

# Case study – the impact of face coverings

**Claire Randall**, Head of a Deaf Support provision, shares the findings of her small scale study exploring the impact of face masks and visors on her students’ listening clarity and the students’ own perceptions of this

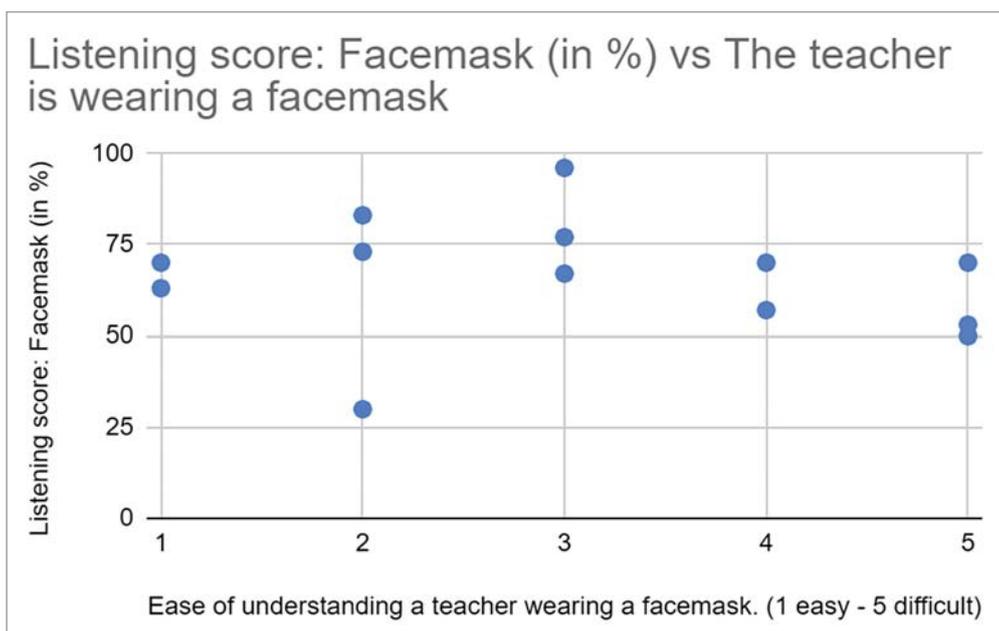
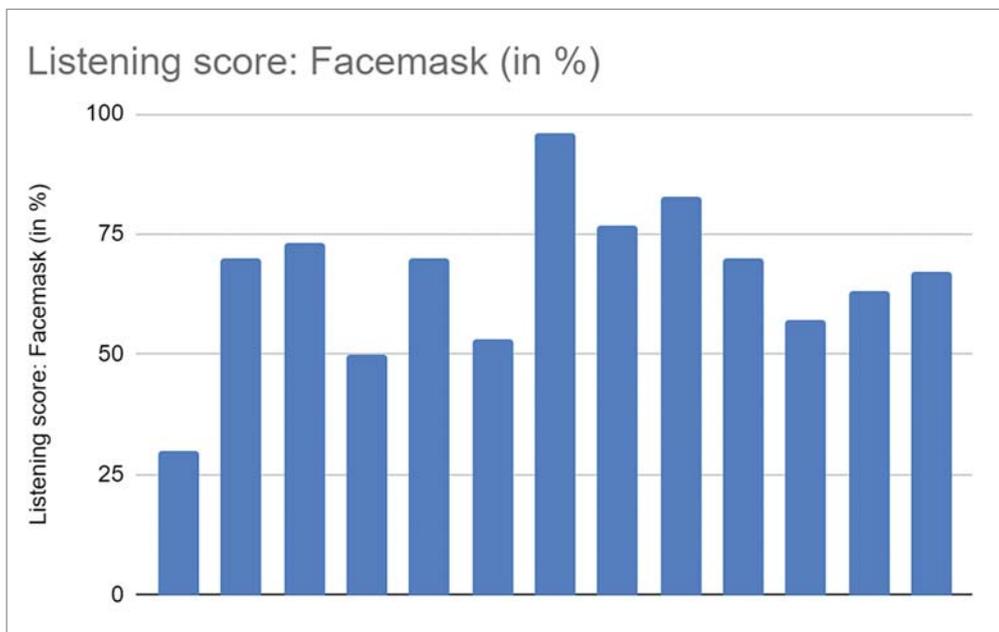
As Qualified Teachers of the Deaf we are all aware that most of our students’ listening skills are negatively impacted by the wearing of face masks and visors. However, as professionals we were unaware of the degree of this impact upon the students whom we supported within our school. Working with a group of twelve students between the ages of 11–16 we felt that it would be beneficial to survey the students to gauge their own perceptions of any communication difficulties they may now be experiencing.

We regularly use the LIFE-R questionnaire with our

students and it is a format they are all comfortable with; so, as a department, we decided to adapt this to use with our students to ensure we got their honest opinions. The results were interesting and showed a wide disparity between students who reported they had no difficulty in understanding people speaking to them wearing any form of face covering to those who found all face coverings difficult to negotiate within all settings. There was limited correlation between students’ answers and any other data that we held on them. However, there was a strong correlation between those students who believed they

were already comfortable communicators and those who reported limited difficulties with the use of face coverings. This did not match our lived experiences with the students whom we believed were finding listening difficult, but either they were unaware of this or decided to not give accurate answers on their survey form.

To check the validity of students’ responses to the survey, it was decided we would conduct a listening test using the AB word list. We use these listening tests with the students on a regular basis and therefore they were familiar with the concept. We conducted two tests. The first was with us wearing a face mask in background noise. This was to replicate the mask being worn when speaking to the student in a corridor or classroom setting. We used one set of words marked out of three for each word if the beginning, middle or end sounds were correctly repeated. None of the students scored 100% for this aspect of the listening test with one student scoring as low as 30%. Interestingly, there was no correlation between the

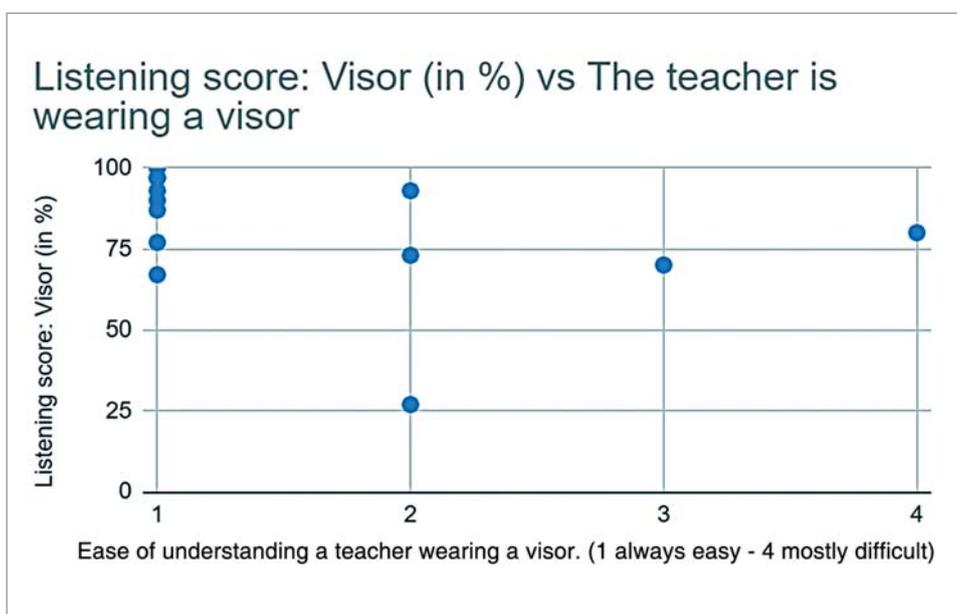
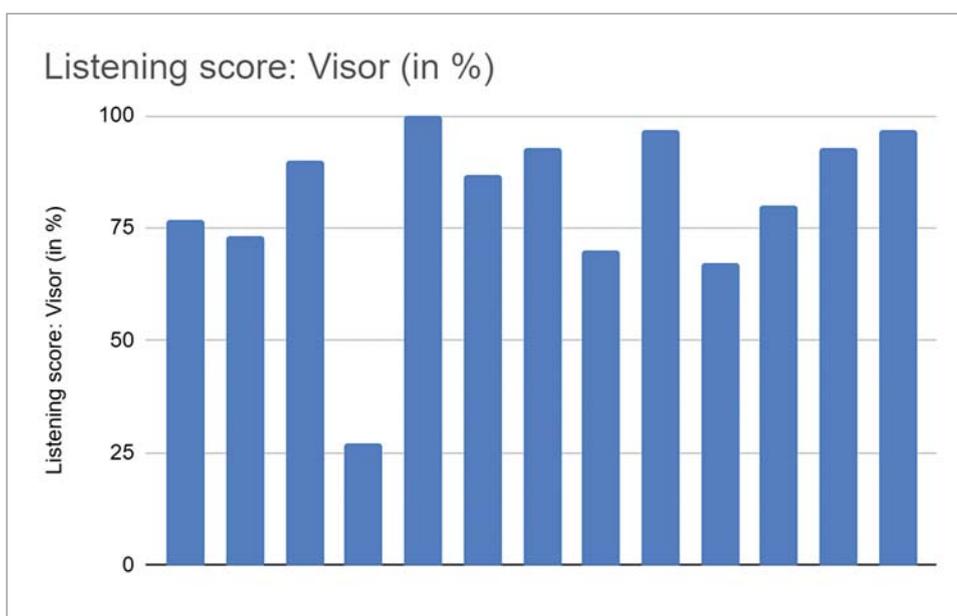


scores students achieved in their listening test and the scores they gave themselves for understanding a teacher wearing a face mask. Some students did not score well on the listening test but were unaware of this, as they would often substitute what was said for another word. Without lip patterns many students found this test very difficult.

The listening test was repeated, but this time using a plastic visor. We had anticipated that most students would score higher with a visor than a face mask. This was the case; however, 33% of the students achieved higher scores with the face mask rather than the visor. Upon further investigation they told us that they found it more difficult to hear through a visor, it distorted the sound, and they often found the light reflected off of a teacher's face mask making lip reading impossible. Generally, the scores were much higher, however, as was the correlation between student's perceptions of their listening ability and their listening scores.

This is a small, site-specific study and has, by no means, been a scientific investigation into student's listening capacity with a range of face coverings. However, this small scale study raised some interesting points that, as professionals, we have used to inform our teaching.

1. Students who are normally confident communicating verbally may have difficulties in understanding people wearing face masks but be unaware of these difficulties.
2. Preference about type of face mask is personal. It is really important, when appropriate, to involve deaf students in decision making about what type of face covering is used when speaking to them.
3. All students found listening difficult when any type of face covering was used. It is really important that all other methods in our teaching tool kits are utilized to support student's understanding.
4. Listening tests involving all face coverings can provide



valuable information for both professionals and students.

We believe that we have further research to do in relation to the impact of radio aid usage upon students' listening skills, however, this has not been possible during the current lockdown and is something we will be investigating further when we are able.



Claire Randall is the Head of Deaf Support at Lister Community School in East London.

A modified version of Claire's questionnaire 'Assessing how difficult it is to listen with Covid-19 related adjustments in place' is shown on the following pages as well as being available for members to download from the BATOD website. ▶

## Pupil questionnaire

### Assessing how difficult it is to listen with Covid-19 related adjustments in place

	<p>1. The teacher is talking to you wearing a fabric face mask. How well can you hear what they are saying?</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>always easy</th> <th>mostly easy</th> <th>sometimes difficult</th> <th>mostly difficult</th> <th>always difficult</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	always easy	mostly easy	sometimes difficult	mostly difficult	always difficult					
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	<p>2. The teacher is talking to you wearing a visor. How well can you hear what they are saying?</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>always easy</th> <th>mostly easy</th> <th>sometimes difficult</th> <th>mostly difficult</th> <th>always difficult</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	always easy	mostly easy	sometimes difficult	mostly difficult	always difficult					
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	<p>3. How easy was it to hear the teacher with the radio aid last year? How well can you hear what they are saying?</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>always easy</th> <th>mostly easy</th> <th>sometimes difficult</th> <th>mostly difficult</th> <th>always difficult</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	always easy	mostly easy	sometimes difficult	mostly difficult	always difficult					
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	<p>4. A teacher speaks to you in the corridor with a face mask on. How well can you hear what they are saying?</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>always easy</th> <th>mostly easy</th> <th>sometimes difficult</th> <th>mostly difficult</th> <th>always difficult</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	always easy	mostly easy	sometimes difficult	mostly difficult	always difficult					
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	<p>5. A teacher speaks to you in the corridor with a visor on. How well can you hear what they are saying?</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>always easy</th> <th>mostly easy</th> <th>sometimes difficult</th> <th>mostly difficult</th> <th>always difficult</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	always easy	mostly easy	sometimes difficult	mostly difficult	always difficult					
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	<p>6. Your friends speak to you in the corridor with a face mask on. How well can you hear what they are saying?</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>always easy</th> <th>mostly easy</th> <th>sometimes difficult</th> <th>mostly difficult</th> <th>always difficult</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	always easy	mostly easy	sometimes difficult	mostly difficult	always difficult					
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Many deaf learners are familiar with David Canning's LIFE-UK, which was a revision of the US LIFE. This questionnaire is modelled on that established resource. It can be modified further to meet the localised context of each setting.

\*A range of face coverings, clear masks and radio aid products exist. The use of any product is for illustrative purposes only.



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7. How easy is it to understand a teacher wearing a face mask and a radio aid?

How well can you hear what they are saying?

always easy	mostly easy	sometimes difficult	mostly difficult	always difficult



8. How easy is it to understand a teacher wearing a visor and a radio aid?

How well can you hear what they are saying?

always easy	mostly easy	sometimes difficult	mostly difficult	always difficult

Do you have any other comments about face masks and visors?

Please rank the face masks and visors on how easy it is to understand people when they wear them. 5 is the best and 1 is the worst. If you do not know what they are then please write n/a under.

Fabric face mask with see-through panel	Fabric face mask	Face shield	Clear mask	Medical mask

If we could do anything to help your understanding of other people in school what would it be?

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