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ANOTHER TOOL FOR ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATION NEEDS? TRY THE TRACA!



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Obtaining a comprehensive insight into the communication needs of our patients is important if we are to help reduce the problems caused by their hearing loss. But it can be difficult to obtain a detailed view within the time constraints of the initial assessment. A number of pre-fit assessment tools are available to audiologists to gauge these communication needs (e.g. COSI, HHIE, TELEGRAM). In practical use, our clinic has found each of these tools has some advantages, but each also has some disadvantages.

We have developed a new tool to try and better meet the needs of patients and clinicians. The criteria to be met were -

- Easily understood and quickly completed by the patient (without involvement of the clinician)
- Comprehensive (covering a wide range of communication situations)
- In a form that facilitates patients' "ownership" of their communication needs.
- Contributes to selection of appropriate counselling strategies (patients' perception of communication difficulties compared to test results, and realistic expectations from device fitting).
- Facilitates involvement of communication partners in the patients' on-going management.
- Flexible (can be used for new patients, or to assess communication ability for on-going patients who are considering replacement devices).
- Ability to validate treatment effectiveness (comparison of pre-fit needs and post-fit outcomes).
- Ability to link with the EARtrak™ process for measuring treatment effectiveness.

The one-page tool (Fig. 1: TRACA) surveys the patient's perceived difficulty understanding speech in a variety of situations. The tool has been used in our clinic since early 2014.

Name:

Date:

How much difficulty do you have hearing in the following situations?

	No difficulty	Slight difficulty	Moderate difficulty	Quite a lot of difficulty	Very much difficulty	Not relevant
One to one conversation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conversation in small groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conversation in large groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outdoors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concert/movie	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Place of worship/lectures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watching TV	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
In a car	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Workplace	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Telephone - Landline	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mobile	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restaurant/café	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Have the criteria for inclusion in our clinic been met?

- Easily understood and quickly completed? Patients can complete the survey quickly in the waiting room before their initial appointment. It is rare for patients to seek guidance or clarification from staff.
- Comprehensive? Patients are prompted to consider and report their perceived abilities across a variety of listening situations. This gives the patient and the audiologist a quick overview of the areas where the communication abilities fall short of the patient's needs.
- Patient "ownership"? The TRACA stresses "Their reported assessment" as the key feature. By reflecting on their communication ability in each of the listening situations, patients can clearly see where their needs are not being met, and are given a useful framework to engage in discussion with their audiologist.
- Pre-fit counselling tool? The patient hands the survey the audiologist at the start of their appointment (Example 1). The audiologist can quickly assess the patient's responses on the survey. Following the completion of testing, the audiologist can use this information to relate test results to the patient's perceived difficulties, and choose the most appropriate counselling strategy for the patient. For example, for patients reporting significant problems in all situations, counselling regarding the potential of various management options to improve their communication, including the benefit that could realistically be expected from device fitting. Another example - if a patient reports no difficulty understanding speech in any listening situation, but testing reveals a significant hearing impairment, the audiologist is alerted to the need for counselling as the most appropriate initial management strategy, rather than recommending hearing aids to a patient in denial about the impact of the hearing-loss.

Figure 2. Example 1

How much difficulty do you have hearing in the following situations?

	No difficulty	Slight difficulty	Moderate difficulty	Quite a lot of difficulty	Very much difficulty	Not relevant
One to one conversation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conversation in small groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conversation in large groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outdoors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concert/movie	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Place of worship/lectures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watching TV	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
In a car	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Workplace	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Telephone - Landline	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mobile	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restaurant/café	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Facilitates involvement of significant others? The responses of the patient can be discussed between all parties. For example, if the patient reports they have no difficulty with television, the communication partner might contribute to the discussion by adding that the reason the patient perceives no difficulty is because they raise the volume of the TV to levels that are uncomfortable for the partner.
- Flexible? The tool works well for new patients, but also has been found to be useful in helping patients and clinicians to evaluate the effectiveness of older fittings, and to identify best options for improving the patient's communication in problem areas if new devices are being considered. It can also help identify where assistive listening devices might be required to overcome the limitations of hearing aids in more difficult listening environments.
- Validation of treatment effectiveness? Patients can complete the survey again following an adjustment period with new devices. By comparing these responses with their pre-fit results, both patient and clinician can see if the treatment has been effective at reducing the problems in areas where improvement was required. If not, it can facilitate further useful discussion about on-going management. (Example 2)

Figure 3. Example 2

How much difficulty do you have hearing in the following situations?

	No difficulty	Slight difficulty	Moderate difficulty	Quite a lot of difficulty	Very much difficulty	Not relevant
One to one conversation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conversation in small groups	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conversation in large groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outdoors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concert/movie	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Place of worship/lectures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watching TV	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
In a car	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Workplace	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Telephone - Landline	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Mobile	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restaurant/café	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

- Link with the EARtrak outcomes measurement process? The listening situations on the TRACA are the same as those in the EARtrak survey (www.eartrak.com). This enables the clinic to compare the post-fit outcomes reported to EARtrak to the pre-fit communication needs identified on the TRACA at the first appointment, and the post-fit TRACA completed in-house after the device fitting and adjustment.

We are also currently collecting normative data for comparison of communication abilities for normal hearing adults. For example, 20% of adults with normal hearing in the age group 40-49 years report slight-moderate difficulty in the "restaurant/cafe" situation, and this rises to 57% of those in the age group 50-59 years. This information is valuable when helping our patients set realistic expectations for their communication in these situations, as they will be able to compare their communication abilities in both the aided and unaided condition to a group of similarly aged individuals with normal hearing.

In summary, the TRACA has been found to be a useful tool to help patients and clinicians to identify communication difficulties, to plan appropriate management and to evaluate treatment effectiveness.

Susan Clutterbuck is the owner of Gippsland Audiology with two locations in Victoria, Australia. She, along with her husband Neil Clutterbuck operate EARtrak, an independent patient satisfaction benchmarking survey. Susan can be contacted at butterclucks@gmail.com.