Classroom organisation
Why this strategy is important

In the classroom the learning of children with conductive hearing loss is compromised by the effects of classroom noise and generally poor classroom acoustics. When hearing is reduced, the presence of background noise makes any listening task even more difficult. For Aboriginal children, the fact that the language of instruction is not the child’s home language, and a general failure to recognise Aboriginal cultural differences, further compromise learning (Lewis, 1976).

The different teaching and learning activities planned for any classroom over the course of the day call for different communication and speech processing skills. It is important that you consider the communication and speech processing demands of the particular activity and plan to use the type of classroom organisation which best suits those demands. Your choice of classroom organisation strategy can have a significant effect on the learning of a child with conductive hearing loss.

Classroom principles to support the strategy

Change environmental factors to reduce background noise

Reducing the amount of background noise may help children to hear better. Consider:

• using soft furnishings;
• carpeting classroom floors;
• encouraging children to limit excess noise, particularly at important listening times;
• turning off noise sources such as radios, fans or noisy air conditioners; and
• placing rubber stoppers on the bottom of chairs.

Consider hearing loss when planning seating arrangements

• Seat the hearing impaired student close to the teacher and allow the student to move to a better seating position if necessary.
• Check the student has a clear vision of the whole class for participation in whole group activities.
• If the child has better hearing in one ear, ensure that the better ear is directed to the class and teacher.
• Seat the student away from noisy areas (e.g. roads, air conditioners, fans).
Use communication behaviours to maximise hearing opportunities

- Make sure the students can see your face when you are speaking or reading.
- Ensure that your mouth is not covered by hands, books or facial hair.
- Speak clearly.
- Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers are skilled at subtly watching children who find listening hard and prompting them to pay attention, or re-instructing those who need it.
- When giving direct instruction or instructions to complete a task, formally notify the class to listen. Look for attentive behaviours (i.e., looking at teacher, not talking) in at-risk students. Prompt them (call their name) or ask your Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers to monitor them. Try to maintain a position in the classroom where all children can see you. Walking around while instructing make it difficult for hearing impaired children.
- Make clear distinctions between listening time and other times. Children should be encouraged to “sit still” at listening time.
- Routines make life much easier for a hearing impaired child. They can predict what is required of them. Routine is essential particularly for children in the early primary years.
- Make sure the hearing impaired student is attending, not just listening when you begin new work, when you ask a question, or when you give out a job. You may need to negotiate listening behaviour, particularly with rural and remote children who may not be comfortable making eye contact with a speaker. Alternative indications of auditory attention could be:
  - sitting up straight, hands in lap; and
  - no talking to others.
- Check to ensure that students have understood instructions.
- Encourage students to let you know if they have not understood what has been said.
- Make other students aware of conductive hearing loss and encourage positive acceptance of students who may have difficulty in hearing (see Strategy 2).
- If a sound field amplification system is available, use this for selected teaching contexts.

Small group work

We know that those children with conductive hearing loss who are able to succeed in the classroom seek out specific information from peers and community education workers (Lowell, 1995). Children are empowered to do this in activities which are planned around small group work. Working in small groups allows children to pay close attention to their own speech and language, and to better hear and process what other children are saying. It encourages peer interaction and also allows teachers and Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers to monitor more closely an individual child’s comprehension or participation, and to provide useful feedback to the child. Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers are particularly skilled at assisting children in small group work as this is a familiar, culturally appropriate way of teaching.
Small group work should be your preferred choice for phonological awareness tasks, phonemic awareness tasks, negotiating text (for example procedures or plays), pre-teaching concepts or vocabulary, for negotiated spelling/encoding tasks and for activities which aim to develop oral language abilities.

**Buddying**

A second effective organisational strategy for children with conductive hearing loss who have misunderstood instructions is to seek advice from a nominated peer. In research carried out in Northern Territory classrooms, Lowell (1995) found that children who used a buddy experienced greater success in the classroom. The role of the buddy is to assist comprehension and ensure that children are able to follow instructions in the classroom setting. The role of the buddy should be explicitly discussed with children, and buddies chosen for their ability to carry out the role well. Best friends may not be best buddies!

A buddying system is indicated when a child has active ear disease and is aware of experiencing difficulty in hearing. It will also be useful when teacher talk is complex or involves long sequences of instructions. In these situations it is easier for children to refer to a buddy than to have constant interruptions and repetitions which will affect the whole class. Using a buddy system may also reduce the risk of children adopting and maintaining avoidance behaviours.

The buddy system is a particularly effective management strategy when a small number of children in the class are affected by conductive hearing loss. In this case, identifying a buddy with unimpaired hearing will not present a problem. In many Indigenous classrooms, however, the incidence of conductive hearing loss is very high. In some classrooms 100% of the children are affected. In this case it would not be effective to use the buddying system and a whole-class approach would need to be developed to accommodate the need for re-instruction.

Buddying is an effective option for ensuring that children with conductive hearing loss are able to meet the demands of whole class activities.

In order for buddying to work effectively the children in the classroom must have participated in an awareness program about conductive hearing loss. Strategy 2 provides some ideas about how to do this.

**Re-instruction**

Enlisting the help of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers to re-instruct small groups of children with identified conductive hearing loss has proved to be an effective strategy. Knowing which children are most at risk, the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers may visually check that the children are on task, and can supply appropriate, quiet, discreet re-instruction as required. This approach reduces the feeling of ‘shame’ in the target children.

Re-instruction is an effective option for ensuring that children with conductive hearing loss are able to meet the demands of whole class activities, and may also be used when children are working on individual tasks.
**Pre-teaching**

Before a whole class instruction lesson takes place, key concepts and vocabulary should be taught to children who are aware that they have a hearing loss at the time, or who have a history of conductive hearing loss since infancy. This will ensure that these children are not disadvantaged in the more challenging whole group situation. A small group approach to pre-teaching is recommended. In this approach too, the special skills of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers can be used to good effect.

**Amplification**

Sound field FM amplification is the amplification of choice for most classrooms with a high number of children who have conductive hearing loss. The use of sound field amplification in the classroom needs to be planned and used in conjunction with negotiated listening behaviours.

Whole group instruction is most effective when amplification is used. Listening behaviours should have been negotiated so that the teacher has appropriate expectations about behaviours which show that children are listening. Children should be aware of ways to indicate to the teacher that they are listening. Noise control should also have been negotiated. That is, agreement should have been reached about appropriate levels of background noise for the type of activity which is to take place. Before beginning a whole group instruction lesson, it is also important to check that the classroom environment will be supportive of the children with a current hearing loss.

One of the most effective uses of FM sound field amplification is to let children use the microphone. This allows them to hear the contributions of their peers, and also to hear their own voice amplified. For some children this may be the first time they have clearly heard themselves using particular sounds, and this provides very valuable feedback. Allowing children to use the microphone is particularly effective when carrying out phonetic or phonological awareness tasks.

Use of FM sound field amplification should be your preferred choice for whole group activities in which one person (teacher or child) talks at a time, and in which background noise has been controlled.

It may not be appropriate to use FM sound field amplification for all activities in the classroom. The use of FM sound field amplification requires the teacher to speak into a microphone so that children receive the best possible auditory input. If, however, the children are engaged in small group work, use of the microphone by the teacher will result in all children in the class hearing the teacher’s interaction with one group. This may make it difficult for children to focus on the talk in their own group. Turn the sound field amplification off when small group work is undertaken but negotiate speaker and listener roles.
**Summary**

Maximise opportunities for learning by controlling background noise, monitoring your communication behaviours and selecting appropriate classroom organisation strategies. Match the teaching / learning goals and the hearing / processing demands of the task with the classroom organisation strategies which will give the children the best possible access to learning.
Remember! Your tools are:

- control of background noise;
- monitoring your communication behaviours;
- small group work;
- buddying;
- re-instruction;
- pre-teaching; and
- amplification for selected purposes.

Select the tools which will provide children with the best possible opportunity to learn.