

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the modern world, being employed means much more than an income. The beneficial effects of employment for social integration and emotional well-being, besides financial independence, have been demonstrated repeatedly (Jacobs, Larsen & Smith, 1979; Jiranek & Kirby, 1990; Miranda, 1996). The rights of persons with disabilities to be included in all aspects of life, including the work setting, are being increasingly recognised. The South African Employment Equity Act, passed in October 1998, aims at creating equal employment opportunities to hereto disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities. Employers are obligated to develop employment policies to achieve this aim.

Yet employment issues for people with little or no functional speech (LNFS) have been described as "the monster in the closet" (Williams, 1994). American statistics in this regard show that an estimated mere 35 % of speech-impaired adults between 21 and 64 years of age hold full-time or part-time employment (LaPlante, 1993). South African statistics show an overall employment rate of 12 % for people with disabilities (Schneider et al.), indicating an underrepresentation of people with disabilities on the workforce.

Effective and efficient communication is certainly an important skill for gaining and keeping employment - starting with the compilation of a curriculum vitae and the initial job interview (Creech, 1994; Light, Stolz & McNaughton, 1993). People with LNFS are thus at a particular disadvantage when seeking employment. This population has to rely on augmentative or alternative communication (AAC) to supplement or replace verbal communication. AAC, especially if it involves aided methods of communicating, tends to be slow, demands more effort from both partners in terms of maintaining attention, and is prone to communication breakdown (Von Tetzchner et al. 1996, p. 32). These characteristics of AAC will obviously influence the quantity and quality of interactions which an AAC user has in the work setting.

AAC specialists seem to have little experience of AAC users in employment, and little knowledge of the communication demands faced by AAC users at the workplace. Consequently, there is a lack of intervention aimed specifically at communication in employment situations (Light et al., 1993, p. 45). If indeed AAC intervention aims at functional outcomes and improvement of life quality, employment issues should become a high priority (Willard, 1995, p. 19).

Potential employment sites for people with physical and multiple disabilities do not only pose task-related challenges to the individual, but also opportunities and demands in terms of social interaction. Developing social relationships and social supports at the work place leads to increased emotional well-being and better work adjustment (Parent, Kregel, Metzler & Twardzik, 1992, p. 28). Specifically, job satisfaction, work performance, job retention, and successful stress handling at the workplace have been found to be related to employees' participation in social relationships at the workplace.

Workers with disabilities often struggle to engage in successful social interactions - leading to loneliness and isolation at the work place. In fact, social problems have been suggested to be a more frequent factor for job termination than task-related problems for individuals with disabilities (Butterworth & Strauch, 1994, p. 118). Any communication impairment immediately has a negative impact on the person's perceived social competence. AAC users might therefore find the social demands in an employment context more challenging than the task-related demands. In order to promote the individual's integration and adaptation at the workplace, AAC systems and strategies need to support not only work-related communication, but also communication functions which afford the user social access to the workplace. As a first step, social interactive opportunities and demands of potential employment contexts thus need to be researched (Creech, 1994, p. 128).

Ethnographic methodologies and naturalistic observation (including environmental inventories and communication samples) are of prime importance in researching the dynamics of communication occurring in real-life contexts for various groups of individuals (Beukelman, McGinnis & Morrow., 1991, p 180). Balandin and Iacono (1998a) further note that word frequency counts alone do not give the whole picture -

in determining *how* this vocabulary is used to support the communication needs and interests of different groups, researchers are encouraged to enter the fields of discourse and topic analysis (p. 131).

Data on the topics referenced during social interaction of nondisabled speakers in the work context is an important source of information to guide vocabulary selection for AAC users. Knowledge of and access to relevant topics of conversation will assist augmented communicators to socially interact with nondisabled colleagues and co-workers. Furthermore, nondisabled peers are likely to rate the augmented speaker's communicative competence more highly. Ultimately, relevant vocabulary for AAC users will contribute to the development and maintenance of appropriate and satisfying relationships at the work place.

1.2 TERMINOLOGY

The following terms warrant clarification as they are frequently referred to in this study:

1.2.1 Augmentative and Alternative Communication

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association defines Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) as “an area of clinical practice that attempts to compensate (either temporarily or permanently) for the impairment and disability patterns of individuals with severe expressive communication disorders” (1989, p. 107). Lloyd, Fuller and Arvidson (1997) further state that AAC is “the supplementation or replacement of natural speech and/or writing using aided and/or unaided symbols” (p. 524).

1.2.2 Little or no functional speech

Individuals with a verbal repertoire of 15 words or less (Burd, Hammes, Bornhoeft & Fisher, 1988, p. 373).

1.2.3 AAC system

“An integrated network of aided and unaided means to represent (symbols), select and transmit; and the strategies, techniques and devices that an individual uses to communicate. A system involves the integrated use of many components for communication” (Lloyd et al., 1997, p. 522).

1.2.4 AAC user

A person with little or no functional speech who is at present using or is a candidate for an AAC system (Lloyd et al., 1997, p. 522).

1.2.5 Aided

Communication symbols, strategies or techniques that make use of something apart from the communicator’s body to represent, select or transmit messages (Lloyd et al., 1997, p. 522).

1.2.6 Conversation

Conversation is described by McLaughlin (1984) as “... two engaged in a relatively informal interaction in which the role of speaker shifted from one to the other at irregular intervals” (p13). Crow (1983) defines conversation as the “collaborative work towards the construction of coherent communicative text” (p. 137).

1.2.7 Social conversation

Conversation that is aimed mainly at creating social closeness through interaction that is enjoyable, and through which participants can create the impressions they want (Todman, 2000).

1.2.8 Rate of communication

Refers to the speed of output measures in words per minute (Foulds, 1980, p. 169).

1.2.9 Pre-stored messages

Refers to words and phrases that are pre-selected and displayed on a communication board or stored in a technological communication device.

1.2.10 Text-based communication systems

Communication systems that allow users to access a large number of pre-stored messages, such as the TALK system (Bedrosian, Hoag, McCoy, Pennington & Wright, 2000).

1.2.11 TALK communication system

The TALK (talk aid using preloaded knowledge) was originally designed by Todman, Alm and Elder (1994). Its purpose was to give the user access to conversation by storing longer text units, by predicting (intuitively) the conversational macro-structure. Conversational contributions are organised according to the 'ritualised' parts of conversation, such as greeting, small talk, wrap-up and farewell. A category is included specifically for 'repair'. Contributions relating to content of conversation include content-sensitive contributions (which can be used across various topics) as well as content-specific contributions, which are organised in such a way as to facilitate quick retrieval by the user.

1.2.12 Topic of conversation

"What conversation is about" (Crow, 1983, p. 137), i.e. the content of conversation.

1.2.13 Referential frames

For the purpose of this study, these denote aspects of topic pertaining to

- 1) Time, i.e. what point in time is referenced in conversation
- 2) Person, denoting the whom the utterance is about, and
- 3) Content, relating to the objects, events or ideas that are being discussed.

1.3 ABBREVIATIONS

AAC	-	Augmentative and alternative communication
LNFS	-	Little or no functional speech

1.4 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 gives the introduction to the study as well as a list of terminology, the abbreviations used and an overview of the chapters.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the theoretical issues relevant to this study. The concept of social conversation is described. The use of pre-stored messages as a rate-enhancement technique in AAC is discussed, as well as the implications of such a technique for conversation. The concept of topic and its bearing on social conversation using AAC systems is defined and discussed. The current research study is positioned within the framework of previous topic research in AAC.

In *Chapter 3*, the methodology of the study is provided; specifically the aims, the research design, the selection of work contexts and participants as well as the equipment and material used. The data collection procedures as well as the analysis procedures are described.

The results of the topic analysis procedure are discussed in *Chapter 4*, in terms of the three referential frames *time*, *person* and *content*. As far as possible, comparisons are made with previous topic research.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study, discusses its limitations as well as implications for clinical practice and further research.

1.5 SUMMARY

The underrepresentation of people with disabilities in the workforce is highlighted in this chapter. The challenges for AAC users regarding the communicative demands of the workplace are discussed. Social access to the workplace - which is shown to be a determining factor in successful employment - might be negatively influenced by the use of AAC. Research on conversational topics of nondisabled employees is proposed as one method by which social interactive opportunities and demands at the workplace can be better understood, which might lead to more specific and guided message selection for AAC systems. Terminology used in this study is defined, an overview of the chapters is given.