

# A Research on the Use of the Alexander Technique in Flute Education Given in the Music Department and Music Teaching Departments of Faculties of Fine Arts in Turkey

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## Abstract

The Alexander Technique is a method that emerged as a result of Actor Frederick Matthias Alexander's work on himself to solve the problems he had with his voice during his performance. This technique, which was effective for himself, rapidly became widespread because it was tried by different people over time and positive results were obtained. Today, it is effective not only for music but also for people from different disciplines to use their bodies more comfortably and thus have a natural posture. In this sense, in the study, ten different instructors working in various locations were selected as the study group to reach the findings related to the use of the Alexander Technique and the results of the technique in flute lessons given in the music departments of higher education institutions in Turkey. Framed by the researcher, interview questions with expert opinions were asked, and the data obtained were tabulated and presented with the content analysis method, one of the qualitative research methods.

**Keywords:** music education, instrument education, flute education, Alexander technique

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction of the Problem

It is observed that Alexander Technique is not taught in flute education courses given in music education institutions in our country, since the instructor does not have enough knowledge about this technique or even has no knowledge at all. This situation leads to the fact that the physical problems experienced by the students in the lessons cannot be eliminated. From this point of view, the necessity of flute instructors working in these departments to have a complete theoretical and practical mastery of the Alexander Technique arises. The query "What are the opinions of flute instructors in Turkey about the Alexander Technique?" forms the basis of this research.

### 1.2 Explore Importance of the Problem

While seeking an answer to the problem, the following subproblems will also be examined:

Do you explain the Alexander Technique to your students in detail and apply it in flute education?

Why do you apply it or why not?

What sort of changes have you observed in your students who have acquired the Alexander Technique?

In this regard, in the research, it was aimed to examine the views of the instructors working in flute education institutions in Turkey about the Alexander Technique, and in line with the data obtained, ideas were put forward on how the Alexander Technique should be standardized in our country's circumstances. In line with the data acquired, it is thought that the results of the research can contribute to other studies to be made in this field in line with the mastery of the Alexander Technique of flute instructors working in music education institutions in Turkey.

### 1.3 Describe Relevant Scholarship

The behaviors that a person develops for a specific purpose by making choices in compliance with his/her abilities and interests, which continue throughout his/her life, constitute the content of the education. Education

has a wide spectrum of different disciplines, and music education is a branch of it. Music education is “the process of providing an individual with certain musical behaviors through his/her own life, purposefully changing the individual’s musical behavior through his/her own life, or creating certain changes in the individual’s musical behavior through his/her own life, and purposefully developing the individual’s musical behavior through his/her own life (Uçan, 1997).” In this regard, one of the most important areas of music education is instrument education. Flute education, on the other hand, is within the scope of instrument education of the whole interrelated education spiral.

In order to develop a good tone and intonation, and to reach a level that can be considered to be technically perfect, it is necessary to minimize the physical discomforts that can be experienced during flute training. It is thought that physical discomforts that may occur can be prevented by the technical information to be given by the trainer, along with the cognitive and physical knowledge, to the students with the experiences they will have through stage performances. When the person works with his/her instrument for long hours, discomfort occurs as a result of uneven distributions and overloads in the body over time. According to Gray (1999), the discomforts experienced increase with the ignorant use of instruments and prevent the body from responding physically and spiritually well in daily life. As a result, various problems are experienced in the muscles (Gray, 1999).

In line with this information, “He has seen that his voice, which gets hoarse when he goes on stage, but returns to normal when he rests, is hoarse not only because of the wrong use of the vocal mechanism but also because of the use of the whole body, especially the contractions in his neck (Buswell, 2006, cited in Özmenay, 2018). For this reason, after years of work, he developed a kinesthetic perception of his body and managed to use it more accurately, and thus the problems he had with his voice ceased. The chronic diseases that he had throughout his life, apart from the hoarseness, disappeared as a result of using his body properly (Valentine, 2004, cited in Özmenay, 2018). The Alexander Technique is a re-learning method that helps to relieve tensions in the body by preventing many behaviors that have become habits without being noticed over time. This technique emerged after a long period of self-monitoring in which the Australian actor Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) suffered from hoarseness on stage and the doctors could not find a cure for it. Later, the positive results of this technique on different performers led to the rapid spread of the technique in the international arena (Özmenay, 2018)”.

The Alexander Technique, which has been used in music education for over half a century, is a technique used in many music education institutions around the world. Due to his discomfort, Australian actor F. M. Alexander has developed a new paradigm in which pain and muscle tension, poor coordination, poor posture, stress, and anxiety are not viewed as separate phenomena but as part of misuse of the body that they all constitute together. For musicians who perform with their instruments, the disorders that occur as a result of the unconscious overuse of non-optimal patterns of muscle and mental neuromuscular behavior become a habit over time and emerge as physical ailments. In this regard, Alexander, who developed a new technique using his own body, defined using his body in a constructive way as an active “psychophysical retraining” method. Consequently, although the Alexander Technique training may have more in common with the concept of neuroplasticity than any physical therapy, this technique is kept apart from activities that try to affect both physical structure and functionality, such as exercise, yoga, or pilates, since it does not bring a separate application in the daily playing activities of musicians (Davies, 2011).

According to Özmenay (2018); in the Alexander Technique, the training of the body to give the right sensory feedback in order to eliminate the discomforts in the body of a person is called “Correct Use”. Correct use means balanced contraction and coordination of the muscles in every movement of the body (Özmenay, 2018). “By keeping the technical focus on the body, it aims for the person to immediately notice when there is an excessive contraction during the movement. The body, which constantly receives this type of sensory feedback, performs inhibition and reaches a balanced and coordinated state by gradually getting rid of unnecessary habits (Valentine, 2004). This state is also a point where the body feels happy and safe (Gray, 1999, cited in Özmenay, 2018)”.

The Alexander Technique aims to improve the quality of life by preventing the physical ailments that a person may experience through the conscious use of the body. For this purpose, the person focuses on the balance system between the sense organs and muscles. Kolat (2018) maintains that the Alexander Technique is also seen as a way to get rid of unnecessary tensions that occur in a person’s life over time and prevent movements. Thus, she states that with the correct use of the body, the correct distribution of the workload can be ensured. Touching upon the importance of having a comfortable neck in the Alexander technique, Kolat (Figure 1) says that for a correct spine posture, first of all, a balanced head position should be gained (Kolat, 2018).

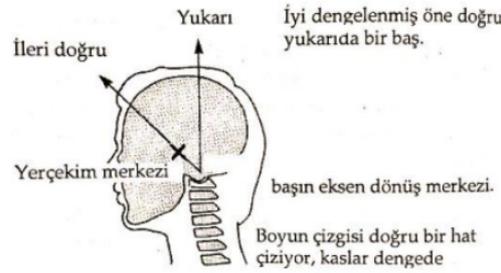


Figure 1. A balanced and poised head (Gray, 1999, cited in Kolat, 2018)

In the Alexander Technique, as in many parts of the body, during breathing, the shoulders should be in a relaxed and wide state, and on the back, the movement should be more visible in the lower ribs.

Emphasizing the long and wide use of the back area, Kolat (2018) gives an example of upright and correct posture (Figure 2), with the spine as if being pulled with a rope from above. In this example, the back should be in a relaxed position. At the same time, the body is given a relaxed position by thinking that the shoulders expand to the sides. Thus, a correct spinal line is created with a good head-neck relationship (Kolat 2018).

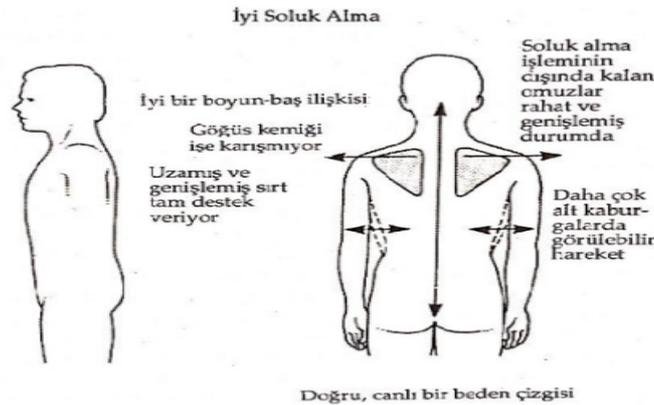


Figure 2. Correct body posture during breathing (Gray, 1999, cited in Kolat, 2018)

Hunt mentions that he went through three years of intensive training to explore the Alexander Technique in detail and to help others. In this direction Hunt (2007), Alexander mentions that the technique is a discovery method that takes a long time to create permanent changes in the person. “However, Alexander himself said it took from 20-30 lessons for a person to have the skills to take charge and make the Technique a resource for their whole life (Hunt, 2007)”.

In line with this information, some of the musicians, who predominantly experience musculoskeletal disorders together with acute stress and performance anxiety, use the Alexander Technique (AT), a psycho-physical method that helps to relieve involuntary muscle tension and retrains such involuntary wrong movement patterns by deliberately inhibiting their undesirable habits. For musicians, the gravity-balanced stance of the whole body interacts delicately with the instrument, becoming a dynamic response to the flexibility and strength that vary depending on the muscle tissue. The Alexander Technique training seeks to improve the musician’s use of the whole body by inhibiting stressful reactions and developing positive thought and movement patterns. In this regard, such strategies potentially change the way the musician practices and plays, affecting the quality of performance outcomes such as technique, stance, tone, or musicality.

“With the Alexander Technique, the relationship of the head, neck, and back is primary in every activity. Just as

we pay little attention to key, time signature, and tempo until there is change, so in the Alexander organization of awareness when something changes, we reconsider our total pattern.... How to intelligently involve the whole self in one's flute playing, naturally and spontaneously, is the purpose of studying the Alexander Technique (Murray, 2012)".

In this study, it was aimed to evaluate the evidence regarding the effectiveness of the Alexander Technique, which is also used in flute education, on the respiratory function, performance anxiety, and posture of musicians. In the findings acquired by literature review and interview method, the evidence obtained to investigate the effectiveness of Alexander Technique sessions in musicians suggests that it can improve performance anxiety with its positive effects on musical performance, respiratory function, and posture.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Identify Subsections

In this study, in which the significance of the Alexander Technique in flute education was examined, the data were obtained by using the literature review method and the technique of interviewing the lecturers working as flute instructors in music education institutions of various universities in Turkey. The interview form, which was formed with open and closed-ended questions based on expert opinion, was prepared by the researcher in line with the purposes of the research.

The study group of this research consists of 10 (ten) flute instructors working in various music education institutions in Turkey. In the research, the data obtained by the literature review and interview method were divided into categories by the content analysis method in line with the subproblems of the research and presented in the form of descriptive tables.

### 2.2 Research Design

In this research, descriptive analysis and content analysis methods from qualitative research methods were used to obtain data about the role of the Alexander Technique in flute education.

In the descriptive analysis, which is aimed to present to the reader by organizing and interpreting the findings, this description is interpreted after the data obtained are described logically and understandably, and some conclusions are reached by examining the cause-effect relationships (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2000, cited in Güleç & Pirgon, 2022). "The data revealed by descriptive analysis has been analyzed by content analysis method in order to be examined in-depth and divided into categories. [Social, Mentality and Researcher Thinkers Journal 2021 November (Vol. 7, Issue 52 smartofjournal.com/editorsmartjournal@gmail.com/Open Access Refereed/E-Journal/Refereed/Indexed 3080) The main objective of content analysis is to reach concepts and relationships that can clarify the collected data. The data summarized and interpreted in the descriptive analysis are subjected to a deeper process in content analysis, and concepts and themes that cannot be noticed with a descriptive approach can be discovered as a result of this analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2000, cited by Güleç & Pirgon, 2022)".

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Data Analysis

Table 1. Opinions of instructors on explaining and application of Alexander technique to students in flute education

Instructor 1: I use the Alexander technique in my flute lessons, but I have never talked about the technique theoretically, I only use it when explaining the posture and holding position.
Instructor 2: I do not explain it in detail. I explain and show as much as possible within the technique that I have given only the basic principles.
Instructor 3: I am well-informed about the technique due to my longstanding interest. I attach great importance to it. However, I do not apply it because I do not have any training on the subject.
Instructor 4: I am not knowledgeable about it, and consequently I do not practice it.
Instructor 5: I take advantage of the basic principles of the Alexander Technique, especially the posture technique, and I do breathing exercises, but I do not describe it as the "Alexander" technique... I call it the "puppet-like hanging position ...." correct posture-holding-blowing.
Instructor 6: Students have information about this technique. However, we do not have the opportunity or time to practice it in detail and every lesson.
Instructor 7: Because I do not have enough equipment, I cannot explain and practice it in detail.

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Instructor 8: Yes, I am enlightening them.

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Instructor 9: I explain technically by reading from scientific articles on the subject. Then we adjust the posture-holding and blowing position, thinking that the body is hanging from above as if it were a puppet.

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Instructor 10: I do warm-up exercises. I know about the Alexander Technique, but the course time is insufficient for me to fully practice it.

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The findings obtained indicates that flute instructors working in different higher education institutions did not receive Alexander Technique training from their specialists during their training. It is understood that there are teachers who do not apply the technique in their classes, as well as instructors who have gained practicality by learning this technique with the knowledge they have obtained through their means and trying to teach it to their students.

The findings imply that flute lessons taught in music departments partially constitute an infrastructure for students for Alexander Technique, but due to the lack of instructors with academic expertise in their field, it is believed that the education provided in schools is not enough.

Table 2. Thoughts on the reasons for applying or not applying the Alexander technique in flute lessons

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Instructor 1: The flute instrument has a technique that is not physically suitable for the body, especially in terms of holding. I think that the Alexander technique is important physically and mentally in terms of healthy, natural, and flexible use of this posture and holding position.

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Instructor 2: I could only get to know the Alexander Technique from the books and articles I had acquired. There are also associations related to this technique. However, as far as I know, there are no certified Alexander Technique practitioners and trainers in our country. Training abroad for the technique is also quite expensive. Therefore, I do not want to apply a technique that I did not receive professional training directly in my classes.

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Instructor 3: I do not practice it because I do not have any training on the subject.

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Instructor 4: Although I am not fully knowledgeable about the technique, I do not feel the need for it.

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Instructor 5: Although it looks like the right position from the outside, they cannot distribute the weight evenly on the feet, they tighten the neck muscles too much. For this reason, we make practical use of the technique.

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Instructor 6: I know that the technique positively affects the physical conditions related to posture and breathing, and I know its benefits, so I use this technique when teaching and talking about its advantages in both internal and external undisturbed states. Most importantly, it helps open the airway. It should be well known and adopted by students.

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Instructor 7: Unfortunately, this is the first time I see the Alexander Technique as a term, as a concept. However, when I researched, I saw that the elements that the technique describes for correct posture and correct grip are things that I attach great importance to and pay attention to in lessons. If there is no airflow with the correct posture, grip and a comfortable posture, the correct playing will not occur...

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Instructor 8: Due to the short duration of the lessons, I cannot give much coverage to this technique in classes. In the lessons, however, I make explanations to raise body awareness and I give speeches on the need to start working by warming up the body parts used while playing the flute. We also make applications of the technique depending on the duration of the lesson. By constantly emphasizing the importance of working with the right posture for performance, I try to create awareness and develop a habit of it.

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Instructor 9: I apply it in order to support the breathing and grip technique of the student with the correct posture.

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Instructor 10: I cannot answer this question as I do not practice the technique.

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The findings show that some instructors do not consider it necessary to apply the Alexander Technique in their classes. On the other hand, since the flute instrument has a technique that is not physically suitable for the body, it is thought that the Alexander technique is important physically and mentally in terms of healthy, natural, and flexible use of posture and holding position. In this regard, it can be concluded that they benefit from this technique when talking about its advantages on both internal and external relaxed states since the technique positively affects the physical conditions related to posture and breathing.

The findings also indicate that the most important purpose of applying the Alexander Technique in the lessons is to provide the students with a flexible posture and to provide comfort in internal and external positions. Thus, it is thought that the student, who has acquired a comfortable posture, can also easily progress in his/her studies through the use of correct breathing and the development of tone quality.

Table 3. Reflections on changes observed in students who comprehend the Alexander technique

Instructor 1: They have a healthy, natural, and flexible posture and grip position.
Instructor 2: Even when I apply only some very basic principles, I receive feedback such as the comfort of posture and grip, improvement in agility, and solution of problems experienced in tone. Since 2002, I have been teaching the basic posture with Alexander Technique principles primarily for natural comfort.
Instructor 3: Although we work only theoretically, we have prepared a seminar on this subject with my graduate students and presented it as a paper.
Instructor 4: I cannot practice because it is not a technique I am very knowledgeable about.
Instructor 5: The student who comprehends it properly balances his/her weight, relaxes the neck and arm muscles, and transmits power to the fingers (uninterruptedly).
Instructor 6: The volume of the voice increases, and its color becomes more vivid. Relaxation of the muscles ensures ease of performance. As the posture and grip disorders are corrected, the problems that may become permanent are fundamentally solved.
Instructor 7: Since I cannot apply the technique, I cannot compare and tell the difference.
Instructor 8: I observe that they can use their body in accordance with their build, they can play with a more correct posture, and they do not experience physical ailments (back, neck, wrist pain, etc.).
Instructor 9: They do not experience bodily problems as they achieve a more correct posture. Accordingly, I observe positive progress in the development of tone quality and intonation.
Instructor 10: I cannot answer this question as I do not practice the technique in my flute lessons.

In line with the findings acquired above, it has been observed that the changes noticed in the students who comprehend the Alexander Technique has a more natural and flexible stance and holding position and an improvement in agility and tone quality. Thus, it was observed that the students who grasped and applied this technique did not experience physical ailments (back, neck, wrist pain, etc.).

In line with these explanations, it is concluded that it may be advantageous to have the Alexander Technique as a separate course in performance-based instrument lessons, etc. at universities, but it should be taught by teachers who specialize in this technique, especially by receiving professional training. In this regard, it is believed that students who practice the Alexander Technique on the flute acquire a more flexible and natural posture and grip technique. It is observed that the quality of tone and intonation is also positively affected because they do not experience physical ailments.

In the findings obtained, it turns out that the Alexander Technique is not available as separate course content in higher education institutions in Turkey, but the inclination towards this technique is realized in accordance with interests and abilities.

#### 4. Discussion

Within the framework of this research, it is necessary to pay attention to the selection of students who have a suitable body structure for the flute so that the students who are just starting their flute education do not experience any physical problems. Thus, it will be effective in the prevention of physical ailments that may be encountered in the future. After the selection of students who are physically suitable for flute education, their being informed about the correct use of the organs used during the performance will be effective in preventing problems that they may experience.

Furthermore, it will be beneficial to provide technically informative programs for flute educators and flute students in Turkey, within the scope of physical problems encountered in flute education, by people who are experts in flute playing and flute education, in order to solve the problems encountered.

It is concluded in line with the data obtained from the research that:

- The flute instructors in the study group did not receive training from a specialist in Alexander Technique in the flute education they received at the undergraduate level,
- Some instructors explained the Alexander Technique in a technical sense by reading from the relevant scientific articles, and then adjusted the posture-grip and blowing position in accordance with the information they obtained,
- In the flute lessons given in the music departments of higher education institutions, infrastructure was created for students on the Alexander Technique, albeit partially, but the training provided for the full implementation of the technique is not sufficient,
- Some instructors do not know the Alexander Technique in the flute lessons given in some music

departments in higher education institutions, and therefore the students are not informed about this technique,

- The most important reason for the application of the Alexander Technique in flute lessons is to provide a flexible posture and an internal and external undisturbed state,
- The volume of the voice increases and the color of the voice becomes more vivid in the students who grasp the technique; it provides ease of performance because the muscles are relaxed,
- The problems that may become permanent have been solved fundamentally since the posture and grip disorders are improved in the students who apply the technique,
- The students who apply the Alexander Technique in flute performance can use the flute in accordance with their body structure, play with a more correct posture, and as a result, they do not experience physical ailments,
- Teaching the Alexander Technique under a separate course in higher education institutions in Turkey and teaching it not only in flute but also in other lessons that require performance will improve student performance in a positive sense.

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