Fluent Speakers’ Advice to People Who Stutter

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine fluent speakers’ beliefs about techniques that people who stutter (PWS) can employ in the presence of fluent listeners to promote effective communication. An open-ended, written survey that addressed this topic was administered to 145 university students.

Participants most commonly advised PWS to use strategies that increase intelligibility or decrease stuttering, to self-advocate, and to control negative emotions associated with stuttering.

Introduction
Fluent speakers have long been reported to hold negative stereotypes toward PWS (e.g., Woods & Williams, 1976). Fewer studies have examined fluent speakers’ attitudes toward stuttering in a broader context.

Perceptions of PWS and stuttered speech are influenced, in part, by the effort listeners need to expend as well as speech and personality characteristics associated with the person who stutters (e.g., Susca & Healey, 2002).

The purpose of this study was to examine participants’ beliefs about facilitative techniques that PWS can employ in the presence of fluent listeners in order to promote more effective communication.

Methods
- Participants
  - 145 university students with no history of stuttering
  - 102 women (67%) and 48 men (33%)
  - 18-58 years old (M = 22.5, SD = 6.18)
- Written Survey Instrument
  - Asked the open-ended question “What, if anything, can people who stutter do to help their fluent listeners?”
  - Collected demographic information (age, gender, etc.)
- Data Analysis
  - Thematic analysis of data as described by Maxwell (2005)
  - Data coded and sorted into themes which present the broader issues representative of participants’ individual responses

Results: Major Themes
- Communication Strategies: PWS advised to employ strategies that make them more effective communicators or help them to stutter less.
- Advocacy: PWS encouraged to engage in advocacy behaviors such as acknowledging stuttering and educating others about stuttering.
- Emotional Control: PWS advised to control their strong reactions to stuttering and to listeners’ reactions.

Communication Strategies Themes
- Effective communication was associated with less stuttering for greater intelligibility and listener comprehension.
- Commonly advised strategies were to talk slowly and think before speaking.
- Stuttering was perceived as being lessened when PWS:
  - Talk less in general
  - Avoid problematic words
  - Use gestures or writing
  - Speech therapy or use of therapeutic devices were recommended by a small percentage of participants.
Communication Strategies Quotes

- "They can help their listeners by talking slower, because that way the listener can make out what the person is trying to say instead of trying to guess what the person said."
- "I think that people who stutter can help their listeners by expressing their thoughts completely yet briefly. If possible, it might help if they are able to compound their thoughts. This would help a listener know what the person who stutters is saying."
- "People who stutter could talk with their hands and move around so that people don't just focus on the stuttering."
- "I've heard of an experimental device that, when inserted in the ear, eliminates the problem of stuttering completely."

Advocacy Themes

- Participants viewed self-advocacy by PWS as having benefits for fluent listeners.
- PWS were advised to engage in advocacy behaviors, including educating others about stuttering.
- Disclosing stuttering at the beginning of a conversation was recommended so that listeners would not be "surprised" or "shocked" by the stuttering.
- Expressing one's self despite stuttering was also advised, as was the use of humor when discussing stuttering.

Advocacy Quotes

- "[PWS] maybe should inform their listener that they have a stuttering problem, and if the listener doesn’t understand what stuttering is, explain it to them. Once the listener is informed it will be easier for them to communicate with a person who stutters and to be patient."
- "I think people who stutter can help their listeners by explaining if they have any special needs or by being willing to answer their listeners’ questions about stuttering."
- "Be yourself. Express who you are just as anyone else would. This should dispel some of the myths/preconceived notions about those who stutter."
- "Talk!"

Emotional Control Themes

- In general, participants believed that PWS are under duress due to their stuttering and related factors.
- PWS were advised to control their internal negative emotional reactions to their stuttering which were perceived as anger, frustration, excitability, and insecurity.
- The reactions of listeners to stuttering were perceived as negative and also a source of negative emotions for PWS. Controlling emotional upset over these reactions was advised, as was being patient with listeners.

Emotional Control Quotes

- "[PWS] should appear confident, because listeners are less likely to feel awkward and judged if someone is confident or unashamed of a disability."
- "People who stutter can just stay calm and try not to get so frustrated."
- "Do not get frustrated or upset if [listeners] don’t understand what is being said at first."
- "Both listeners and people who stutter need to not become frustrated if they are not connecting, and they should be willing to talk it out, as this also happens when talking to lots of other people whether they stutter or not."

Conclusions

- Fluent listeners were perceived as using greater cognitive and emotional effort when conversing with PWS.
  - This finding is consistent with previous research in which stuttered speech samples were presented to naive listeners who had little familiarity with PWS (e.g., Panico et al., 2005; Susca & Healey, 2002).
  - Note that the present study’s results in this regard were similar despite differences in the participants, (75% of whom reported familiarity with at least one person who stutters), and stimulus presentation (stuttered speech samples versus an open-ended question).
Conclusions

• Fluent listeners were perceived as being uneasy around PWS, a finding that emphasizes the need to address listener comfort in stuttering therapy (O’Brian et al., 2003). Disclosure of stuttering and self-advocacy were thought to contribute to listener comfort.
• PWS were advised to communicate more effectively in general, which mirrors Kamhi’s (2003) assertion that overall communication should be the focus of stuttering therapy.
• Avoidance and secondary behaviors were also recommended. Ongoing education of the general public appears necessary in this regard, as does future research investigating the extent to which the advice suggested by fluent listeners, when put into practice, actually facilitates perceptions of increased communicative effectiveness.