

Clear Speech

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Early in my career, I engaged in several research projects to try to determine why some people were excellent lipreaders while others did not benefit as much from watching the speaker's lips. Were the better lipreaders smarter, better at visual discrimination, able to pay closer attention? One of my research projects involved a task in which the research participants had to predict what a written sentence was, when some of the letters were missing. I thought that better lipreaders might be better at "filling in the blanks" when they were trying to use the visual cues of speech to understand conversation. The results of my research project showed that there was no correlation between letter prediction ability and lipreading.

After doing the sentence prediction task, one of my research participants, a late-deafened individual, told me I was going about my lipreading research the wrong way. "What you need to study," she said, "is the talker, not the lipreader. If the talker speaks clearly, I'm a great lipreader. If they mumble, I'm a terrible lipreader." I took her advice and ended up publishing a number of articles on how the talker affects lipreading success. As my research participant had predicted, people vary considerably in how easy or difficult they are to lipread.

In recent years, researchers have found that:

- simply asking a person to speak more clearly results in approximately a 20% increase in how much is understood by listeners who are hearing impaired.
- in less than an hour, partners of people with a hearing loss can learn to improve their ability to be understood by 40% or more, even in noisy backgrounds.

What are the characteristics of clear speech? It involves speaking slightly slower, with more precise pronunciation, a little more volume, and most importantly, frequent pauses between key phrases. It is these pauses that seem to provide considerable help to listeners because they give them the chance to process what has been said before the talker says more. For example, saying the following sentence, word by word, with no pauses in between, would be much more difficult than if the phrases were chunked into meaningful pieces:

My husband's sister is coming to visit us in Florida in April.

Instead, pausing in the manner shown below might be very helpful:

My husband's sister (pause) is coming to visit us (pause) in April.

Here is another example of normal speech:

I'm going to run in the Chicago Marathon this year so I can qualify for the Boston Marathon.

And now let's apply the clear speech method:

I'm going to run (pause) in the Chicago Marathon (pause) this year (pause) so I can qualify (pause) for the Boston Marathon.

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These pauses are not so long that they disrupt the natural flow of the conversation, but just long enough to give listeners a better chance of processing what is said. Pauses are especially helpful for listeners, who often feel like they have difficulty understanding everything the talker is saying. This is especially true in noisy situations. The pauses help the listener figure out what the talker is saying before more information is added. In the second example above, if the talker does not pause, the listener may be so busy trying to understand the words "Chicago" and "Marathon" that it will be difficult to tune in to the last part of the sentence.

How helpful can clear speech be to the listener who is hearing impaired? Recent research at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia showed that after minimal training, the husband of a woman with hearing loss was over 40% easier to understand in noise by listeners with a hearing loss when he made an effort to speak clearly. How can you help your loved ones learn to speak more clearly?

Simply ask them to do four things when communicating with you:

- slow down a bit,
- speak a tiny bit louder,
- say things as clearly as possible without exaggerating their mouth movements,
- pause at meaningful places so that your ears can catch up with their mouths.

You will probably find that most of your family and friends will be able and willing to produce clear speech because it not only helps you, it benefits them. They will probably be happy to not need to repeat things as much. But be forewarned: most people will probably speak clearly for about three sentences, maybe even four or five. After that, they may slip back into their typical speedy, mumbled, soft mode of talking. It may help you and your frequent communication partners to work out a reminder system. You could agree, for example, that when you gently tap your chin, it is a reminder that means, "Don't forget to speak clearly to me." If you have grandchildren, you might even have a secret code to use with them to remind them, "Slow down and speak clearly." Fun for them, and possibly a huge help for you!

Here's a little poem you may want to send to your closest family members and dearest friends. *"If you would say it slowly and clear, I would probably understand you much better, my dear. If you speak a bit louder and take time to pause, I will be happy to shower you with applause. Thanks for using your best clear speech for me."*