Assessing Client Communication Needs: Try the PACA!

SUSAN CLUTTERBUCK
Gippsland Audiology and EARtrak
clutterbuckns@gmail.com

It is important audiologists gain a comprehensive insight into the communication needs of our clients if we are to help reduce the problems caused by their hearing loss. But it can be difficult to obtain a detailed understanding within the time constraints of the initial appointment. A number of pre-fit assessment tools are available for clinicians to gauge these communication needs (e.g. COSI, HHIE, TELEGRAM, APHAB). In practical use, the clinical experience of 8 audiologists (with more than 100 years clinical experience) working at Gippsland Audiology is that each of these tools has some advantages, but each also has some disadvantages. COSI is the tool of choice for many clinicians working in the OHS program, but may not always be suitable for a pre-clinical encounter. In particular, the open-ended nature of the questionnaire can make it difficult for some clients to articulate their goals without strong guidance from the clinician, which can result in clinical bias.

In addition to the initial assessment of client communication needs, we were looking for a single tool that would meet the broader needs of our clients and clinicians.

The criteria to be met were -
1. **Easily understood** and quickly completed by the client (without involvement of the clinician).
2. **Comprehensive** - covering a wide range of communication situations.
3. A format that facilitated **"client ownership"** of their communication needs.
4. Appropriate for **"significant others"** - to give their perception of the hearing difficulties of their communication partner.
5. Able to contribute to **selection of appropriate management strategies.**
6. Able to **facilitate involvement** of communication partners in the client's on-going management.

7. Able to help **identify the client's goals** for the outcome of any clinical intervention.
8. **Flexible** - able to be used for new clients, or to assess communication ability for previously fitted clients who might be considering assistive or replacement devices.
9. Able to **validate treatment effectiveness** - comparison of pre-fit needs and post-fit outcomes.
10. Able to **link with the EARtrak™ process** for measuring treatment effectiveness.

A new one-page survey tool has been developed, the Personal Assessment of Communication Abilities (PACA). This tool surveys the client's perceived difficulty understanding speech in a variety of situations. The tool has been in clinical use at Gippsland Audiology since early 2014. The tool was reviewed in Audiology Practices (the Academy of Doctors of Audiology magazine) over a year ago and generated much positive clinical discussion. It is available for download at www.eartrak.com. It has been downloaded many times, reflecting considerable clinical interest across the broader audiological community.

HAVE THE CRITERIA BEEN MET?
1. Easily understood and quickly completed? Clients complete the survey quickly in the waiting room before their initial appointment. It is rare for clients to seek guidance or clarification from staff.

2. Comprehensive? Clients are prompted to consider and report their perceived abilities across a variety of listening situations. This gives the client and the clinician a quick overview of the areas where the communication abilities fall short of the client's needs.

3. Client "ownership"? The PACA stresses "Personal assessment" as the key feature. By reflecting on their communication ability in each of the listening situations, clients can clearly see where their needs are not being met. This gives them a useful framework to engage in discussion with their audiologist.

Communication Abilities

Name: SH (Female, 57 years)   Date: 4 Jan 2016

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	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Conversation in small groups	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Conversation in large groups	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐
Outdoors	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Concert/movie	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Place of worship/lectures	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐
Watching TV	☐	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐
In a car	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐
Workplace	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐
Telephone - Landline	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
- Mobile	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Restaurant/café	☐	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐
Other (specify)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	

PACA (Personal Assessment of Communication Abilities) by EARtrak ©2015   www.eartrak.com

Above/ *Example 1 PACA*

4. Appropriate for "significant others"? Clients are encouraged to bring their most frequent communication partner to their appointments. This "significant other" (SO) can complete the PACA (SO) version while waiting with the client in the waiting room. This information "rounds out" the snapshot of communication needs for both parties.

5. Pre-fit counselling tool? The client hands the survey to the audiologist at the start of the appointment. (Example 1 PACA). The audiologist can quickly assess the client's responses on the survey. Following the completion of testing, the audiologist can use this information to relate test results to the client's perceived difficulties, and choose the most appropriate counselling strategy for the client. For example, for clients reporting significant problems in all situations, the potential of various management options to improve their communication can be considered. These options might include communication training, as well as the benefit that could realistically be expected from device fitting. Another example - if a client 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.

6. Facilitates involvement of significant others? The responses of the client and their SO can be discussed between all parties. Are they "on the same page"? Or do their perceptions differ significantly? For example, a client might report he has no difficulty with television, but the communication partner might have reported their partner has "Very much difficulty". This information can lead to a discussion about why there is such a difference in perception (perhaps the client perceives "No difficulty" because the TV volume is raised to levels that are uncomfortable for his partner?) The reported difficulties in other situations can also lead to useful discussion about optimum communication strategies that can be used by both partners to improve their communication.

7. Assist with goal-setting? The client can be asked to rank his needs in order of importance (the situation where he has the most difficulty might not be a high priority for him to have improvement). Using the PACA in this way allows relevant and realistic goals to be set (similar to the process used in the COSI). The PACA framework gives the client a way to actively participate in the rehabilitation planning process.

8. Flexible? The tool works well for new clients, but has also been found to be useful in helping clients and clinicians to evaluate the effectiveness of pre-existing fittings. It can identify problem areas with a current fitting, and guide discussion regarding the options for improving the client's communication in these 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 (e.g. remote microphones, FM systems).

9. Validation of treatment effectiveness? Clients can complete the PACA again following an adjustment period with their new devices (Example 2 PACA). By comparing these responses with their pre-fit results, both client and clinician can see if the treatment has been effective in reducing the problems in areas where improvement was required. If not, it can facilitate further useful discussion about on-going management.

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

Normative data on 143 subjects (who attended an audiology clinic in Victoria, for a pre-employment hearing test) was collected to provide baseline data on the communication abilities for normal hearing adults. For example, only 27% of adults with verified hearing thresholds within normal limits in the age group 50-59years report "No difficulty" communicating in Large Group situations, with 32% reporting "Slight difficulty", 27% reporting "Moderate difficulty" and 11% reporting "Quite a lot of difficulty". This information is valuable when helping clients set realistic expectations for their communication in these situations. This data has been published in the Hearing Review and is available at http://www.hearingreview.com/2016/02/using-personal-assessment-communication-abilities-paca-tool/

In summary, the PACA has been found to be a useful tool to help clients and clinicians work together
· To identify communication difficulties,
· To plan appropriate management and
· To evaluate treatment effectiveness.

The PACA & PACA-SO forms are available at www.eartrak.com/PACA ●

Communication Abilities

Name: GWR (Female, 82 years)   Date: 3 Mar 14   ☑ Unaided   ■ Aided 3 June 14

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	■	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐
Conversation in small groups	■	☐	☐	☐	☑	☐
Conversation in large groups	☐	■	☐	☐	☑	☐
Outdoors	☐	■	☑	☐	☐	☐
Concert/movie	■	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐
Place of worship/lectures	☐	■	☐	☑	☐	☐
Watching TV	■	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐
In a car	☐	■	☐	☑	☐	☐
Workplace	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☑
Telephone - Landline	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☑
- Mobile	☐	■	☑	☐	☐	☐
Restaurant/café	☐	☐	■	☑	☐	☐
Other (specify)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	

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Above/ *Example 2 PACA*