

Use of voice in the foreign language classroom



Whispering, shouting, singing in the English Foreign Language classroom? Mario Rinvoluceri, the well-known English author and teacher trainer, presents a whole range of how to use your voice.

Few of us language teachers had any voice training when we were studying to be teachers, unless we also took part in drama courses or went in for singing. Arguably, the voice is any subject teacher's single most important personal resource, and in the case of the language teacher it is her voice that brings the world of the second language to the students. I will never forget the Austrian English Foreign Language (EFL) trainer and writer, Herbert Puchta, telling me about a talented 8 year-old pupil who told him: "All the English I have in my head, Herr Puchta, I hear in your voice." It would be hard to find stronger evidence of the importance of voice to the language learner.

This article is in two parts: first I will offer you ways of using your own voice more effectively in your own classroom and then I will suggest some exercises that propose varied voice use by the students.

TEACHER VOICE USES

There are many ways you can influence your students by consciously varying your voice use and what follows are a few clear, useable techniques.

First letter/last letter, whispered dictation

Tell the students they are to take down a text that you will dictate, but they are only to take down the first letter and the last letter of each word, like this:

You dictate *an* and they write an _____
 You dictate *the* and they write t_e _____
 You dictate *small* and they write s ___l _____
 You dictate *catastrophe* and they write c _____e _____

Whisper your dictation slowly enough for the students to leave roughly the right sized spaces between first and last letters.

Pair the students and ask them to fill in the missing letters. Now show them the text.

When you whisper a dictation your students are experiencing English differently. Whispering creates a need to be quiet among the students so they can hear, and it fosters an atmosphere of intimacy. Whispering also makes certain sounds more prominent than they are in voiced language. So whispering has its technical phonological justifications.

Hurry-up dictation

Your tempo, or speed of speech, in class is a major feature of your voice use.

Your natural tempo in L2 may be too fast for some of your students and yet it may be boringly slow for others. It is good to consciously vary your tempo, as in the "Hurry-up dictation".

Choose a text from a unit ahead of where you currently are in your coursebook. Tell the students they are going to have to write very very fast. Ask them to stand up and run on the spot, so that their heart rate goes up a bit. Tell them to sit down and write down what you read out.

Dictate as fast as you dare, without making the task impossible, or people will give up. Pair the students so they can help each other with any words they missed. Ask them to turn to the relevant unit in the coursebook and check what they have written.

The speeded-up dictation pleases students who find you normally too slow for them, but it will annoy people who are slower-paced. Let the class give their feed back on how they felt as you galloped ahead.

Other dictation voice uses

I have given standard three-reading dictations, changing voices:

First reading: in a very sad, self-pitying voice

Second reading: in an emotionally neutral speaking voice

Third reading: in a voice enthused with joy.

I have chosen a tune and sung my dictation to the tune.

I have stood as far from the students as possible and shouted the dictation to them.

I have done dictations in Roman Catholic plain chant.

In doing all this I have offered my students English in a richer and more adequate way than I was offered Spanish and French as a school boy. Die gute alte Zeit ist, Gottlob, vorueber. Yes, I do feel sad/bitter about having been taught languages rather thinly and inadequately.

Story-telling from behind

Maybe you are working with sixth or seventh grade students and have decided to tell them a story. Where should you stand in the room to tell your story from?

Mostly we tell stories from the front so the students can see our face and expressions. If your story is a very visual one, with lots of words in it that invite listeners to make mental pictures, then you might want to follow this procedure:

Go round behind the students and tell them you would like them to shut their eyes while you are speaking. Stand up straight, your shoulders back, breathe from the top part of your chest (shallow breathing) and tell the story to a fairly fast tempo and in a fairly

high pitch. Your voice should come out fairly high, and fairly fast and without much variation.

At the end of the story ask the students to work in fours and tell each other about the pictures they created in their heads. The high, fairly fast, unvarying voice you used tends to help listeners create internal pictures. Not looking at you and closing their eyes also helps the students to create pictures internally. The point of standing behind the group is that a listener apprehends a voice coming from behind quite differently from one coming from in front. The voice from behind is less confrontational and blurs boundaries.

GETTING YOUR STUDENTS TO THINK ABOUT THEIR VOICE USE

Voice questionnaire

Dictate the following questions:

- How many telephone voices do I have?
 - How does my voice change when I speak to a friend, my Mum, a teacher?
 - Who, in my family, has the voice most like mine?
 - Can I think of three singing voices I really admire? What makes them good?
 - And three speaking voices? What makes them good?
 - Do my teachers have very different voices? Which ones come to mind most strongly?
 - Which of these voices on my own do I like best: my early morning voice, when I whisper, when I sing, when I yell, when I talk quietly, when I ask for something my late night voice.
 - Does my voice change when I speak a foreign language? How does it change?
 - Which is the native speaking English voice I most like?
- Ask the students to work in fours to answer the questions.

The aim of this questionnaire is to make them think about their natural voice use and to put the whole subject of voice on the table. This type of work could also usefully be done in Mother Tongue language classes.

Talking at the same speed

Pair the students and ask them to choose who will be A and who will be B. Take all the Bs out into the corridor. Tell them that when they go back into the room they are to let the other person start a conversation on whatever they want. B will observe the speed/tempo of the other's speech and will reduce or increase the speed of their own interventions to match the partner's tempo.

After 3-4 minutes of conversation tell the Bs to tell their partners what they had been doing. Bring the class together and ask the Bs how easy or hard they found it to get into tempo with their partner. What happens in this exercise is that the students are increasing the harmony between them, the rapport.

Working on volume

Pair the students and take the As out into the corridor. Tell them to get their partner to start a conversation; they notice the person's speed of speech and they approximate to it. They also notice how loud or quietly the person is speaking and they adjust their own volume to the other person's. Halfway through the conversation they very gently lower their own volume and with a

bit of luck their partner will begin to speak more quietly. After a few moments ask the As to tell the Bs what they were up to and how successful they reckon they have been.

The "Romeo and Juliet" dictation

This idea will not work if you are working in a skyscraper but will be fine if your classroom has windows and is on the ground floor, first floor or second floor.

Group your students in threes with a boy and a girl in each triad. (The third person can be male or female.) Give the boy "Romeo" the text you want dictated – he goes outside and stands below your classroom windows. If you have a ground floor room, then ask the boy to stand 15 metres from the window.

Have the girl "Juliet" from each trio stand at an open window. The third member of the threesome sits on the other side of the classroom from the windows, with paper and pencil at the ready. Romeo, who has to make his voice carry, dictates the first bit of text to his Juliet, who then crosses the room and dictates what she has heard to the seated member of the team. Juliet then goes back to the window so Romeo can dictate the next bit ... At the end of the dictation the Romeos come back in and they check what number 3 has written. The point here, in terms of voice use, is that both Romeo and Juliet have to make their voices carry over a longish distance, without shouting, and with the distraction of all the other people speaking at the same time.

The area of voice is much larger than you would guess from what you have just read but I hope that, in this short article, I have given you some food for thought and some practical ideas you can use in your classes. One of the great things about voice is that your students may well not have thought about this aspect of themselves before, so to get them to do so, in the context of the English class, is to take them over fresh, untrodden ground, rather than terrain they have already trampled over many times in modern teaching. One reason for FL lessons boring students, is that the students mostly only repeat stuff they have already thought through many times in German. To have new thoughts via English positively modifies their relationship to this language, this rather primitive form of West Frisian Platt (seen from a High German point of view).

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Mario Rinvolucri edits
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