

2009

Beyond Error Detection: A Cycle of Pedagogical Skills for Choral Conductors

Patrick K. Freer

Georgia State University, pfreer@gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/music_facpub



Part of the [Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Freer, P. K. (2009). Beyond Error Detection: A Cycle of Pedagogical Skills for Choral Conductors. *Choral Journal*, 50(3), 34-45.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Music at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

An abstract painting of a conductor, rendered in a style reminiscent of Vincent van Gogh's 'Olympia'. The conductor is depicted in profile, facing right, with a dark silhouette. The background is a complex, layered composition of bold, expressive brushstrokes in a rich palette of red, yellow, blue, and black. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and rhythmic movement, mirroring the subject of the book.

Beyond Error Detection: A Cycle of Pedagogical Skills for Choral Conductors

Patrick K. Freer

When asked by a local reporter to elaborate on a statement that half of teaching is procedure, noted author Frank McCourt replied, "It took me 15 years to begin to feel comfortable in the classroom. It takes a while to develop your own style, an unconscious philosophy of teaching, personality, strategies for different kids."¹ In this simple statement, McCourt alluded to the relationship between the philosophy and practice of teaching. Although this relationship has been repeatedly examined at length and in detail, it is a relationship that remains at the center of nearly all conversations about music, conducting, and teaching.

McCourt's brief comment includes the phrase "unconscious philosophy of teaching" that he equates with the style of teaching, or the techniques and strategies that are most resonant with or effective in specific combinations of teachers and students. And yet, his use of the word "unconscious" suggests that the underlying philosophy of teaching is frequently unspoken or without thought. The other-than-conscious foundational philosophy of choral conductors is a concern for all invested in the future of amateur choral ensembles, as they exist in schools, universities, churches, and communities. If, as McCourt suggests, unvoiced philosophies can be made evident through

teaching style, it would be incorrect to assume that the practice of choral conductors lacks a philosophical grounding. Rather, the need to discuss the philosophical may seem less important than how that philosophy is realized through practice.

The terms we use to describe our roles as choral leaders reflect both the conditions of and our philosophies about our work, whether we choose those terms consciously or not. Those of us who serve as pre—Kindergarten—12 school personnel are primarily music teachers who instruct through choral music. The term "choral music teacher," therefore, best describes the responsibilities of these conductor/teachers. In pre—Kindergarten to 12th grade settings, teaching and conducting are intertwined such that there is no justifiable distinction between the two. However, in the broader view of choral music, the term "choral conductor" speaks to the larger art form, encompassing both the educational needs of the singers and the musical interests of composers and repertoire. Use of the term "choral conductor" implies service to both singers—the choral ensemble—as well as composers and repertoire—the choral music.

The elements that bridge these two components, the singers and the music,

Beyond Error Detection

constitute the choral experience. Conductors, by definition, deeply influence the choral experience of singers through their implementation of philosophy and facility with pedagogical skills, in combination with the musical perception of the choristers. Some conductors intuitively blend philosophy with pedagogy such that some of the most profound moments within the choral experience appear to occur spontaneously. All conductors, however, make a variety of conscious decisions that either promote or discourage the conditions within which optimal choral experiences can occur. This article focuses on one of those conscious efforts—the giving of feedback to choral singers during rehearsal. This feedback from conductor to choir encompasses elements of the spoken word, vocal modeling, and non-verbal cues such as facial expressions or pre-arranged signals.

The Design of Rehearsals and Rehearsing

Choral music is an art form people listen to, study, sing, feel and conduct. It can be thought of as a noun and a verb. In a *Choral Journal* interview some time ago, the music education philosopher David Elliott spoke of singing—a verb—as a demonstration of musicianship—a noun. In Elliott's words, singing is "musical knowing-in-action."² Similarly, the classic philosophical riddle, asking whether a falling tree makes sound if no one can hear it, might be reframed to ask whether choral music exists if there is no one to sing it. The music might exist as an object, but it is the transformation of the music through human bodies that brings forth an experience of choral music.

Within this framework, conductors who think of choral music as something people do might consider themselves as primarily in service to the singers. In contrast, conductors who view choral music as encompassing composition and performance-as-product might consider themselves as primarily in service to the music. Conductors who focus on the participatory aspects of choral music will give substantially different feedback to choristers than will conductors for who music-as-object is preeminent. The reality is that

these views are not mutually exclusive, and conductors likely hold both views in a fluid proportion that reflects the unique contexts of individual rehearsals or performances.

Which view is more conducive toward effective rehearsing? Some answers may be found in the words of esteemed conductors who have constructively negotiated between the boundaries of both views. For instance, one chapter in the book *In Quest of Answers: Interviews with American Choral Conductors* presents the responses of many choral conductors to a question about the primary objectives of their choral programs.³ Joseph Huszti responded by linking elements of his philosophy and practice:

My philosophy is pretty simple. I want to give my students a musical experience upon which they continue to grow as musicians and as persons. My approach is both intellectual and emotional. I want the singers to understand what is in the score. I want them to sing so that they are aware of what it is to create an ensemble. I try to give them musical know-how so that they can leave the university situation and be able to survive musically as individuals. We must arm our singers with tools enabling them to continue their growth as artists.⁴

In his response, Huszti epitomized the views of conductors for whom choral music is an experiential process made satisfying by an ever-increasing combination of musical skills and knowledge. It is the conductor/teacher's responsibility to craft each moment within rehearsals—and across multiple rehearsals—to provide singers with a carefully sequenced progression of musical encounters that matches the challenges of repertoire with the skills of the choristers. Even so, choruses are comprised of individual singers who respond and react uniquely, leading to multiple choral experiences rather than the choral experience.

Reflecting on the nature of musical experience, conductor, teacher and philosopher Estelle Jorgensen wrote,

The human dimensions of music education are just as important as

the material to be learned and taught and cannot be separated from it . . .

The word experience is understood here in the deep sense of a profound impact on the person, one that is practical and relevant to the needs and interests of student, teacher, and public alike; perceived as significant by the individual undergoing it . . . Music education comes alive when learners view knowledge as relevant to their lives; within their powers to grasp; challenging, inspiring, and encouraging them to move beyond past attitudes, abilities, and attainments.⁵

Matching the challenges posed by choral music with the skills of the singers reflects a delicate, ever-changing equation. On the one hand, choral repertoire is likely to be rehearsed for several months prior to a concert. Conductors need to predict that the choir will be able to successfully perform the selections on concert day, even though the singers may begin the rehearsal process unable to successfully sing any portion of the repertoire. On the other hand, each successive rehearsal yields to the next in close enough proximity that effective conductors can accurately adjust the pedagogy to meet the needs of both the music and the singers.

If the conductor is too focused on music as object, the most carefully developed rehearsal plans may be quickly abandoned when the singers' efforts fall short of the idealized final product. This falling short frequently occurs in rehearsals led by young conductor/teachers who stop to address every incorrect issue they detect, whether pitch, rhythm, pronunciation, or vocal production. At the other extreme are conductors who may be reticent to address these technical issues for fear of squelching the positive experience of their singers. Conductors with a more balanced view are able to see how immediately addressing a technical issue may lead toward a better singer experience and how postponing another technical adjustment may be a more suitable decision.

An appropriate balance and timing of these decisions can come with experience. These decisions, however, occur with such frequency that conductors and singers may sense that rehearsals are merely searches

for errors, haphazardly designed, or without overarching plans. Rehearsal plans are abandoned (if there were lesson plans to begin with), and the pacing of rehearsals becomes more rapid. In these instances, conductors often detect an error, give singers something to do in response, and, rather than comment on the singers' efforts, immediately proceed to address a different error. As researcher Harry Price noted,

If the teacher starts the group by telling them where to begin (directions) and how to perform the task (musical task presentation), has them interact with the task (performing), and then gives them feedback that is contingent on their performance, a constructive rehearsal environment has been created in which the students know what is wanted and how to do it ... If the teacher waits until after an ensemble starts performing before deciding on the task, the ensemble members are essentially deciding rehearsal content by virtue of their mistakes.⁶

When conductors allow the errors of their choristers to determine the content of rehearsals, they have no choice but to react to discrepancies between the singers' efforts and the ideal end product of choral music. But, when conductors methodically design the content of their rehearsals based on long-term plans and knowledge of the singers' most recent efforts, they can craft instructional strategies that meet the needs of choristers and repertoire. A methodical rehearsal design must also guide each individual rehearsal micro segment that begins when conductors request that the choir perform a task.

The following "Cycle of Pedagogical Skills" is suggested as an organizing tool that conductors can employ to promote rehearsals that balance the singers' experience with the musical integrity demanded by the choral art form (Illustration 1). This cycle was initially developed in my university choral methods course as a way to encourage young conductors to provide specific feedback to their choristers.

A Cycle of Pedagogical Skills

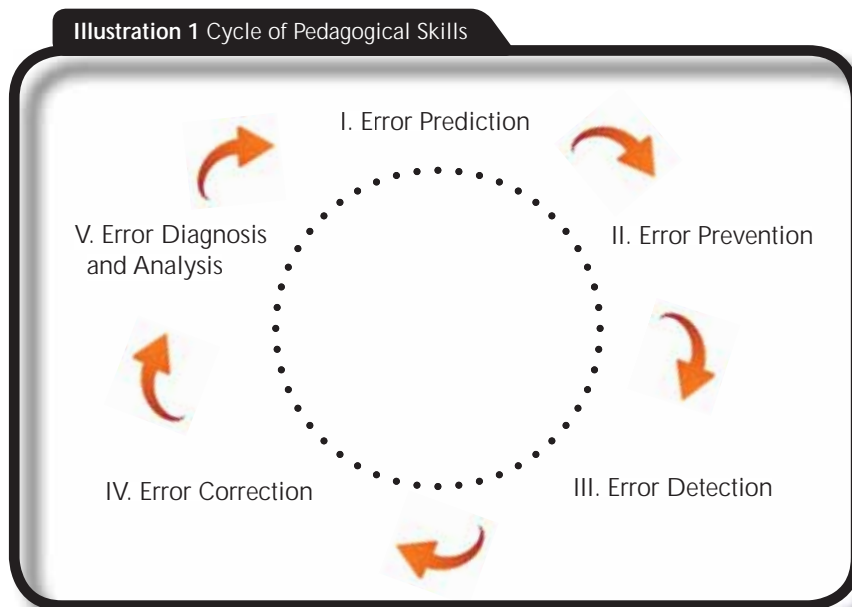
The phrase "pedagogical skills" firmly situates the choral conductor as leader and teacher of the rehearsal. Leading, however, is not the same as dictating; it need not be heavy-handed and exclusionary. Leading choral rehearsals ought to be about guiding singers from one level of choral experience to another, more advance level of experience. Though the singers will likely achieve that heightened experience because of the enhanced individual skills they gain during rehearsals, they will do so in collaboration with their fellow choral musicians—including their conductor. Leading rehearsals implies a plan grounded in an educational and artistic philosophy that informs each step along the process of planning and conducting rehearsals. As a macro view, conductors who are aware of their philosophical stance toward rehearsing can make decisions about what to address preemptively, what to focus on in the moment it occurs, and what can be anticipated for the future. This macro view, then, informs the manner in which conductors proceed through the detailed give-and-take of each rehearsal session.

The pedagogical cycle begins long before the planning of any specific rehearsal when the conductor starts studying the score and

develops an aural image of the composition. During the planning for each individual rehearsal, the conductor predicts errors that singers may make based on score analysis and knowledge of the singers' level of vocal, musical, and linguistic abilities. Once the potential errors have been identified, the conductor designs a warm-up sequence to preemptively address these issues in an effort to provide singers with knowledge and skills to handle the specific problem spots as they arise within the repertoire. This stage of error prevention may require a sequence of skill development that spans multiple rehearsals, depending upon the complexity of the concepts or vocal techniques presented in the repertoire.

During the rehearsal, the conductor vigilantly detects the errors that occur, both those that were anticipated and any others that arise. The conductor prioritizes among these to ensure that the correction of errors does not move the rehearsal away from the plans and goals that were established during the initial planning phase. The cycle concludes as the conductor diagnoses the problems that occurred during rehearsal, determines whether there were underlying, undetected issues that prompted the errors, and analyzes the information for how to best proceed in subsequent rehearsals. The cycle begins anew as plans that reflect the analysis

Illustration 1 Cycle of Pedagogical Skills



Beyond Error Detection

are developed for the ensuing rehearsal.

In the paragraphs that follow, each skill in the cycle is illustrated by a narrative depiction of how that skill might look in practice. The simulated illustrations take place in the classroom of Mr. Kyle Ellis. Kyle is the choral music teacher in an urban high school. The well-established choral program includes an eighty-voice choir of freshmen and sophomores for which Kyle has programmed Mack Wilberg's arrangement of *Shenandoah* (Oxford University Press). The arrangement of this popular American folksong was chosen because of its long, *legato* vocal lines, *divisi* that creates unusual harmonies, dramatic use of *crescendos* and *decrescendos*, and the fact that each student sings the melody in its entirety. Finally, the SATB voice parts in Wilberg's arrangement reflect the multiple vocal ranges of the adolescent students in the choir.

Error Prediction

Kyle introduced *Shenandoah* to the choir during yesterday's rehearsal by playing a recording, analyzing the compositional form, and having students discuss the musical challenges posed by the arrangement. Two of the student-identified challenges related to breath management: (1) the sustained *legato* lines of the melody and, (2) the *crescendo* at the exact midpoint of the arrangement. The teacher senses that breath management will be most easily handled by working through the unison melody rather than at the point of the *crescendo* where voice parts contain different pitches. With this information in mind, Kyle decides to build his warm-up vocalises around excerpts of the melody, incorporating breaths as they occur the octavo, and then immediately transitioning from warm-up to repertoire by having students find and mark the corresponding required breaths in their scores.

Error Prevention

Based on his predictions of where singers might make errors, Kyle designs his warm-up procedures to mitigate the chances that those errors will occur. He begins by sequencing his warm-up so that relaxation

leads to proper physical alignment. This is followed by exercises focused on breath management, with specific attention to the muscular processes involved during sustained exhalation.

At the end of the warm-up session, Kyle revisits these breathing exercises as he leads students in singing phrases of the *Shenandoah* melody that he has notated on the board, with inhalations occurring where they will be marked in the score. Kyle further emphasizes the importance of muscular control during exhalation by having students come to the board and insert *crescendos* and *decrescendos* that the choir adds to their singing. Kyle's intent for this step is to prepare an experiential foundation for work in later rehearsals on the crescendo students identified at the midpoint of the arrangement. Once they agree on where the dynamic markings should occur, students turn to their octavos and make corresponding notations in the score.

Error Detection

As the rehearsal of *Shenandoah* begins, Kyle returns to the vocalise material by having students sing those phrases from the score. He notices that most students are successful at transferring the breath management techniques from the warm-ups to the score, except for the tenors. Some tenors seem to take extra breaths, while others show signs of vocal tension at the ends of phrases. The basses raise their chins upward when singing the first note, the high do, of the second phrase. Meanwhile, the sopranos and altos experience slight intonation problems, singing sharp in the opening and ending phrases, but not in the middle phrases. Kyle quickly notes these issues in his score and ponders his response.

Error Correction

Kyle has some decisions to make. He cannot simultaneously attend to each error, so he decides to begin by correcting the errors most directly related to the breath management issues addressed during the warm-up session. He reminds the choir that he was listening for two issues: breath man-

agement within each phrase, and the marked *crescendos/decrescendos*. When prompted, students indicate that the dynamic contrasts were more easily performed.

Kyle further questions, asking students to identify similarities in the abdominal muscular movement needed for breath management and dynamic control. Students respond correctly and Kyle then turns to the tenors to inquire about their singing/breathing experience. One tenor says that he remembered to use his abdominal musculature to assist with dynamic contrasts, but forgot to do the same elsewhere. After the tenors nod their heads in collective agreement, Kyle asks them to sing the phrases again, with the other singers instructed to raise their hands if the tenors successfully sustain the breath as they sing. The choir responds approvingly to the tenors' efforts, and Kyle congratulates them for solving the problem.

Error Diagnosis and Analysis

Kyle sits at his desk and begins to plan for tomorrow's rehearsal. He is a bit concerned because the students made some errors that he did not anticipate, but he is pleased that his attempts to predict and prevent potential errors related to breath management and dynamics were largely successful. He knows that his goal is to equip with students with choral skills that they can use beyond high school, so he wants to ensure that students understand and develop their musicianship by solving appropriate musical challenges posed by the repertoire.

Still, there were some errors that remain to be addressed, and these errors will require students to rely on Kyle's professional knowledge and judgment. He recalls that too much breath pressure can cause intonation problems. Since the sopranos and altos were only singing sharp on the phrases with lower pitches, he concludes that they were simply trying too hard to do what he had asked. Kyle also noticed that some of the ninth-grade tenors were straining to sing the low do on the first note of the melody, perhaps distracting them from the inhalation necessary to sustain the entire first phrase. He decides to temporarily change the low do to a high do to alleviate this problem

for the tenors. Meanwhile, Kyle remembers that the basses had difficulty singing the high do. He looks at his score and sees that the pitch occurs with the initial diphthong in the word “way.”

Kyle determines that he knows how to handle the problems encountered by the sopranos, altos, and tenors, but he needs to consult his resource library for some ideas about how to assist the basses. Kyle begins to plan tomorrow’s rehearsal by further examining the score to predict any other errors the choir might make were he not to provide them the necessary tools for successful singing. And so, the cycle begins anew.

The Giving of Appropriate Feedback

If our philosophy is grounded in the principle that choral music requires human engagement to breathe life into compositions, then a logical extension is that the purpose of rehearsals is to provide singers with the knowledge and skills needed to engage in choral music experiences throughout in their lives. Rather than the concert two months away, the goal is enlarged to encompass a forthcoming concert two decades away. What can we do today to help ensure that our singers will be singing long after they have left our care?

Such a philosophical position may relieve conductors (and their choirs) of the unproductive stress that accompanies the goal of musical perfection. But, it brings forth a complexity of purposes as multifaceted as the diverse individuals within our ensembles. How do we meet the needs of each individual singer while upholding the musical considerations of the repertoire? We may not be able to know each of our singer’s musical needs, nor may we be able to sufficiently address each need within the limited time we have with our ensembles. What we can do is establish parameters of rehearsal structure that both nourish our larger goals and allow opportunities for individual singers to identify and make progress toward their unique goals. As Graham Welch fittingly stated,

A person’s physical and social

environment can assist or hinder the development of any vocal behavior including that of singing. Research has demonstrated that the singing development process may be significantly influenced by interaction between the individual and her/his singing environment. In order for the individual to become more accomplished vocally she/he needs to be in an environment that fosters such development. In part, this will be dependent on the quality of available feedback.⁷

The giving of appropriate feedback to singers is frequently missing from choral rehearsals.⁸ A recent meta-analytical review of research concerning instructional feedback resulted in four important conclusions that can further inform the pedagogical cycle described above.⁹ These conclusions can be easily applied to the choral rehearsal.

First, feedback needs to provide a link between what singers currently understand and what conductors want them to understand. This understanding implicates all skills in the pedagogical cycle, but most specifically involves the skills of error prediction and error prevention. Though these two skills precede the rehearsal, the outcome is a specific rehearsal plan (feedback) based on the choir’s previous work. The late Frauke Haasemann commented on this in the opening minutes of her *Group Vocal Technique* video: “You have to give [singers] techniques to sing the music right, because some of the music that even amateur choirs sing is, in a vocal way, very difficult. You cannot say to [your choir], ‘just do it.’ You have to give them tools. And, I think that you have to teach them those tools . . . with exercises composed [from] the music that they will later rehearse.”¹⁰ A conductor’s effective feedback—which includes modeling—can provide singers the tools to be successful at negotiating vocal challenges posed by the repertoire.

Second, feedback must be contextualized to both the singers and the learning situation. Feedback to an ensemble of twelve—year-olds should be qualitatively different from feedback to an ensemble of university students, even though the content might be

similar (vowel formation, perhaps). This first pair of research-based conclusions speaks to a choral conductor’s feedback that might develop through the stages involving the skills of error prediction, error prevention, error detection, and error correction.

A subsequent pair of conclusions focuses on issues that most directly affect a conductor’s skills employed in the stages that occur before and after feedback: error prediction, error prevention, and error diagnosis/analysis. First, the feedback of a choral conductor comes after singers have responded to a task, often through singing. The implication is that the initial task request positions the singers for success or failure. To the extent possible, the bulk of a conductor’s pre-rehearsal planning should be toward ensuring success for the singers by diagnosing and analyzing what occurred previously, predicting what errors are likely to occur under the same circumstances, and then seeking to prevent the likely errors from occurring.

The final conclusion: feedback is not always appropriate. Instead, direct instruction may be necessary before singers can understand the feedback. As stated earlier, the warm-up segment of choral rehearsals is a vital component of direct instruction if it is specifically designed to address vocal and musical challenges that will arise in that day’s rehearsal. Once singers have been successfully engaged in direct instruction, the conductor can provide feedback that calls upon what the singers have already accomplished as it arises throughout the repertoire.

Conclusion

Whether conscious to us or not, our philosophies are telegraphed through the rehearsals we design and the feedback we provide to our choristers. “Why do people come to sing for you? Not because of your musicianship or your beautiful conducting gestures. They come because of you. When your hands come down, the important thing is that you care about the choir, not the right notes or right rhythms.”¹¹

The Cycle of Pedagogical Skills outlined above is an organizing tool intended to assist conductors in the development of rehearsal plans and feedback that are appropriate for

Beyond Error Detection

our singers and, hopefully, reflect our philosophical paradigm. Many conductors can recall rehearsals that just didn't seem right, only to later realize that they had temporarily led their singers in a manner inconsistent with their beliefs about singing, teaching, and the experience of choral music.

Working with a set of instructional, musical plans enables conductors to be transparent about their pedagogy because they have made deliberate decisions about pedagogy. Such awareness allows freer discussions with singers about why certain rehearsal strategies are employed and others will be held for another time. One result of this instructional transparency is that the choral experience becomes a collaborative process more overtly shared by conductor and singers. Each of us is a participant, both a giver and receiver of choral artistry, and our philosophies and instructional goals can be intertwined to provide opportunities for all participants to give and receive at ever-increasing levels.

and Student Experience in Middle School Choral Rehearsals," *Music Education Research* 10, no. 1 (2008): 107–24; Harry E. Price and Cornelia Yarbrough, "Effect of Scripted Sequential Patterns of Instruction in Music Rehearsals on Teaching Evaluations by College Nonmusic Students," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 119 (1993): 170–78; Cornelia Yarbrough and Paul Henley, "The Effect of Observation Focus on Evaluations of Choral Rehearsal Excerpts," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 47 (1999): 308–18; Cornelia Yarbrough and Katia Madsen, "The Evaluation of Teaching in Choral Rehearsals," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 46 (1998): 469–81.

⁹ John Hattie and Helen Timperley, "The Power of Feedback," *Review of Educational Research*, 77, no. 1 (2007): 81–112.

¹⁰ Frauke Haasemann and James Jordan, *Group Vocal Technique (Video)* (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1990).

¹¹ James Jordan. Speech delivered for the music teachers of Cobb County. Marietta, GA. October 14, 2005.

NOTES

¹ Adam Tanous, "A Teacher at Heart: An Interview with Writer Frank McCourt," *Idaho Mountain Express and Guide*, August 30–September 5, 2000. <<http://www.mtexpress.com/2000/08-30-00/8-30mccourt.htm>> (July 31, 2008).

² David J. Elliott, "When I Sing: The Nature and Value of Choral Music Education," *Choral Journal* 33, no. 8 (1993): 11–12.

³ Carole Glenn, ed., *In Quest of Answers: Interviews with American Choral Conductors* (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1991): 172–83.

⁴ Glenn. *In Quest of Answers*: 175.

⁵ Estelle R. Jorgensen, *Transforming Music Education* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2003): 124–25.

⁶ Harry E. Price, "An Effective Way to Teach and Rehearse: Research Supports Using Sequential Patterns," Update: *Applications of Research in Music Education*, 8, no. 1 (1989): 44.

⁷ Welch, Graham. "The Developing Voice." In *Bodymind and Voice: Foundations of Lifespan Voice Education*, ed. Leon Thurman and Graham Welch, 711. Iowa City, IA: *National Center for Voice and Speech*, 2000.

⁸ Patrick K. Freer, "Teacher Instructional Language

