

Pitch Accuracy Teaching Method

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Please give me feedback on how you go!

I thought up this method in the middle of the night a year or so ago for a piano student who was desperately unable to sing in tune. It worked so well that I started a 'tone deaf' choir for adults, and after ten minutes they were all singing a note in unison. It went from there. After eight weeks of fun and lots of graded repertoire, they were able to join my regular choir. The result? They sang Mozart's Ave Verum in parts, accompanied by a chamber orchestra in a performance for the state governor and an invited audience. Salutations and a life-changing experience.

Here is my (surprisingly simple!) method. Adapt it to suit and use your own words where I have used first person.

1. 'Hold your fingers in front of your mouth and exhale evenly for my eight counts. Feel the air on your fingers so that it has the same quality of air flow for the eight beats. Realise that you don't need a huge intake of breath to do this, but rather, you need to control the airflow by calculating the distance to comfortably get to eight without expiring/falling on the floor.' (*Start at four counts if eight is too many.*)

2. 'You do the counting for (e.g.) six beats with a firm speaking voice while breathing out. Watch my hand to give you the speed of your counting. Inhale as my hand goes up. Count so that you match my hand beats. My hand will also tell you when to stop.' (*Do several of these. The conducting helps students feel the beat, a new experience for many.*)

3. 'Say in a sing-song voice (*to develop vocal pitch awareness*) the words **How now brown cow** to my hand beat.' (*Demonstrate first. These words are good because apart from n in brown, each one ends with a vowel.*)

4. 'This time when you say **How now brown cow**, stop when my hand tells you to but keep the sound going on that syllable. (*By sustaining a spoken pitch, sung pitch will be discovered. Do this several times to lock this physical sensation into the mindset. For a student unable to stay on a note, redo the breathing, sing with him/her/them to do this 'cross over' from a spoken to a sung pitch. Optional extra: You may like to explain the physiology of the vocal folds, diaphragm, trachea etc. at this point, but this will of course depend on the student/s.*)

5. Play a note (e.g. D) on the piano. Have the student slide their voice up and down until they can match the D note. Have them cup their hands behind their ears to better hear their own voice. (*This can bring about a miraculous understanding of pitch.*) Do this until it becomes a more instant 'found the note'. Do E in the same way. (*Keep playing the note over and over so that the sound isn't lost, or better still, use an organ or violin sound on a keyboard because it will sustain the pitch better than a piano.*)
6. Sing made-up or known poetry words on the D. Do the same on E E, and then on the alternating D and E. (*You may prefer the minor third. Use what suits. Only add a new step when the student is ready. Keep revising earlier steps. Hasten slowly.*)
7. Make up and find simple two or three note songs. Examples: Chicken on the Fence Post, Merrily we Roll Along.
8. Gradually extend repertoire. Do lots of echo singing where you sing a short improvised phrase and they echo it. Try this also with a wide distance of physical space between you e.g. front and back of room to develop stronger listening skills.
9. Write on a white board the solfa chart (do it in a vertical line). Put a narrower gap between me/far and te/upper doh. Do short echo phrases where you sing while indicating which solfa notes you are singing with your hand, after which the student/s sings the same phrase while following your hand only. Use the solfa words. Do some solfa-pointing silently where students sing what you have pointed to. This will help develop the inner ear.
10. Student/s sing songs they know well with a piano accompaniment to check if they can hold their melody line while the piano does its harmonic backing. Grow the repertoire, extend the vocal range, add simple two-part phrases and then part songs. Listen to the breathing skills of professional singers, watch YouTube performances and/or just listen to choirs, soloists etc. Extend the listening repertoire by including a wide range of genre – e.g. opera, the original Ode to Joy, and as many different musical experience as possible. Attend concerts. Have immense fun!