

Egyptian AAC Challenges

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I am proud to share with you, AAC Family all over the world, and with anybody who is interested in AAC, my challenges to spread and raise awareness about AAC in Egypt. It is a long way to go to raise awareness and get people, phoniaticians, speech therapists, parents, school students from primary to secondary stage to know about AAC and to be convinced with any means of communication that helps non-speaking individuals to communicate and to be understood in their society.

ISAAC in Egypt works on 5 axes:

- (1) phoniaticians and speech therapists in hospitals and clinics
- (2) volunteers in churches vary between teenage, university students, young adults
- (3) parents' attitudes towards using AAC with people with complex communication needs
- (4) school students from primary to secondary levels learning about the concept of AAC
- (5) people with complex communication needs (CCN) take the teacher role

(1) The first axis is the Phoniaticians and Speech therapists Misconceptions

To start with the phoniaticians as the most influential category on parents and the parent belief in what they tell them in their clinics, the National Congress for Phoniaticians and Logopedics was held in 2017. The topic of Applying AAC with Individuals with CCN was one of the presentations accepted by the scientific committee for the Congress, which is a really great step forward.

The participants are phoniaticians and speech therapists from Cairo, Aswan, Sohag, Assiout, Alexandria, Mansoura, different cities in Egypt. The speech doctors' belief is that using any mean of communication with the individuals with complex communication needs will prevent them from talking. So the trend is that we use traditional speech training with non-speaking individuals. But accepting AAC as one of the presentations means the start of change in the way of thinking.



(2) The second axis is the volunteers providing services in church:

Most of the Egyptian Churches provide services for people with special needs .This service is offered by volunteers, who are teenagers, university students, and young adults interested in the field. They need to learn about the types of disabilities, level, characteristics of each disability, and means of communication.

I was asked to give lectures about how to communicate with those with no speech or limited speech. This is a good step in that people in charge and responsible for the services are much more aware of the needs of people with disabilities. I do present the AAC theoretical part beside practical part for cases on the video. Also, I demonstrate AAC material as communication boards, schedules, stories.... The participants were so happy to understand more about the main characteristics of children with autism and

older ages and to find out different means to communicating with various language and behavioural problems.

(3) The third axis is Parent's attitude towards using any mean of communication:

Among participants in lectures for the volunteers were parents who have their complaints and each one was asked to share his problem, worries, and wishes for their son or daughter, which was very comfortable for them. I shared my experience as having a brother with mental disability so we spoke on the same level. I shared my worries, successes, and wishes, which was very convenient for them. Then I moved to my professional role and started my presentation about the concept of AAC and suddenly a mother spoke up with strong objections to the idea.

She had bad experience with her 5-year-old child with a speech therapist who worked with her. I replied, saying that she went wrong because she did not study about AAC. But by good chance one of the mothers attending the lecture strongly defended using means of communication with children who cannot talk because it helped her 4-year-old girl to express her needs using some vocabulary. It happened that I was working with her daughter, and she talked about the hard time I had with her in the speech sessions: screaming, beating, throwing, and refusing to sit. But I controlled her after struggling for several sessions and she improved a lot. She could express her basic needs with pictures and had expressive vocabulary.



(4) The fourth axis is the school students from primary to secondary level learning about AAC:

School students are very challenging. I had a meeting with my team to discuss how to present AAC to them, what to do to convey the idea and how to capture their interest. We decided to give a presentation about the concept of AAC, show some fun games with AAC material and then divide the participants (usually 25 students) into three groups and have a workshop where they use some AAC material by themselves.



Usually we have students coming for visits from different schools throughout the year to my workplace, the Right to Live Association, for people who are mentally disabled. We had that day only one hour for this workshop so I started the presentation with the question, “If you are travelling to a country where they do not speak or read English, such as Japan, and you are coming from the airport and need to go to a hotel, how do you communicate your needs???”

One student said to write a message – but they do not know how to read English. Another one said draw a bed and home, and another said to make the sign for sleep and point to the bag so they grasped the idea.

Another team member then showed a video of people using AAC and he explained the improvement of the people in the video when using this means of communication. Then another team member, who specializes in learning tools and adaptive equipment, presented AAC games and how to have fun using AAC cards. Finally, we had the workshop where we divided participants into three groups and each one was asked to create a communication board for one topic, such as someone sick visiting a medical clinic. Another was going to the club and a third was going shopping. They had cards for different categories. So the students with their teachers worked together. Each group was competing to finish first and have the best outcome.



(5) The fifth axis is the Competence of Students with Complex Communicatin Needs:

Very promising was having my students with CCN who already use this means of communication take the role of a teacher training new staff coming to the school. The new staff happens to work in classes where the students are not talking or have no

speech or their speech is not understood , so the staff need to know how communicate in these classes.

One student with CCN used sign language and she taught signs to the new staff, dividing the signs into categories: daily routine, daily school schedule, colours, days of the week, feelings, people, places. We used the pictures as support to remember the signs and practice doing them alone. Both students and staff enjoyed the training session.

The other boy used Blissymbols, which consist of certain shapes, each one representing a meaning, with the word written on each symbol. The boy taught staff to match the picture with the Blissymbol by guessing which symbol was the right one.

He also used a game-like puzzle for some categories like body parts, people, means of transportation, and so on. We worked on each category one at a time



He put down the symbols and picture for each one and mixed them up in each category, for example, the body parts category, and the staff were asked to choose which symbol was the right one for each body part. This fun game made the lecture, which took the form of a training session, an easy-going interaction between the student and staff.

These sessions worked well for the students as they felt proud, gained confidence, and had the sense of responsibility to teach others. For the staff, experiencing AAC with students with CNN was so interesting for them, so motivating and easier to understand.

- This article was published as part of the July 2017 issue of the ISAAC CSWN Newsletter