

VOICE CARE TIPS FOR TEACHERS

As a teacher, the most important tool you have is your voice. Far more than simply a vehicle for communicating information, your voice brings emotional colour to your classroom. You use it to build excitement, generate engagement and manage behaviour. Yet, despite the impact the teacher's voice has on effective classroom practice, too few of us know how to support it properly and too many of us experience the symptoms of vocal fatigue. At best, this could mean hoarseness and an irritated throat, at worst, total voice loss.

TEACHERS ARE 8 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO SUFFER VOICE PROBLEMS THAN ANY OTHER PROFESSION.
(VOICE CARE UK)

It is very difficult to teach if you have no voice but the development of a few good habits, along with some small improvements to your vocal care, can minimise the chance of vocal fatigue, as well as improve the impact your voice has on your classroom presence and, ultimately, on learner engagement.

Breathing A poor breathing habit is one of the main causes of vocal fatigue. In everyday conversation we commonly use shallow, upper chest breathing but, to ensure the breath support required when speaking for long periods, we need to utilise our full lung capacity. Think 'breathing to your belly'. When you inhale, your lower rib cage should expand as the bottom of your lungs fill with air. Put your hands round your torso, just above your waist, to get a feel for this. Inhale for five. Hold for five. Exhale for five. Repeat (stop if you feel light-headed). As you improve, exhale on an 'Aaaaah' sound. How long can you hold a steady note for? Just five minutes of breathing exercises daily can help you improve.

Posture Effective breathing requires a relaxed, open posture. Stand feet hip-width apart, spine in natural alignment. Shoulders and neck loose and tension free. If seated, again remain tension free, spine naturally aligned (not slumped), feet planted on the floor (avoid crossing your legs). Consider, also, the impact your posture can have on your classroom presence. Good posture sends a message of confident engagement. Non-verbal communication speaks volumes.

Articulation Are you a mumblor? Does your voice have a tendency to taper off at the end of sentences? Carve your words clearly with your articulators - your tongue, teeth and lips. Tongue twisters are great for waking your articulators up and preventing you from tripping over your tongue, particularly first thing in the morning.

Vocal Variety Vary pitch, pace and volume to engage your listeners. Do you consistently pitch your voice too high? Do you have a habit of speaking too quickly or too slowly? Either of these can lose your audience. To help you identify areas for development, it can be useful to invite a colleague to be a 'critical friend' and give you feedback on your use of voice in the classroom.

Volume If you are breathing effectively, you should find your volume improves. (We're talking projection here, not shouting. A raised voice rarely has a positive impact in the classroom.) The great thing is, if articulation, pitch and pace are all in place, your voice **will** carry. If you still find vocal projection a challenge, it can help to literally 'think the voice out'. As you speak, imagine your voice travelling to the back of the room. Keep working on those breathing exercises.

Daily warm up A daily vocal warm-up will do wonders for your articulation and audibility. Start with a few stretches to loosen your limbs and release tension. Next, imagine you are chewing a really sticky toffee or allow yourself a big yawn to warm up those facial muscles. A super simple but effective way to warm up your voice is to hum - perhaps on the way to work or as you set up your classroom.

Hydrate Drink plenty of water throughout the day. Keep your larynx lubricated! Avoid caffeine, not only does it dehydrate but tiny coffee granules can irritate your delicate vocal folds.

Vocal health It's important to give your voice a chance to rest across your working day. That might mean minimising the staffroom conversation or taking some quiet time on a free period. Reflect also on the extent you speak during lessons. Remember - the teacher's voice should never dominate. If your voice lacks its usual strength, becomes hoarse or you feel that telltale scratch at the back of your throat, you may be suffering vocal fatigue. Vocal rest is vital. Do not whisper - that just puts more strain on your vocal chords. Avoid medicated lozenges - suck a fruit pastille instead. Gargle with cooled, boiled and salted water or soluble aspirin. If the problem persists, you should visit your GP in case of underlying medical issues.

All this, and more, is explored through the interactive online course **Use and Care of Voice for Teachers** available now at www.echo-3.co.uk.

