

The benefits of attending a lipreading class

A talk by Jill Bradshaw

“I’m an experienced lipreader, so let me tell you about myself. I was diagnosed as deaf at four years old. I was told I was lipreading before then, as I understood what was going on around me. I was given a hearing aid and had speech therapy from age four to 14. I gave up speech therapy at 14 as I had to do my ‘O’ levels, so my parents became my speech therapists. Now my children are. If I come across a word I haven’t lipread before, they help me – lipreading words is very different from hearing them.

When I was at school, I sat at the front of the class to lipread the teacher. Primary school was great, as I had the same teacher all the time. There was no problem, but in P5 I was becoming resentful at having to sit at the front of the class all the time. I had a teacher with blue hair called Mrs Martin who helped me all the time. One Thursday morning, I said to her, “Can I sit at the back with my friends?” She said, “Off you go and sit with your friends.” To my horror, I didn’t have a clue as to what was said when I was sitting at the back of the class – and she had a very clear lip pattern. On the Friday morning, I thought she would say for me to come to the front, but she said, “No, go to the back.” I worried about this all weekend – I worried how I would lipread her at the back of class. On the Monday morning, I asked her, “Can I sit at the front?” and she said, “Of course you can.” In later years, when I looked back at this, I realised that she taught me a very valuable lesson in respect of where I sat when I was lipreading.

After primary it was secondary school. That was more difficult because there was more than one teacher. Now we all know we tell people to have eye contact with us, but this proved difficult in a classroom as teachers always walked up and down – I missed a lot.

There was one teacher with a marvellous lip pattern and I could lipread him perfectly. But he had two front false teeth and that was annoying as they kept moving up and down. I had to look at him and lipread him with his teeth moving! At the beginning of each lesson, he would move his front false teeth up and down. I knew he would do this, but I had to look at him as I had to lipread him and I didn’t want to miss anything. That’s unfortunate as we see so many horrible things, like people eating while speaking at the same time and people sucking pens. My pet hate is people smoking, because they carry on talking while smoking. There are a lot of annoying habits that we come across every day.

Some people talk very fast and others don’t give eye contact, and then you have so many different accents. All these factors can change a lip pattern, which makes lipreading difficult. We have to raise awareness when we are lipreading. I was shy when I was young and wouldn’t ask people to face me, but as I’ve got older I say, “Hey, I lipread, so face me.”

I have a lot of hearing friends and I go out for meals with them. One day, eight of us went out for a meal and there was a rectangular table and I couldn’t understand what was being said. I said to my friend that I wished we’d had a round table. Next time we went out, there was a round table that my friend had booked and it was one of the best meals I’ve had as I could be part of the conversation.

I’ve told my friends they cannot sit in front of a window as I can’t lipread them, so now I sit with my back to the window and lipread everyone and it makes such a difference.

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Being a lipreader, you make so many mistakes as so many words look the same: 7, 17 and 70 and 14, 40, 15 and 50 all look the same. The most difficult for me is 8, 9 and 10 – I can't tell the difference. So now when I'm shopping or speaking about numbers, if someone says 17 or 70, what I do is write the number in the air and they always write back to me so I know what's being said. It's up to us to raise awareness as people won't learn until we tell them.

There are so many words that look the same, for example mark, park, bark. I tell people my son's name is Mark, I like to take a walk in the park, the dog likes to bark at the postman. Now if someone was to say that to me quickly with no context, I'd find it difficult. Remember, you're not alone and we all go through this. It's up to us to say, "Hold on, repeat that again."

I've always said it's important when you are a lipreader to have eye contact and be faced. My children have told me that I lipread side-on. They used to think I wasn't watching them and would talk about things, but then I would say, "Hey, what did you say then?" and they would ask, "How did you do that side-on?" It's amazing how many ways you can lipread as you practise. When I'm on the train with my family, I look at people and watch what they're saying. My family and children say to me, "Who are you lipreading now?" I say, "I can't help it." They say to me, "What are they saying?" I say, "I'm not telling you." I can't help it because my eyes travel and I find a pair of lips! It is very useful to lipread. When I worked in the bank, I worked upstairs and someone asked if I could lipread something in a room to find out what was happening. I said, "I am not doing that, no way." It was too far away anyway. Some people take advantage of you!

Many years ago, when I was young and there were no subtitles on the television, I would lipread the television. Sometimes there was no newsreader and just a picture of a famous person and I would wonder if they'd died or got divorced, so would have to wait and read the paper the next day to find out what happened. I'd go to my work in the bank and say, "Wasn't that awful what happened yesterday?" and have a different story. They would say my story was much better. Now we have so much technology and I'm amazed. It's not so isolating with all the technology we have now – email, text messaging, Facetime and iPads. But the most precious thing we as lipreaders have is our eyes. We have to look after our eyes as we use them to help us communicate. That won't change, even with technology.

I worked in the bank and also worked in social work, sign language teaching and lipreading teaching. Sometimes we have people we can lipread with no problem and it's wonderful, but others are impossible to lipread. My family say if I don't understand someone, my face goes blank and I nod my head and they say, "Mum, you didn't pick them up, say repeat again." Sometimes you get fed up asking for someone to repeat, but now I say, "Please repeat again."

Many years ago, my car broke down in Coatbridge. There were no mobiles then. I asked someone to phone the AA. I waited 20 minutes and two AA vans arrived in the car park and I thought to myself, I'm getting special treatment. I wondered how I would lipread, as the car park was dark. They were coming with a torch and I had a brain wave. I told them that I'm deaf and I asked them to put their torch under their chin when talking. They looked at me as if I was daft but they agreed. They said they had to look under the bonnet and then they passed the torch back and forward to communicate with me. I have to say I started giggling with these two men talking to me with a torch under their chin. When they'd finished, one of the AA men said that they had to follow me home to make sure I got home safely because of my deafness and because of the temporary fix to my

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car. I had the AA van following me and thought it was great! I arrived home and in order to communicate with the AA man, I dragged him to the lamppost so that I could see what he was saying in the light as the streets were dark. He explained what I had to do the next day for the garage. The AA man told me that I gave him a great idea of how to communicate with people that lipread. That was a funny episode.

Being a lipreader, you have to constantly ask people to face you and have eye contact with you because you lipread. You always see panic in their face. I say, "Hey, I'm deaf and I lipread," and say it with a smile. As I always say, a smile breaks down a barrier. If you have a grumpy face, people don't want to know you.

As I've said, we have all this technology now and it's a big improvement in life with subtitles, iPads, email and text messages. Subtitles help with breaks from lipreading, but we have to use our eyes at all times, so look after them as they're very precious to us. Remember, face me and have eye contact and we'll have a wonderful conversation."

Talk on her life-long experience of lipreading: Jill Bradshaw

Event: West Lothian Council Adult Basic Education Service Lipreading Open Day at Strathbrock Partnership Centre, Broxburn

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