

# A Sure-fire "Recipe" for Communication Clarification

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At one time or another there are moments in conversation when we have absolutely no idea what someone has said to us. It happens to everyone. Most people, with or without a hearing loss, have difficulty communicating anywhere there is background noise (CHABA, 1988). It's what we do with this conundrum that makes us unique.

When that moment of misunderstanding occurs, the vast majority of people say: "Huh?", "Excuse me?", "Pardon me?", "Beg your pardon", "I'm SORRY, what did you say?" or "What was that?"

The common element of all of these phrases is that they are not specific and don't provide our conversation partners with any clues to what exactly it was that we missed. If this is your typical coping mechanism, research has shown that it is not very effective (Gagné & Wyllie, 1989; Owens & Telleen, 1981).

Others may elect to use a non-verbal strategy. They nod and smile when that moment of misunderstanding occurs, choosing to pretend to understand. The problem is that with the right or wrong question (as the case may be), you can land yourself in a whole heap of trouble! Worse yet it can be the beginning of the end of the conversation. Conversations are progressive. As the



conversation continues, and the misunderstanding grows larger and larger, it may be that in time, you decide to withdraw completely from the conversation.

To avoid unpleasant feelings (of frustration, anxiety, impatience, anger, loss of competence and self-esteem, withdrawal and social isolation), one of the goals of an effective aural rehabilitation plan is to handle difficult communication situations assertively and independently. To do this, communication strategies training is essential as people are not always able to instantly adopt effective coping skills to deal with the misunderstandings that happen in everyday situations (Hétu & Getty, 1991; Heydebrand, Mauze, Tye-Murray, Binzer, & Skinner, 2005; Kricos, 2006).

The difficulty with having a list of communication strategies is that you can still find yourself in that moment of misunderstanding where you know what to do, but for whatever reason you are unable to ask for what you need. To help you get over this hurdle, we offer you a "recipe" for how to phrase a request for communication clarification. This all-important recipe, inspired by a recent lecture by Susan Binzer titled Improving Understanding with Communication Strategies, has five essential ingredients.

## The Ingredients

1. Use "I" statements -- don't place the blame on others for your misunderstanding.
2. Make a specific request.
3. Explain why you are making the request -- People with normal hearing do not always know what to do when communicating with someone with a hearing loss. A normal hearing person may not realize that a hand in front of their face could be blocking important lip-reading cues you are relying on. Never assume that someone knows exactly what you need to ensure your understanding.
4. Be courteous -- Your communication partner is more likely to comply with your request if you are polite and courteous. And...
5. Be grateful -- This increases the likelihood that the speaker will comply on future occasions and remember what you asked for and why it was important.

# The Recipe in Action

Here are some specific situations and examples of the recipe in action offered by Susan Binzer.

## Situation 1 - "Your hand is in the way."

"Excuse me, I could lipread you better if you would please lower your hand."



## Situation 2 - "You're talking too fast."

"I could understand you better if you repeated that slower please. I have a hearing loss."

## Situation 3 - "It's too noisy in here."

"My hearing aid/cochlear implant helps me understand a lot better, but I still have trouble in noise - would you mind moving to a table away from the piano?"

"Thank you for moving away from the music; I always enjoy talking to you."



## Situation 4 - "You mumble. I can't understand a word you're saying."

"I use a hearing aid and I could understand you better if you would speak a little slower. That way I won't have to ask you to repeat so much."

## Situation 5 - "You know not to call me from another room."

"My hearing aid microphone is powerful enough to pick up that you are talking to me, but we are too far away from each other for me to understand you."



## Situation 6 - "You are all speaking too softly."

"I think my cochlear implant/hearing aid needs adjustment; can you please wait a moment while I make some changes? I really want to hear what you have to say."

Remember; keep your chin up and your spirits high. Armed with our sure-fire recipe for communication clarification - with practice you are bound to succeed! We strongly feel that this recipe can help you become an effective and fluent communicator. We recognize the challenge that hearing loss creates. It's not the hearing that you have left that is critical but what you do with it that counts most during a moment of communication misunderstanding. We look forward to opportunities in the future to support our clients and partners at HEAR with more workshops and training sessions in this area of aural rehabilitation.