

Will cheap be cheerful for those who need communication aids?

The impact of iPads and Androids on the world of AAC was the big theme for the Communication Matters annual conference at the University of Leeds last week.

Communication aids which can play back pre-recorded speech or generate synthetic speech have revolutionised the lives of many of the 300,000 children and adults in the UK who will need Augmentative and Alternative Communication at some point in their lives.

✘ Many people who need AAC have severe and permanent physical disabilities from birth as a result of conditions such as cerebral palsy. Others have degenerative conditions which leave them unable to speak.

It is a disgrace that in a wealthy country such as Great Britain children and adults are being left without the power of speech simply to save money.

One solution is to find cheaper alternatives to the specialist aids. In recent times, companies have started to develop apps which will work with iPhones, iPads, Androids and other tablet devices.

Good news you might think. The trouble is that the users need support, training for themselves and their carers, robust devices which will bounce off pavements and ongoing research and development to make the next generation of communication aids the best that they can be. Buying a tablet online and downloading an app does not even begin to address these problems.

Catherine Harris, [Chair of Communication Matters](#), summed up the dilemma saying: “It is an exciting time for the sector. Developments in adapting technology have increased the range of options for people and the growth of access methods, such as eye gaze, provide people with alternative ways to use their equipment. However, these developments need underpinning by comprehensive assessment, funding of equipment and longer term support services if they are going to be really effective.’

[Leicester Lions and Eye Gaze help Teresa to communicate](#)



tobii eye gaze in
action

2011 is The National Year of Communication which highlights the importance of good communication skills for children and young people. Some of those children need help from technology if they are to have a voice.

Last week, I was invited by Northgate Managed Services to an event called “Engage, Evolve, Excel”. It had Professor Stephen Heppell as the keynote speaker and was an ICT showcase for the great work done in Leicester schools.

There I met Teresa, a year 11 pupil from Ash Field, a day and weekly boarding special school. She demonstrated a Tobii Eye Gaze system that lets users with severe physical disabilities control their computer just by using their eye movements.

Her school had bought the system but the camera was provided by Leicester Lions Speedway. Teresa uses Eye Gaze to access

her communication device which enables her to speak. The school invited some Leicester Lions into assembly and Teresa used her Eye Gaze to deliver her presentation thanking them for their fundraising efforts.

What a difference a bit of kit can make!

And the winner is ...Proloquo2go



Sal and comedian Alun
Cochrane meet the winners
from Proloquo2go

Rebecca Bright is a Speech and Language therapist and has been closely involved with Proloquo2go so she was delighted to learn that it had won the BETT Special Needs Award 2011. It is an app which can be used on an iPad or iPhone to give a voice to those who have a disability such as cerebral palsy or autism which prevents them getting their message across.

Proloquo2go is an affordable solution for those who need communication aids. There are many specialist augmentative and assistive communication (AAC) devices on the market but they often cost thousands of pounds and demand outstrips supply so some young people are left literally without a voice. Now, with increased funding restrictions, there are more people who need a reasonably priced aid and Proloquo2go offers access to many people who would formerly have found AAC out of reach.



AAC in your
pocket

“Proloquo2go is also very socially acceptable,” said Rebecca. “It works on devices which everyone else has or wants to have so it is not seen as a specialist device for people with disabilities This has had a knock on effect. In the past some learners were unwilling to use their communication aids outside the classroom or home because it marked them out as being different but now that stigma is removed. There are over 300,000 apps on iTunes and we are finding that users are going for a mix and match approach. They might use Proloquo2go symbols for a message and then switch into YouTube to show a video and then call up photos of their family as part of a conversation. All of us at [Proloquo2go](#), the developers [AssistiveWare](#) and those of us who work at the UK partner [TherapyBox](#) are delighted to win the award. It is good news for us but it is also good news for those who need communication aids. It shifts the spotlight from dedicated technology to low cost, mainstream mobile technology.

Watch a video to see how Proloquo2go changed one little boy's life.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulf11Kg8-lI>