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Involving people with severe speech and physical impairments in the early design of a context-aware AAC system

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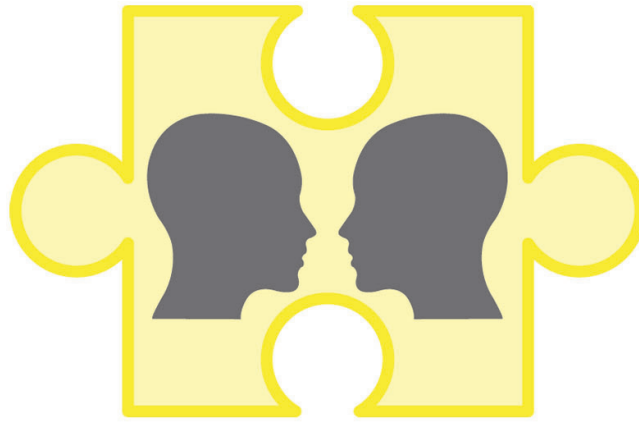
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Involving people with severe speech and physical impairments in the early design of a context-aware AAC system

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Despite the increased availability of VOCAs (both as dedicated devices and, more recently, as apps on mobile devices), the limited use and abandonment of such systems remains high. One of the major reasons for the abandonment of assistive technology (AT) relates to the poor usability of devices. The importance of engaging with end users in the design and development of technology is now embedded in software engineering standards and is seen as key to ensuring usability. User-Centred Design is a methodology which demands the early and continual involvement of end users. However, the inclusion of end users with complex disabilities, such as those with severe speech and physical impairments (SSPI), pose challenges for designers with the result that few products reflect a truly user-centred approach. Designers of AAC devices tend to employ proxy users in the early stages of a project, only targeting disabled users in summative evaluation studies. This paper addresses challenges faced by designers in the early stages of a research project developing a novel context-aware communication system. We will describe the larger ACE-LP (Augmenting Communication using Environmental data to drive Language Prediction) project and will present the results of two early design workshops, highlighting challenges encountered and solutions adopted when working with disabled users.