

The Language of Teaching Voice: A Qualitative Study

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The Language of Teaching Voice: A Qualitative Study

Voice practitioners use a variety of language to describe the act of sounding. Because practitioners cannot literally “see the voice,” they rely on imagery, imagination, anatomical descriptions, and acoustic feedback to encourage positive results for clients. There is often a debate among voice practitioners about the value of science and art when choosing both the type of voice exercise to give and ultimately the language to use with clients in order to achieve positive vocal training outcomes. This article outlines a qualitative research study assessing the effectiveness of using metaphorical or scientific language or both for improving student and client outcomes in the voice studio, the speech language pathology clinic, and in performance. The results of the study suggest that there is a pedagogical advantage to using both metaphorical and literal language with voice clients. Because of this, there is a potential need to advocate for the increased intersection between art and science in teaching voice. Suggestions for this approach are given, and the implications for training future voice practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: voice pedagogy; voice coaching; voice training; education; language; metaphor; literal language

Introduction and Background

As voice practitioners, we often struggle to find language that effectively describes to our students and clients how to achieve desirable vocal outcomes. Many of our challenges are due to the fact that we cannot see much of the vocal mechanism. Unlike other instruments, there are no buttons to push, no strings to manually tune. And we often rely on our ears alone, or what we feel, to determine whether or not the resulting sounds we produce are “correct” or “desired.” Relying on our own hearing is further complicated by the position of the ears (Martin and Clark 2018). If you have ever recorded yourself speaking or singing, then you will know how shocking it can be to listen to those recordings for the first time, especially if recorded on low quality recording and playback equipment. “Do I really sound like that?” is a common despairing remark from my own students. As our own inner ears are receiving vibrational feedback through bone conduction as well as air conduction, we do not perceive our own voice as external listeners do. Because of this phenomenon, I assert that our students and clients rely on us as voice practitioners to give clear and articulate instruction and feedback.

My own history of voice training (as an undergraduate in music and theatre schools) involved working with practitioners who used a great deal of metaphorical and imaginative language to achieve results. I found this both freeing at times and also enormously frustrating. What exactly was I doing physically to achieve positive feedback from my voice instructors? Conclusive results seemed so elusive, difficult to describe, and often even more difficult to repeat. I longed for what I called a more “scientific

approach” to voice training; an approach where I could learn the physiology and acoustic properties of producing articulated sound. Antidotally, according to many of my frustrated fellow students, I was not alone as I recall.

These experiences ultimately led me to develop of this qualitative study, which attempts to explore the relationship between a practitioner’s use of metaphorical and literal language in the voice studio and learning. The kind of metaphorical language used by instructors during my undergraduate voice training is commonly found in the practice of teaching voice. There are several justifications for this inquiry. Ti-Wei Chen in his dissertation *The Role and Efficacy of Verbal Imagery in the Teaching of Singing* indicates that verbal imagery “can by-pass complicated explanations of physiological aspects of vocal tract and evoke physiological movements in correcting vocal problems” (Chen 2007, i). Likewise, Kristin Linklater in *Freeing the Natural Voice*, one of the canonical texts on voice training for the actor, makes no apologies for using imagery and imagination as tools to achieve physical and vocal awareness stating: “I have chosen to describe the voice by its perceivable features in metaphor and analogy. The simplifications may make a voice scientist quail, but it has proven to be the best approach for the voice user” (Linklater 1992, 14).

There are, indeed, cases where voice scientists have done more than just quail. Patsy Rodenburg, in the forward of Christina Shewell’s (2009) text *Voice Work*, describes a scenario at a conference where speech therapists and singing teachers publicly dismiss each other’s approach to training. I, too, have witnessed a similar debate at the Fifth International Care of the Professional Voice Symposium in 2006. Here, an established singing instructor debated the need for understanding the anatomy of the voice and challenged a speech language pathologist to try and achieve the same results as she did without engaging the imagination.

Ultimately, the heart of the conflict is not only a different *approach* of teaching methods, but it is also a difference in the practitioner’s *use* of language. A speech language pathologist’s (SLP) training involves intensive study of anatomy, physiology, and neurology, and consequently, the language used with their clients reflects this (Shewell 2009). Their language is often more literal and less grounded in imagery and metaphor. It is no surprise that the sciences have a propensity for using literal language and dismiss figurative language. For centuries, cognitive scientists have considered metaphorical language to be misleading. In his introduction and overview to *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language an Understanding*, Gibbs discusses the history behind this viewpoint stating two of the central cognitive philosophies of the early twentieth century support the “idea that literal meaning best reflects the objectively determined external world and is the primary mode for the description of truth” (Gibbs 1994, 5).

Even though, as Bowes and Katz indicate in their paper *Metaphor Creates Intimacy and Temporarily Enhances Theory of Mind*, current research “shows metaphor is commonly used and is comprehended with relative ease” (Bowes and Katiz 2015, 953). The debate between using metaphorical or literal language or both continues to rage on in several academic circles. Voice studies, highly relevant to both the world of art and

science, is certainly one such area where the debate is vigorous and stimulating (Sansom 2016).

Inspired by both the art and science of voice work, I undertook this research study to examine the effectiveness of metaphorical or literal language or both for improving student and client outcomes in the voice studio, the SLP clinic, and in performance. For the purpose of this study, “performance” included communicating with one or more people outside of the studio and clinic space, or in the case of the singer/actor, performance is the heightened act of a formal musical or theatrical presentation.

Defining Metaphorical and Literal Language in this Study

“Metaphor is a type of figurative language that alters the literal meaning of words and phrases” (Bowes and Katz 2015, 953). In voice training studios, singing and acting voice teachers may use phrases such as “sing as if there is a small orange at the back of your mouth.” A more literal translation of this could be “lift the soft palate to create more space at the back of the mouth.” I once had an instructor who told me to “breathe through the bottom of my feet.” It is, of course, physiologically impossible to breathe through the bottom of one’s feet; nevertheless, the metaphor worked for me in that it resulted in a release of the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles on the inhale, which was a much more literal and scientific description of what this teacher was aiming for in terms of a physical outcome.

Examples of answers from participants in this study that were counted as metaphorical include:

- “Throw your sound to the back of the room.”
- “Sing on the air.”
- “Bring your voice forward to the front of your mouth.”
- “Breathe from the tailbone.”
- “Caress the sound.”
- “Reach out and grab something across the room with your voice.”
- “Pull on your marionette string.”
- “Knock the sound out of the park.”
- “Spin the sound.”
- “Breathe through your eyeballs.”
- “Imagine a spear of sound coming out of your forehead.”
- “Syphon the sound up.”
- “Allow the cellos into the higher sounds.”
- “Take a constipation breath.”

Examples of answers from participants in this study that were counted a more literal/scientifically oriented include:

- “Lift the soft palate.”
- “Stabilize your larynx.”

- “Release the root of the tongue.”
- “Massage the masseter muscles.”
- “Release the rectos abdominus muscles.”
- “Allow the intercostal muscles to expand and contract.”
- “Place the tip of the tongue on the alveolar ridge.”
- “Allow the sternum to release on the exhale.”
- “Massage the sacrum.”
- “Feel the diaphragm contract and expand.”
- “Align the skeleton and allow your musculature to support you.”
- “Massage and release the sternocleidomastoid.”
- “Strengthen the transverse abdominus muscle.”
- “Allow the tip of the tongue to rest easily behind the bottom front teeth.”

How this data is organized inside the survey is explained within the “Results” section of this article.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodological paradigm. The concept of “qualitative research” comes from the qualified or detailed data that is used to collect and interpret answers to broad questions (Johnson and Christensen 2007). The study design was as follows: (1) I created a qualitative survey assessment with feedback from two voice practitioner colleagues who served as subject matter experts in the debate between metaphorical and literal language in voice studies. (2) I began distributing the survey in February 2014 and continued to do so over an eighth month period through multiple means of dissemination as described below. (3) I analyzed the data using themes and descriptive statistics. (4) I interpreted the data and did so through a discussion and intersection of research literature. In other words, I examined how the data and previous research relates to each other, and I allowed the data to inform the research focus. Doing so is a common tool in qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklen 2007).

Participants and Data Collection

I used a variety of means to find participants for the survey, both online and in-person. I found participants from a pool of colleagues, students, professional acquaintances, and professional recommendations. All participants had received voice training and/or therapy with a voice practitioner. Or they were currently receiving voice training and/or therapy with a voice practitioner. These practitioners encouraged participants to complete the study.

I defined voice practitioners as any of following individuals: voice and speech instructors, singing instructors, speech language pathologists, and choral conductors. Because the majority of the surveys were completed within a university setting, it was evident that most practitioners participating in the study had some kind of voice and teaching credential. Nevertheless, the study did not specify or frame these credentials;

thus, this variability in credentials is a consideration and potential limitation of the study.

Participants in the study were asked to complete a questionnaire which was available on-line and in hard copy. Part A of the questionnaire was completed by speech and singing voice students and/or speech language pathology clients. Part B of the questionnaire included additional questions for voice practitioners.

The University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada and St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada allowed hard copies of the questionnaire to be distributed to several of their music and drama voice students during classes beginning in February 2014. Online questionnaires were also distributed through an e-mail campaign across Canada to university fine arts voice practitioners as well as speech language pathologists beginning in March 2014. This e-mail campaign was driven by my colleagues within the voice training community. Additionally, members of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association were encouraged to complete the online questionnaire through their listserv, VASTAvox,¹ and members (most of whom are voice practitioners) were encouraged to share the survey with their colleagues, students, and clients. All participants consented to volunteer and rules and guidelines were following as required in the St. Thomas University Ethics Research Proposal 2014-04.

A full list of the Part A and Part B questions that I used in the study are included in the Addendum section of this article below. Importantly, Part A has questions for students and clients, and Part B has questions for voice practitioners. Participants were instructed to answer the question set (or Part) that related to their experience. During the analysis phase, I compiled the answers to each question in all parts. Nevertheless, in presenting the data for this article, I chose to focus on the Part A questions 6, 8, 10, and 13 and the Part B questions 5 and 8. As the results show below, these questions ultimately highlighted what became the central research focus of this study: how do voice clients and practitioners understand and favor metaphorical and literal language in voice training? This evolutionary data collection and interpretation process is a common practice within qualitative methodology (Bogdan and Biklen 2007).

Results

There was a total of 218 participants who completed Part A: Questions for Students and Client Surveys, and there was a total of 88 participants who completed Part B: Questions for Voice Practitioners. Using Part A, Figure 1 shows the kinds of voice training or therapy that the students/clients received, and Figure 2 shows the number of years the students/clients received voice training or therapy. Using Part B, Figure 3 gives the voice practitioners' specialization, and Figure 4 offers the numbers of years the voice practitioners have worked in their fields. Figure 5 shows the primary focus of the voice training focus for the students/clients, which is found in Part A.

Figure 1. Kinds of voice training or therapy that students/clients received, Part A.

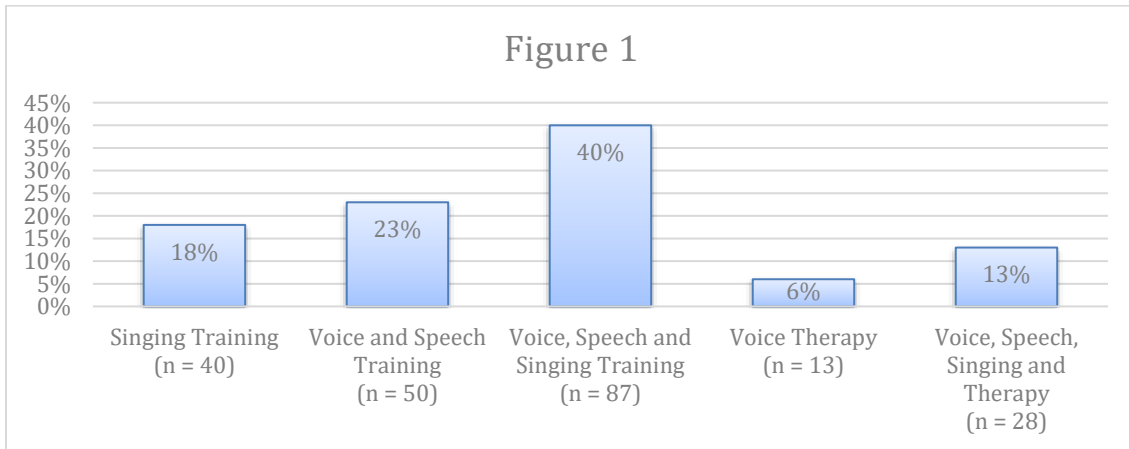


Figure 2. Number of years students/clients received voice training or therapy, Part A.

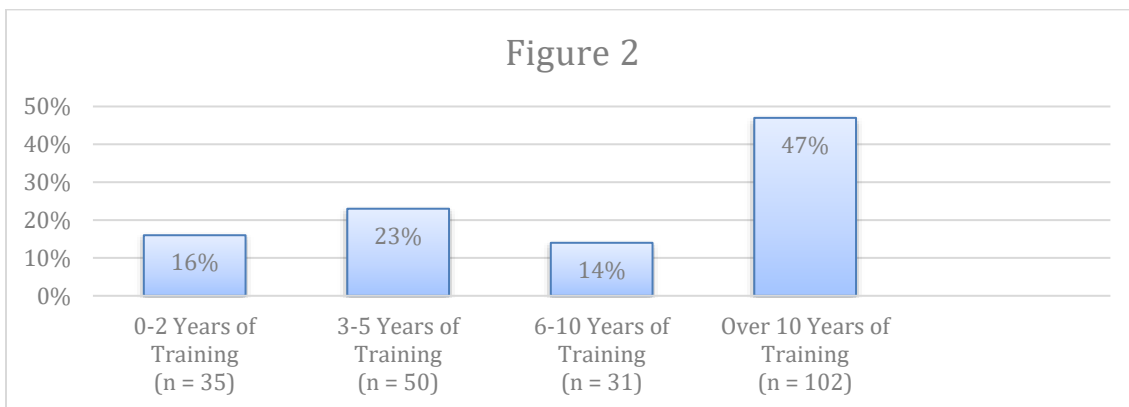


Figure 3. Voice Practitioners by specialization, Part B.

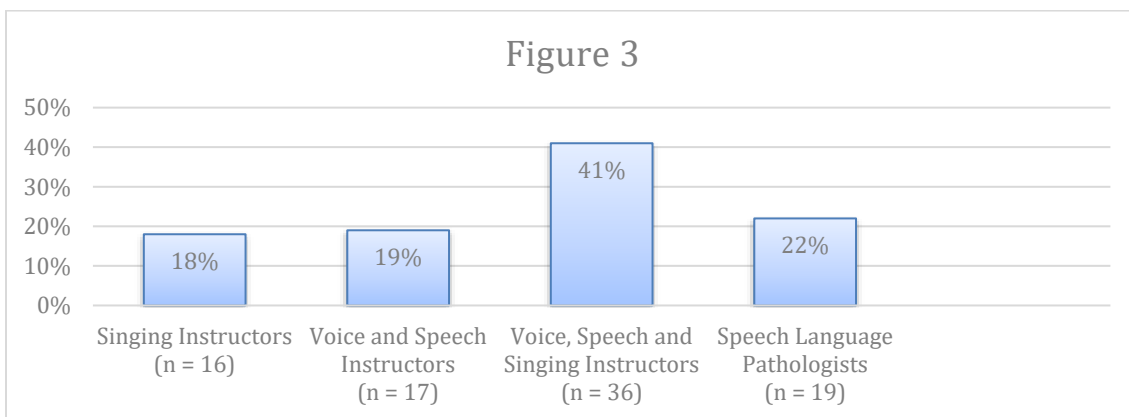


Figure 4. Voice Practitioners by years of experience, Part B.

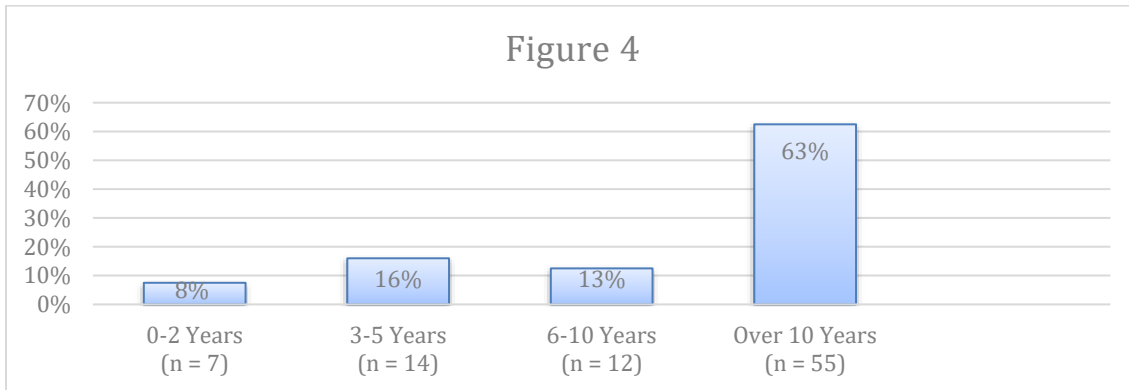
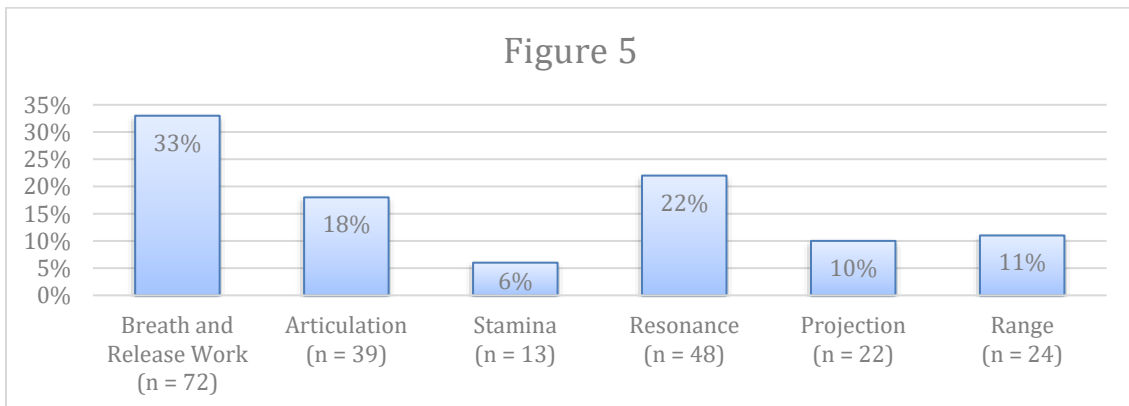


Figure 5. Primary focus of voice training focus for students/clients, Part A.



In the above section called “Defining Metaphorical and Literal Language in this Study,” the participants in this study offered examples that helped outline the two key themes and terms in this study: metaphorical language and literal language. Essentially, the survey responses in Part A Questions 6, 8, 10, 11 and 13 and the survey responses in Part B Questions 5, 6, 8 were coded into large themes (metaphorical language and literal language). Again, these themes/definitions are outlined in the above section. Results were themed and then calculated in order to determine the percentage of metaphorical and literal responses in the relevant survey questions. Figure 6 reflects the combined calculations made in Questions 6, 8, 10 and 13 in Part A. The total combined short answer responses from questions 6, 8, 10 and 13 are n = 286. The total metaphorical response is 48%. The total literal response is 52%.

Figure 7 reflects the combined calculations of Question 5 and Question 8 in Part B. The total combined short answer responses from questions 5 and 8 are n = 182. The total metaphorical response is 83. The total literal response is 54%.

Figure 6. Style of language deemed useful by students, Part A.

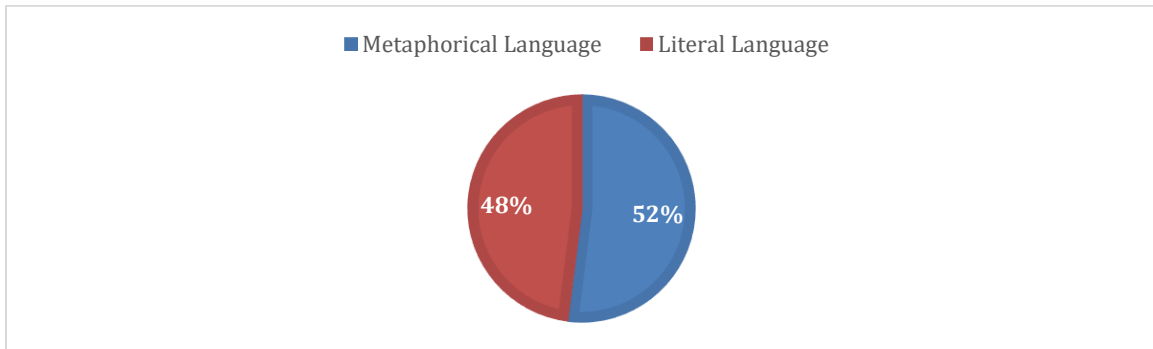
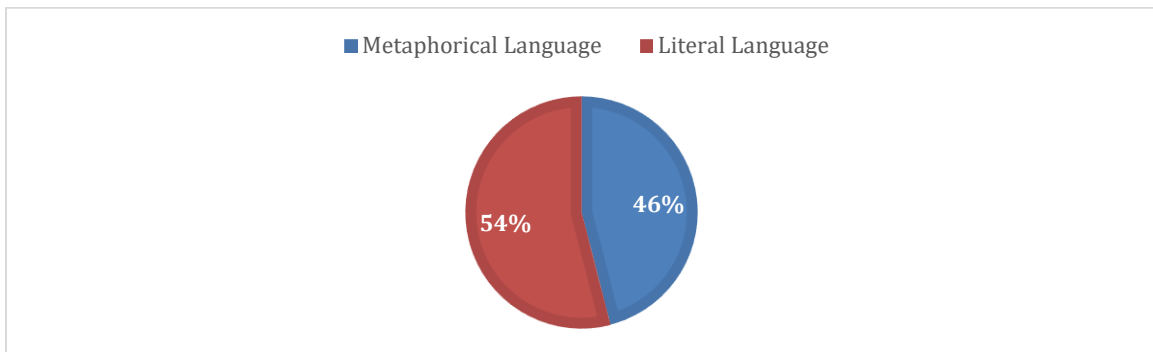
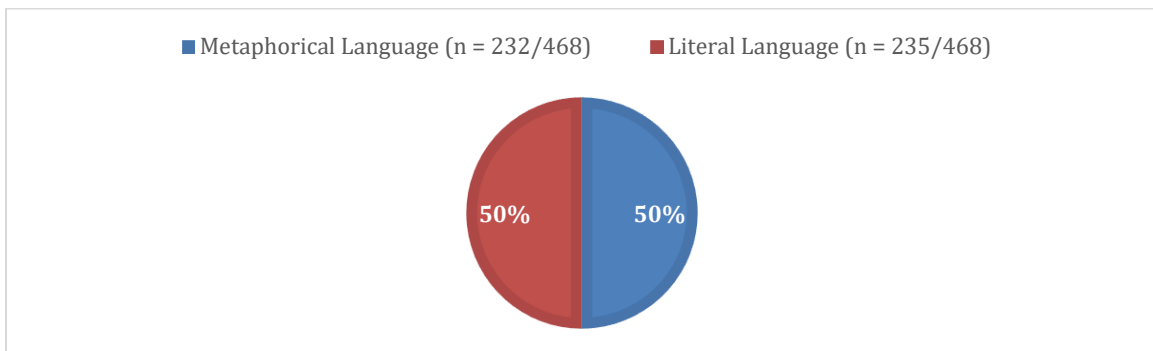


Figure 7. Style of Language deemed as useful by voice practitioners, Part B.



Part A of the survey suggests that students/clients slightly prefer metaphorical over literal language, and Part B suggests that practitioners slightly prefer literal over metaphorical language. However, the overall combined results of this survey, as seen in Figure 8, reflects an equal distribution between the use of metaphorical and literal language as being the overall desired means of communication between clients/students.

Figure 8. Combined total from both students and practitioners.



When calculating the overall number of participants, the comments suggest that only a small percentage of practitioners and students/clients strongly preferred either

metaphorical language 16% or literal language 8% in their voice work. The vast majority 76% of the participants generally desired a strong combination of both.

Of note, only 9% of the student/client participants in this survey specifically indicated that they had never received any kind of anatomical description as to how the voice functions, and 48% of the participants indicated that they often receive anatomical and scientific descriptors in their training.

Limitations

I acknowledge that the qualitative nature of this study and the structure of the assessment tool (see the survey in the Addendum) may have influenced the relatively even results. The survey may encourage a recall bias with some participants. For example, all of the practitioners who answered both Part A and Part B indicated that they had been both students and practitioners at various points in their lives; this design in the study may have influenced the data results.

Discussion of Themes

Overall, the results of this study suggest that using both metaphorical and scientific language for improving vocal outcomes in the voice studio and SLP clinic may be desirable. This implies that practitioners may wish to strive for a diverse and balanced use of both literal and metaphorical language in their work with students and clients. The data also indicates that voice practitioners are responding to this desire and that several students/clients are already receiving basic literal descriptors of “how the voice works” along with more metaphorical instruction in their work with voice practitioners.

Based upon the nature of questions offered in this survey, it is challenging to determine the accuracy and level of understanding student/clients and practitioners have with regard to voice, and any conclusions offered must take this factor into consideration. Nevertheless, this study suggests that voice students and clients desire a balanced and diverse use of both metaphorical and literal language in order to help achieve a desired level of vocal understanding and success.²

Previous educational research essays and manifestos support the data in this study and argue that the study of vocal anatomy and physiology can and should be included in the instructional curricula alongside metaphorical language. Mary Howland supports this approach in a dynamic VASTAvox discussion: “I have only ever experienced any technical approach to help expand and release expressivity – understanding how a speech sound is made can help an actor intuit why a writer uses that sound in a text” (Sept. 16, 2016). Rockford Sansom (2016) agrees:

I’m not saying science instead of art; I’m saying science for art. Different techniques exist to teach the art of voice, and those different techniques, which may include scientific concepts, should be respected, explored and appreciated since we are all working towards the same goals. I think applied scientific knowledge of the voice is just as liberating as imagery-based exercises about the voice because some students simply need detail. [... practitioners should]

embrace a diversity of pedagogies and teaching styles to maximize the number of students we can impact. (165-167)

Educational practice has for many years recognized the need for different methods of teaching, inviting a variety of methods that include diverse and descriptive language choices.

This study also suggests that speech pathologists should also consider the effectiveness of using a variety of methods with clients, including both metaphorical and image-based work. Christina Shewell writes, “For many people, using an image enables them to access a sensation and a movement in the body that technical instructions will not achieve” (Shewell 2009, 22). Tanya Elchuk affirms that “specific imagery, anatomically accurate or not, is of great value in guiding students to greater ease and accuracy in the use of their bodies and voices” (Elchuk 2018, 3).

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study suggest future voice practitioners’ training can and perhaps should include both the art and the science of voice work. The implication, then, is that practitioner training programs should include the study of how the voice works physiologically in addition to more creative approach to training, which are arguably more historically aligned with the voice and speech training field. Voice practitioners are often encouraged to obtain a teacher certification in a specific method or pedagogy that may not necessarily include both the science and art of voice work (Sansom 2016). As a field, we may need to consider a broader approach to training where voice practitioner certification in one particular method is no longer the end goal, but perhaps only one part of the training journey.

This mix of art and science is not unique to voice and speech. Kim Burwell explored the use of metaphorical and literal language in teaching both singers and instrumentalists. Burwell’s study found that singing teachers use more metaphorical language in their studios than instrumental teachers do, and the study suggests that “singing teachers and learners may have much to gain by considering the approaches taken by instrumentalists, and instrumentalists, in turn might have much to learn from singers” (Burwell 2006, 343). Robert H. Woody states that “there is still much to learn about the use of imagery and metaphor in music instruction [...] such approaches can be problematic when used with some students” (Woody 2002, 222). While Woody acknowledges the perceived value in the use of imagery and metaphor as a teaching tool, his study suggests more research is needed when combining imaginative language technical musical terminology in training.

Suggestions for Further Research

In this study, there appears to be a small statistical correlation between those who were primarily singers preferring more metaphorical language during instruction. I assert that there may be a correlation between prosody, the rhythm and intonation of language, and metaphor. Maltese et al. (2012) demonstrate that understanding prosody correlates with

the understanding of idioms and proverbs, which is crucial for the achievement of metalinguistic awareness. Singers, who may potentially have a more advanced understanding of rhythm, pitch, and intonation from early training, may have an affinity for metaphorical language. This correlation and my assertion creates a research topic that is open to further investigation.

Final Personal Reflections

As an artist and a researcher, I believe that the process of generating ideas (creativity itself) is ultimately a blending of both art and science. The more we understand this process as a whole, then the more we realize how much we cannot have one element without the other. The intersection of art and science is truly where interesting ideas and a remarkable creative energy is generated within voice training.

If these links between art and science are to be forged in our field, we must consider how we structure our educational experiences. I have made it a personal mission to foster dialogue between all disciplines and support a willingness to consider new methods of both teaching and program delivery. This particular study is an example of reaching out to the scientific and artistic communities in order to build connections that will facilitate a deeper understanding of what teaching language can help clients or actors succeed.

Although the primary focus of this study was initially to provide information to the actor/singer voice trainer, I believe that this research can ultimately offer deeper insights to vocal health care professionals as they seek out new ways to work with their clients. As one of the survey participants wrote, “The better one understands the voice, the easier it is to describe simply. The more simply one can explain how it works or how it needs to work, the quicker one gets back to the experiential process at the core of new learning.” Our work as voice practitioners continues to benefit from collaboration between performers, teachers, and scientists. It is my sincere hope that we can build on these collaborations for future research. As James Trezona (2011) said, “The future is all about ideas connecting. Those who can bridge art and science will be in demand, will be powerful” (2).

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Addendum

Part A Survey Questions – Questions for Students and Clients

- (1) How many years have you studied or received therapy in some aspect of voice, speech, and/or singing?
- (2) Indicate what kind of instruction and/or therapy you have received.
- (3) Are there any specific aspects about your own voice that you are currently working on such as articulation, resonance, projection, breathing, etc.
- (4) If so, what voice exercises have you found most effective to help with your voice training?
- (5) Are there certain words or phrases that a voice instructor or speech language pathologist has used that you will think about often when you practice speaking or singing?
- (6) If you answered yes, what are some of the words or phrases that you that you find most useful in your vocal practice?
- (7) Have any voice teachers and/or speech language pathologists ever used imaginative words or phrases to describe the kind of sound or physicality they wish you to emulate or produce?
- (8) If you answered yes, what are some of your favorite images that any voice teachers and/or therapists have used to assist you in working on your voice?
- (9) Have any voice teachers and/or therapists described how the voice works anatomically?
- (10) If you answered often or sometimes, what anatomical descriptors were most helpful to you?
- (11) What have you found most frustrating to understand in your voice speech and singing training and/or therapy?
- (12) While performing or speaking publicly to another person, or group of people, are there certain phrases or images that you will think of that remind you of your “vocal technique” or assist you in using your voice effectively?
- (13) If you answered yes, or sometimes, what words, phrases or images are most effective for you while you are in the act of performing or speaking publicly?
- (14) Do you have any further comments?

Part B Survey Questions – Questions for Voice Practitioners

- (1) How many years have you been working as a voice practitioner?
- (2) As a voice practitioner please indicate the type of practice and/or teaching you have done.
- (3) Is there a specific voice method or exercises from an established practitioner that you are drawn to and use in your work?
- (4) Do you use imagery and metaphorical language when you instruct students/clients?
- (5) If you answered often or sometimes, indicate some of your favorite phrases or imaginative language that you feel consistently has positive results for your students.
- (6) If you answered rarely, are there any reasons why you choose not to use

- imagistic and/or metaphorical language in your teaching?
- (7) Do you use anatomical descriptors or scientific explanations about acoustics, physiology, etc. in your work with students/clients?
 - (8) If you answered often or sometimes, what anatomical descriptors and/or scientific explanations do you find most useful when working with your voice and speech clients?
 - (9) If you answered rarely, are there any reasons why you choose not to use anatomical descriptors and/or scientific explanations in your teaching?
 - (10) Do you have any further comments?

Notes

¹ VASTAvox is an on-line listserv community of voice practitioners sponsored by the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA) who wish to communicate thoughts and concerns about voice and speech.

² How vocal understanding and success is individually or broadly defined for students, clients, and practitioners is beyond the scope of this study.