

Perception of Students on Voice Teaching and Learning of Selected Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

The voice is a difficult and delicate instrument that needs to be developed by right methods and correct style. This paper therefore looks at the views of voice students and the problems associated with the teaching and learning of voice. Questions were formulated to guide the researcher through the study. The research was carried out in two Universities and one College of Education. To determine how voice is done in the schools, sixty voice students' perception and methodology of learning were noted and analysed from the structured questionnaire they responded to. Interview and direct observations were also carried out to cross-check the responses and arrive at a conclusion on how voice is done in the schools. The investigation revealed the state of voice learning in schools, the problems experienced by students during voice learning and remedial measures to be taken.

Keywords: Voice Student, Singing, Voice Learning

Introduction

Voice is one of aspect of applied music study in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. It is a performance tool employed to express and interpret words into sound. It is used to make vocal music as contrasted to instrumental music. Talking about singing synonymously implies talking about the voice – the instrument of expression in singing. From time immemorial, singing has been the most widespread and spontaneous way of making music (Machlis, 1963:7). It is a prime source of music. Riggs (1985:113) says of singing:

Artistically speaking, singing is using your voice in a musical manner to communicate ideas and emotions to an audience. Technically, however, singing is nothing more than sustained speech over a greater pitch and dynamic range.

The voice is definitely supreme in comparison with man-made instruments. It is the most beautiful of all the instruments which nature has made. It is the greatest of all musical instruments.

The learning of voice in tertiary institutions could be seen as a stride towards producing people with great touch of professionalism in singing. The issue of how the voice is nurtured into a resonant and beautiful one is of concern both to the possessor and the listener (Ugoo-

Okonkwo, 2013a:1). There should be a course of instruction to the art of voice production and interpretation as this will help the students to sing better. The production of a good singing voice in all respects is like the production of excellent tone on any woodwind or brass instrument. The difference lies in the fact that the woodwind instrumentalist uses his reed; the brass uses his lips vibrating on a column of air, to produce the tone. But the singer uses his vocal cords which could be damaged by misuse.

A voice teacher in a tertiary institution should be able to bring up a voice that could be said to be good enough a pleasing and beautiful instrument. Nevertheless, this reference is made to people who have sense of tonality and not those who are tone-deaf that is those who will never sing in tune. The amateur nonetheless should be encouraged by the teachers to sing along side the professionals on group singing. Graves (1954:3) concurring with this idea says: However there is a vast number of people who can take pleasure (without giving pain) in community singing, singing in church, singing at school or singing on the march in addition to those who can aspire to sing solos acceptably. The fulfillment of this instinct which provides many persons with one of their few active contracts with poetry, beauty and higher emotions desires more encouragement than it gets.

The teaching of voice should be seen as a serious business. The view some voice students have about voice as an instrument is that it is not taught or meant to be taught. Some think that the study ends where and when they are given some voice pieces to learn. Once the pieces are learnt for examination purposes, they have done voice. It is high time this wrong notion and attitude is corrected and it is the duty of the voice teachers to do so. The students should be made to understand that there are rudimentary approaches to the study of voice that voice is like any other musical instruments that is learnt step by step. Learning to sing for examination pieces is not voice teaching or learning. Similarly, the voice teacher need to take into account both stimulation-induced maturation (age maturation) and musical maturation are important (Ugoo-Okonkwo, 2013b:317).

Details will have to be followed in voice teaching as there is no quick or easy method to master the use of one's voice. Some muscles need to be trained over a period of time as anyone who practices singing discovers that a well developed voice can function well through time unlike an undeveloped voice that soon dies out. There is no gainsaying the fact that the human voice at its best is the most beautiful of the instruments which art or nature has made. Songs could be appreciated more by the good quality and sonority of the singer's voices hence the need for teaching good voice production in singing.

Different voice teachers have different approaches to voice teaching but all have one objective in mind – to bring out the best in the voices they work on. Jones (2000) in his article – *Psychological Hints for teaching singing* writes about some psychological hints and approaches for teaching singing, his techniques include:

- establishing and maintaining a good rapport with the students;
- recalling previous lessons;
- investing in the process and not the result;
- using positive motivation;
- beginning each lesson with a single concept in mind;

- long – term realization – having the singer think in co- ordination rather than bits and pieces;
- the teacher not entirely controlling the lesson but should allowing the student as much input as possible; and
- bringing the lesson to an end by reviewing what was accomplished and congratulating the student on that accomplishment.

Many teachers of voice use scales on vowels to teach vocal technique. Vocalize is one of the methods employed by voice teachers in training singers. Greenish (1953:104) writes of it as “an exercise for the study of singing to vowels or to solemnization – syllables. The periods of voice lesson should depend on the student’s ability and the demands of a particular music he/she is singing. A minimum of two lessons a week is good for a beginner that is someone learning correct technique for the first time. For a professional singer, the teacher may need to check the technique once or twice a week. One should only study regularly with his/her teacher until he/she is able to apply the techniques learnt to his/her songs. Then, all the person needs is an occasional check-up.

Jones, speaks of his won approach to vocal training:

I focus my efforts with a beginning singer on the development of a solid technique. I do not rush this process. I take an athletic approach to teaching singing, by that, I mean, like any thorough coach. I spend much time and determination to train and develop the voice, built over time, this understanding of technique allows the singer the freedom to bring the music to life (Jones, 2000 <www.voiceteacher.com/psych.html>).

In teaching voice, the teacher should create an atmosphere of friendliness during classes with the students, this is essential as it affects the way the students receive instructions and directives. Onyiuke notes that:

Within the music class the teacher should make adequate effort to establish a favorable musical knowledge, understanding, and responsiveness. The teacher should provide both stimulating and challenging environment where the child [the learner] can explore to achieve his/her objectives (2003:69).

Sarcasm and nasty criticism have to be avoided in teaching of voice and singing. Any criticism should be made with dignity and good humor. An atmosphere devoid of friendliness and kindness hampers the teaching of voice. As a teacher, get to know the students, he should place himself in their shoes so that they will understand whatever he teaches them. Establishing an interest in the students will make them come out of their shells and be themselves and also learn well. Cranmer (1974:59) comments on voice teaching:

The teaching of singing is a most personal and individual job, and because the whole of singing is done by the singer himself each pupil becomes a separate problem.

Method

This study was carried out in the music departments of three selected institutions: Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka; University of Nigeria Nsukka; and Nwafor-Orizu College of Education Nsugbe. This study was limited to the prevalent voice learning problems in the institutions

researched according to the students' perception. In the course of this study, six research questions were posed.

Research Design: The study was designed in a way as to obtain the relevant information to the research questions as regards the students' perception of voice learning problems in tertiary institutions. It therefore employed survey research design using questionnaire, observation and interview.

Instruments: The instruments for data collection were questionnaire, interview and observation. The structured and the unstructured types of questionnaire which were developed to obtain information in relation to the objectives of the research were designed so that the respondents were not entirely restricted in their responses to the questions. The Fixed-Response type of the questionnaire was structured with forced response options using the *Likert*-type scale (Nworgu, 1991:104). The open-end type of the questionnaire was developed in such a way that the questions pertinent to the problem under investigation were asked. The respondents were free to supply their responses in their own words and in the manner they deemed necessary.

The second tool employed in the data collection was closed and open interview (Obumneke, 2000:211). Interview was held with the respondents which involved a direct face to face interaction with the researcher. A tape recorder was used to facilitate it. An interview schedule was used for guidance. Observation as a data collection tool was also used to crosscheck the other tools – questionnaire and interview. It therefore revealed the actual situation of the problem under investigation.

Sample: The study was carried out in Three (3) higher institutions of learning in Nigeria. Two (2) Universities and One (1) College of Education: Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN); Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka; and Department of Music, Nwafor-Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe (CEN). The accessible population for the research was sixty (60) voice students in the Music Departments of the selected institutions.

Data Collection: The questionnaire were personally administered to the respondents by the researcher and collected by hand. Sixty questionnaires were collected back and completely filled. The interview was done with the researcher as the interviewer and the respondents as the interviewees. Voice classes were observed by the researcher in order to ascertain the actual teaching/learning methods employed by the teacher.

Data Analysis: Views of the respondents on each test item was done using frequencies and mean ranking. Specifically, the statistical procedure for each test item is as follows: collected questionnaires have been arranged to get the total response of each category (frequency) of every test item. The order of ranking for various categories is as follows: Always (A) = 4 points; Sometimes (S) = 3 points; Rarely (R) = 2 points; and Never (N) = 1 point. The number of points allocated to each category is multiplied by the frequency of each category. The summation of these is then divided by the sum of the frequency for each category (ΣF).

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{(4 \times \text{No. of (A)}) + (3 \times \text{No. of (S)}) + (2 \times \text{No. of (R)}) + (1 \times \text{No. of (N)})}{\Sigma F}$$

Any response with calculated mean of 2.50 and above is considered as agreed and disagreed if the mean calculated is below 2.50.

The mean ratings of the respondents in the test items meant for answering the research questions were tabulated in Table 1.

Results and Discussion

The focus of the study has been the identification of issues that are peculiar to the selected Nigerian institutions as far as voice teaching/learning is concerned. Having reviewed some related literature on this subject, some of the findings concurred with the previously identified problems by researchers while some disagreed. The analysis of the data collected for the research work is hereby presented and analysed. The data are presented in table form and are arranged accordingly in the order of the various questionnaire items as answered by the respondents.

Table 1

Mean Responses for the Research Questions

S/N	Test Item	A	S	R	N	F	Mean	Decision
1	Do you like voice as an instrument?	50	10	0	0	60	3.83	Agree
2	Do you enjoy singing as a voice student?	50	5	5	0	60	3.75	Agree
3	Do you have interest in practicing singing even outside classes?	40	18	2	0	60	3.63	Agree
4	Do you like your teacher? Why?							
	a) He/She teaches well	45	15	0	0	60	3.75	Agree
	b) I like my music teacher but I don't like the subject	50	10	0	0	60	3.83	Agree
5	Do you understand whatever he/she teaches?	40	15	5	0	60	3.58	Agree
6	From the way he/she teaches, do you think he/she is happy with the subject of voice teaching?	35	25	0	0	60	3.58	Agree
7	Do you think he/she enjoys teaching voice?	35	25	0	0	60	3.58	Agree
8	Does your voice teacher encourage you to learn the instrument?	45	15	0	0	60	3.75	Agree
9	Your teacher teaches you the examination voice pieces.	22	28	0	10	60	3.03	Agree
10	You most times learn examination voice pieces by yourself.	32	23	0	5	60	3.36	Agree
11	Your teacher accompanies you on the keyboard or arranges for an accompaniment.	25	30	5	0	60	3.33	Agree
12	Your teacher teaches you breathe control.	15	10	15	20	60	2.33	Disagree

Test items 1 and 2 have mean ratings of 3.83 and 3.75. This indicated that the respondents agreed that voice among other instruments is placed highly and thus, was used to answer the

research question that asked: What is the position of voice as a valued instrument of musical expression?

The students who are the subject of teaching were enthusiastic about voice learning. They all appreciated singing as an indispensable aspect of music. The researcher tried to find out if the studying of voice was imposed on the students or they made the choice by themselves. The finding revealed that about eighty-five percent (85%) of the students studied chose to study voice of their own accord while fifteen percent felt compelled to do so. The teachers were neither their problem nor the voice as a subject but one can find out that quite a number of them were misinformed about the right attitude to learning.

Test items 3 and 4 have mean ratings of 3.63 and 3.75, respectively. Therefore, it shows that the students exhibited positive attitude towards the learning of voice except in the area of punctuality where they have negative attitude. Inasmuch as majority of the voice students loved to study voice without being forced to, their attitude towards the subject was reported to be discouraging. The students also agreed to understand what their teachers teach them. Most of the voice teachers teach them well and that they enjoy a fairly friendly and conducive atmosphere for learning. The teachers' offices served as the classrooms for the teaching. They have keyboard for teaching and for accompaniment of the songs.

Test items 5, 6 and 7 have mean ratings of 3.58 each. The students agreed to understand what their teachers teach them. Most of the voice teachers teach them well and that they enjoy a fairly friendly and conducive atmosphere for learning. The teachers' offices served as the classrooms for the teaching. They have keyboard for teaching and for accompaniment of the songs. They also agree that their voice teachers encourage them to learn the instrument. Similarly, they agreed that they learn their examination voice pieces by themselves most times but the teacher accompanies them on the keyboard or arranges for an accompaniment.

Report on Direct Observations

The researcher paid several visits to the selected institutions to see for herself how voice was being taught and learned by both the teachers and the students. Observations were made as follows:

- The teaching and learning of voice pieces for examination purposes is what mostly was regarded as voice lessons. Some of the times the teachers rehearsed the students; at other times, the students sang the voice pieces to the teacher while the teacher corrected some faulty portions from time to time.
- There was no fixed time on the timetable for voice teaching; the teachers had the time fixed by themselves for the voice classes.
- The venue for the classes was sometimes in the classrooms and at times in the teachers' offices. The consideration for the choice of venue for lessons as observed was mostly due to the availability of piano or electronic keyboard to guide the students.
- The lesson lasted for as long as the time the teachers had at their disposal therefore there was no fixed length of time for it.
- There was no systematic way of teaching voice as an instrument; the emphasis more or less was on learning the voice pieces.
- Some teachers assign up to five vocal pieces to the students per term while others limit them to two. The voice pieces encompassed different vocal genres such as

classical, African folk songs, popular music, and contemporary art songs. The criterion for assigning of the voice pieces were according to the academic levels of the students, voice category/range and students' proficiency in voice pieces (for same academic level) while some and same voice pieces for students in the same academic level.

- Piano Teachers accompanied the students on the keyboard while they practiced. It was also observed that advanced piano students were encouraged to accompany their fellow students for both rehearsals and practical examinations.
- It was observed that the teachers used vocalize as a preliminary exercise at the beginning of voice lesson. But the exercises were not done all the time they met.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, the perception of students' on voice teaching and learning in selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria was handled. This study found out that in many cases voice learning in tertiary institutions in Nigeria is done without following established procedures. For instance, in all the research institutions, the teaching of voice has no separate time allotted to it in the time table. Voice is one of the instruments studied in the schools and is a part of Applied Music/Individual performance studies. Therefore the teaching takes place within the times allotted for the Applied Music/Individual Performance Studies. The voice students should be aware that the art of singing is not to be seen as the simplest of musical expression. It has its techniques, styles and mechanism for a good sound production. Good singing includes producing beautiful sound. Therefore, voice students who aspire to make an optimum use of their voice should as a matter of necessity dutifully work to develop the voice into a resonant, flexible and beautiful instrument. It is the duty of the teacher to teach and guide the students. A voice teacher's duty is not to force the growth of the voice but to free it to develop to sing with warmth, colour, and vibrancy, whereas it is the responsibility of the students to communicate musical ideas inherent in a song by the use of their instrument, the voice.

The following recommendations are hereby made:

- Any promising voice should be recruited for the choir. This will get the student singing at all times because "practice makes perfect".
- Since many students offer voice in schools, even when and where there are voice specialists, the number of students will obviously greatly outnumber that of the teachers. Other teachers of voice (non voice specialist should undergo some courses in voice since they handle voice teaching.
- Vocal workshop should be held from time to time for voice teachers/instructors.
- Voice students should be exposed to the fact that musical practice is a vocation. Being choirmasters, instrumentalists, technologists and vocalists is a vocation, which yields financial benefits by being engaged in the services (Okonkwo, 2003:38). Therefore, voice students should be aware that training well in voice and also mastering interpretative skills in singing could be a beneficial vocation for them.

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