

AAC User Profile: Tom's Literacy Journey

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Tom has had his communication device 'Bob' (an Accent 800) with Unity for about 5 years. He has severe autism and although he has some speech, this is not diverse enough for him to reach the aspiration of spontaneously initiating conversations. When he came to me in September, he was proficient in using 'Bob' to get his needs met, but only using single words e.g. emotions, colours, people etc.



This year we have explored 'personal touches' for him to show his cheeky personality. He is a joker through and through, so one of the first things I taught him was the crazy 'hello' button – causing much hilarity and infectious giggles! We then took this to the next level, and I taught him the jokes page and unsurprisingly he LOVES it!! He will ask several times to tell us all jokes and will choose the right one appropriately e.g. telling Claire the 'Claire the way I'm coming through' joke! From this we also explored the riddles page and he loves a good game of 'whack a mole' too! All of this, although not directly reading and writing skills, it had a massive impact in terms of his motivation to use 'Bob' as it was more uniquely his voice.

We also decided to put a big push on core words in order to develop his sentence building skills. Tom illustrated he had good emerging literacy skills – he had already learnt the phonic sound for some letters, which he communicated either through speech or using 'Bob', and through our focus on core words he was able to read basic sentences and books. This was a massive breakthrough for Tom and showed his potential to embark on a more specific journey, through **Literacy Through Unity**, which was developed specifically for the programme he is using. This offers a highly personalised and clear path in developing literacy skills.

The use of Literacy through Unity has been a real game changer for him. He absolutely loves the sessions. Tom's concentration and ability to focus and attend can be fleeting at times, but whereas in typical lessons we may get 5 minutes' work before needing a sensory break, during these sessions he will stay focussed and on task for 30 minutes. The variety within it enables learning to be fast paced, keeping up with Tom's active mind.

By focussing on both reading and writing in a variety of ways he has made noticeable progress. The emphasis on both sight words and phonics will ultimately give him the best chance of being a fluent reader and writer. I like the focus on core words, which we have within the classroom in order to immerse him in language. He loves the cards with the pathways attached, finding them on his device independently. I have gradually removed the visual prompts, enabling him to find these proficiently. He is generalising these in a range of different contexts, for example when speaking to a staff member he commented 'I shouldn't!'

The way that the phonics skills are built up has been a real success, with Tom gaining confidence in being able to spell independently. He is enjoying exploring the sounds himself and making up his own 'nonsense' words too. We use the phonics page, rather than the keyboard, as this gives him the model of the phonics sounds (which means that he is now vocalising and saying several). This is also in lowercase, unlike the main keyboard, enabling him to progress as he is not having to convert between upper- and lower-case letters.

Tom is showing his spelling skills outside of sessions too – 'Bob' is his voice, so although this is a great vehicle to motivate him to spell, ultimately he needs something separate to write. He is using the basic notes page on the iPad beautifully and is able to find letters when told the sound and is at the beginning stage of writing the initial sound for words independently.

The pride when he achieves each step is magical to watch and infectious – you can't help but be kept swept up with it. It's exciting to think of how far Tom will progress and Literacy Through Unity has given him the biggest gift of not only a voice, but having the world opened up to him through reading and writing.