

The communication aid dialogue trainer

There is a recurrent problem that many people with communication difficulties are given communication aids but never use them to their full potential or even don't use them at all. One of the reasons for this is that it can be difficult for many people to get enough practice in using the aid to the extent that it becomes more effective than other strategies such as gesture, and thus is a functional improvement for them.

This project intended building on previous work, on training people's speech. This project developed a computer based dialogue practice system. The computer has a video of a conversation partner asking questions to which the user has to respond by means of his or her aid. All responses are recorded and at the end of the dialogue the user can play the whole conversation back to see how it went as a whole. There are many different conversations in the system to avoid boredom and enable a range of types of dialogue to be practiced. The system also records data on how the participant uses the programme. It is envisaged that the system could be used independently at home and thus enable a lot of practice opportunities. The thinking behind the project is that many people do not have a willing communication partner to practice with, and also in the early stages of learning to use an aid it can be tiresome and even embarrassing for both aid user and partner and thus the initial steep part of the learning curve in using the aid is never surmounted.

The systems have been used by two people with motor neurone disease. Both participants were able to use the system and their data are being analysed.

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