

One in six

Tips and ideas for making your class inclusive for those with an acquired hearing loss. By London-based yoga teacher, Bram Williams



Eleven million people in the UK have a hearing loss. That's about one in six people in the population. Want some more figures? More than 40% of the population over 50 years old have a hearing loss. That rises to 71% of people over 70 years old. *

So, you'd think that these numbers statistically suggest that at least a couple of people with a hearing loss may well be in your yoga class, wouldn't you? Well maybe, maybe not. As a hard of hearing yoga student, I have tried a good many classes over the years and rejected a lot. I simply couldn't follow what was going on.

It wasn't always the teacher, it's more often the room, the background noise, the lighting (or lack of it), the music. As a hard of hearing yoga student, I just got an instinct over the years for the teachers who communicated well and the environments that were conducive to effective participation. And, sadly, what should have been a relaxing experience turned into frustration and confusion. And all too often I gave up.

As teachers we don't hesitate to modify for people with a physical need in yoga practice, so it's obvious we should for somebody with an invisible, sensory, need. And it's fair to say most teachers would willingly do so, but all too often they don't know how. It's also worth bearing in mind for Course Tutors, Foundation, Diploma, IST teachers it's a requirement to make reasonable adjustments for a student's access needs where necessary.

Don't worry, mostly it's common sense. There are some very simple adjustments you can make and things you can remember that will help make communicate flow for everybody – not just the hearing-impaired student.

While hearing aids can make a huge difference to what people who wear them can hear, they do not in any way restore perfect hearing. This is where communication tips are vital, both for people with hearing loss and for the teacher communicating with someone who has a hearing loss.

Tips when you know a student in your class, course or workshop has a hearing loss:

- Dialogue with the student and ask what might help them - hearing loss is unique and different people need different adjustments. Don't assume.
- For new and detailed instructions make sure you have the person's attention before you start speaking. For personal instructions use their name first to attract their attention. People usually hear their name better than they hear other words.
- During adjustments don't approach them from behind, or tap them on the back to attract their attention. Approach from the side or the front.
- Noise and distractions make isolating a voice difficult or impossible, so if you generally play music in class the student has very little chance of following any verbal instruction (and it's unlikely they'll come back!).
- Turn your face towards them so they can easily see your lip movements.
- Speak clearly, not too slowly, and use normal lip movements, facial expressions and gestures.
- Clarify to make sure what you're saying is being understood.
- Do provide a context for your talk - flagging up a new subject or topic makes the world of difference in getting some grasp of what's being said.
- If they don't understand what you've said, try rephrasing it and saying it in a different way.
- Keep your voice down: it's uncomfortable for a hearing aid user if you shout and it can appear as aggressive.
- Get to the point: use plain language and don't waffle.

When we communicate face to face, facial expressions, lip shapes and body language are important. It's likely that people with hearing loss will rely on these visual clues even

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more to help them follow what someone is saying, even if they don't realise it. Make sure you can be seen, check the room lighting. If you have a window or a light behind you then you'll be silhouetted – if necessary see if you can arrange to have the light facing you.

An experienced yoga student can infer what's going on and what key instructions might be – much of what they're practicing comes from just going along with those around them. However, a beginner needs to be taught (and deserves their money's worth).

As a lip reader (consciously or subconsciously) they might follow what you're saying to a large extent when you're standing, sitting or otherwise facing you, but the moment they can't see, they can't 'hear' as well. Bear in mind lipreading is only possible for around 30% of speech anyway – the rest is 'mental-tie-up' or inference. We might, if we're lucky, 'get the gist' of what's being said, but only if both parties are relaxed and a suitable distance, angle and in favourable conditions. Here's some of the challenges I might face in a common yoga class:

"Detail in Down Dog, great just what I came for. Oh, what's that? You're talking in great detail to your own thighs whilst you demonstrate, sorry no idea what you are saying."

"Locust? You'll guide us while we do it? But I'm on my tummy, I can't see you..."

"Yes, that's a good place for me to put my mat to follow you. Thanks. Oh, and now you're off wandering around the room, chattering as you go."

"A guided relaxation? With the lights off?"

"Close my eyes when we meditate and you'll talk us through. Really?"

You get the idea. It's also worth remembering the room acoustics make a difference. The way sound reverberates around and through a space has a huge effect on audibility. Reverberation is the collection of reflected sounds from the surfaces of an enclosed space. It makes the sound persist after it has been produced. It mainly comes from low frequency sounds. Speech includes lots of low frequency sounds. These are mainly the vowels – and they tend to sound louder when we say them than the consonants e.g. fish, cow, hut. Consonants tend to be high frequency sounds. They give clarity to speech. If you cannot hear them then words are difficult to follow.

So, echo or reverberation means louder, low frequency sounds bounce around the room. This blurs words and makes it more difficult for people to understand speech. Think of a typical yoga studio or church hall. Now consider how the sound might appear to someone trying to follow vocal instructions.

So, if reverberation varies depending on the size, shape and nature of the room then some sound insulation reduces the amount of low frequency sound bouncing around and makes a space more hearing-friendly. Sound insulation can be created by carpets, soft furnishings, table cloths, soft seating, noise absorbent panels and even curtains. Difficulties in hearing are created by high ceilings, hard surfaces and noise from adjacent rooms, conversational chatter, music and other ambient sounds.

With some common-sense, discussion and basic adaptation to the way we teach our classes and courses, communication can be improved for everyone. Perhaps if the student becomes a regular you could share your stick plan with them so they know what's coming next, or send them the relaxation or key points before a class by email. Dialogue with the student. Ask for advice ** and be open to new ideas and everyone can benefit. Who knows, maybe I'll see you in class.

Seven common access barriers to avoid:

- Dipping your voice mid-way through words or sentences, or using hushed tones to add drama or emphasis, all of which can create inaudible gaps for the listener.

- An increasingly fast pace of speaking as you become more passionate and involved in what you are saying.

- A range of subjects or complex points being talked through without occasional recapping to assist those who may have missed or misheard some parts.

- Not providing enough time to allow listeners to absorb the information given.

- Not writing down key information e.g. names, dates, acronyms, or giving hand-outs to help fill in missed information and recap on what was said. Note: Sanskrit terms will mean little visibly (i.e. on the lips) to someone unfamiliar. Write terms up or provide a vocabulary sheet.

- Not summarising or repeating questions that cannot be heard by everyone so there is no context to the response you give.

- Lengthy presentations or discussions that continue without break or pause to allow a rest from intensive and fatiguing listening and/or lipreading effort.

References and notes

*Figures from Action on Hearing Loss, 2015

**For advice a good place to start might be:
W: actiononhearingloss.org.uk

If you're hard of hearing it's worth joining a lip-reading class in your area, try:
W: atallipreading.org.uk

Are you a hard of hearing yoga teacher? If so I have an advice pack in preparation.

Get in touch and I can forward you a copy when it's ready.

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