

EFFECTIVE SPEECH TRAINING FOR THE THEATRE STUDENT-ACTOR

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Abstract

The article describes an approach for dealing with the complexity of stage speech for articulation, pronunciation and clarity of the student-actor. Many times the actor may be relatively fluent but remain quite inaccurate in articulation and enunciation. The pronunciation is often thought of as being "fossilized" (Selinker, 1972), highly resistant to change. This tendency for high resistance to change on the part of the average student-actor is the main impetus for this paper, which focuses on training the student-actor to acquire the skills for intelligibility and accuracy and vocal effectiveness. This entails vital and specific skills about emotion building i.e. character portrayal as it affects voice, diction, and the instinct to sway the audience. In order to express this, we take a brief look at the Alexander Technique from his habitual point of view, a practical and theoretical approach, and the significance is for the development of the total actor for vocal performances; for the effective use of the speaking voice and accent training for reflecting any linguistic varieties. Unique about the article is the discourse on the proficiency of the student-actor to unlearn old habits of speech production, delivery, movement, posture, acquired from either the mother tongue or wrong teaching, and to retrain for appropriate new habits. By learning linguistic peculiarities and the skill of substitutions, the student-actor develops the capacity to create new characters for play productions, suiting the personality to the role being played.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to present a technique for effective actor-training for speech communication in theatrical performance for the actor. Osipovich 2006:461 views that "a theatrical performance is a particular kind of interaction between performers and observers (actors and audience members) in a shared physical space." Here, the main element of this interaction is that the performers pretend that the interaction is something other than what it actually is, and that the observers are aware of this pretence. To Lessac, it is a culture where theatre and the society occupy separate quarters. Theatrical performance offers everyone entertainment, reflection and, more significantly, plays a powerful role in contemporary society: that of educator, trainer and facilitator, toward the development of personal culture, personal style and personal growth for the actor-training. How then does the actor achieve this believable pretence for the audience? Lessac (1997:3) informs that actor-training, when truly integrated,

involves optimal exploration of the human skills and talents, be they physical, emotional, artistic, intellectual, intuitive; and provides a creative problem-solving resources for such related areas as an energy-systems approach to body ecology, cross-cultural education, physical training, body-voice-speech therapy, and research in identifying body synergies, among other areas.

Theatre and actor-training, in particular, is the only art form that makes optimal use of the total human instrument. It requires the mastery of movement, sensitivity, vocal life, nonverbal communication, and character development. Riis (2004:3) also informs that one type of acting convention of nineteenth-century helped the actor to emphasize broad and distinct postures, gestures,

and mimicry; another type relied on small "everyday" reactions. This, therefore, calls for the refinement of perception and awareness, as well as the projection of emotion and personality. Clearly, serious actor-training can even lead to the elevation of human behaviour.

Speech, by way of introduction, is that elevation of human behaviour and the basis for manipulating an actor into the theatrical performance. We readily agree that theatrical performance is primarily an interpretation of a literary work through the use of voice, movement, emotion, awareness and perception with the spoken language. Three pertinent questions arise, concerning the teaching and training of student-actor's speech for theatrical performance and character portrayal. What are the main aspects to focus on in the student-actor's speech for effective performance? What is the nitty-gritty of character portrayal? What is the essence of the speech training for theatrical performance and every day communication? This will enable us to locate the necessary and sufficient conditions of speech training for the actor for effective theatrical performance.

Speech is also an acquired form of knowledge for communication, which has been in existence from primitive times till these modern days of relatively high national literacy. It is the basis of everyday life and the form of communication to which we turn most readily and most often. Speech communication occurs in different stages, and involves the manipulation of certain physical organs of articulation. Furthermore, speech can be described as the dialect or language of a people; the basis of their culture and civilization. Thomas (1977:169) bluntly states that "what marks human beings out among animals is their possession of language." Human communication goes beyond the mere use of non-verbal communication. We only need to imagine a world of total speechlessness (dumbness) to realize the significance of speech in

our day-to-day lives. This, therefore, suggests that, human culture depends on language as a means of communicating, teaching, and transmitting of traditional norms from one generation to another, and influences from one culture to another.

Speech is basic to all kinds of living. The purpose of speech is to communicate effectively in words. Birch (in Umukoro, 2002:70) adds that

speech can be audible without being distinct. Audibility depends upon correct breathing, breath control and resonance. Distinctness depends upon these with the addition of correct use of the articulate organs and requisite pitch.

Distinctness otherwise depends on speech arts, or vice versa, while elocution is a speech art that deals with clear and expressive speech especially of distinct pronunciation and articulation. It is obvious that voice and articulation constitute an important part of that effectiveness.

In the classroom, at home, in social and business gatherings, we communicate with speech. Sometimes, we say what we do not mean, most especially when we are angry. Sometimes we misunderstand one another. Sometimes, too, we use speech to establish acquaintanceship with others. These various situations and circumstances lie at the basis of speech training. As Turner (1993:1) observes, "Speech is an acquired habit...but speech is the result of much laborious experiment, which is forgotten as soon as the movements of the tongue and lips have been repeated in sufficient number of times to set up a habit." Speech is not the only, but it is the most common, medium by which people get along with one another – or fail to understand one another. Through speech, to a much greater extent than written plays or script, we share what is in the minds of men. The Bible recognises

that "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." The meeting of minds, through speech, between writers and actors, is a vital psychological process in artistic creativity.

Furthermore, speech has a significance that reaches into realms of human endeavour which do not necessarily form a part of what can be described as 'everyday transaction'. One such realm is the stage. Speech, as a course in theatre, can be challenging to both the teacher and the taught. It overlaps with actor training; it consumes psychological resources – body, emotion and facial expression; it can be very demanding of students' time. One of the major areas of focus is the interference or intrusion of the mother tongue (MT) on an L2 (second language) learner.

Speech makes the actor; speech is the actor. To understand this truth is to understand the theatre environment. The way we speak is determined by what we hear, how we hear it and how we unconsciously choose to use it in the light of our individual personalities and experiences. Cicely Berry (1991:51) informs that our speech is conditioned by four factors: environment, ear, physical agility, and personality. By environment, Berry relates it to children who learn to speak unconsciously because of their needs and are influenced by the sounds they hear spoken around them. It is an imitative process. This affects the student-actor who has brought into the college certain manner of speaking from what has been acquired over the years. In clarifying the functions of the ear in speech communication, Berry (1991:52) explains that:

Some people hear sounds more distinctly than others, and more people are more accurate in their production of them. If you have a good 'ear' you are open to greater number of different notes in the voice and to the differing shades of the vowels and consonants.

This is a major challenge for teachers of speech who find some actor-students able to reproduce sounds more distinctly than others. In a group chat with VASTA (Voice and Speech Trainers Association) on the Art of Listening, especially for L2 users of English language, Pratap groups the ear factor into four basic categories as follows:

- (a) Not able to produce; not able to hear;
- (b) not able to produce; but able to hear;
- (c) able to produce; but not able to hear;
- (d) able to produce and hear.

Everyone starts at the stage (a). Some curious folks develop one or both skills and move to the next stages. Proprioception helps one to produce sounds. Once they place one of their legs here (the land of producing sounds), they can develop to train the other leg (the land of hearing/discriminating sounds).

The suggestion for those in groups (a) and (b) is to use a slowdown tool to help them identify with their articulators, understand their usage and play with them using different sounds, and then substituting the appropriate sounds for the wrong ones. The third factor is physical agility. People have varying degrees of muscular awareness and freedom which has more to do with the environment and may have become too rigid for exercises to make flexible either at home or at school. Thus, bringing the student-actor to such training may be damaging to the actor's vocal tools. Knight-Thompson's work helps the actor-student in many possible ways, especially in the beginning stages with exercising the vocal organs. It is completely process-focussed; the actor is not interested in achieving a result, but interested in playing with the mouth, and one just happens to notice what results.

The last factor is Personality. By personality it is meant that it is in the light of the three factors that an actor unconsciously forms his own voice and speech. Imitation is the result of this because an actor tends to copy what he hears and attempts to move speech the organs in a particular formation. Lessac (1997:10) opposes imitation as a skill for actor-training, because, for him,

Imitation is a difficult behaviour to surrender. It has all the appearances of comfort and none of the benefits. Without strong motivation for additional growth and development, the angry voice will remain angry, the timid or the insincere voice will endure, and the pompous voice, to which so many actors are prey, will persist.

The student-actor needs to understand that the so-called natural voice or speech may not necessarily be so, as we attempt to clarify in the next segment of this article.

Habit and Nature

The use of voice and speech is a habit built up and sustained throughout life. As a child begins to grow and understand the environment and people around, he or she experiences the skills of verbal communication through imitative habit. Habit has much to do with our manner of speaking, which is why we need to know what habit is, in the first instance. *Encarta Encyclopedia* defines habit as "an action or pattern of behaviour that is repeated so often that it becomes typical of somebody, although he or she may be unaware of it." This means that habit is something we do repeatedly till it becomes part and parcel of us and so is our speech. But we readily ask ourselves this question, why do we speak the way do? It is quite a challenging question, but Crannell (2012:372) informs that "speech (and often voice) is a learned

process that becomes habitual if the speaker's intelligence and physical structure are relatively normal." He further adds that "habitual refers to a pattern of behaviour acquired by repetition whereas natural can be defined as not artificial." Our current speech is a result of habit, and also a repetition a particular behaviour. It is quite difficult to distinguish between nature and habit. To buttress the views expressed above, Hodgkinson (1989:6) adds that Alexander Technique helps the actor to understand that

habits are not reflexes; they have been learned until they become automatic. But as a habit can be learned, so it can be unlearned. The best way of unlearning a bad habit is to replace it by a good one, and practise the good habit until that becomes innate in its turn.

But before understanding the influence of habit and attempting to experiment these techniques, as a speech teacher and coach, one has to consider the student-actor's lack of conscious reproduction of new sounds, and the failure at adequately exercising the speech organs. One can never be quite certain that the technique adopted for a primary school class, for instance, would be applicable to the student-actors who have trained their speech organs to specified habits and the more one desires to hear them speak in a particular manner the less intelligible they may be. The question that logically arises is: should the student-actor articulate merely for a performance and go back to the old habits afterwards? Or should he or she develop a stage or career speech so as to improve communication skills? The theories emanating from the works of Arthur Lessac and Frederick Matthais Alexander, offer us a means of going beyond the confused state of teaching the young learner how to transcribe IPA symbols to the understanding of sounds common to the student-actors' MT. This, indeed, provides the

basis needed for the training of the student-actor. According to Hodgkinson (1989:4),

Alexander believed that many human characteristics are simply learned habits, rather than innate aspects: and every time we perform an everyday action wrongly, we deepen the habit still further.

This thus means that student-actors have, over the years, carried on old habits, mostly wrong habits, from the secondary school into college, which persist in the absence of proper remedial or corrective measures. The primary purpose of Alexander technique is to teach people how to replace bad, negative speech habits with good, positive ones, so that the student-actor can achieve their maximum potential not only in diction but emotionally, physically and in character portrayal. This article further explores the Alexander Technique because it appears to be the basis for many voice and speech experts in evolving methodology for actor-training.

Habitual speech pattern is determined by factors that are both environmental and physiological. The local regionalisms that most of us have developed result from a peculiar manner of speaking that we heard from infant, especially here in Nigeria where English is the second language known as L2 in many homes and also the language of formal instruction. We learned to speak by observing those around us. If infants and growing children, hear poor speech most of the time, the chances are that they will end up speaking badly. Conversely, if they are surrounded by good speakers of the language, they will more readily acquire the right speech habits. Experts argue that the best time for learning a foreign language like English is in the early years of life. This, however, does not imply that adults cannot acquire new manner of speaking. Referring to the early years of a child's life, Crannell

(2012: 382) says that "at that time you are a sand dune just waiting for a footprint. What you hear and mimic while learning to talk seems natural." Therefore, making a conscious effort to change our speech habits and nature will help us achieve a desired speaking pattern which eventually develops into natural habits.

Career Speech Vs Stage Speech

With the aim of achieving a perfect speech habit or trained speech habit, an individual or actor struggles with acquired and trained speech habits, as earlier noted. This, to Crannell, is a new language called "career speech". Career speech is the type of speech that is expected in a specific career in which oral communication plays a significant role. More often than not, actors assume career speech to mean the same thing as stage speech but Crannell clarifies that, career speech is a standard way to speak, more like Received Pronunciation (RP), unlike stage speech which can take the form of any accentuated English, based on characterisation.

The important feature of stage speech is the use of substitution and this, for Crannell, is that every dialect or accent has its own peculiarities which the student-actor needs to master for effective stage communication. For example, in a play featuring a British man with a Cockney accent, we do not expect a real Cockney speaker by colour and personality to play the role; rather the student-actor needs to be trained to understand the characteristics of Cockney. Some of the major peculiarities between Cockney accent and Received Pronunciation are listed below:

| Received Pronunciation | | Cockney |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Happy | /hæpi/ | /ha:pi/ |
| Cold | /kəʊld/ | /kaʊld/ |
| Taxi | /tæksi/ | /teksti/ |
| Me | /mi:/ | /mʌi/ |
| Beach | /bi:tʃ/ | /bʌitiʃ/ |
| Stay | /stei/ | /stai/ |
| Gate | /geit/ | /gait/ |
| Whether | /weðə/ | /wevə/ |
| Birthday | /bɜ:θdeɪ/ | /bɜ:fdai/ |

According to Knight (2012: ix),

The vocal and speech needs of the actor within performance is constantly changing...the actor, as an enactor of human behaviour, is a scavenger of all behaviours and therefore of all speech actions.

Comparing Crannell and Knight-Thompson techniques, we can then conclude that this type of training is to the advantage of the actor as he will meticulously train himself to identify specific sounds and replace them with the peculiar features or characteristics, and use them on stage to carry the audience along. Crannell's technique implies that achieving effective speech delivery will require actors developing a stage speech for varied performances, either to gain new grounds in their chosen human communication profession, or ignore all exercises based on improving speaking skills for performances or everyday communication.

Negative Speech

For a student-actor to perform a role in the theatre, he is expected to form an idea about the meaning of that role within the context of the play and then express this idea on stage. He is to imitate a character and while assuming that role, he is encouraged to develop a speech habit called "stage speech", as earlier mentioned, through exercises; a technique which Crannell calls negative speech practice, in which the student-actor becomes not only aware of the trained manner of speech and voice but also capable of reproducing on demand either old speech habits or just plain incorrect speech and voice. Thus, negative speech, according to Crannell (2011:622), "is the process of consciously exaggerating and practicing an error and contrasting it with the desired behaviour (also in exaggeration)." This technique is somewhat controversial. Crannell acknowledges that "some communication experts contend that it emphasizes the error and, thus, should be avoided" but one can argue that if it is properly and consciously done with the individual/actor realizing the problem and the process, the desired result can be achieved without any negative consequences. For example, if an actor's problem is vocal tension, fluctuating between relaxed and tense speech or sound delivery.

using negative practice as a tool, can be effective especially when done properly and consciously.

At this point, we should emphasize that theatrical performance is simply an interpretation of a play. Stage fright is capable of altering the actor's capability to deliver the lines. One of the ways by which the student-actor can deal with this problem is performing the relevant breathing exercises. Breathing is essential in speech delivery as we will observe in the next part of this paper.

Breath Control

Turner (1993:6) identifies the four basic factors that need training to achieve the desired speech for stage communication as "the breath, the note, the tone and the word", each of which must be developed on its own merit. These four factors determine the way an actor sounds. Berry (1991:66) adds that the voice is incredibly sensitive to any feelings of unease. For example, in everyday life, when you get nervous over a situation, your emotions invariably reflect in your voice.

In everyday life, breathing is what is termed a reflex act, which means that the movement is carried out without the will being involved. We are usually not conscious of this act but as a technique and a major aspect to be considered by actors, speech experts strongly advise a consciousness in developing new breathing habits like singers do. As stated earlier, everything about our voice and speech is habitual. Crannell (2011) explains that breath is the foundation of good voice and speech. He adds that the major function of breath involves vegetative breathing, that is, to keep the organism alive, and secondly for speech. He further gives three types of breathing called: Diaphragmatic (abdominal), Clavicular and Upper Thoracic. For him,

diaphragmatic breathing (abdominal breathing) is recommended for career speech by most trained voice and speech specialists. In this type of breathing, a downward movement of the diaphragm is accompanied by an expansion of the lower ribs. This technique provides greater control over exhalation.

Many times student-actors often find it difficult to achieve this form of breathing, but it is a necessary habit to be learned by the student-actor. Clavicular breathing is when the actor or individual attempts to breath in by raising his shoulders. This kind of breathing can be exhausting and resulting in harsh and high-pitched voice. Upper Thoracic is a breathing used in swimming where the breastbone is elevated during inhalation and often pulls in the lower ribcage. Using Upper Thoracic and Clavicular breathing will result in poor speech delivery to both hearer and speaker.

Finally, in creating new breathing style you have to imagine yourself as a baby in a cot, because when a baby takes a breath, the abdominal region rises to an amazing degree and the rib area expands. This exercise is capable of resulting in some dizziness, but Crannell (863-864) advises the actor to continue, explaining that: "this occurs because your bloodstream is not accustomed to so much oxygen at once." He adds further:

You are hyperventilating momentarily. If this occurs, sit down (before you fall down). Don't let this discourage you from doing your breathing exercises, however. You will build up a tolerance for the increased amount of oxygen in your lungs in no time at all. If you keep in mind that you breathe diaphragmatically when you breathe for life, the task will not seem so alien.

Exposure to Accent

The truth is, whether you speak in a standardized variety of English as the lingua franca in Nigeria or an English native speaker, you certainly speak with an accent. Yule (2004:227) writes that "it is a myth that some people have accents while others do not." The argument here is that every language user speaks with an accent and, as Yule further clarifies, the term accent, when used technically, "is restricted to description of the aspects of pronunciation which identify where an individual speaker is from, regionally and socially". Accent training has a lot to do with actor training because of the need for accurate characterisation in the theatre. Now, we do not expect him to travel to a specific country or city for language immersion, but to acquire the needed accents through speech training, which then makes him to be multi-talented.

In developing accents for performances, there are two major considerations. First, select the most characteristic aspects, without attempting to present all the vocal idiosyncrasies. Second, you must desire authenticity, but not at the expense of intelligibility. Third, be consistent in using the speech characteristics that you have chosen. Any discerning audience is quick to pick up a lack of consistency. To use any of the dialects accurately in performance, you must study the rhythm, pitch changes, tempo, and other acoustical phenomena in that dialect.

Below is a brief list of consonant sounds typical of some accents, involving what is called "phoneme substitution". According to Crannell, phoneme substitution refers to the ability to replace a phoneme in a word with another phoneme to form a new word. This is a very important step in the development of regional vocal performance in Cockney, German, Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, and their substitutions as reflected below:

Cockney substitutions:

/θ/ for /f/

/ð/ for /v/

/ŋ/ for /ŋk/

German /r/ is using the back of the tongue and the uvular; it is more like a gargling. German substitutions are as follows:

/θ/ for /s/, /t/

/v/ for /f/

/ɜ:/ for /eR/

/ð/ for /z/

/w/ for /v/

/hw/ for /v/

/tʃ/ for /ʃ/

/dʒ/ for /ʒ/

/s/ for /ʃ/

/z/ for /ts/

Yoruba substitutions:

/θ/ for /t/

/v/ for /f/

/f/ for /v/

/ð/ for /d/

/tʃ/ for /ʃ/

/z/ for /s/

Hausa substitutions:

/g/ for /k/

/f/ for /p/

/θ/ for /t/

/ð/ for /d/

Ibibio substitutions:

/dʒ/ for /j/

/g/ for /k/

Conclusion

Speech is an art of the theatre which demands proper and conscious attention for effective communication. Just as a choreographer will exercise and train his body for flexibility in preparation for a performance and a singer will train his voice to perfect for a musical concert so is the actor expected to train his voice and diction for vocal performance and conversational speeches.

However, this paper has tried to show that the most important part of actor training is the training of the speech and voice for characterisation as opposed to daily communication. The fact that a student-actor has good voice and speech does not imply that he has them trained for vocal performances. False imitation results in mannerism and affectation which must be discouraged. Of what use is sheer affectation to the actor when his audience do not understand and can barely hear what he says? Techniques on proprioception, substitution, unlearning bad habits and learning good ones for vocal performances are workable, achievable and desirable. Habits and nature make us who we are, and since speech itself is a habit we, as individuals, should consciously strive for a change in the way we articulate and communicate. Finally, it is hereby affirmed that, through the application of speech experts'

tested and workable techniques, plus the actors' willingness to learn new speech peculiarities, a student-actor can be aided to develop effective human communication, both onstage and offstage.

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