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Developing Vocal Technique and Artistic Expression Skills in University Music Education

Le Thi Thu Trang
Hong Duc University, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT:
Background: University vocal training must develop reliable vocal coordination while enabling students to communicate musical and lyrical meaning. When technical exercises and artistic interpretation are treated as separate activities, improvement in one may not transfer into convincing performance. Objective: This article examines the competencies and teaching decisions required to integrate vocal technique with artistic expression in higher music education. Methods: An interpretive, practice-oriented review synthesises scholarship on voice science, singing pedagogy, musical expression, deliberate practice, feedback, and performance assessment, supplemented by three Vietnamese studies of university vocal instruction and one bounded cross-disciplinary teaching comparison. No new student, acoustic, or intervention data were collected. Results: The synthesis identifies four interconnected competency domains and four recurring pedagogical tensions. It proposes the VOICE cycle - Vocal coordination, Observation and diagnosis, Interpretation, Contextual enactment, and Evaluation and revision - and translates it into a repertoire-based teaching sequence with observable learning evidence and a descriptive assessment scheme. Conclusion: Technical proficiency and artistic expression are best approached as mutually informing dimensions of learning rather than competing outcomes. VOICE offers a conceptual design tool for university teachers; its feasibility, assessment reliability, and educational effects remain to be tested in classroom and studio settings.

KEYWORDS: vocal technique, artistic expression, university music education, singing pedagogy, repertoire-based learning, formative assessment, VOICE framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher music education prepares singers not merely to reproduce pitches but to make musical decisions that remain coherent in public performance. A singer must coordinate respiration, phonation, resonance, articulation, intonation, and rhythm while shaping a text, projecting an artistic intention, and responding to accompaniment. These dimensions are often practised through different activities. Scales, sustained tones, and technical studies build coordination; song analysis, rehearsal, and stage work address interpretation. The educational problem arises when progress in isolated exercises is assumed to guarantee expressive performance, or when expressive intensity is taken as evidence of technical security.

The distinction is consequential for undergraduate students, whose entry profiles, repertoires, prior instruction, and vocal development vary. Some may achieve a stable tone but struggle to communicate the progression of a lyric. Others produce compelling phrases in a familiar song yet lose consistency when the tessitura, tempo, language, or performance setting changes. University instruction must respond to both situations without imposing one ideal vocal colour or one fixed model of emotional display. The nature of the chosen repertoire matters: a sustained classical phrase, a folk-derived song, and a contemporary popular ballad do not demand identical articulation, timbre, breath distribution, or stage presentation.

Voice science explains important functional conditions of singing (Sundberg, 1987; Titze, 2006), while psychological research has examined the cues through which musical performance communicates emotion (Juslin, 2003; Juslin & Laukka, 2003). Research in popular-music voice teaching further emphasises genre-sensitive expertise, professional agency, and institutional conditions (Keskinen & Juntunen, 2024; Keskinen et al., 2024). Vietnamese pedagogical publications address matching technique with songs about Thanh Hoa and specific technical challenges faced by vocal students (Trinh, 2022; Le, 2023, 2024). These contributions are valuable, but their different emphases leave a practical design question: how should technique, expressive decision-making, performance conditions, and evidence of student progress be connected within one teaching cycle?

This article examines three research questions. RQ1: Which competencies jointly support technically dependable and artistically meaningful singing by university students? RQ2: What tensions occur when teachers pursue technical accuracy, individual interpretation, sustainable practice, and accountable assessment? RQ3: How can those competencies be translated into teachable tasks and reviewable evidence without reducing artistic quality to a single standard? The intended contribution is an integrated pedagogical framework for the planning and review of vocal courses. The article does not report gains in vocal ability or claim that the proposed framework has been experimentally validated.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Vocal coordination, technique, and healthy practice

Vocal technique comprises coordinated bodily and acoustic processes rather than a fixed list of effects. Sundberg (1987) describes the relationships among breathing, phonation, resonance, and articulation that underlie singing. Titze (2006), using a physical model, explains the rationale for semi-occluded vocal-tract configurations; such evidence informs functional understanding but does not establish a universal exercise prescription for every voice or style. For higher education, these accounts support attention to efficient coordination, audible consistency, and adaptation to the particular technical demands of a phrase.

A pedagogical distinction is needed between technical means and musical ends. Breath organisation may support a long phrase, but the phrase must still have a meaningful destination. Accurate onset can improve clarity, but a deliberately soft onset may be an appropriate stylistic choice. Register transitions require coordination, yet neither an entirely uniform timbre nor an expansive range is automatically an artistic success. Work on the occupational health of contemporary commercial singers also cautions against simplistic claims that a stylistic sound is inherently healthy or harmful: the interaction of workload, technique, intensity, and recovery matters (Morawska et al., 2022). Teachers should monitor perceived effort and persistent difficulty, while leaving diagnosis and treatment to appropriately qualified professionals.

Vietnamese publications make the repertoire connection concrete. Trinh (2022) discusses the selection of vocal techniques for teaching songs associated with Thanh Hoa. Le (2023) addresses staccato and rapid passage work for undergraduate soprano repertoire, while Le (2024) considers expanding vocal range in the same broader educational setting. These are context-specific pedagogical discussions, not controlled demonstrations of a teaching method's effectiveness across universities. Their transferable implication is narrower but useful: technical exercises should be chosen in relation to the score, the singer, and the musical purpose instead of applied indiscriminately.

2.2. Artistic expression as musical decision-making

Musical expression is not synonymous with exaggerated emotion or increased volume. Juslin (2003) describes several interacting facets of expressive performance, including clarification of musical structure, emotional communication, motion-like shaping, and stylistic variation. Juslin and Laukka (2003), reviewing vocal and musical expression research, identify similarities in the acoustic cues associated with perceived emotions. These studies show that timing, dynamics, articulation, and timbral decisions can contribute to communication; they do not imply that every emotion has one obligatory vocal formula.

For singing, expression is negotiated through both music and language. Accent, consonant timing, vowel duration, pauses, melodic contour, dynamic trajectory, and interaction with accompaniment help an audience understand the speaker, situation, and change of intention within a song. The interpretive task is therefore to justify choices against the text and musical form. A singer may test two versions of a phrase, compare their intelligibility and character, and retain the version that best communicates the intended meaning while remaining vocally manageable. Such comparison treats interpretation as a skill that can be explained and refined, without claiming that artistic judgement is fully objective.

Genre sensitivity is essential. Green (2002) shows the importance of listening, imitation, and peer learning in popular music practices, while Keskinen and Juntunen (2024) identify the diversity of knowledge areas involved in popular-music voice pedagogy. University teaching can borrow aural learning strategies without presenting imitation as the final goal. Students need to recognise conventions, identify what makes a model performance persuasive, and adapt those resources to their own voice and repertoire.

2.3. Deliberate practice, feedback, and assessment

The relationship between exercise and performance depends on the structure of practice. Ericsson et al. (1993) conceptualised deliberate practice as effort directed toward specific improvements with informative feedback. In an observational study of advanced pianists, Duke et al. (2009) found that practice time alone did not account for subsequent performance rankings. The piano findings are not direct evidence for vocal students, but they sharpen the pedagogical question of what the learner corrects, how the correction is checked, and whether it remains available under performance conditions.

Feedback is more useful when it identifies a goal, provides evidence about present performance, and indicates a next step than when it merely labels a rendition successful or unsuccessful (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). For a vocalist, a recorded phrase may reveal unstable vowel formation, a delayed consonant, or a weak interpretive climax. The task is to distinguish the source of difficulty before prescribing repetition. Assessment rubrics can clarify criteria and document progress, although they cannot remove the subjective dimensions of musical judgement (Wesolowski, 2012).

Music-performance pressure complicates the picture. Blair and van der Sluis (2022) and Mazzarolo et al. (2023) note that evidence about anxiety management does not always translate easily into ordinary music teaching. Gradual rehearsal under realistic conditions, predictable feedback, and supportive opportunities to perform may therefore be incorporated as educational practices, without presenting them as clinical treatment or guaranteed anxiety reduction.

2.4. University learning design and contextual relevance

Constructive alignment relates intended learning outcomes to practice activities and assessment evidence (Biggs & Tang, 2011). A course that claims to foster expression but assesses only pitch and duration provides an incomplete account of its goals. Repertoire-based performance projects can connect technical learning to authentic audiences and collaborative rehearsal (Tobias et al., 2015). Similarly, assigning marks for emotion without describing observable musical decisions invites arbitrary judgement. The aim is not to score artistic personality; it is to make technical control, interpretive reasoning, and performance application visible through different forms of evidence.

Keskinen (2025) reports that voice teacher education in two Nordic contexts places importance on reflection, creativity, resilience, and student agency. These findings concern particular institutions and cannot be assumed to describe Vietnamese universities. A Vietnamese article on teaching technical sewing skills in fashion design likewise discusses practice-oriented instruction (Tran, 2024); it is included solely as a cross-disciplinary illustration of the need to connect skill objectives and learning tasks, not as evidence about singing. Together with specialist vocal studies, these sources motivate a model that is adaptable to institutional contexts rather than prescribed as a universal curriculum.

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Corresponding Author: Le Thi Thu Trang

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design

The study uses an interpretive integrative review and a practice-oriented pedagogical synthesis. Its unit of analysis is the instructional decision: how a teacher identifies a vocal or interpretive problem, chooses a learning task, obtains evidence of a student's response, and revises the next task. This design addresses conceptual relationships and course organisation rather than the measured effect of an intervention. It is distinct from a systematic review and from empirical classroom research.

3.2. Documentary sources and selection principles

Sources were selected purposively from identifiable academic and professional publications covering vocal function and health, musical expression, voice pedagogy, deliberate practice, feedback, assessment, and higher-education learning design. International literature supplied disciplinary concepts and published findings; three Vietnamese papers supplied bounded illustrations of technique applied to particular vocal-learning contexts. One Vietnamese practice-based study outside music was retained only for a limited comparison concerning instructional alignment. Relevance to at least one research question and clarity about the source's evidentiary role were the main selection principles.

The selection was not exhaustive. No database-wide search protocol, registered screening strategy, formal quality score, or effect-size synthesis is claimed. General findings from music psychology and voice science were not treated as evidence that one specified lesson structure is effective for a particular cohort. Descriptive reports, theoretical arguments, and the author's design proposals were kept analytically separate.

3.3. Analytical procedure and limits of inference

The synthesis involved four linked steps. First, sources were examined for the competency or teaching issue they addressed and for whether they offered empirical findings, conceptual analysis, or contextual description. Second, concepts were grouped into vocal coordination, artistic interpretation, communicative performance, and reflective learning. Third, competing instructional priorities were compared to identify tensions that could weaken transfer from exercise to repertoire or from rehearsal to public performance. Fourth, the relationships were translated into a cyclical model with teaching questions, observable products, and possible assessment criteria.

The framework was retained at the level of pedagogical propositions, not tested outcomes. No student interviews, course assessments, acoustic recordings, physiological measures, or teaching observations were collected for this article. The tables are analytic and illustrative; the proposed weights and sequence below have not been validated. Future empirical work must examine feasibility, fairness, reliability, and effects on different types of singers before general claims are warranted.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Four connected competencies for university vocal training

The synthesis identifies four mutually dependent competency domains. Vocal coordination concerns reliable intonation, rhythmic timing, phrase management, articulation, register transitions, and sustainable effort. Artistic-interpretive literacy concerns understanding lyrics, genre, form, emotional trajectory, and the reasons behind expressive choices. Communicative performance concerns making those choices audible and legible in full musical situations, including coordination with accompaniment and purposeful stage action. Reflective agency concerns identifying one's own difficulties, responding to feedback, comparing alternative solutions, and preparing independently.

The domains should not be taught as isolated successive semesters. A technically secure phrase needs interpretive direction; an emotionally convincing intention must survive the technical demands of singing; and a performance context can expose weaknesses that were hidden in individual practice. A student's apparent lack of expressiveness might reflect an excessively demanding key or an unclear understanding of the lyrics. Conversely, a phrase that sounds uncontrolled could be a deliberate stylistic choice. Diagnosis therefore needs multiple forms of evidence.

Table 1. Competency domains and evidence for university vocal learning

Competency domain	Observable learning focus	Possible evidence
Vocal coordination	Intonation, phrase control, articulation, register, effort	Targeted recordings; teacher observation; practice notes
Interpretive literacy	Lyric analysis, stylistic reasoning, phrasing alternatives	Annotated text; interpretive rationale; alternate takes
Communicative performance	Coordination with accompaniment, presence, whole-song coherence	Rehearsal video; peer response; complete performance
Reflective agency	Diagnosis, feedback use, independent adjustment	Revision log; comparative recordings; short reflection

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis of voice, expression, practice, and assessment literature.

4.2. Four pedagogical tensions

Four tensions organise the synthesis. First, accuracy versus expressive purpose: attention to notes may obscure phrase meaning, while dramatic delivery may become unreliable. Second, consistency versus stylistic individuality: dependable technique should preserve genre-appropriate variation. Third, teacher modelling versus student agency: demonstration can clarify technique, but imitation without analysis can limit artistic ownership. Fourth, final performance versus developmental evidence: a polished recital may conceal inconsistent preparation, while one weak take may obscure meaningful progress.

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Corresponding Author: Le Thi Thu Trang

Table 2. Pedagogical tensions and balancing decisions

Tension	Risk of narrow practice	Balancing question
Accuracy / expression	Correct notes but uncommunicative phrasing	What technical choice serves this musical intention?
Consistency / individuality	One prescribed tone obscures style and identity	Which variations are intentional and repeatable?
Modelling / agency	Imitation without personal artistic judgement	Can the student explain and test an alternative?
Final product / progress	One performance obscures learning and revision	What evidence documents development and transfer?

Source: Authors' interpretive synthesis; proposed rather than empirically ranked tensions.

These tensions require balanced decisions rather than a choice of one side. The practical test is whether an exercise enables a clear musical intention, whether the intended expressive effect remains repeatable, and whether the student can explain and adapt the decision in a new context. Vocal health and workload planning cut across all four tensions: neither technical advancement nor public performance should be used to justify persistent discomfort or unsupported claims about vocal safety.

4.3. The proposed VOICE pedagogical framework

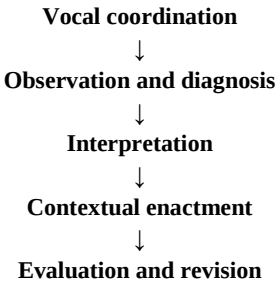
The findings are translated into the VOICE cycle: Vocal coordination, Observation and diagnosis, Interpretation, Contextual enactment, and Evaluation and revision. Each element represents a teachable decision and a type of evidence rather than a fixed number of lessons. The cycle is iterative because the musical result of one stage may require return to an earlier stage. In practice, the singer may begin from the expressive objective and then identify a technical need, or begin with a coordination difficulty revealed by a recorded performance.

Table 3. Operational questions and evidence in the VOICE cycle

VOICE element	Core teaching question	Minimum review evidence
Vocal coordination	Can this phrase be sung dependably without avoidable strain?	Short task recording; effort note
Observation and diagnosis	What exactly is unstable, unclear, or inconsistent?	Baseline comparison; diagnostic note
Interpretation	What do the text, form, and style require?	Annotated lyrics; comparison of choices
Contextual enactment	Does the intention survive accompaniment and staging?	Full-phrase or full-song run-through
Evaluation and revision	What changed and what should be retested?	Feedback record; next-step decision

Source: Authors' proposed pedagogical framework; validation is required.

Figure 1. The proposed VOICE pedagogical cycle



Evaluation informs renewed coordination, diagnosis, and interpretation.

Vocal coordination establishes workable conditions for an intended phrase. Observation and diagnosis compare those conditions with a baseline recording and teacher-student discussion. Interpretation identifies the musical and linguistic intention, tests alternatives, and records the rationale for a choice. Contextual enactment places the choice into accompaniment, movement, stage acoustics, and a complete rendition. Evaluation and revision compare the result with the intended goal and identify one or two specific changes for the next cycle. The process is proposed as a practical heuristic, not as an empirically confirmed sequence of vocal development.

Two safeguards are important. First, not every technical feature should become a numerical target; a rubric can indicate the degree of stability or communicative clarity without ranking one timbre or personality as universally superior. Second, a recording is a partial representation of performance because microphone placement, room acoustics, and accompaniment affect what is heard. Audio, video, direct listening, student reflection, and teacher judgement should be used together where feasible.

4.4. A repertoire-based learning and assessment design

VOICE may be applied through a twelve-week course example, with overlapping phases rather than a rigid intervention schedule. In the first phase students choose repertoire suited to their present resources, analyse lyrics and form, and record a short baseline. In the second, teachers select limited technical problems directly connected to expressive goals, and students produce contrasting phrase versions. The third phase

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integrates accompaniment and low-stakes run-throughs with peer feedback. The final phase consolidates a complete performance, a short written explanation of artistic decisions, and a reflection identifying evidence of progress and unresolved needs.

Table 4. Illustrative twelve-week application of VOICE

Phase	Instructional emphasis	Evidence of learning
Weeks 1-3	Repertoire analysis and diagnostic baseline	Initial recording; lyric and phrase map
Weeks 4-6	Targeted coordination and expressive alternatives	Exercise log; paired phrase takes
Weeks 7-9	Accompaniment and staged transfer	Rehearsal video; criterion-based feedback
Weeks 10-12	Complete performance, evaluation, revision	Final recording; brief reflective portfolio

Source: Illustrative course plan, not a tested intervention timetable.

An assessment portfolio might include annotated lyrics, a targeted technical exercise log, paired recordings before and after revision, one rehearsal video, the final performance, and a short reflective statement. To avoid substituting process paperwork for music-making, the portfolio should be selective: each item must answer a specific learning question. Teachers may assess technical dependability, interpretive coherence, communicative execution, and reflective response through descriptive criteria, then use numerical weights only if the institution requires them. For illustration, a course could allocate 30% to vocal coordination, 25% to interpretation, 25% to performance integration, and 20% to reflection and revision. These proportions are proposed, not empirically justified, and would need calibration against learning outcomes and assessor agreement.

A short worked example shows the cycle's purpose. In a lyrical song, a student may sustain a climactic high note accurately yet obscure the crucial consonant at the start of the phrase. Rather than demand additional power, a teacher can first establish the phrase's linguistic stress, compare recorded consonant-vowel timing, adjust the preparation of the vowel, and then test the result with accompaniment. A second recording can document whether intelligibility improved without sacrificing ease. Such a sequence illustrates an instructional reasoning process; no observed student or measured improvement is asserted here.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Integrating functional and artistic learning

The proposed framework responds to a recurring false opposition in vocal instruction. Technique is sometimes treated as a neutral foundation completed before interpretation; expression is then added as a finishing layer. Yet the selection of a technical strategy depends on phrase purpose, repertoire, and style. Conversely, musical intention has limited value if it cannot be enacted consistently. This reciprocal relationship is compatible with voice-science accounts of coordination (Sundberg, 1987; Titze, 2006) and with research on the expressive function of timing, dynamics, and timbre (Juslin, 2003; Juslin & Laukka, 2003). The contribution of VOICE is to translate reciprocity into decisions, tasks, and review evidence.

5.2. Implications for university music programmes in Vietnam

A Vietnamese university programme may combine classical training, popular repertoire, school-music preparation, and songs associated with regional cultures. The same assessment vocabulary cannot imply identical tone production or stage convention across all of these settings. Local studies on Thanh Hoa repertoire and vocal techniques show the relevance of matching exercises to song characteristics and student needs (Trinh, 2022; Le, 2023, 2024). At the same time, the present synthesis cannot determine how widely these needs occur in Vietnamese institutions or which methods have the strongest effects.

A practical curriculum response would therefore specify technical and expressive outcomes for each selected repertoire category, permit alternative interpretations where justified, and include opportunities for students to compare their decisions against musical evidence. Voice teachers, accompanists, and performance instructors could share short notes about problems that cross lesson boundaries. Such coordination may prevent a stage assignment from undermining a phrase strategy established in the studio. It also makes resource requirements visible: adequate rehearsal time, suitable repertoire, recording access, and predictable criteria matter as much as the choice of exercise.

5.3. Evaluation, inclusion, and sustainable development

A defensible evaluation system distinguishes technical error from intentional difference. Pitch instability, unintelligible text, and poor coordination with accompaniment can be identified against the task's musical purpose, but emotional credibility also requires informed human judgement. Wesolowski (2012) supports explicit assessment criteria, while Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasise feedback that leads to an actionable next step. Rubrics should therefore be accompanied by concise narrative commentary and opportunities to revise, rather than treated as mechanically sufficient representations of artistry.

The approach also creates responsibilities concerning learner diversity. Students differ in voice type, language background, prior training, confidence, and experience with public performance. Teacher modelling should be paired with invitations to propose alternatives; rehearsal feedback should describe observable actions rather than personal inadequacy. Performance anxiety should be acknowledged as a possible obstacle to demonstrating competence, without assigning clinical diagnoses within ordinary vocal teaching (Blair & van der Sluis, 2022; Mazzarolo et al., 2023). Similarly, monitoring vocal effort and recovery is a matter of responsible pedagogy, not a substitute for specialist assessment where persistent symptoms occur (Morawska et al., 2022).

5.4. Limitations and directions for research

The principal limitation is the conceptual design. The sources differ in population, musical genre, method, and level of inference; findings about professional singers, piano students, and Nordic teacher education cannot be transferred automatically to Vietnamese undergraduate vocal courses. The Vietnamese publications offer valuable situated examples but do not form a representative dataset. No independent review team,

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exhaustive evidence search, student sample, classroom observation, inter-rater reliability analysis, or pre-post intervention measurement was undertaken.

Future work could pilot VOICE in contrasting programmes, first testing whether instructors and students understand its terminology and can produce the proposed evidence without undue workload. A subsequent mixed-methods study could combine repeated performance assessments, assessor agreement, recordings evaluated under consistent conditions, student reflection, and interviews with teachers and accompanists. Outcomes should include technical stability, communicative clarity, student agency, and sustainable preparation rather than a single overall performance score. Until such studies are conducted, VOICE is a reasoned pedagogical proposal rather than a validated model.

6. CONCLUSION

Developing vocal technique and artistic expression in higher music education requires more than adding interpretation to technical drills. The synthesis identifies four connected competencies - vocal coordination, interpretive literacy, communicative performance, and reflective agency - and shows how narrow teaching choices can place these competencies in tension. The proposed VOICE cycle links exercises and repertoire to diagnosis, artistic intention, performance conditions, and revision. It offers teachers an explicit structure for planning tasks and collecting meaningful evidence while respecting repertoire diversity and individual vocal resources. Its value should be assessed through subsequent classroom and studio research rather than assumed from conceptual coherence alone.

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Corresponding Author: Le Thi Thu Trang