

Introducing a Reading Scheme to AAC Users

Margaret Girdler and Julie Frame

Recent literature regarding the development of reading in young children has highlighted differences between the early literary experiences of speaking children and those using AAC. One such difference is that the young non-verbal child often has an extremely limited output of vocabulary even if he or she has access to an AAC system. We considered the effect of this on the non-verbal child's ability to learn to read, when we introduced the Oxford Reading Tree scheme to two *TouchTalker* users attending Graysmill School in Edinburgh.

"Until a school system experiences success in teaching reading and spelling to the non-vocal and non-writing, they are often quite reluctant to try. Much needs to be done in educating school personnel about the learning capabilities and communication needs of individuals with severe communication disabilities. Professionals who work in the field of alternative and augmentative communication acquire specialised knowledge of the needs of individuals with severe communication difficulties, but usually are not reading specialists."

Berninger and Gans (1986) p. 62.

The teaching of reading to non-speaking children at Graysmill School has required close liaison between the class teacher and the speech and language therapist. As we read relevant literature, we were alerted to a number of points which we see as important to the teaching of reading to children using augmentative and alternative communication devices. Many of these are relevant to the majority of our pupils at Graysmill who experience delay in language and reading development but the points are particularly relevant to our AAC users.

Light et al. (1994) point out:

- a) *"Many children who use AAC fail to develop their literacy skills. Those who do, tend to lag behind their peers"*. This may result from "limited access to informal literacy experiences and to formal reading and writing instruction".
- b) Teachers need to remain aware of *"the 'contracts' of literacy"* e.g. "how to derive meaning from books and 'talk' about the contents, how to follow the topic established through the story and interpret the pictures and text of the book as symbolic representations, not the 'real thing'."
- c) *"Story reading activities are important particularly to introduce children to the form of reflective thought and decontextualised language which is so much a part of classroom experiences"*.
- d) *"The early literacy experiences of pre-schoolers who use AAC are quantitatively and qualitatively different from those of their non disabled peers"*, e.g. *"they have minimal involvement in taking meaning from the text, never ask questions, seldom talk about the story and seldom fill in lines or words from the text"*. They also "are involved less frequently in writing and drawing experiences and have less frequent access to printed materials than their non disabled peers".
- e) Children rarely have *"access to AAC systems during story reading sessions"* and therefore rely on *"unaided modes e.g. eye pointing"*.
- f) Adults tend to dominate the interaction and many children do not *"participate actively in story reading even when the book is familiar"*.

In addition to these important points highlighted by Light et al. (1994), we also felt it vital to bear in mind that:

- g) The non verbal child has an extremely limited output of vocabulary even with an AAC system. In order to expand the single word vocabulary, the child has to have varied opportunities to develop this vocabulary and has to learn and recall the icon sequences for each word. These are two time-consuming extra steps to learning to read.
- h) It is necessary to check and assess text comprehension.

With these key points in mind below are strategies we use at both the pre-reading and early stages of reading:

- a) Joint participation in story reading.
- b) Relate knowledge of world to make sense of stories.
- c) Read a story, talk about the text and relate this to the child's own experiences.

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- d) Respond to children's attempts to participate and attribute intention and meaning to these attempts.
- e) Provide opportunities to re-read familiar books frequently and as books become more familiar introduce more complex and more "decontextualised" language.
- f) With familiar books expect the child to take a more active role.
- g) Modify the interaction pattern in order to better facilitate literacy and language development through encouraging the child to take an active role in story reading, ask questions, pretend to read, make comments on the story and rely less on adults' control of process of interpreting the story's meaning.
- h) Be aware of the child's unaided mode of communication e.g. eye pointing
- i) Ask questions frequently so that the child feels obliged to be involved.
- j) Make use of evocative techniques e.g. simple *yes/no* questions, encourage child to predict outcomes and interpret reasons for actions.

Last year Graysmill reviewed the reading schemes in current use and decided to purchase the Oxford Reading Tree (ORT) scheme for use in the lower Primary classes. This scheme uses a 'whole language approach' and a 'story method'. The following quotes from the ORT Teachers Manual tied in with our key points above –

- *"The main reason for adopting this approach and method is the recognition of the importance of story experience for all children".*
- *"Pictures and text work together to give children clues and cues to help them predict the meaning of simple sentences."*
- *"Stories provide a context which lends a purpose to reading."*
- *"As children hear the stories, talk about the text and pictures, and retell the stories themselves, they will gradually match and check what they are hearing and seeing and come to an easy, enjoyable appreciation of what reading is all about."*

The two children described below were introduced to the ORT scheme nine months ago. They both use *TouchTalkers* with a 128 overlay containing the Minspeak Application Programme IEP+. Stuart is a nine year old boy with cerebral palsy. He has no spoken output but uses gestures, facial expressions and vocalisations to communicate. He received his *TouchTalker* in October 1991. Lee-Anne is eight years old and received her *TouchTalker* in March 1992. She has cerebral palsy resulting in spastic quadriplegia and therefore had physical accessing difficulties.

Prior to the introduction of the Oxford Reading Tree work on the children's communication focused on building up their knowledge of vocabulary stored in their *TouchTalkers*. For the most part this was linked to their everyday experiences, encouraging them to use their *TouchTalkers* communicatively through group work and 'fun' tasks e.g. jokes, songs and games. However there was no ongoing direct attempt to coordinate their acquisition of vocabulary with their reading.

Stuart's previous reading experience was with the Link-up Reading Scheme. A relatively small number of books were chosen which contained as much IEP+ vocabulary as possible. Along with these books, individual books were made in the classroom, allowing Stuart to revise the sentence structures present in the Link-up books and incorporating this vocabulary into stories relating to himself and familiar situations. Lee-Anne had little reading experience before she was introduced to the ORT. Like Stuart she was given some customised 'reading books' made in school which contained simple sentences relating to her everyday experiences.

Stage 1

We began our work with the ORT by looking at the selection of books available at Stage 1. These early books have no text. The teacher's manual which accompanies the reading scheme states that the aims of Stage 1 are:

- 1 Getting to know the scheme's characters.
- 2 Learning the first key words.
- 3 Developing listening skills.
- 4 Making the link between stories and pictures.
- 5 Encouraging the children to talk about themselves and their experiences in relation to the stories.

We acknowledged that these were important early steps in learning to read and were keen to provide our two AAC users with these opportunities. The names of the ORT's characters were programmed into the

TouchTalkers and group work focused on getting the children to recognise these names and the early key words e.g. 'a', 'and' and 'the' in the written form.

In order to enable the children to talk about the pictures contained in the Stage 1 storybooks, we looked through a number of the books identifying vocabulary that was necessary for discussions. This proved to be a difficult task as we had no way of anticipating what particular elements of the stories our two different children would want to comment on. However as Light et al (1994) point out in relation to AAC users and early reading "*careful consideration should be given to ensure access to appropriate vocabulary to allow full participation in story reading sessions*". We therefore identified what we considered to be relevant and appropriate vocabulary. Both Lee-Anne and Stuart had individual therapy sessions during which the chosen vocabulary was introduced and practised in a variety of games. The children were then able to participate to a certain extent in the 'story reading' sessions with the Stage 1 books. We felt that anticipating and teaching all the vocabulary that the children may possibly require to comment spontaneously on all of the Stage 1 picture books were impossible tasks. We therefore limited the time spent on Stage 1 and achieved the first four aims listed above. Aim number five is an ongoing aim throughout our work with the ORT.

Stage 2

Our introduction of the books at Stage 2 was by the following 5 steps.

- 1 Selection of books. Whilst the ORT has six Trunk readers we felt the vocabulary contained in them was too extensive. We therefore chose six books with some element of repetition to restrict the amount of new vocabulary to be taught ensuring that the key words identified by ORT were included.
- 2 Compilation of word lists for each book and joint decisions (teacher, speech therapist and sometimes the child) as to the location on the *TouchTalker* of words not contained in IEP+.
- 3 Individual therapy sessions to introduce new vocabulary. A range of games and activities were planned to provide opportunities for practising the learned words.
- 4 Weekly classroom-based group activities with the speech therapist and the class teacher. This provided an opportunity for the link to be made between the newly learned vocabulary and the written word.
- 5 Introduction of a reading book to read and discuss.

As a result of this preparatory work, story sessions were clearly satisfying for the children. They were able to achieve success with their reading and were able to engage in some discussion about the content of the stories.

As Light et al (1994) pointed out "*for story reading sessions to be optimally effective in fostering language and literacy growth, they should allow numerous opportunities for the child to talk about the story and take meaning from the text.*"

We believe we have enabled the children to go some way towards this.

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*Julie Frame, Speech & Language Therapist
Margaret Girdler, Senior Teacher
Graysmill School
Redhall House Drive
Edinburgh*