Article from **RERC on Communication Enhancement eNews**
(http://www.imakenews.com/aac-rerc/e_article000381626.cfm?x=b11,0,w)

April 5, 2005

First Person: Literacy Opens Doors in Communication

by Joe Hemphill, with Johana Schwartz

I enjoy novels by Hemingway, but I have to search to find them on tape or CD because I can't read very well. I have cerebral palsy and certain complex communication needs, which may have interfered with my ability to acquire literacy. My love of literature has sparked my interest in an ongoing AAC-RERC (Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Communication Enhancement) project. AAC-RERC partners Janice Light and David McNaughton at Penn State University are conducting the Literacy Support Project with the goal of developing computer software that may help people with communication disabilities overcome common challenges to literacy. As a member of the target group, I recognize potential for this project.

I am an articulate active adult. I am the author of several short stories, some poems and two novels. However, I have always felt at a disadvantage. Like all aspiring authors, I wanted to read the great writers, but I couldn't because of my limited reading skills.

Researchers in the area of literacy have identified deficits in phonological awareness as a common obstacle to early reading skills for all individuals, including those who require AAC (augmentative and alternative communication). People who have difficulty learning to read may not be aware that sounds make up words and that letters can represent sounds. Further, those who are unable to speak may have a hard time sounding out a written word or "hearing" it in their head, and thus, learning to read.

The project entitled *Literacy Support Project* constructs phonemic awareness activities in two stages. In the first stage researchers use non-electronic materials (and provide reading instruction activities on paper). Then they transfer effective light-tech lessons to the second stage during which they create accessible teaching software that people with complex communication needs can use to develop literacy skills.

The AAC-RERC research team is collaborating with Don Johnston Inc. to develop products (e.g., computer programs) that assist people who are learning to read and write. The new software will support an individual, family members and educators by making a customized tutorial format available that enables the individual to progress in reading at an appropriate pace.

Software features that will allow students to learn at their own pace help overcome a significant barrier in acquiring literacy skills for those who use AAC. McNaughton identifies this barrier as a "lack of appropriate and effective instruction." During my primary school experience, for example, my instructors found it difficult to teach me to read. Because I could not pronounce the words clearly, my teachers could not determine whether I was sounding them out correctly. As a result, I lost out on a crucial intervention in the process of learning literacy. I believe that the Literacy Support software can solve this problem by offering students a higher degree of accessible instruction without requiring an oral response.

I regret that this literacy software curriculum was not available during my youthful attempts at learning to read. However, I am excited at the prospect of second chance. Light and McNaughton will design the software to address the diverse needs and abilities of people with communication disorders so that it can assist a variety of people. The new curriculum will be appropriate for coaching individuals at all stages across the life span from preschool to mature

adults like myself who did not learn to read early in life. The materials can be adapted to fit the skills of the student and will be compatible with the technology they are accustomed to using. McNaughton and Light are working to achieve their goal " to create a curriculum that can be used with as many individuals who require AAC as possible."

I have confidence that at this point in my life the AAC-RERC Literacy Support Project will open new doors for me. Gaining literacy will only enhance my prospects. Literacy skills will enable me to access information in society, increase my employment options and allow me to partake more fully in my favorite leisure activity of reading. Keeping in mind these motivations, I stress the underlying goals of the Literacy Support Project as cited by McNaughton and Light, " With this deep belief in the fundamental importance of literacy for individuals who require AAC, it was a logical step to develop instructional supports to help individuals who use AAC to learn to read and write."

For more information and updates on the progress of this research, please visit www.AAC-RERC.com.

This article can be found online at http://www.atnet.org/journal/010102.htm