

Enhancing Comprehensibility: Speaker Strategies

Adapted from Vogel & Miller, 1991; Yorkston, Strand, & Kennedy, 1996; Yorkston, Strand & Miller, 1995

1. Provide your communication partner context for what you are saying

Knowing the topic of conversation makes a big difference in understanding speech that is distorted. If your speech is difficult to understand, provide the context by writing or spelling the topic of your message.

2. Don't shift topics abruptly

If your speech is difficult to understand, your partners may get lost if you change from one topic to another without a transition. Let people know that you are changing topics and what the new topic is.

3. Use turn-taking signals

Conversations tend to go very quickly. If your speech is slow, you may need to use clear signals that you want a turn (e.g., eye gaze, breathing pattern, body movement, gesture or verbal interjection). Choose one or two that work for you and make sure listeners are aware of them.

4. Get your listener's attention

If your speech is difficult to understand, it is even more important that listeners pay full attention. Before you begin a message, alert your communication partner by saying his/her name.

5. Use predictable types of sentences

Simple, grammatically predictable sentences are generally easier to understand than longer, grammatically complicated sentences.

6. Use predicable wording

If your speech is difficult to understand, avoid unusual idioms or slang expressions. Be direct.

7. Watch the tone of your voice

We communicate a lot of information by changing the tone of our voice. If you have difficulty expressing subtle changes in meaning with your intonation, you'll need to express sarcasm or humour in other ways.

8. Rephrase your message

If listeners have not understood you even after you have repeated the message, try communicating the thought using different words. But use a signal to let them know.

9. Accompany speech with simple gestures when appropriate

At times, speech may be supplemented by simple gestures. For example, "Stop and turn around where you are".

10. Take advantage of situational cues

Your surroundings may help you give a listener extra cues. For example, you might point to objects in the room in order to introduce a topic.

11. Make the environment as "friendly" as possible

Avoid carrying out important conversations in noisy places or in places where your communication partner cannot watch you speak (e.g., dimly lit room, over distance)

12. Avoid communicating over long distances

Trying to speak to someone who is across the room or in another room is difficult. If you need to call attention to yourself, a buzzer, beeper, or baby monitor might be useful.

Enhancing Comprehensibility: Partner Strategies

Adapted from Vogel & Miller, 1991; Yorkston, Strand, & Kennedy, 1996; Yorkston, Strand & Miller, 1995

1. Make sure you know the general topic of the conversation

Knowing the topic of conversation makes a big difference in understanding speech that is distorted. Encourage speakers with dysarthria to introduce topics.

2. Watch for turn taking signals

Some speakers with dysarthria for whom speech is slow have a difficult time getting a turn in conversation. Watch carefully for your partner's signals or decide in advance on some turn-taking signals.

3. Give your undivided attention

Speech that is slow and/or distorted is more difficult to understand and therefore requires undivided attention.

4. Choose the time and place for communication

Most of us can talk all day without getting tired. Talking may be very difficult and fatiguing for the speaker with dysarthria. Avoid important conversations when the speaker is tired. Mealtimes may no longer be the best time for conversation.

5. Watch the speaker

A lot of information is obtained while watching a speaker. When speech is slow and/or distorted, it is even more important to look at the speaker's face.

6. Piece together the cues

Some people describe the task of understanding slow and distorted speech as a process of piecing together a series of cues. Take advantage of whatever cues are available to you (e.g., speech, gestures, physical surroundings)

7. Make the environment work for you

Maximize your ability to understand the speaker with dysarthria by making sure that you have enough light, that the light is on the speaker's face, and that all extraneous noise is eliminated/reduced.

8. Avoid communication over long distances

Make sure to always be in the same room when you initiate conversation. It is difficult for many speakers with dysarthria to speak loudly enough to be heard in another room.

9. Make sure your hearing is as good as possible

Excerpted from *Optimizing Communicative Effectiveness and Comprehensibility in Dysarthria*, Allyson Dykstra, SLP(C), PhD