

# Looking after speech and hearing

*By Meghan MacNeil, M.Sc., S-LP(C)-Reg*

The month of May is Speech and Hearing month, a time to raise awareness of communication health and the work of audiologists and speech-language pathologists (S-LPs). The theme for 2025 is *S-LPs & Audiologists: Doing More Than You Think*. S-LPs who work in the public school system are NSTU members who work to assess, diagnose and treat communication-based disorders and to support their colleagues in meeting the diverse learning and communication needs in their classrooms. While many are familiar with some of the communication challenges students may face, teachers are often less aware of the potential challenges they themselves may face. Some communication health challenges that teachers are common among teachers include:

## Voice

Much like singers, lawyers, and clergy, teachers are occupational voice users. Your voice is one of your greatest assets, but misuse can cause damage leading poor sound quality, poor volume control, and pain or discomfort. When you're speaking, your vocal folds – commonly called vocal cords – vibrate to produce sound much like the strings of a guitar. The vocal folds function best when speaking at a conversational volume and when kept well hydrated. Frequent yelling or raised volume, talking for long periods of time without vocal rest, and even coughing or throat clearing can cause the muscles in and around the vocal folds to become irritated or inflamed. Repeated irritation can lead to serious vocal problems which may require medical intervention to alleviate. Teachers can help protect their voices by using amplification systems in their classrooms, drinking plenty of water, and using nonverbal call-and-response practices to gain attention instead of shouting. If you notice your throat feeling dry or fatigued, or your voice sounds hoarse or raspy, do your best to rest your voice, don't just push through it. S-LPs who work with adults can provide support free of charge to anyone with a Nova Scotia health card through Hearing and Speech Nova Scotia (HSNS).

## Communication Modalities

Teachers excel in using and understanding language and improve year after year as their experience grows. Yet we've all had the experience of repeating ourselves over and over only to be faced with hands-up asking what to do. Many teachers are unaware of or underestimate the number of different ways they communicate with students and how they might be able to improve outcomes and reduce frustration. Among the most important strategies is the use of visuals. Writing down key words or using pictures (even poorly drawn!) can help improve communication by turning temporary verbal messages into permanent information. Giving instructions in simple language chunks and repeating it in the exact same way each time means students with language and executive function difficulties do not get confused as to whether it is a new instruction or an old one repeated. Using gestures to

demonstrate vocabulary words and new concepts helps students to understand you more quickly and be better able to work through material independently. Using voice amplification is again useful in improving understanding in your classroom by boosting not only volume but clarity. Increasing the effectiveness of your own communication is not only UDL but also improves your effectiveness and confidence in your classroom. Your school S-LP can help support you in improving your classroom communication.

## Hearing

Schools can be loud. While legislation protects workers from excessive noise from machinery or equipment, a crowded hallway, packed gymnasium, or excited classroom can quickly rise to a volume high enough to cause damage to your hearing. You may have attended a concert and noticed difficulty hearing afterward only to be back to normal by morning. However, long-term, repeated exposure to noise can cause irreversible damage to your hearing causing a great deal of personal and professional frustration. Common symptoms of noise-induced hearing loss include difficulty hearing high pitched sounds like birds chirping, difficulty listening in situations with multiple sound sources (e.g., having a conversation when the television is playing), asking people to speak louder or more slowly, and ringing or buzzing in the ears called tinnitus. You can help protect your hearing by helping students to understand and monitor their voice volume to keep classroom noise lower and working with your school's Occupational Health and Safety team to find ways to improve classroom acoustics and reduce echoes and reverberations. Some teachers such as music or physical education might consider specially fitted earplugs which can reduce volume while preserving sound quality. Most important is to regularly have your hearing assessed by an audiologist to help establish a baseline for your hearing health. The waitlists can be long, but audiological evaluations are available for free through Hearing and Speech Nova Scotia (HSNS).

S-LPs know how difficult changes to communication health can be for anyone, and teachers, as professional communicators, are particularly at risk. Small changes to your practice can make a difference in ensuring the longevity of your voice, hearing, and communication. In Nova Scotia, S-LPs and audiologists are regulated health professionals and are available to help — they do more than you think!

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