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What Is Lipreading?

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Lipreading (or speechreading) is a visual-communication technique. We “read” lips when we look at people as they are speaking. We gather information about what they are saying as they move their lips to form different sounds and words. We also pay attention to their gestures, facial expressions, and body language to help us understand what they are communicating. The rate and rhythm of their speech gives us clues about what they are saying as well.

Some sounds are easier to see than others because we produce them in the front of the mouth. These sounds include /p/, /b/, /m/, and /w/, where we put both lips together; /f/ and /v/, where we touch the top teeth to the bottom lip; and /th/, where we bring the tongue forward. Sounds that are made in the back of the mouth and vowels can be more challenging to lipread. Another challenge of lipreading is that many sounds look the same when we produce them. Knowing the topic, or

context, of the conversation helps us distinguish between sounds that look alike, “pop” versus “bob” for example.

Learning to Lipread

Almost all of us lipread to some extent. We rely on lipreading even more when communicating in noisy environments, such as being at a booming concert or in a noisy restaurant. Individuals who have hearing impairments/deafness may especially depend on lipreading. Even though we may lipread naturally to some degree, it takes much time and practice to become proficient at lipreading. There are different ways to help improve lipreading skills. These include: looking directly at the speaker’s face when he/she is talking; making sure there is enough lighting to be able to see the speaker’s face; paying attention to the speaker’s nonverbal information, like gestures, facial expressions, body language; practicing lipreading with familiar phrases first (e.g., “Good morning” “How are you?”); practicing lipreading with familiar people, like family members and friends; watching yourself speak in a mirror; watching television programs or videos with and without the sound; and taking a formal class that teaches lipreading.

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