Design considerations for a dual hearing aid and hearing protection device for individuals with hearing loss
S. Ollivier, J. Voix, F. Bonnet, R. Bouserhal, C. Giguère, H. Nélisse
ÉTS, Université du Québec, Montréal, QC, Canada

Context
43% of Canadians work in loud environments

Among them, an increasing proportion suffers from noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL)

NIHL is responsible for difficulties in communication as well as in the perception and localization of sounds

Existing solutions and their limitations

- Wearing both hearing protectors and hearing aids simultaneously
  Lack of research on the effects, no consensus amongst professionals on how to use them
- Active hearing protectors
  No advantages in high noise environment, lack of data on the actual amplification and its risks for the user

Goal
To develop and validate a prototype of a protective hearing aid that can be used for research on the communication needs and the noise exposure of hearing-impaired workers in a loud environment.

Design considerations

The device will consist of two earplugs, each instrumented with a loudspeaker and two microphones, such that a final prototype has the benefits of both hearing aids and hearing protection devices. Algorithms will be implemented into a connected platform. Some features should be particularly investigated as they need to:

Hearing Aid Algorithm
- Be adapted to workers with low to severe hearing loss
- Maximize speech intelligibility with the right choice of prescription algorithm (NAL, FIG6,...)
- Include a prescription algorithm, volume control, user tilt and Automatic Gain Control input and output units.

Wide Dynamic Range Compression
- Independently adapt compression features depending on the frequency range
- Include a particular number of bands chosen by finding a compromise between vowel recognition and consonant recognition

In-ear dosimetry
- Allow real time measurement of sound level in the protected ear canal
- Be adapted from attenuation measurements using F-MIRE method
- Help selecting the protecting tip providing the best acoustic seal through the sound level measurements
- Enable to monitor noise exposure and prevent overexposure

Noise Reduction Algorithm
- Reduce background noise
- Minimize speech distortion
- Help evaluate the benefit of Active noise cancelling

Expected outcomes

- Advise audiologists, OHS professionals and workers on feature choice depending on hearing diagnosis
- Familiarize hearing aid and hearing protection manufacturers on the needs of workers in loud environments
- Develop a method for noise dosimetry to assess the risks for hearing-impaired employees in noisy workplaces

References

