Colorado Probation Research in Brief
Effects of Speech Clarity on Recognition Memory for Spoken Sentences


Communicating Expectations Clearly

Communication is a vital part of our daily lives. The ability to recall verbal messages is an important aspect of communication. Researchers wanted to test if messages spoken clearly were easier to understand and later recall than information that was expressed in a conversational manner.

Researchers recruited individuals from the University of Texas to participate in two separate experiments. A voice actor recorded a series of sentences. For clear speech, the voice actor was instructed to talk as if she was speaking to someone who had difficulty hearing. For conversational speech, the voice actor was told to talk as if she was speaking to someone familiar with her voice and speech patterns. The recordings were either of sentences that were logical (e.g. the dog ate the food) or abstract (e.g. the sun smiled upon you). In the first experiment, 18 participants listened to audio recordings with noise added. Researchers grouped sentences into two types (logical or abstract) and played 40 clips of each type. Participants were asked to write as much of each sentence as he or she could understand. For the second experiment, researchers played 40 random (20 clear speech, 20 conversational) clips, without noise, for 33 individuals. After participants listened to the recordings, they were shown sentences and asked to identify if it was a new sentence or from the recordings.

The results of the experiments indicated that clear and meaningful speech was better understood and recalled than speech that was conversational and abstract. It is important to note that clear speech was better understood and better recalled than conversational speech in both logical and abstract sentences. Logical sentences also helped individuals understand and recall verbal information.

Practical Applications:
- When communicating information and instructions, be clear and concise. Use pauses, variation in tone, and distinct words to help the receiver understand and remember the details.
- Provide information in a clear and organized fashion.
- Avoid extraneous words and present information that matches the individual's understanding.
- Be mindful of information overload. Too many topics may impede a person's ability to retain information.
- Check for understanding. People with hearing issues, TBIs, learning disabilities may struggle with retaining information.
- Noisy environments require additional effort to process and remember information. When meeting with probationers, try to find quiet locations free from other conversations and background noise. It might be helpful to turn off music and fans during appointments.
- Keep in mind that your verbal communication skills may assist probationers with remembering expectations and assignments.
- In addition to verbal instruction/info, some people will need to write things down to fully recall details.