

Voice Projection Exercises

by Nancy Hiser

Voice projection is a strategy that has migrated from public speaking and acting into an effective technique for ESL speakers. Voice projection allows a person to achieve greater clarity and power without straining or pushing to increase volume. One of the keys to this technique is to imagine that your voice travels on a string to a point several feet away or more. In addition to this mental imagery, upright head position and a relaxed neck and shoulders are helpful.

I'm a native speaker and, after trying it myself and finding it beneficial, tried and then adopted it for every ESL client in our pronunciation training. Various versions of this strategy exist. I like this one because it is easy and effective. It's difficult to predict who will be helped but, in our very diverse training population, it significantly improved the speech of five out of six people. To try it, you will need a pencil with an eraser and a recording device (any kind, including phone voice mail.) Here are the steps:

1. Turn on the recorder and place it on a table or desk in front of you. Say one sentence in your normal speech. Try to forget the recorder is on; do not change your speech for the situation. Then hold up the pencil vertically about 6 inches from your mouth as if it were a microphone. (The eraser on the pencil is the receiver of the microphone.) Say the same exact sentence into the "mic." Stop the recorder and play the two recordings back. Analyze the differences. Is the second recording louder, softer, slower, faster, more precise? Does it have better intonation or more pauses?
2. Turn on the recorder again. Extend your arm straight out in front of you, holding the pencil as you did before. Say something different this time, remembering to "project" your voice to the mic. Stop the recorder again and replay it. How do you sound?
3. Turn on the recorder for the third time. Find a focal point more than 5 feet away and say a third sentence. Stop the recorder again and play it back. Is it "better" than your normal speech?

Why would your speech improve when speaking into a microphone? Not too difficult to explain—a microphone means you have an audience—people are listening to you and you make an effort to speak more clearly. It's a psychological trick that translates well.

When you teach voice projection to a group, it will be more effective to break into small groups for the first two steps. Counsel students about not speaking too loudly as some people think a microphone means to raise your voice. ("You don't need to raise your volume because it's a very sensitive mic.") Point out that they need to project to the eraser. It's easy to tell they aren't projecting if they aren't looking at the eraser.

Have students complete steps 1 and 2 above before playing back the recordings. Encourage student to comment on the specifics of what is different about the speaker's projected speech. They will quickly notice that some people slow their rate of speaking, some become more articulate, especially pronouncing ending sounds better, some have more pauses, some show increased pitch changes. Prompt students to listen to these various aspects of speech which affect intelligibility. "Is the person clearer? Why?" "How is his volume compared to the first recording?" "Is she faster or slower in the second recording? Which is better?" You will be educating them about important speech variables: loudness, rate, pauses, articulation, intonation.

Each speaker should listen to the comments of others. Then ask each person to listen to their own recordings to see if they can hear a difference. (This is more difficult than listening to others.) When individuals recognize the improvement that occurs with voice projection, it motivates them to use this technique. If they believe they are too loud, ask them to repeat the recordings using a more comfortable volume, but still projecting. Then collectively analyze that sample and give feedback. This is especially important because if people think they are too loud, they will not use voice projection. No one wants to talk when they believe they are shouting. Even at lower volumes, projected speech can be quite clear.

Working now as a whole class, tell students that the only "mic" in the room will be yours (a pencil you are holding). Ask them a simple question and ask them to take turns responding to the mic. That means they will be projecting from various distances within the room to your microphone. Again, remind some they don't need to raise their volume because it's a very sensitive mic. Some students will be engaged with thinking of their response and **will** forget to project. You can tell because their eye contact is elsewhere. Encourage them to try again, look at the mic, and speak into it.

The final step of this voice projection technique is to establish the "mic" focal point on your physical self—an earring, the bridge of your glasses, your nose. Explain that this is the new "mic." Ask another question and prompt them by pointing to your focal point. Elicit comments from others about what they are hearing. "Does that student sound 'better' than in normal conversation?" Ask the speakers, "Do you sound different?" You want them to believe in it if it helps them because this will motivate them to use it. If you spend one hour teaching this technique to an entire group, it may be one of the most worthwhile activities you use. For some people, voice projection will result in significantly improved intelligibility.

Next, create situations for your students to use voice projection. Pair up students to practice. Remind them that they are both working—one is talking, the other is listening to determine if the speaker is projecting. Begin each class by using a gestural prompt, such as wiggling your earring. Ask students if they are projecting. If they cannot respond with a definite "yes"—even if they did project—ask them to repeat what they said while projecting. It becomes an off-on switch and students need to be convinced they can turn it on whenever they want to. Then, use your prompt as needed. Fade the prompt over time, replacing it with a more subtle prompt such as raising your eyebrow. After students

have practiced and know how to project, give them assignments outside of the classroom—perhaps leaving a voice mail message by projecting into the phone.

You can also suggest they try a greeting and the first sentence of a message when talking with someone in person. Ask them to visualize the person and tell you where the focal point will be. It should be somewhere near the eyes to make the listener believe the person is looking at them. This supports eye contact, too. Listeners may recognize that the speaker sounds clearer, but reassure students that their listeners will not know what they are doing. They won't be able to use it consistently in the beginning, as it adds yet another layer to the challenge of speaking. But gradually, they can adopt this if it is helpful. It's a technique I use each time I speak to a group.

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