

# SPIRITUAL LEARNING CHALLENGES RELATED TO HEARING: ARE YOU ALSO A *SPECIAL NEEDS* CHRISTIAN?

By Kenneth A. Pudlas, EdD

<sup>14</sup>And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,  
‘You shall keep on listening, but shall not understand;  
And you shall keep on looking, but shall not perceive;

<sup>15</sup>For the heart of this people has become dull,  
With their ears they scarcely hear,  
And they have closed their eyes,  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
Hear with their ears,  
Understand with their heart, and return,  
And I would heal them.’

<sup>16</sup>But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.  
(Matthew 13:14-16 - NASB)

As I write these words I am reflecting on Lent, Good Friday, and finally, Easter Sunday just recently celebrated. Why were the events of Good Friday and of Easter necessary as a part of the plan of a sovereign, loving, righteous Creator? Because I fall short of the mark; I miss the target; I need salvation, and as I seek to live the abundant life God promises (John 10:10) I need His help to reach my full potential. I am a *special needs* Christian and I need spiritual *special education*.

In previous articles the notion of exceptionality (see Pudlas, 2019) and parallels between specific learning disabilities (LD) in the academic sense and those in the spiritual realm were discussed (Pudlas, 2022). The verses above and others speak to having eyes but not seeing and ears but not hearing. Can lessons applicable to spiritual growth and development be derived from the kind of challenges faced and special educational attention received by persons who encounter various learning challenges? And, as Christians recognize their own shortcomings, they might be more inclusive, both individually and as the Body, of those who might otherwise be marginalized.

## Background and Foundations

My journey in special education began in part because my younger sister was born with profound deafness (see Pudlas, 2020). The cause of Catherine’s deafness: “unknown,” is the commonly listed etiology. The cause was not, as some supposedly well-meaning church members suggested, due to some unconfessed sin

on the part of our parents; nor was it the result of lack of faith or some other failing in the prayers of our parents. Nor could our mother provide a satisfactory answer to my sister's question, "What for God made me deaf?"

Christians believe in God and that He is a loving, sovereign, righteous Creator. And, at the same time, they see around them or perhaps have friends or family who have disabilities. John chapter 9 contains an account of Jesus and His disciples encountering a man who was born blind. Jesus rejected the sin of the parents or of their son as the cause but rather *that the Glory of God might be revealed*. God in His sovereignty may allow or perhaps cause various so-called disabilities to exemplify ways in which we all fall short of His normative standard.

One purpose here is to further that discussion, suggesting that all are *exceptional*; all deviate from God's normative standard: "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy." (1Pet. 1:15, 16). Exceptionality may be defined as deviating significantly from an established norm or standard. Like students with learning challenges, be they physical, cognitive, behavioural, or sensory in nature, believers, too, need *special education* to develop spiritually to their full God-given and God-mandated potentials. By definition, *special education* (now commonly called inclusive education) is what is needed to help learners achieve their full potential. In other words, *special education is all about removing barriers* (see *The Tale of the Pike*, Pudlas 2020).

Regarding deviating from normative standards, in John 10:10 Jesus said that He came that his people might have life and that they might have it to the full. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson interprets the verses this way:

<sup>6-10</sup>Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

Jesus came to provide a means to real and eternal life, more and better than ever dreamed of. Are his people, as individuals and as members of Christ's Body on earth, experiencing the full potential of that promised abundant life?

The words that prefaced this chapter are another example of the *body language* replete in scripture. Believers are all members of one body (1 Cor. 12). In Ephesians 4 Paul states, "From him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held

together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work” (NIV). Each part of the body (the church) must do its work, that is, reach its full potential, if the body is to be fully functioning. In the local church, is everyone becoming all that God would have them be and therefore fulfilling their role in the church? Not only are believers far from meeting God’s standard of holiness, but they also have various (spiritual) learning challenges that keep them from reaching their full potential as authentic apprentices of Jesus and from experiencing the rich and full and abundant life that Jesus promises. They also have God-given gifts and abilities that can be used to glorify Him and to contribute to the Body.

This article offers insights borrowed from decades of experience as a special educator, for capitalizing on strengths and applying specific strategies to overcome barriers so that believers may more fully approach the ideal standard that God has set for them. Specifically, it explores spiritual lessons that can be learned from a study of hearing impairment.

## **Hearing - Sensory and Spiritual**

Quoting Isaiah 6, Matthews’s gospel starts with a reference to hearing impairment. “You will ·listen and listen [keep on hearing; or listen intently], but you will not understand. You will ·look and look [keep on seeing; or look intently], but you will not ·learn [perceive; comprehend]” (Matt. 13:14 EXB). These verses involve the terms: listen, hear, understand, perceive, comprehend. They describe some form of obstacle to learning and understanding and the metaphor of the senses of seeing and hearing are used as potential barriers.

Humans are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). For example, a tiny mechanism the size of a pea (the ossicular chain) in the middle ear, along with related physical attributes, amplifies sound to such a degree that humans are able to “hear” the faintest whisper; yet that same mechanism reacts almost instantaneously to loud sounds so as to protect the mechanism (tympanic membrane, ossicular chain, oval and round windows) from damage. The mechanism serves to channel the energy of waves created by sound into the cochlea where tiny hair cells resonate at appropriate frequencies and intensities and transmit electrical signals along the auditory nerve to the brain. The brain then perceives different frequencies as pitch and intensities as loudness. This, in turn, allows humans to understand speech, appreciate music, and sounds of nature. This one example of the greatness of creation raises the question: which takes more faith: purposeful creation or random evolution?

Hearing loss can be classified in degrees, from mild or moderate to severe or profound based on the average loudness (measured in Decibels) that can be detected as pure tones of various frequencies (measured in cycles per second or hertz). The average level of detection across the frequencies that encompass normal speech is known as the hearing threshold level (HTL). People do not communicate merely in pure tones. Beyond simply objective measures of pure tone frequencies (those “beeps” that are usually the first step in an audiologic exam), it is important to understand a functional definition of hearing impairment which is derived from the ability to receive speech through audition alone. A person who is functionally deaf, by definition, needs additional input such as might be provided by sign language. And the notion of auditory-figure-ground is also important; the meaningful auditory signal must be louder than any background noise. The auditory-figure ground is discussed more fully in the concluding sections.

What follows is a discussion of how barriers encountered in listening and hearing are a form of applied communication disorder, and how they may mirror failures in spiritual growth and development, along with models or schematics which illustrate how audition is a part of communication. Spiritual applications can be seen in the communication models illustrated in the figures that follow.

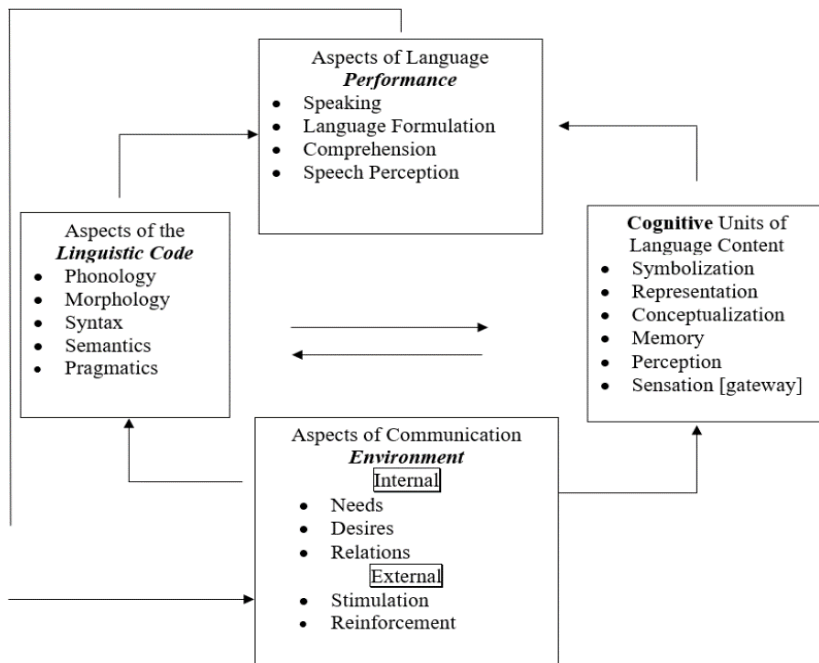


Figure 1. Communication: An Integrative Model [After Carrow-Woolfolk & Lynch]

Figure One gives a general overview of communication as discussed in Pudlas (2022). The units of the linguistic code (the words heard and read) are dependent upon the signal passing through the sensory gateway on the cognitive side of the model. While the ears are created to receive auditory information, it is the brain that interprets that information. As in the verses above, while believers may listen intently, there may be barriers, be they sensory, perceptual, experiential that prevent their full understanding.

To be able to understand, that is, to perceive and comprehend, as in the verses above, believers need to be able to receive a clear sensory signal. An illustration of hearing but not understanding is presented in 1 Samuel. Only after Eli helped Samuel understand who it was that he was hearing did Samuel perceive that the message was from God. Hearing and understanding are inextricably related - but they are not the same thing. For example, a husband at times may “hear” his wife - know that she is speaking to him - but fail to understand what she is conveying. She may then point out that he has once again forgotten to wear his hearing aids. Believers may sometimes fail to hear and/or understand God’s intended message when He speaks to them. Another model or schematic of the communication process will illuminate potential barriers.

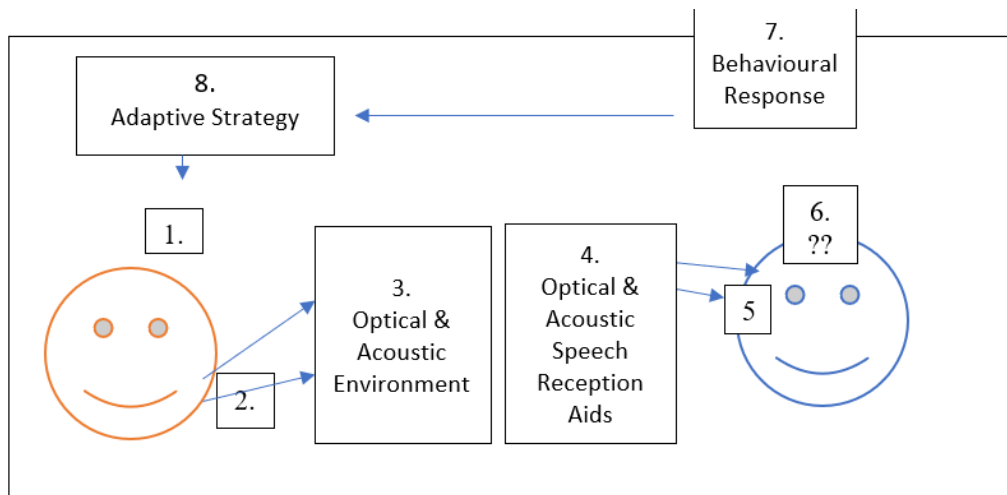


Figure 2. Another Communication Model [Adapted from N.P. Erber]

Figure Two illustrates that communication requires both sending and receiving. Apart from sensory issues, eyeglasses, contact lenses, or hearing aids may help make the propositional intent of the message understood. A message has both a surface structure (what is seen or heard) and a deep structure or propositional intent. For example, Jesus is described as “the spotless lamb of God.” Looking only at the surface, which appears to be some form of anthropomorphizing, may not convey the deep structure or intended meaning.

Similarly, believers may fail to understand what God is telling them because they do not hear (or see) beyond the surface. They may debate the veracity of textual minutia and perhaps miss the intended enduring understandings.

A related concept is that of automaticity. Without conscious effort expended on interpreting the medium, hearers may concentrate on meaning, because they are so familiar with the surface structure. Surface structure is important because speech is made up not only of individual phonemes (smallest unit of speech sound) but also of prosodic elements of rhythm and disjuncture, that can give the spoken work a kind of melodic character. People can, for example, distinguish between different persons uttering the same words not by the content (which is the same) but by the manner in which that content is presented. They may distinguish between different forms of music as “more pleasing to the ear” or between different performances of the same music as subtle differences in the presentation of the same notes influence their appreciation. On the other hand, they may need to concentrate on the speech of someone with a strong foreign accent to derive the meaning. As another example of nuances in spoken messages, experienced listeners can detect irony or sarcasm. Consider a wife’s response of “no” to a husband’s query if there is a problem; the manner in which she says “no” betrays much meaning beyond those two simple phonemes.

These aspects of communication relate to Jesus’ teaching in John 10:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup>But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” <sup>6</sup>

This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

The listeners did not understand the propositional intent (verse 6) of Jesus’ words. In verse 4 the sheep follow Jesus *because they know his voice*; they will flee from a stranger because the voice is not familiar. That familiarity is a kind of automaticity; God enables those who are very familiar with His voice to appropriate his message and follow him. A parallel may be drawn from infants. Even before they are born, infants respond differently to the voices of their

parents, not because of the content of the message but because of their familiarity with the sound of the voice.

When believers move beyond the sensory gate by actively listening and attending to the input, they begin to perceive and understand. Yet the scriptures quoted above suggest that understanding can be hindered by challenges caused by impaired hearing.

### Impaired (Spiritual) Hearing - Symptoms and Solutions

Special education refers to the anticipation and removal of barriers that stand in the way of exceptional learners that might otherwise keep them from meeting their full potentials. The removal of barriers that prevent the reaching of potential applies to spiritual growth. Especially applicable is the concept of adaptive communication.

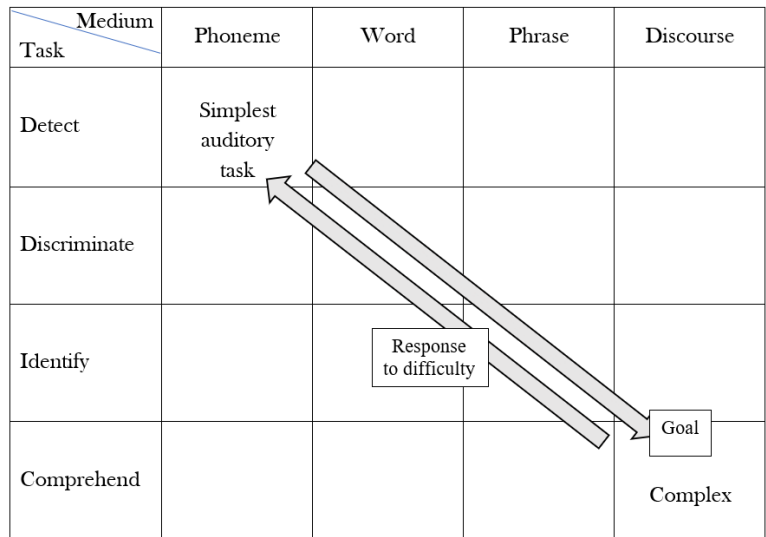


Figure 3. Adaptive Communication - The goal is to comprehend complex messages. A requisite ability is to detect sound. The reaction to difficulty is to find a positive niche - that is to retrace steps to where success was last achieved and then resume movement toward the goal.

In figure three, the goal is a progression from simply being able to detect sounds (the sensory gateway of the previous model) to then discriminating between sounds, identifying sounds, perceiving them as meaningful phonemes that are joined together into words, phrases and ultimately comprehending complex connected discourse or complex print, thereby deriving meaning. Figure one shows that the sensory gateway and subsequent aspects of cognition are inextricably linked to the other facets, most immediately to the units of the linguistic code. Figure three illustrates that when difficulties are encountered, the response is to “backtrack” to find a less complex task that can be performed at a level of

automaticity, and then gradually to move toward more complex tasks. In figure two, the behaviour of the respondent signals whether the message was correctly received and interpreted. For example, if a student – or an apprentice of Jesus – fails to respond to a series of related instructions, it is important to determine the reason for that failure to comply. If the reason is a communication barrier, the first step is to ensure that the instruction was heard (detected,) then to check subsequent steps. Alternatively, the failure to respond might be a behavioural issue. Behaviour disorders are not discussed in this article.

Romans 10:14 (NIV) reads, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” This progression retraces the necessary steps. In *The Message*, the steps are interpreted thus:

But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it? That's why Scripture exclaims, A sight to take your breath away! Grand processions of people telling all the good things of God! But not everybody is ready for this, ready to see and hear and act. Isaiah asked what we all ask at one time or another: “Does anyone care, God? Is anyone listening and believing a word of it?” The point is: Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to.

There is, in this passage, a trusted and familiar voice, one that must be listened to and heard in order to become trusted and familiar. Samuel detected “a sound in the night” and in time came to a full comprehension of God's voice and message.

In Chapter 10, Matthew quotes Isaiah again. Jesus had just told the parable of the Sower and the seeds, and said, “Whoever has ears to hear let them hear.” Yet not all those with ears to hear have spiritual understanding.

<sup>10</sup>The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

<sup>11</sup>He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. <sup>12</sup>Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.



<sup>13</sup>This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. <sup>14</sup>In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

<sup>15</sup>For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>16</sup>But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. <sup>17</sup>For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

The words of Jesus carry implications for a full and abundant life. Like the disciples who experienced the living Christ, the followers of Jesus through the ages want to be blessed by eyes that see and ears that hear. And yet despite their daily apprenticeship with Jesus, those disciples fell short of the mark. What follows are examples of behaviours that may identify barriers related to impaired hearing and some potential means to overcome the barriers.

### **Summary Thoughts, Principles, and Potential Applications**

Appendix A identifies behaviours that are characteristic of persons with a hearing loss along with simple suggestions for ameliorating these barriers. This may be useful for those whose ministry involves children. A perusal of the list might prompt a visit to an audiologist. As germane to the purpose of this article is a brief review and discussion of basic principles that might be applied to spiritual growth and development. Some of those principles can be derived from the figures and models discussed above.

One principle is that hearing and understanding, while related, are not the same thing. That is why a thorough audiologic assessment includes responses to pure tone and also speech awareness and speech reception testing (see figure three). Various passages have been discussed that speak to having ears to hear but lacking understanding.

Another principle is redundancy. The term “redundant” may be unwelcome if written in red on an English term paper. However, in ameliorating communication challenges posed by impaired hearing, redundancy, providing multiple forms of the same message, is a good thing. (For an academic treatise on simultaneous versus successive processing of speech, see Pudlas, 1987). Practically

speaking, redundancy in communication means providing complementary sources of input information. A preacher may have a profound point to make, but if the congregant fails to hear it, in the physical or sensory realm, the message is lost unless there is some redundancy such as a sermon outline or a PowerPoint slide. As per the message of Romans 10:14, authentic apprentices of Jesus ought to serve as a form of redundancy by being visual examples, living the Gospel.

Another principle comes by way several important caveats. The first pertains to the previous notion of redundancy and is related to the earlier discussion of auditory-figure-ground. It is important to ensure that the intended meaning is clearly heard and not obscured by competing noises. Is the way Christians live a complementary message to the good news of the Gospel or do they present as “a noisy gong or a clanging symbol?” (1Cor. 13: 1 RSV) The second caveat is that repeated and prolonged exposure to loud noise can cause damage to the hearing mechanism of the ear. At what point, both in the physical realm and in the spiritual realm, does “sound” become “noise”? When the Body comes together and reflects, is it quiet? Or, have Christians dulled their hearing by allowing too much noise? If that noise is the physical sensory form, the Body needs to take measures to protect its hearing (see Pudlas, 2021). Or, on an individual basis, does the need for constant auditory stimulation or hyper attentiveness to “the news of the world” or being attuned to social media keep me from hearing the still small voice of God? Consider the intended message in Psalm 46, written in a time of conflict and strife, of the words that declare, “... be still.”

The nature of hearing is such that intensity increases with proximity. Each time the distance is halved between the speaker and the hearer, the intensity increases six decibels. Known as *the 6 dB rule*, one of the simplest steps in remediating hearing challenges is to bring into proximity the sender and the receiver. While 6 may be a small numeral, in audiological terms it may be significant in optimizing the signal to noise ratio as per the earlier discussion of the speech reception threshold. The implication? In James 4: 8 we read, “Come close to God, and God will come close to you.” (NLV). The closer we come to him the more our ability to clearly hear and understand him becomes.

In previous discussions of exceptionality and of special education (Pudlas, 2022), it was noted that *special education is all about removing barriers*, and requires a *special educator*. In the spiritual realm, God has given his people a teacher in the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:26 ff states that the Spirit helps believers in their weakness. John 14:26 teaches that the Spirit of God, who was sent at Pentecost to dwell in all believers, was given to instruct us. In effect, the Holy Spirit is offered as a spiritual special education teacher to enable believers to overcome their weaknesses. An important first step in special education is to be aware of barriers and that they may be multifaceted: there are parallels in our spiritual lives. A second step is to seek

help to remove whatever hinders believers from reaching their God-given and God-ordained potential and purpose.

Ken Pudlas earned his doctorate at the University of British Columbia, and recently retired as a Professor in the School of Education at Trinity Western University. He was instrumental in establishing and teaching special education courses at both UBC and at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee prior to his tenure at TWU. Prior to his university career, Dr. Pudlas taught students with special needs in the K-12 public school system in several districts in British Columbia. He developed and was the Director of the MA in Educational Studies in Special Education program, approved by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and launched in the summer of 2014. Dr. Pudlas also developed the Minor in Special Education program which has grown in popularity as pre-professional teachers realize the ever-increasing diversity among learners in today's classrooms. He has done extensive research on the Full Inclusion model of service delivery and has presented locally, nationally, and internationally on topics related to learners with diverse needs.

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**Appendix A Resources regarding Impaired Hearing Behaviors That May Identify a Student with a Hearing Loss**

The following would be cause for further follow-up assessment:

1. Inattentive or seems to intentionally ignore.
2. Fails to respond appropriately to questions.
3. Frequent requests for words, questions, or assignments to be repeated.
4. Demonstrates an inability to hear/follow in a group situation.
5. Frowns or strains forward when talked to.
6. Holds head in a particular position.
7. Confusion in direction or source of sound; not sure who has spoken.
8. Demonstrates a marked change in response following an illness.
9. Omits or substitutes certain sounds in speech.
10. Uses an unusually loud or soft voice.
11. Complaints of ringing in ears.
12. Suffers from an unusual number of earaches.
13. Failure to participate in classroom discussions.
14. Seems bored with classroom activities.
15. Frequently upset or frustrated for not apparent reason.
16. Tired or easily fatigued.
17. Increased activity level, unable to sit still.
18. Written work shows consistent errors in spelling, omission of word endings, consistent errors with verbs, or garbled language.

Note that if you have strong reasons to suspect a hearing loss, document those reasons and follow through until a satisfactory diagnosis is obtained. Translation: mild to moderate losses may be masked or misdiagnosed, so be persistent.

### **Suggestions for Assisting a Student with a Hearing Loss**

Discuss with the student what modifications work best. The student should “take ownership” whenever possible. In general:

1. Face the person directly.
2. Seat student near major teaching area; seated with better ear towards teacher.
3. Keep obstructions away from front of face (including hairstyles or mustaches).
4. Stand so that light is on speaker's face not in the student's eyes.
5. Speak normally; do not shout or over-articulate.
6. Maintain eye contact; use an overhead projector whenever possible, and; speak *after* writing on the chalkboard.
7. Avoid seating the student near sources of noise: doorways, hallways or windows.

8. Choose one place to stand when teaching; avoid walking around.
9. Obtain student attention before giving important directions or assignments.
10. Encourage students to indicate when they do not understand verbal information.
11. Use outlines, summaries, pre-reading assignments, or visual aids to prepare the student with hearing loss for difficult lessons.
12. Signal the beginning of a new train of thought or new topic.
13. Summarize or repeat important ideas (including during group discussion).
14. Use written rather than oral tests whenever possible.
15. Use closed caption films/tapes or obtain outlines or scripts for the content.
16. If taking notes is required, ask for a buddy or volunteer to either use carboned paper or share notes for photocopying.
17. When reading orally to the class, give the student additional visual cues by providing an outline or pictures. Check preferential seating position.
18. Encourage full participation by the student with a hearing loss.
19. Beware of “noddors and shakers”. (Those who mimic their peers in response to the question, “Does everyone understand?”)
20. Remember, hearing the sounds does not necessarily indicate understanding the message.