Communication practices and needs of multilingual persons in need of/using AAC

*Background and Aim*

The provision of AAC services, although still limited in South Africa (Maguvhe, 2014), has received support in official policy documents (Department of Education, 2010). The advent of more affordable mobile technology options has increased access to electronic AAC systems that are more readily available than dedicated device options (McNaughton & Light, 2013). With its 11 official languages, the country is a context of great linguistic and cultural diversity, with a complicated history regarding language policy and use.

As yet, there is a limited evidence base for the provision of AAC services in multiple languages (Soto & Yu, 2014) and design considerations for AAC systems that can give access to expression in more than one language are not well-understood (Baker & Chang, 2006; Soto & Yu, 2014; Yong, 2006). In this presentation, we will situate AAC intervention and design considerations within the broader dialogue of language policy and language use within the South African context as a background to the study. We will then report on the outcomes of a study that aimed to determine the communication practices and needs of South African multilingual persons using or in need of AAC as a first step to inform system design.

*Method*

To address the first aim, language policies specifically in education as well as research on language practices and use in South Africa are being reviewed. To address the second aim, a predominantly quantitative survey design using interviews and questionnaires will be used to gather information from persons with a good understanding of language who use or need AAC, caregivers/family members of persons who use or need AAC and service providers such as speech-language pathologists and technology providers. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling will be used to recruit participants, amongst others via an email group as well as various organizations that provide services to or represent the interests of people in need of AAC and their team members. A questionnaire with primarily closed-ended questions will be used – both a paper-based version as well as an online version to gather data from a broader group of respondents. At present, the questionnaire for people who need or use AAC has been developed, focusing specifically on the following aspects:

- Expressive and receptive proficiency in different languages
- Exposure to different languages
- Expressive modalities used with specific focus on technology and SGDs
- Perceived need for access to more languages through AAC technology and desired design features of such technology

The questionnaire was piloted with seven participants. Results suggest that questions were easy to understand and analyse.

*Results*

Both freedom of expression and the choice to use any language one wishes are recognised as constitutional rights in South Africa (Bill of Rights, The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, 1996). Practitioners in the field should reflect on how these rights may be realised for people who need and/or use AAC. At the same time, language policy and use in South Africa have complex histories, especially in education (De Klerk, 2002; Heugh, 2002;
Webb, 1999). Active developments to promote the use and development of all of South Africa’s 11 official languages are complicated by practicalities and ideological factors. Developing context-sensitive and context-sensible practice in AAC requires cognizance of and engagement with these factors in order to work towards ‘best practice’ in contexts of diversity. One avenue that can help to ensure client-centred intervention is stakeholder input. Most participants from the pilot study of the survey hoped to extend their abilities to communicate in multiple languages through the use of appropriate AAC technology in the future, although it became apparent that in this group lack of literacy in home language could be a potential challenge. Data for the main study is intended to be collected within the first five months of next year, and the results will be presented at the conference.

Conclusion
A review of language policy and use can help practitioners and researchers in the field to understand AAC intervention and system design within a linguistically and culturally diverse context. Input from stakeholders will highlight important AAC technology design considerations for developers and practitioners working with multilingual persons in need of AAC and their families.

Declaration of interest
The financial assistance of the National Research foundation and the University of Pretoria as well as the CSIR Meraka Institute (EU-GBS project) towards this project are gratefully acknowledged. The authors have no further financial or non-financial interests to declare.

References


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Program Planner/Instructional Personnel’s Name: Kerstin Tönsing

Course Title: Communication practices and needs of multilingual persons in need of/using AAC

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What was received? (Check all that apply)

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<td>Grants X</td>
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<td>Gift</td>
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<td>Speaking fee</td>
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<td>Hold patent on equipment</td>
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Other financial benefit (please describe): [Blank]

For what role? (Check all that apply)

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<th>Employment</th>
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<td>Board membership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
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<td>Membership on advisory committee or review panels</td>
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Program Planner/Instructional Personnel’s Name: Karin van Niekerk

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☐ Bias, please describe: ____________________________

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☐ Board membership

☐ Volunteer consulting

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Program Planner/Instructional Personnel’s Name: Dr. Georg I. Schlink

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