to practice voiceless consonant sounds in English; 3) apply singing to reduce learners' negative emotions when speaking English.

## **2 Apply Basic Vocal Techniques to Prepare for Pronunciation Practice**

To improve English speaking skills, understandable pronunciation is a top priority. Morley claimed that the pronunciation component played an essential role in communicative competence and students would not be able to communicate effectively without having good pronunciation skills [11]. Yates and Zielinski also said pronunciation is important in learning English since much attention had been paid to English pronunciation [12]. The essence of pronunciation is voice production, a process of air moving out of the lungs and towards the vocal folds. In order to speak clearly, Huang and Jin proposed that it was very necessary to firstly learn to control the airflow with breath [13]. And they also gave advice on practicing breathing to Chinese students who have difficulties in English pronunciation. Besides, Li stressed the importance of respiration as one of the four key elements in vocalizing [14]. Accordingly, breathing is one of the most important foundations of vocal techniques. However, some of them neglected the importance of a good posture, which is a prerequisite for breathing easily.

When vocal students do singing training, the teacher pays much attention to their standing or sitting posture. Dayme mentioned that the alignment and balance of the body is determined by posture, and good bodily alignment is the foundation of efficient breathing and healthy singing [15]. Proper posture can make breathing easier, tension reduced and singing less tiring [16]. Because when people stand in correct posture, the ribs are elevated, which allows greater lung expansion and better control over breathing. Feldenkrais also points out that it is much easier to use the muscles freely in correct posture than the skeleton can counteract the pull of gravity [17]. Instead, if singers stand or sit with poor posture, the muscles have to do some of the work of the bones. Besides, muscles that can affect vocal production should compensate for maintaining body position. Then, the tension of these muscles is very likely to degrade sound quality [16]. Moreover, singers without correct posture tire easily as they spend too much energy on maintaining balance. Thus, it is not uncommon to see that vocal teachers usually remind their students to adjust their posture into a proper one during the singing classes.

On this basis, it can be concluded that a good posture is a prerequisite for singing beautifully. And due to the similarity between the singing and pronouncing: producing voice through breath control and muscle movements, I suppose that a proper posture is also a prerequisite for pronouncing the English words correctly. But unfortunately, many English teachers ignore this aspect when teaching the pronunciations. Students are prone to sit with their shoulders rounded or hunched. Also, their chests collapse or



**Fig. 1.** Illustration of good seated posture

slump when their shoulders are propped up by the chairs. In this position, it becomes difficult for them to keep the sternum elevated, and it can have a negative impact on breath support [16]. In China, many students find it hard to pronounce the consonant /θ/, so they usually replace the correct sound /θ/ with /s/ [18]. One of the reasons can be the deficiency in guidance of practicing this pronunciation in a proper posture at the beginning of learning. Learners feel so arduous to pronounce it that most of them give up. However, this situation can be improved with a good posture and practice of breathing. When students pronounce /θ/ with shrugging their shoulders and having a hump, they tend to feel the airflow is obstructed. By comparison, it is less struggling to pronounce it when sitting upright. It is because that breath control will suffer if people do not maintain an elevated sternum when sitting improperly and rounded shoulder position increases the amount of muscle tension in the body.

Accordingly, there are some suggestions for English teachers when teaching pronunciation. Firstly, paying attention to the learners' sitting posture is significant. Mckinney once suggested sitting in an erect posture and back in the seat [19]. The shoulders should be rolled backwards, as if they dropped into their sockets [16]. Thus, referring to Fig. 1, English teachers are responsible to help learners avoid making the shoulders rigid or locked. Moreover, seats which encourage the raising of shoulders like armchairs and bucket chairs should be avoided in the classrooms. Students may tend to fold their body inward, which negatively affects proper breathing and pronunciation.

Secondly, doing breathing exercise to relax the muscles before practicing pronunciation can be beneficial. For students, "Rag doll" is an excellent exercise to help them adjust to a good sitting posture and relax their muscles [16]. First, learners should put the knees together and lean the torso forward so that the shoulders can rest. Then, slowly roll the torso up to an erect position until the sternum is comfortably high and the shoulders are falling into their sockets without tension. Finally, they should inhale fully and sing a prolonged vowel /a:/ or exhale on /s/.

Thirdly, using mirrors while practicing English pronunciation can boost learning efficiency. In vocal classes, there is a common practice of singing "ah" while moving the head back and then forward and jutting out the chin to see how the sound changes. In this process, Davids and LaTour suggested vocal students to use a mirror to find a correct chin position that is neither too forward nor too backward [16]. As for students who learn the English pronunciations, it can also be a good and efficient way for them

to find the correct way to articulate. According to Wang, Chen, Yi and Ma, mechanical imitation cannot bring effective improvement [10]. In the process of imitation, learners should constantly analyse their own problems so that they can continuously improve their pronunciation. Thus, mirrors can enable them to learn English pronunciation more efficiently by observing their muscle movements and comparing the slight differences between the sounds they make.

### 3 Apply Singing Staccato to Practice Voiceless Consonant Sounds

When acquiring a foreign language, learners can be negatively influenced by their mother tongue. As for Chinese learners, adding extra sounds to the original sounds of English is a very common problem. This mistake often occurs when a voiceless consonant is put at the end of a word [20]. For instance, some Chinese students are prone to replace [buk] (book) with [bukə] and replace [weɪt] (wait) with [weɪtə]. Besides, Liang found another common mistake made by Chinese learners that they often prolong the time of pronouncing /s/ and make it voiced, since pinyin /si/ is a voiced sound and can be prolonged in Chinese [9]. For instance, some Chinese students tend to replace [spi:k] (speak) with [sipi:k]. There are many words like “sī kǎo” and “sī yǎ” with the prolonged /si/ in Chinese. Accordingly, Chinese learners are accustomed to adding another sound like /ə/ or /i:/ after a voiceless consonant because Chinese is monosyllabic. Consonants rarely appear alone (except n and y) and are usually attached to a vowel in Chinese. In addition, consonant clusters don't exist in pinyin. Therefore, Chinese learners tend to add vowels between or after consonants and pronounce them as voiced sounds by transferring the pronunciation in Chinese to English inevitably.

These problems above, in other words, can be concluded as wrongly substituting prolonged voiced sounds for voiceless consonant sounds. And the root of the problem can be the weakness of abdominal muscles or deficiency in practicing making the abdominal muscles aspirate without vocal cord vibration. In order to solve them, Chinese students should practice the articulation skills of making short and voiceless sounds repeatedly. Thus, I suggest applying singing staccato to practicing the pronunciation of English voiceless consonant sounds. Staccato in singing means making short and detached sounds, so vocal students have to sing very fast and move very quickly in the same pattern when practicing singing staccato. Musical scale is often used by vocal teachers. It is a good way for students to explore staccato sounds as they skip notes along the musical scale. Besides, it helps exercise the abdominal muscles effectively as singers have to hold their breath and utilize abdominal muscles to get the notes as short as possible.

Referring to Fig. 2, vocal students sing the staccato repeatedly for five times and then take a short breath to sing them again with singing range upward. To sing staccato,



Fig. 2. Illustration of singing staccato with musical scale

singers should keep their larynx steady and keep the muscles in the neck still [21]. Also, they should make the notes short and light by keeping them connected to their breath. As Luo suggested, through singing staccato, it is much easier for vocal students to understand that singing is more dependent on the movement of breath instead of compressing the throat muscle [22]. And then their breathing muscles and abdominal muscles can be strengthened and activated to articulate instead of making sounds arduously. Coincidentally, all these requirements and articulation skills above are similar to those for pronouncing voiceless consonants. Thus, it can be useful and beneficial for Chinese EFL learners to practice voiceless consonants through this vocal technique. With the harmonious melody and cheery rhythm, the pronunciation practice can be much more interesting and enjoyable. Meanwhile, they can exercise their abdominal muscles to pronounce the voiceless consonant correctly with short and light sounds.

#### **4 Apply Singing to Filter Negative Emotions**

In language learning, teachers have begun to pay more attention to learners' emotions. Besides some objective factors, the affective factors like anxiety, motivation, self-confidence and shyness are emphasized. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, optimal learning occurs when the affective filter is quite weak [23]. The "affective filter" is a metaphorical barrier that prevents learners from acquiring language through comprehensible input. In other words, a learner who is anxious, nervous, disappointed or bored tend to "filter out" input no matter how available it is. In a second language learning situation, speaking is suggested as the most anxiety-provoking aspect [24]. And anxiety has a negative effect on the oral performance of speakers of English as a second language [25]. Thus, one of the implications for teachers is to create a relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere for language learners. It plays an indispensable role in developing English speaking skills.

In order to achieve this goal, many researchers have claimed that singing can be conducive to weakening the affective filter in language learning. As early as 1962, Bartle argued for use of music in a language acquisition context for the increase of motivational interest it generates [25]. As Schoepp suggested, the enjoyment aspect of learning language through songs was directly related to affective factor [26]. Saricoban and Metin stated that songs could cultivate the English skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking more effectively with the learners' willingness boosted by music [27]. Eken proposed that songs could stimulate students' eagerness for discussion of ideas or feelings and add fun to language learning [28]. So far, many researchers abroad have applied this theory into reality and conducted empirical studies on students by integrating songs into English classes to relieve negative emotions. In 2012, Duarte Romero, Tinjacá Bernal and Carrero Olivares found that, by utilizing songs as the main source to learn English, the Spanish students who learned English during their first years of learning a foreign language were more motivated to learn English in a non-threatening environment [29]. Christamia showed that students were more active in learning English and to participate in speaking activities with the implementation of English songs and puppets in classes [30]. Besides, Lan, Van and Huong also proved that an interesting and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom could be established through the use of pop

songs, which indirectly led to the improvement in the speaking skills of the first-year students at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration [31]. In China, Chen and Chen proved that listening to song and singing in English classes is an effective teaching method to stimulate students' interest and motivation in learning and improve their level of English speaking [32]. All of these studies above confirm in the function of songs: filtering negative emotions in a language acquisition to improve communicative competence.

In addition, a friendly teacher-student relationship can be established on the basis of a relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere. Songs can also create harmony among students while they sing the songs with teacher and classmates in class [31]. As Kang, Scholp and Jiang proposed, singing effectively helped people build up social bonds, enhance the sense of social belonging and also bring personal happiness [33]. Thus, singing should not only be the privilege of vocal students or professional singers but also be universal to other people, especially learners who learn to acquire another language. It is efficient in enhancing their intrinsic motivation and relieving their negative emotions like anxiety and shyness to improve their communicative competence.

## 5 Conclusion

Under the background of globalization, students pay more attention to their oral English and become more eager to improve their speaking skills, so new pedagogical methods are in great need. Also, many researchers have begun to study the relationship between musical aptitude and language acquisition. According to the published empirical researches related to musical aptitude, almost all of them demonstrate that there is a certain correlation or predicted relationship between musical aptitude and L2 phonological skills. On this basis, this thesis assumes applying vocal techniques to improve students' English speaking skills and gives three suggestions.

Firstly, English teachers should pay attention to the basic vocal techniques when guiding students to practice pronunciation. In singing classes, vocal students' standing and sitting postures are put on great emphasis. It is a prerequisite for breathing easily and singing beautifully. Thus, vocal teacher frequently reminds students to keep an erect position with the sternum comfortably high and the shoulders falling into their sockets without tension. However, many English teachers focus too much on practicing the pronunciation through imitation or other teaching methods so that they ignore the students' sitting position when making sounds. It may make students feel difficult in pronouncing some aspirated sounds with their heads down or shrugging shoulders. Thus, the right sitting position in vocal music classes should be applied into English phonetic teaching.

Secondly, singing staccato can be applied to practice voiceless consonant sounds in English. The main reason is the similarity of using abdominal muscles to make short and light sounds between singing staccato and making voiceless consonant sounds. Thus, by singing staccato and practicing the pronunciations of voiceless consonant with musical upward, Chinese learners can acquire the articulation skill and avoid adding vowels between or after consonants.

Thirdly, English teachers can filter students' negative emotions by playing suitable songs or singing in English speaking courses. Learners are very likely to feel anxious

when speaking another language and using it to communicate with others at the very beginning. Since an anxious, nervous, disappointed or unconfident learner tends to “filter out” input and be less motivated to keep learning, singing can be used as a pedagogical method to improve the emotional state of students when speaking English.

Accordingly, this thesis is meaningful and inspiring in pedagogical innovation. Applying vocal techniques and singing staccato into English classes could be interesting and creative, which is a good supplement to the current studies. Also, this thesis can give a direction for the future empirical studies in China. Although both domestic and foreign researchers have carried on studies, the number of them is limited and the majority of them were done abroad. Only about 30 empirical studies on the relationship between musical aptitude and second language acquisition have been carried out abroad. In China, by comparison, less than 10 have been published up to now. One major reason for this research gap is the lack of comprehensive instruments for measuring productive music ability and second language speech ability. And another major reason is that most of the tests need to be carried out one-on-one, which is labour-intensive and time-consuming. Therefore, more empirical studies are needed to be done in the future. Last but not least, there is likely to be a wave of innovation in further phonics teaching methods and a transformation of English teachers into those with good singing ability in the future.

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