

# Repairing Communication Breakdowns in Everyday Situations

## [Supporting Success for Children with Hearing Loss](#)

Communication breakdowns occur whenever the speaker is not understood by the listener. Everyone experiences communication breakdowns.

**TYPICAL DEVELOPMENT:** Early communication repair skills are learned experientially as a normal part of language development before students reach school age. Development of these strategies are rooted in toddlers with poor articulation being frustrated with their caregivers not understanding their requests. They learn to repeat what they said, more clearly, slowly, loudly, or emphasize a key word to make their wants known. Thus, when students are young (e.g., age 3), they mostly use the repair strategy of repetition. Use of repair strategies develops as linguistic abilities become more complex and children begin to revise or add clarifying language to expand the listener’s comprehension.

**Students with hearing loss, other auditory-based learning issues, or autism typically do not spontaneously learn communication repair strategies at the same rate or to the same level as students with typical development. Beyond early elementary, their strategies remain immature compared to typical peers.**

The majority of responses to a first request for clarification will be a **repetition** of the initial utterance. Specifically, when a listener is asked ‘huh?’ or ‘what?’ the speaker often repeats what was just said. With growth in language ability, the student will reflect on what they have said and try to provide the listener with the key elements of the message, and/or tailor their communication repair responses to what they believe is the most likely part of the information that was missed. Therefore, a student will begin the **addition** of information, especially when asked for clarification the second or third time. By ages 8-9, students incorporate **addition** strategies that define or provide background information, becoming more predominant by age 10 and fully established as a communication repair strategy in adolescence. Approximately half of communication repair incidents by those with sophisticated language use repetition or revision strategies and the remaining half of communication breakdowns are repaired via use of simple or clarifying addition strategies.



Child 1: “We went to Nona’s over the weekend.”

Child 2: “What?”

Child 1: “We went to Nona’s over the weekend. She’s my grandma who lives in Centerville.”

In the example above, Child 2 didn’t understand the word “Nona” in what was said by Child 1. It may be that it was noisy, and the word was not heard clearly or that the term “Nona” was had not been encountered by Child 2. In the communication repair, Child 1 **repeated** the information and then **added** information to **clarify** the word that would most likely to be unknown by Child 2 and add **background** so that the meaning would be even more clear to the listener.

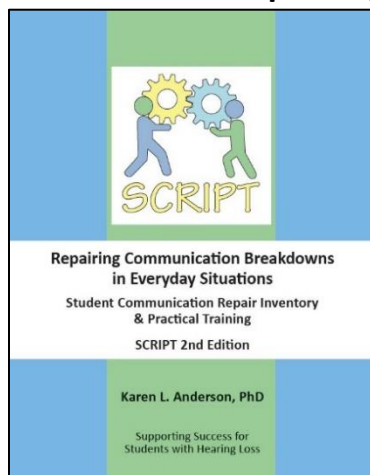
**ATYPICAL DEVELOPMENT:** Students with hearing loss, other auditory-based learning issues, or autism typically do not spontaneously learn communication repair strategies at the same rate or to the same level as students with typical development. Beyond early elementary, their strategies remain immature compared to typical peers. Repetition continues to be primarily used, and inappropriate responses do not extinguish beyond kindergarten. **Even when language ability develops, students with hearing loss, language delays, and cognitive issues usually do not begin to add information to their responses to provide the additional background or clarification needed by the listener.** Therefore, these students can benefit from direct teaching of communication repair skills, which includes practice focused on their application in real-world situations (Blaylock, Scudder, and Wynne, 1995).

## Communication Repair in the Context of Today's Learner

Most students with special needs are primarily educated in the full-inclusion, or mainstream classroom. The underlying assumption of classroom education is that if the teacher provides verbal instruction, the student is able to access the instruction and understand it. This assumption expands to include accessing/understanding classroom discussions and small group work between two or more peers. Thus, the primary mode of classroom instruction is verbal, requiring the student to be engaged in listening and incorporating what is heard into their memory and existing knowledge base.

Missed information can derail attention, confuse comprehension, and cause hesitation in following directions. Students with language learning, attention, hearing, and other educational issues often do not hear, or miss, parts of verbal communication in the classroom. Students require direct instruction to acquire communication repair strategies typical of their same age peers so that they can **fully participate** in social and classroom discussions.

## A Solution for Improving Communication Repair Skills



The [Student Communication Repair Inventory and Practical Training \(SCRIPT\)](#) is a **step by step program, including assessments**, that develops students' communication repair skills at home and in the classroom. The development of these repair skills begins with the student's constant role as a listener in the classroom, recognizing the causes of communication breakdown, and the importance of actively correcting any communication breakdown. For this reason, instructors are especially concerned with students being able to recognize when *they* do not understand and to use repair strategies to elicit clarification of information missed.

Research has focused on identifying the strategies that students use when they are not understood by *others*. This program has been written to support the teacher or clinician in using information about what students do when they are not understood to remediate those areas specific to their use of strategies when they do not understand what has been said. It is anticipated that use of the evaluation and practice components will result in students who are adept at communication repair in situations where they are not understood as well as when they do not understand the speaker.

## Download information listing the communication repair skills are necessary to increase appropriate interactions, participation and comprehension in the classroom

The following information on models of supporting students with hearing loss suggests when teachers or clinicians can integrate communication repair into lessons or activities. Ideally, developing communication repair skills will be an underlying goal of teachers/clinicians and opportunities to practice will be integrated as they work with students on all skills. Ultimately, the child should be expected to repair communication breakdown appropriately as it occurs during 1:1 work and increasingly in all settings and situations.

### **Supporting understanding of language or academic content**

Break down content into key statements that represent the main concepts (“sound bites”)

Present information at an accessible language level that reinforces language targets to:

- o Review subject matter
- o **Develop fluency with communication repair skills**
- o Rehearse complex language
- o Practicing clear, understandable, connected speech beyond the word or phrase level
- o Enhance development of listening skills

**Example:** *Mrs. Johnson has worked with Tammy on preteaching content vocabulary skills. Tammy has demonstrated an understanding of the new vocabulary. Mrs. Johnson continues the final few minutes of review of the concepts by presenting her speech quietly, unclearly, mispronouncing words, using unknown vocabulary, or intentionally saying something that does not make sense. By focusing on these different communication breakdown types so over time, Mrs. Johnson shapes Tammy’s responses so that when she encounters communication breakdowns in the 1:1 environment that she is expected to use her clarification request skills appropriately. Once Tammy demonstrates appropriate responses to communication breakdowns presented at the end of the 1:1 session, Mrs. Johnson will begin to intersperse their 1:1 time with random communication breakdowns to provide Tammy with further practice in repair skills. Mrs. Johnson keeps a data collection page to record Tammy’s responses and progress over time.*

## **Enjoy the Step-by-Step Instructional Materials of the SCRIPT!**

### **Part 1: Strategies a student can use when someone does not understand what he says.**

- a. recognizing the different reasons why someone may have misunderstood what you say
- b. if the student is not understood by others when he or she has said something
  - student’s speech intelligibility is unclear and causes misunderstandings
  - environmental or listener issues interfere with understanding
  - student’s comment is incomplete or does not make sense to others

### **Part 2: Applying strategies when a student does not understand someone else.**

- a. if the student did not understand any of the message
  - student missed an instruction; what a peer answered during class discussion
  - student did not understand a concept (“I don’t understand the difference between mitosis and miosis”)
- b. if the student understood part of the message but needs more information to know what to do or to fully understand
  - “I heard XYZ, but missed \_\_\_\_\_” (example: “I heard Chapter 5 but missed the page number”)

“Can I figure it out by looking around at what other students are doing or other clues (white board, class routine, looking down at text book, etc.)?”