Moving Beyond a Common Roadblock to Successful AAC Implementation

As a school-based augmentative and alternative communication consultant working in a large county in Pennsylvania, I see the challenges and triumphs related to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) implementation on a daily basis. When stopping to reflect on the common roadblocks to successful use of AAC systems in our students, there is one in particular that is glaring and ever-present. This recurring roadblock is the inability of teams to foster consistent and effective AAC system use. Many students are not seeing their AAC systems as their voice, they are not learning language beyond simple requests, they are not motivated to use their systems to communicate and they are often prompt dependent. These problems do not discriminate; they occur across ages, AAC system-types, socio-economic groups and settings. Similarly, the challenges I see in my practice go far beyond the scope of my local area. These challenges are seen globally. Therapists, teachers, paraprofessionals and families supporting AAC users across the globe echo these very same challenges when they post to AAC-related social media groups seeking support and guidance. The good news is that the vast majority of team members (professionals, support staff and families) are truly invested in doing what they can to support language development and effective communication skills using AAC. They simply need some targeted intervention to learn how to teach the language of AAC.

Though there are various factors that lead to failures in teaching someone to become an effective augmented communicator, I see one factor, as the guiltiest culprit. That culprit is lack of modeling. In AAC, modeling system use has a number of different names, but is most often referred to as Aided Language Stimulation (Goosens', Crane, and Elder, 1992) or Aided Language Input. Aided

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Language Stimulation may be defined as "a language stimulation approach in which the facilitator points out picture symbols on the child's communication display in conjunction with all ongoing language stimulation. Through the modeling process, the concept of using the pictorial symbols interactively is demonstrated for the individual." (Goosens', Crane, and Elder, 1992) Regardless of what we call language modeling in AAC, in its absence, AAC very often fails.

Sadly, when an implementation failure occurs in AAC, people may mistakenly assume that the failure occurred because the individual using the AAC system was in some way incapable of learning the system. In my experience, however, the inability of the user to learn and use the system is rarely the cause of the breakdown. Most often, the breakdown occurs because, though well meaning, teams implementing AAC systems with their students/clients did not receive enough training themselves and thus cannot provide sufficient modeling and instruction to foster true language development and system use. Furthermore, for many, gaining access to professionals with adequate skill in implementing AAC can be a real challenge. Those who do have access often report that though they have access to an AAC consultant or knowledgeable SLP, they do not have enough access and still feel unsure about how to proceed. Lack of modeling is certainly not the only factor in stalling AAC learning and use, but in my experience, it's the most significant factor.

So, why is it so hard to model AAC and why is this breakdown occurring so often? In many cases, to successfully teach language, we must understand how language development really plays out in typically-developing communicators. When we consider how natural speakers learn language, it's almost all learned through modeling by those around us. As infants and toddlers, we receive hours and hours of modeling with no expectation that we will produce language in return. Every day, all day, we hear the language we are expected to learn spoken to us and spoken around us. Without direct instruction and practice on how to model symbol use as we speak, we (as natural speakers) typically don't think to model the language we are expecting our students to use … the language of AAC! We have a tendency to place the system in front of the AAC user, ask a question verbally and admit defeat when the communicator fails to respond or respond correctly using their system. Additionally, when we do model, we tend to have the expectation that we will receive an immediate and grammatically correct augmented response. When that doesn't happen, we can quickly become disillusioned. In an effort to combat feelings of defeat related to the pitfalls and time-consuming nature of AAC implementation, let's consider an eye-opening quote from Jane Korsten.

> "It is critical for an individual to not only have symbols, but also to have experience with those symbols in a symbol-rich environment / print-rich environment. The typically-developing child will have been exposed to oral language for approximately 4,380 waking hours by the time he begins speaking at about 18 months of age.
>
> If someone is using a different symbol set and only has exposure to it two times a week, for 20–30 minutes each, it will take the alternate symbol user 84 years to have the same experience with his symbols that the typically developing child has with the spoken word in 18 months!!!
>
> The typically-developing child will demonstrate language competency around 9–12 years of age, having been immersed in and practicing oral language for approximately 36,500 waking hours. For 9–12 years, that child has been using and receiving corrective feedback while practicing with the spoken word.
>
> At twice a week, 20–30 minutes each time, it will take the alternate symbol user 701 years to have the same experience."
>
> *- Jane Korsten (2011) QIAT Listserv April 4, 2011*

Sharing this quote is not meant to cause additional stress or frustration to those supporting AAC users, but rather to illustrate the importance of speaking to AAC users using their system and that learning language takes time. We must provide language input in the same form that we expect the individual to provide as output. If only spoken language is provided for the communicator, how can we expect augmented, symbol-based language to come out? (Sennott, S., Burkhart, L., Musselwhite, C. R., & Cafiero, J. January, 2010). Gail Van Tatenhove further explains the importance of AAC modeling when she says, "The SLP and other communication partners need to 'practice what

they preach.' The SLP (or other communication partner) doesn't need to be able to say everything with the device; however, SLP needs to communicate with the device at the level expected of the student using the device." (Van Tatenhove, 2009)

Folks who are finding it stressful to speak to students using their systems often express that they simply cannot represent every word they speak with a corresponding symbol. They don't know the system well enough to touch/say every word. I always explain that AAC users need to see us communicate with symbols along with our natural speech, but they do not need to see us represent every single spoken word! Selecting and modeling one or two words in your sentence as you speak your sentence will work just fine. What's important is that the person using AAC sees you communicate with AAC, sees you model language structures and has their system validated as a true method of communication (because you're using it too)!

HERE ARE SOME HELPFUL HINTS FROM MASTER CLINICIAN, GAIL VAN TATENHOVE (2009)

Steps for implementing ALgS in the classroom using the student's own device or communication board are:

1. Ensure the student is attending. It does no good to model if the student is not watching which pictures, codes or navigational sequences are being selected.
2. Provide visual input at a pace that allows the student to see what symbol(s) you are pointing to and process that information. The point of this step is not to "show off" your proficiency and speed with the device, but to model vocabulary, vocabulary codes/navigations and word order to the student.
3. Vary the amount of visual model provided based on the proficiency of the student. It may be neces-

If you use my talker, I WILL LEARN HOW TO USE MY TALKER. ~Kate Ahern~
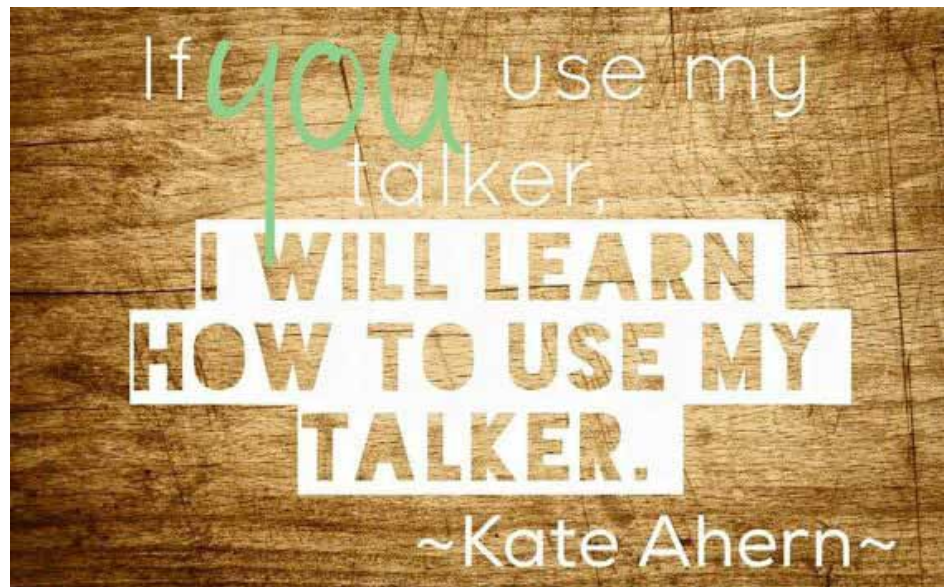
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sary for some students with limited proficiency with their device to model only one or two targeted core words. A general rule of thumb is to model at least one word beyond the student's current mean length of utterance in morphemes and/or words.
4. Pair the visual model with verbal input, filling in the gaps to ensure the student hears a complete sentence.

We have admired the problem, but how can we truly become more comfortable using the technique of Aided Language Stimulation? Like any other instructional strategy, this technique takes some practice and, not surprisingly, is best learned if an experienced "modeler" can model Aided Language Stimulation for you! If you don't have access to an experienced SLP or consultant, there are many wonderful resources on the Internet, including the excellent AAC blog PrAACticalaac.org, AAC-related Facebook groups, YouTube channels with uploaded videos of talented clinicians, teachers and family members, and, of course, local and national training opportunities.

HERE ARE SOME COMFORTING THOUGHTS RELATING TO GETTING STARTED WITH AIDED LANGUAGE STIMULATION SHARED BY PRAACTICALAAC.ORG (FEBRUARY 25, 2012).

1. It takes time to get good at this. We're speaking pidgin AAC until we get fluent, so just keep at it. Give yourself permission to be halting at first. Keep at it and the fluency will come.
2. It helps to start small. If the communication aid, SGD or app is complex, don't try to tackle everything at once. Get comfortable with modeling using the main pages or screens first, then move onto other places where vocabulary is stored.
3. Along those lines, it helps to start off by modeling only core words in the sentence. Those words are already highly familiar to you and they are generally words that are easy to read. That makes it a bit easier to develop a smooth motor pattern for saying those words so that you can move from hunt-and-peck to slide-and-glide."

It's important to remember that it's perfectly acceptable for AAC users to see you flounder as you look for words when you begin speaking to them on their system. Use those errors as an opportunity to talk through the process of finding words. Then you can review the path and procedures you used to find the word. They'll need to learn and employ those same skills! Additionally, when beginning to support someone with a high-tech dynamic display system and navigation of the system is a bit overwhelming, take some screen shots. Get to know where the vocabulary is on just those pages and speak to your student/client using the paper versions. You can always progress to modeling on their system later.

Another important consideration when beginning to model use of AAC is that communication is not developed solely through responses to questions. We have a tendency to try to teach language through a series of questions that require answers, in essence testing rather than engaging learners in naturalistic communication exchanges. We don't teach infants and toddlers by only asking questions and requiring responses and can therefore not expect augmented communicators to learn language in that manner. Tell the student something about yourself, what you like or what you did (while modeling on their system) and then pose a question that flows naturally in the context of the conversation!

While this article cannot teach therapists, teachers, paraprofessionals and parents how to model AAC when speaking to AAC users, I'm hopeful that it encourages readers to seek out information about how to begin to employ this essential technique of modeling AAC. Read blogs! Watch videos! Attend workshops! If we presume competence and provide extensive models of how to speak using AAC systems by doing it ourselves, we are sure to see the development of successful augmented communicators.
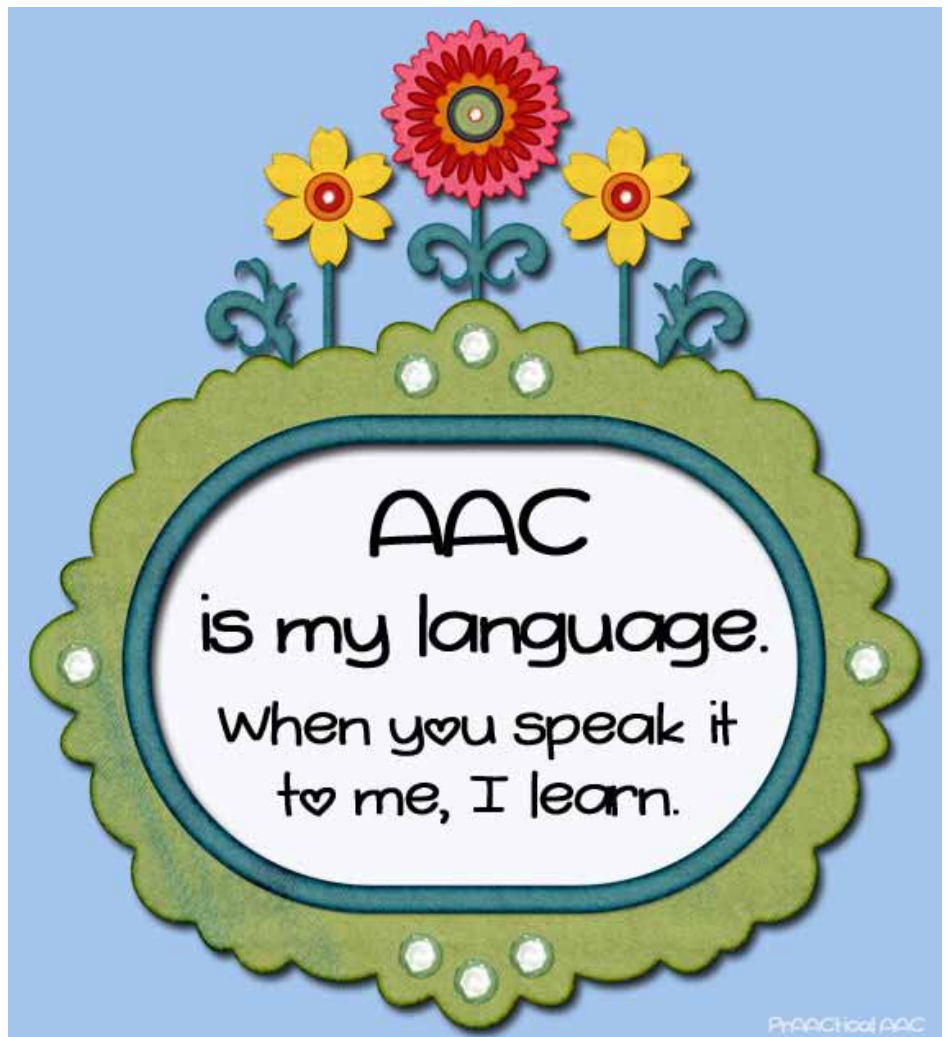
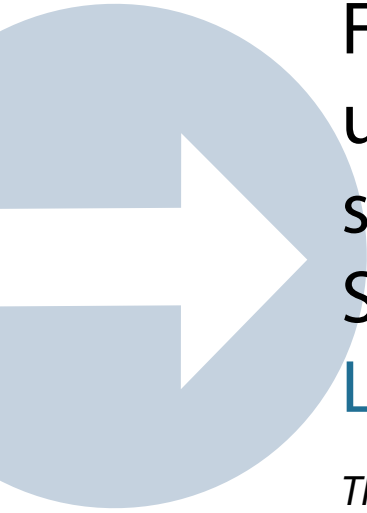Reprinted with permission from PrAACticalAAC.org

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