Individual Preferences

There may be information about the individual’s preferences (e.g., auditory, textural, visual) that will contribute to the decision making process.

- Auditory—You may want to demonstrate both digitized and synthesized speech output for the individual and look for a preference or aversion to one or the other.

- Textural—There may be issues of textures the person prefers or avoids that would aid in selecting one system over another.

- Visual—Some individuals may prefer or require line drawings as opposed to photographs, or vice versa. Size of the stimulus required is another important factor to explore with the individual.

The speed with which a user can scan an overlay of pictures and select the appropriate choice may lead to selecting a dynamic screen arrangement or a static display device. The ability to generate more abstract ideas and relationships between words and pictures may indicate the ability to use a system with semantic compaction (e.g., to communicate “red” in Minspeak, the user would access a picture of a rainbow for “colors,” then a picture of an apple for “red”) as opposed to a more explicit, single meaning arrangement. Even consideration of whether the user is a “fashion trend setter” or oblivious to this aspect can be important information to gather. This exploration will help you match the features of the desired communication system to the abilities and preferences of the user and will increase the probability that the system will be accepted and used.

How do we determine needed features in a communication device?

An assessment kit can be a useful tool in considering a variety of factors as you match the features a communicator needs to a communication system. The contents of an individual kit may vary by population assessed, but there are some basics that allow a variety of tasks to be accomplished that can help to determine the most beneficial features for the user.

If you are working with an individual who has a variety of interests already identified (e.g., music, reading, sports), consider using that information to select items that will be motivating. Levels of sophistication vary widely given the cognitive abilities, motoric abilities, and communicative interest of the candidate for augmented communication.

What is the next communicative step for this individual?

As you examine the individual’s current communication status, the question becomes “What is the next step that augmented communication can provide?” If the person presently communicates by pointing at pictures, this may be a time to explore whether voice output
Funding

If the evaluation has been completed and some type of equipment is recommended, it may be time to consider the funding sources available. Certain formats may be required by certain funding sources. If you anticipate submitting results to a particular funding source (e.g., Medicaid, private insurance, community organization), it is important to align your report to their format. If you generate a report that addresses all of their areas of concern, you will enhance your prospects of funding without protracted revisions and requests for more information. Often when dealing with funding agencies, you will be initially denied for some particular reason. If that particular issue is addressed through an addendum to the report, funding can sometimes be obtained. A different reviewer may see the request each time you submit to a funding source, so never give up until you have resubmitted a minimum of three times.

In some instances, manufacturers of equipment are willing to assist in the funding process. Contact the company and ask if they have a “funding information packet” or a funding specialist.

Equipment recommendations are generally written by features that are needed rather than by specific names of devices. Each feature listed should be addressed and supported in the report of the evaluation and trial periods. Most insurers require considering at least two systems that would meet the individual’s needs as outlined on the feature-match list. A side-by-side comparison is often helpful, including the following:

- features (e.g., size, weight, voice quality)
- price
- manufacturers
- available technical and repair support
- training available from the manufacturer
- rental period availability
- warranty information
- accessories needed and included in the listed price
Conversely, if the user is an adult with challenging access and limited communication abilities following some type of brain injury or insult, a phrase-based communication may allow him to convey messages more quickly, easily, and accurately. Although some skills may eventually be regained and the system may be changed later, the immediate need is for efficient communication of wants and needs. Adding vocabulary at a later time to meet expanded communication needs would be an important consideration depending on the course of the user’s recovery.

Scripting

Scripting is a strategy in which a specific rather than general set of vocabulary is created to address the communication needs of beginning communicators, especially those with cognitive challenges (Elder & Goosens 1994). Scripts then are made up of words or phrases that relate to a specific activity.

Creating an Overlay for an Activity

By anticipating the types of interactions an activity will demand, appropriate scripts of words or phrases can be developed and used with an overlay or activity board to help the individual communicate in specific situations. Scripting is most successful with routine activities like morning circle, picking up attendance forms, cooking activities, checking out a library book, ordering at a restaurant or cafeteria, dressing, or social gatherings.

Regardless of the type of communication system (e.g., pictures, voice-output device, static or dynamic display), the overlay should reflect the vocabulary needed for a specific activity. The number of choices to present depends on the activity as well as the cognitive and motoric abilities of the individual. However, you need to include enough vocabulary options for the communicator to be a functional part of the experience. For example, an overlay for cooking activities in class may look like the following.

![Overlay for Cooking Activities](image-url)
Selecting the Vocabulary to Program for the Script

The next decision is whether to store phrases or single word messages under each location. The ultimate decision is an individual one, generally based on the cognitive abilities of the communicator and the communication goals. The trade-off between these systems is speed vs. flexibility of the message generated (Elder & Goosens 1996).

Each system has advantages and disadvantages for the user. With a single word-based system, the user is able to generate novel utterances by combining single words. The user can use the vocabulary to create different meanings by selecting different word orders and expanding the number of words that are connected to produce a phrase. Unfortunately, the speed of the message is significantly slower with the single word system than with the phrase-based system. On the other hand, if phrases are stored beneath each icon, communication is less flexible as the user cannot alter the message content to meet varying communicative needs.

Home/School Communication

A simple beginning strategy to encourage use of the augmentative communication device and improve home/school communication involves a daily message. This message can be programmed into a particular location on the user’s device or on a smaller, single-message device (e.g., a key chain type messager, single-switch message, or even a “talking photograph” type device available in stationery stores) that travels between home and school.

At the end of the day, a member of the child’s team takes responsibility for programming in the answer to the daily question “What did you do at school today?” The staff member programs the message from the user’s point of view. For example:

“Today Miss Mary came for music and we got to go to the computer lab and play games. Lunch was vegetable soup and peanut butter sandwiches. YUCK!”

At home, before the child returns to school the following day, the parent programs the home message to answer the teacher’s query, “What did you do last night?” Again, the response is recorded from the user’s point of view. This response may be:

“Last night we ate out at McDonald’s and went to look at new kitchen cabinets.”

This strategy encourages daily communication and increased expectations of use, as well as helps those at school and home become more comfortable programming the device. It functions as a check that both school and home are involved in communicating with the individual and ensures at least some level of augmented communication daily. In selecting the message to send back and forth, the daytime caregivers as well as the home personnel must consider what the quality of the user’s day (or evening) has been like. Was he able to make choices about the events he participated in? Did he find those events enjoyable? Was
he part of the action or did he simply tag along? Working with daily messages can encourage caregivers to examine quality of life issues involving recreational and leisure time, interest in structured activities presented, and preferences of the individual using the device.

Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary

Helping a new user find vocabulary and use his device in opportunities that arise is an important teaching task. Sometimes when teachers and therapists are beginning to teach vocabulary, there is a tendency to play “show me.” In this game, the communication partner identifies the 10 or 15 vocabulary words she wants to teach. Then the communication partner says, “Find ________.” In this out-of-context teaching situation, the goal becomes finding the word rather than transmitting a message. Once taught in this way, many communication device users have difficulty breaking out of the responding mode. They have trouble understanding that they can also use the newly learned vocabulary to initiate communication.

Instead of the “find this” strategy, a more appropriate implementation strategy is to give the user a reason to communicate, and then to teach the location of the vocabulary on the device. For example, if you have a user with significantly better receptive than expressive vocabulary skills, you may want to teach the location of emotion words. Your lesson could involve short one- or two-sentence descriptions of emotion provoking situations. For example, “When Joanie saw that her little brother had used markers all over the teddy bear that her boyfriend Jack had given her, steam began to come out of her ears.” Then ask, “How do you think Joanie was feeling?” and present two vocabulary cards to cue the location of the emotion words (e.g., happy, mad) in the device.

The more complex the device, the more there may be a need for cue cards. For instance, in the Unity program used by many of the devices manufactured by the Prentke-Romich Company, the sequence for a feeling always begins with the icon with two masked faces. Then there are a several choices in the activity row that indicate a variety of emotions. The cue card would have a picture of the icon for the masked faces and each of the possibilities listed on it to help the user navigate and learn the “language” of the device and where specific items are stored.

Another example might involve a class discussion after reading a story. The individual with the augmentative communication system could be given cue cards to ask questions about the story and then select the class members to call on to answer the questions. For instance, if the child is included in a third-grade class reading Charlotte’s Web, questions could revolve around character names or attributes, and the cue cards could pose specific questions based on content. The user could also be provided with other cue cards for any new vocabulary specific to this activity.