

Why is the smiling embouchure really no good for flute players?

The smiling embouchure pulls the lips back so that they are thinner at the front center. This may work (at first) for beginners with very thick lips to allow them to sense the lip center opening/aperture.

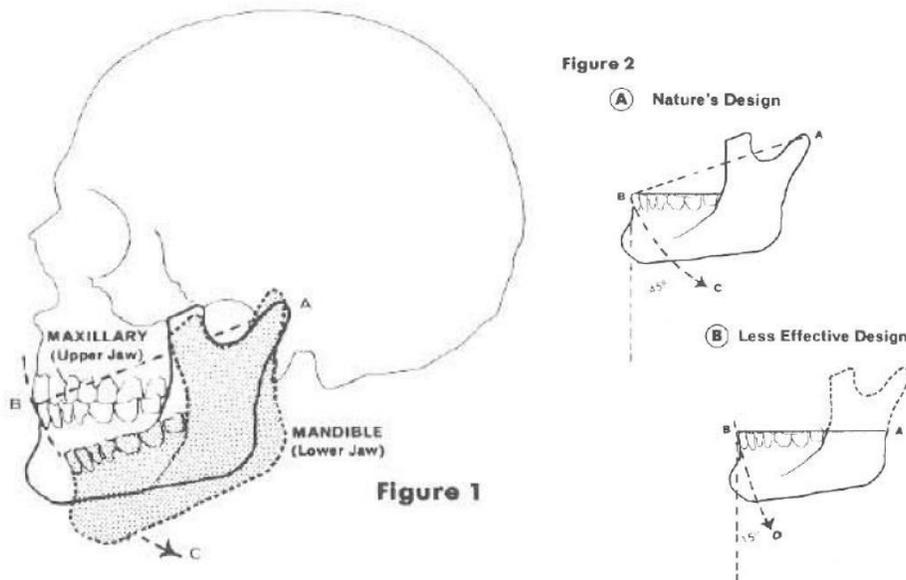
However the reasons why it doesn't work over the long run are these:

- The bottom lip is pulled away from the mouthpiece, creating a long air-reed with no control over the specific angle that the air jet reaches the splitting edge. This creates rough note beginnings/endings, and requires more air to play continuously.
- For flute students who place the lip plate too high on the chin, or too high on the lower lip, smiling embouchure causes a very shallow angle of air jet (thin tone that's quite loud/sharp.)
- In the "smile embouchure" the bottom lip is pulled upward and away from the mouthpiece especially at sides of mouth. This allows few other tone colour options other than "thin in tone" or "overly bright and airy".
- If the airstream is directed too horizontally or even upward in angle it creates a thin tone, sharp pitch, with only high partials sounding (no fundamentals which lend depth or richness to the flute's tone).
- To correct the unattractive loud/sharp qualities of high register, student will often respond by rolling the flute or the headjoint inward to lower the pitch, and this combined with shallow angle of air jet creates a "covered" and very squelched sounding tone on the flute.
- Tight upward pulling lip corners makes facial muscles overly tense. This makes it difficult to drop jaw open, or open the teeth inside the mouth, therefore the tone quality tends toward "eeee" vowel. The facial tension may also lead to a sympathetically tight throat area (throat noise, throat tightness.)
- The tight upward pulling of the corners of the mouth make it difficult to purse out the upper lip in order to blow more downward during crescendos. The upward pulling lip corners hinder the upper lip's ability "HANG OVER". (Upper lip needs to flatten the pitch in fortes by directing the air downward.) Just try angling the air toward the left elbow using lips only. Isometrically tensing against yourself with smiling lip corners creates "work" and is difficult to do.
- The smiling embouchure makes it very difficult to gradually move the center of the lips forward, across the blow hole, for tuning and tone improvements in the high register.
- The tense lip corners of "smiling" actually lock the lips into their relationship to each other, and force the player to jut the teeth and jaw forward in hopes of gaining precise dynamic and tone control.
- When the lip corners are pulled upward or backward, less of the lower lip can effectively cover the embouchure hole and the student flutist may instead jut the jaw far forward in an attempt to cover more embouchure hole. (typically they roll inward instead because it's easier.)
- The jutting forward of the jaw hinge can cause overuse of the jaw hinge rather than the fleshy parts of the lips to control flute sound quality and pitch.
- Overall, the biggest reason why "no smiling, please" is that in smiling, you reduce the contact area of the lower lip to the chin plate of the flute. Among other problems this causes, the lack of skin to chin-plate contact allows the flute to gradually rise up the chin during play which

makes the tone thinner and thinner over several minutes. When non-smiling the lower chin and lower lip's contact with the embouchure plate is the main anchoring point to holding the flute in position on the face. You need maximum chin to metal contact to find a reliable and stable position so that the flute doesn't move when the lips re-position. The lower lip's contact with the embouchure plate is also the most stable point of reference for any changes in the upper lip (for tone, dynamics and attack.)

Do please read Walfrid Kujala's Flutetalk "Jaw Boning" articles from 1987 (May/June and Oct), and also read Thomas Nyfenger book "Music and the Flute" for more on overuse of the jutting of the jaw. It is far easier to utilize the lip's soft tissues instead of moving the jaw forward and back. For those who think they MUST move the jaw forward and back, protect your delicate jaw hinge by making the motions minute to the point of non-existence. Move the malleable fleshy lips first and let the rest of the face stay passive, is my best advice.

Very interesting: Here is one of Walfrid Kujala's pictures of how the jaw actually works at the hinge and what it does when it opens and closes. The jaw goes down and back naturally just from opening the teeth:



In the above 1987 Kujala articles on keeping pitch in dynamic extremes, he used FULP and PLOT as his catch-words. For those who don't know these acronyms: **For Forte**; pull upper lip down, lower lip is pressed downward by upper lip, jaw opens and naturally goes back. **For Piano or Pianissimo**: Lift lower teeth. This naturally brings jaw more forward without jutting and the smaller mouth cavity keeps pitch and airspeed up for soft playing.

Toothy considerations:

Now here's a more rare consideration, but this is also worth mentioning.

With a smile embouchure it's possible to unknowingly pull the hole in center of your lips upward so that the front teeth are literally hanging in the path of the exiting airstream. I have seen this in band students who are self-taught.

The tone is breathy, blowing is too horizontal, and the upper lip is tight across the teeth.

This can also be the result of the "smile" instruction: too high a lip-opening over the front teeth.

Combined with the two front teeth diffusing the path of the airstream, typically the upper lip is also trapped in a high smile position, and hence is pulled tightly across the teeth, which makes the upper lip thin and immobile at its center.

Thus trapped by the "smile" the thinned upper lip then has only one air stream shape against the teeth; horizontal, almost like a straight line.

Lip thinness from corners of the lips pulling from side to side make it almost impossible to use the fleshy center of the upper lip to modify tone or pitch in any way.

If you picture the optimal air-jet shape, as air leaves the lip aperture and travels to the splitting edge, optimally it would be a slight oval shape top and bottom.

With a tight horizontal top lip the top of the air-jet gets flattened to more of a straight line, which can create a kind of splatter-spray on the blow hole's splitting edge. It is too straight, much air is wasted that is not converted into sound, and you cannot control pitch or tone colour well.

Smiley-embouchure students can simply experiment by pulling the upper lip down as if to cover long, horsey-bucked-teeth.

Next, notice how when the hole in the lips is pulled well below your two front teeth, that your jaw is more comfortable down and back.

Then using the mirror, see how your two lips are *more* fleshy if just lightly pressed together as if to say "mmmmmmmmmm"

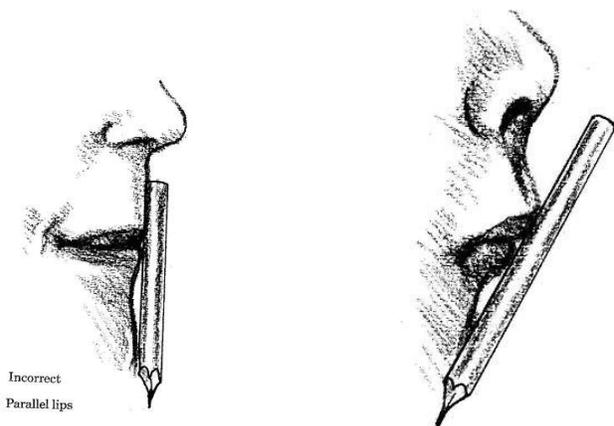
[see faces here:] :>) vs. :> |

Pulling the upper lip downward and over the front teeth lends additional lip fleshiness to the center of the lip aperture which can be used shape the air-jet onto the splitting edge.

The first clue that you're getting it is a noticeably "rounder" and fuller tone quality as you use the center of the upper lip to blow more down into the flute.

When lip corners come forward, lips become infinitely more shape-able.

The book "Illustrated Flute Player" by Soldan & Mellersh had great drawings of the Horse-Face, and side-views of the jaw, showing how to drop the jaw open, so that it's naturally down and back as the upper lip descends upon the lower lip. Every flute teacher and student should own this book and study it well. Here are two terrific jaw pictures. The left is wrong, the right is right. These agree with Kujala's assessment also:



Notice how the lips are more fleshy and malleable when they are not pulled back in a smile.

These pictures are just a small sample of the fabulous explanatory illustrations in the Soldan & Mellersh book:

The Illustrated Flute Player at http://www.jeanie.mellersh.net/illustrated_fluteplaying.htm

This book is a "must have" for flute teachers.

Best Non-Smile exercises:

Teachers can help toothy-former-smilers by asking them to say "Mmmmmm" and to find the most comfortable face to say this syllable, then to move the lip aperture to BELOW the two upper front teeth, and to let the lip corners come forward and down.

You can say close-lipped "mmmm" "Aum" or "Om" too, depending on what resonates with you, but the simplest humming of "mmmm" and then saying a soft "peu" (like the "pe" in Permanent) seems to be easy to do for even beginners.

Really helps to get the teeth out of the way. hahahhaa.

And watch for these features in the Sir James Embouchure demonstration at youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcXRzZZv1mE>

Sir James' exercise works well because lip corners stay flexible and mobile as the jaw glides through its full arc of motion, ending with its most open hinged and comfortable position.

Note the lips need to be fleshy as they roll over one another in a vertical plane, so that later when you play the higher octave, the fleshy inner lips can be utilized to go from "oh" to "oooooh".

More on Smiley Flutey-history:

Some flutey historical reading that I've done points to the "smiling embouchure" as a left over from wooden flutes with oval embouchure holes.

I have read that these late 19th century wooden flutes were used by professional flutists who then went on to teach the "smile" embouchure. (These black coloured wood flutes can be seen on youtube in UK orchestras until the mid-1960s) Apparently the smile embouchure actually did work best on the oval-shaped blow-hole and thicker walled wooden flute that was previously in vogue. The headjoint design required narrow aperture and fast air and had no subtle nuances possible. It was an unattractive flute tone quality by today's standards.

The "smile" pedagogy was evidently still being taught even after the wooden flutes had been replaced by the modern day silver flute which requires a looser and more fleshy-lipped approach. (French flutists had changed the tone quality utterly and made the tone quality larger in colour pallet, more flexible for tone colours, and un-shrill.)

Perhaps this changeover is why some student flutists who took lessons in the 1940s to 1980s sometimes still had teachers who taught "smiley" because no one had yet communicated the difference between the silver flute of the French School and the tight mouthed, shrill black, wooden flutes of the earlier era, and should have noted the differences during the wood to silver transition. Hope this helps, and please join in other embouchure describers.

.... love this topic as it is so little understood.

Best, Jen Cluff May 21st, 2009

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