

Empowering Communication: Innovating AAC Access in Ghana through Training, Mentoring, and Device Donation

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Short Abstract

Bridge Assistive, non-for-profit charity, has commenced projects in Ghana to support local speech language therapists (SLTs) to have increased access to communication devices for the individuals they work with. There is considerable inequity between Majority and Minority World countries in terms of knowledge of and access to Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) in particular electronic communication devices. Bridge Assistive and the University of Ghana have collaborated to design an AAC implementation approach that aims to build AAC capacity and increase access to AAC. The approach tackles barriers to AAC implementation in Majority World contexts, including AAC education and accessibility. As part of the project, local SLTs received AAC Kits, containing both non-electronic and electronic communication systems for assessment purposes, donated by Bridge Assistive. Participants engaged in self-paced online training modules and received mentorship from experienced Australian speech pathologists, equipping them with the skills necessary to effectively utilize the AAC Kits. Furthermore, local SLTs were encouraged to apply for further devices through Bridge Assistive's donation program, ensuring that identified individuals could access their own personalised communication device. This presentation will outline the collaborative model underpinning this project, share key learnings, and discuss the outcomes achieved thus far. We will explore the barriers and facilitators encountered in promoting AAC access in Majority World contexts and detail the steps taken to overcome these challenges, highlighting the potential for sustainable change in AAC implementation in Ghana.

Long Abstract

Communication is a human right, and a precondition for equal opportunities and participation. Unfortunately, there is a considerable global inequity between Majority² and Minority World countries in terms of access to, and knowledge about AAC (Muttiah et al., 2022; WHO & UNICEF, 2022). A survey of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations shows that actual access to necessary assistive technology, including AAC, varied from 3% to 90% (WHO & UNICEF, 2022). Not surprisingly, the lowest access to assistive technology was reported in the Majority World countries (WHO & UNICEF, 2022). An estimated 1.1–1.9% of the world population have significant communication support needs (Bunning et al., 2014).

Bridge Assistive (bridgeassistive.com) is an Australian not-for-profit charity that aims to sustainably increase AAC capacity and access in Majority World countries. Bridge Assistive and the University of Ghana (Department of Audiology, Speech and Language Therapy) have collaborated to design an AAC implementation approach suitable for the Ghanaian context. Situated in West Africa, Ghana borders the Gulf of Guinea to the south. Ghana is a culturally and linguistically diverse country with approximately eighty-one languages spoken across its sixteen regions (Appiah & Ardila, 2020). The official language of Ghanaians is English. Ghana's current population stands around thirty-one million people (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Perceived as a symbol of power and prestige, English is the language spoken in government, education and business. Similar to many countries in the Majority World, communication disability in Ghana receive inadequate attention and support, with limited services available (Wylie et al., 2017).

The project aims to increase local Ghanaian speech and language therapists (SLTs) AAC knowledge, confidence and competence in performing AAC assessments and interventions. The implementation approach involves several key components: device donation, online training and mentoring.

Donation of AAC Kits

Seven AAC kits were donated to the University of Ghana by Bridge Assistive. The Kit includes a range of communication and access options to support their AAC assessment. The kits aim to provide opportunity for assessment and trial of a range of access methods. Six kits are on long-term loan for community speech-language therapists (SLTs). Community SLT Kits include:

- 2x Ablenet Jellybean switches
- 1x Ablenet Big Mack
- Tobii Dynavox I-110 with TD Snap software
- Switch Activated Toy
- Ablenet Quicktalker
- Non-electronic Core vocabulary and alphabet layouts

An additional kit is available at an AAC University Clinic includes a Tobii Dynavox I-16 eye gaze device, Rehadapt table stand and floorstand. This kit can be accessed by community SLTs and their clients with support from the University clinic staff.

Online Training for SLTs

SLTs completed eight interactive training modules on the Tobii Dynavox platform (<https://learn.tobiidynavox.com/>) over four weeks, totalling eight hours. The modules were collated by the project team. The platform was chosen due to the modules being publicly available at no cost, the ability for participants to be added to a group with the curated modules and their progress recorded. Modules included information on:

- The importance of AAC and common misconceptions
- An overview of access methods
- AAC assessment for text and symbol users
- Aided language modelling
- Device specific information

Following the training participants completed an online assessment requiring a pass mark to proceed to receiving mentoring and an AAC Kit.

Mentoring Sessions

Three mentoring sessions were held at two, six, and fourteen weeks post-training via Zoom, facilitated by experienced Australian speech pathologists. The sessions aimed to consolidate SLT knowledge and experience. Mentors underwent preparatory discussions on cultural factors affecting AAC interventions in Ghana.

Device Donation

On completion of training, SLTs started conducting AAC assessments and trials with suitable clients. Following an AAC assessment, if both the SLT and client feel that a certain available AAC system will be beneficial for the client, the SLT can apply for a donation of this system using the existing Bridge Assistive's online donation application system (<https://bridgeassistive.com/apply-for-a-device>).

The project in Ghana includes a number of ongoing qualitative research studies evaluating the feasibility of this implementation approach. The project aims to offer a potential structure for increasing AAC capacity in the Majority World context. Ideally, AAC is not exclusive to some but rather accessible for all people with communication support needs. This ideal situation is still far away, however this initiative may provide access to AAC for at least some people with communication support needs and may lead to building solid AAC foundations for implementation in many more countries in the future.

This presentation will outline the collaborative model underpinning this project, share key learnings, and discuss the outcomes achieved thus far. We will explore the barriers and facilitators encountered in promoting AAC access in Majority World contexts and detail the steps taken to overcome these challenges, highlighting the potential for sustainable change in AAC implementation in Ghana. Attendees will come away with an understanding of a potential training model and resources to support AAC assessment that may be replicated in their own workplaces.

*Full reference list available on request