

Designing AAC Systems for Bilingual Users

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The number of English language learners (ELLs) and learners who are (or are becoming) bilingual is rising rapidly in North America (Lems, Miller, & Sora 2010). ELLs with complex communication needs (CCN) have additional unique needs. Thus, clinicians also face unique challenges when it comes to developing alternative and augmentative communication systems (AAC) with these learners (Soto & Yu 2014). This brief will address a few of the major considerations to keep in mind when working with individuals and family members in designing truly bilingual AAC systems.

Firstly, it's important to know that there is much evidence that bilingualism is the desired and optimal outcome for learners who communicate in different languages (Lems et al 2010). Specifically, continued growth of knowledge and skills in the learner's first language supports, rather than hinders, such growth in the second language (Lems et al 2010). Ability to communicate, read, and write in both the first and second language also strengthens social bonds within families, builds friendships at school and home, provides bridges to fully participate in different cultural communities, and opens up academic and employment options (Lems et al 2010).

Thus, for learners who use AAC to communicate, it is essential that their AAC systems be designed with vocabulary that enables them to communicate with their families and in the larger community (Soto & Yu 2014). Clinicians should engage in a collaborative process with family members and actively ask questions and seek out ways the AAC system can be improved. Specifically, Soto and Yu suggest that "professionals should ask the parents about communicative situations in which they wish their child could participate and target those situations as contexts for intervention" (2014). Although many professionals will not share the family's language, good will, gestures, and both official and unofficial translators can go a long way in designing and implementing AAC systems that can and will actually be used in the home environment. (As a side note, learning even a few words of the language will usually endear you to the family!)

Secondly, it's also critical to be aware that designing AAC systems is not a simple matter of translating English-based systems into the target language. Other languages have different grammars, orthography, speaking and reading cues as well as different cultural referents than English (Lems et al 2010). Bilingual AAC systems must address

those differences in a way that's easy and intuitive for people with CCN and their communication partners to use (Soto & Yu 2014). Soliciting feedback from those individuals and their partners and making adjustments to the AAC system based on such feedback is a critical part of any AAC intervention, but it's especially important when working with bilingual people. For example, bilingual AAC systems should include culturally relevant vocabulary, glosses, and referents (Soto & Yu 2014) which can often only be discerned from family and cultural community members.

Lastly, although designing AAC systems with bilingual users and their partners can be challenging, take heart in knowing other have successfully gone before you. A quick web search for "bilingual AAC" will bring up many ideas as well as case studies of bilingual learners who use AAC. For instance, this speech-language pathologist recounts her work with "Yvonne", a 10-year-old bilingual learner and AAC user from Puerto Rico, emphasizing the research-based approach she took to working with Yvonne to improve her literacy and other communication skills:

<http://leader.pubs.asha.org/article.aspx?articleid=2292452>

In conclusion, although designing AAC systems and interventions for bilingual learners who use AAC brings with it unique challenges, it can also be rewarding and very successful. The key is involving the bilingual learners, family members, and other communication partners in a collaborative and iterative process that addresses their needs and builds on their strengths in both languages.

References

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