Canadian Audiologist
The Official Publication of the Canadian Academy of Audiology

“Can’t I Do That Myself?”: Using Apps To Provide Agency for Students with Hearing Loss

Published January 18th, 2023

Pam Millett, PhD, Reg CASLPO



This edition’s column was inspired by Gael Hannen’s most recent article, “A Client’s Rant”, which reminded me that it’s so important for clients to express how hard it is to have a hearing loss, and for professionals to acknowledge this. One of the ideas that I think Gael was alluding to was that while individuals can (and should) develop self-advocacy, it’s not quite the same as having *agency*. That is, you may have a perfect understanding of *why* a particular situation is interfering with communication but have little or no ability to do anything about it, and that’s frustrating and disheartening. The dictionary defines agency as “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power,” and today’s technology can be hugely helpful in providing ways for students with hearing loss to take action themselves, to exert power when they are having difficulty. Of course, there will always be a need to ask people to repeat, slow down, move away from a window, etc., when communication difficulties arise, but how much better it would be to have more agency in improving the situation using technology! I’m excited about some new technology that allows for this, particularly in apps.

The mute button on transmitters is a perfect example of the difference between self-advocacy and

agency. For decades, most FM system transmitters have had some version of a mute button for a teacher to use when not speaking directly to a student, but the use of the mute button relies on the teacher identifying when it should be used, remembering to do it, and then remembering to unmute when appropriate. A few years ago, I worked with a high school student who received a new FM system, and wanted to explain the system to her teachers herself (rather than having me or her teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing do it). This seemed like an excellent idea, so I showed her how to use the system, and she showed all her teachers. The next week, though, when I came back to check in, she said that she hadn't been using it after the first couple of days because it was distracting when the teachers kept talking when she didn't need to listen. She had forgotten to show them how to use the mute button, but when I reminded her, her complaint was that she would have to continuously remind the teacher to do that, putting up her hand and drawing attention to herself each time. Her question was, "can't I do that myself?" (i.e., mute the transmitter), a perfectly on-point question since she was the one who knew best when she needed to hear and when she didn't. She had the self-advocacy skills to work with her teachers on the use of the FM system and to tell them when to mute and unmute, but it would have been even better for her to have the *agency* to manage the situation herself. In fact, one of the newest transmitters from an FM system manufacturer does have an app that allows the student to do this themselves from their phone, a game changer for high school students.

Another example is from a postsecondary student using an FM system who deliberately didn't want to show the professor how to use the mute button because she assumed (rightly, in my experience) that the professor would forget to unmute at the beginning of class and she would have to interrupt them in a room full of hundreds of students. However, she also liked arriving to class early so she could give the professor the transmitter but didn't want to have to listen to them chat with other students before class. Our solution was to use the hearing aid app for her aids, which allowed her to independently adjust the volume of the FM system so that she could turn the FM volume down before class and then up when she needed it. She knew that there was an app for her hearing aids but had never used it (she thought). Once we looked at it more closely, however, we realized that we could "hack" it to simulate a mute button.

There is a developmental consideration to this, of course – students need to have the maturity and metacognitive skills to use apps like these appropriately. However, we can start small with younger students (can you put your own earmold in? Can you change your own battery? Do you know what the low battery beep sounds like in your hearing aids? What do you do when you hear that? can you charge your own transmitter?) and work up to apps and multiple programs in hearing technologies (can you make your own audiology appointment by using the Bluetooth feature? Do you have a good speech-to-text app on your phone to listen to a podcast? Do you know how a directional microphone program could help if you don't have your FM system? is a music program helpful to you for band practice?). Manufacturers seem to be increasingly attentive to adding features to the basic device function (such as streaming to a phone or selecting directional microphones) and providing agency for the user to have more control over what they hear.

Although it's getting to be a challenge for all of us to keep up with the new advancements in hearing technologies and assistive devices, the more we keep up to date as professionals, the more potential tools we have in *our* toolkit to add to a student's toolkit. I'm always surprised by parents I talk to who, when asked if they use any hearing devices at home, say, "well, we got a box with his hearing aids, but I've never used it, not sure what it is." Technology is complicated, often, we need to explain or demonstrate more than once, and we don't want to overload parents or students with so much information that it's unusable. On the other hand, if we know the possibilities for hearing

access, we can always be on the lookout for situations where we might suggest introducing an app or feature for a student. One of the best resources I have found comes from Dr. Tina Childress, who provides perspectives as both an audiologist and a consumer; I refer to her blog See Hear Communication Matters on a regular basis for ideas on technology for a variety of listening challenges. As Peter Stelmacovich (another audiologist and consumer) notes, there are things that the individual with hearing loss knows best and things that the audiologist knows best; audiologists need to provide leadership in making sure that individuals with hearing loss and their families know about all of the options available to them.