“More is easier” – Bliss as AAC in Sweden
by Margareta Jennische

“Bliss makes me think”
“Without Bliss I would have been a parcel”

These are two reflections expressed by Fredrik. Fredrik had used Bliss since the age of 8 and he was interviewed as an adult a few years ago. Fredrik had Cerebral Palsy, totally depending on motor support by an assistant. He used a lamp on his spectacles to indicate the Bliss-words on his Blissboard. When he sadly passed away a few years ago he worked as an author of stories and articles for the Bliss Bulletin at the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM, www.spsm.se).

In the interview Fredrik had a discussion with his old school friend Mustapha, also a user of Bliss. They both agreed that at first they thought that Bliss wasn’t fun, but their teacher was persistent in teaching them to use Bliss to communicate and showed them the possibilities Bliss gave them to be creative and express own thoughts and invent new Bliss-words and when they experienced these possibilities Bliss became fun.

Another adult user of Bliss expressed: “Bliss-users should appear in bunches”.

My addition to this is that “Bliss – professionals should probably also appear in bunches”.

Maybe these reflections highlight to some extent important issues for the use of Bliss. The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM) plays an important role in the use of Bliss as AAC in Sweden.

The missions of SPSM are to “ensure that children, young people and adults – regardless of functional ability – have adequate conditions to fulfill their educational goals. This is done through special needs support, education in special needs schools, accessible teaching materials and government funding” (The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, www.spsm.se). As there are children using Bliss who start school they are covered by these missions.

SPSM gives basic courses in Blissymbolics as there is a need for training in Bliss for teachers, assistants and others around each child using Bliss. A few hundred persons attend these courses each year. Those include three days of introduction to the characteristics of the structure of Blissymbolics and communication with Bliss and after a few months also a day of follow-up. SPSM also holds a Bliss-network for teachers to exchange ideas around Bliss. At SPSM some special aid advisors are appointed to have Bliss as their focus and can assist schools with advises when needed. The missions of SPSM are most valuable for children with special needs at schools including the needs of children using Bliss. SPSM produces teaching material in Bliss for various topics. Their most important product is Bliss Online, a Bliss database. For a low license the whole Bliss Authorized Vocabulary (AV) is available plus the Bliss writer (a Bliss-word processor) and a tool for quick production of all kinds of charts which may be needed in teaching (Bliss Online. www.blissonline.se). In Swedish schools there are many children with other mother tongues, children are taught foreign languages and they also travel abroad. Therefore Bliss Online now holds the full Bliss AV translated into nine languages and the so called standard chart (500 Bliss-words) in 19 languages.

During early preschool age when children are introduced to their first graphic AAC most children start with pictures. If they transfer to Bliss or not after some time is of course depending on the child’s progress but also very much on their Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP) and teacher, if those have knowledge and insight in the special features of Bliss or not. It is difficult to estimate the number of school children using Bliss today, but it is clear that in some regions of Sweden they are many more than in other regions. In regions of many Bliss users it is possible to arrange for children to meet peers and older friends using Bliss with whom they can identify and be inspired.

When Fredrick and Mustapha started with Bliss they experienced difficulties which they overcame after a period of teaching and they became very fluent “Bliss-speakers”. The teaching and modeling needed to pass the threshold may vary in time. Some children welcome the Bliss-words which challenge their minds and thinking very fast, while others have a slow initial phase.

Insight in the characteristics of Bliss is important for the professionals to successfully teach Bliss in a stimulating way at all linguistics levels. At workshops many participants from the beginning are very skeptical and just see difficulties with using Bliss. After half a day, when they have got the logic of the Bliss language presented, their opinions change and Bliss becomes the graphic system with special possibilities not only for communication but also for teaching the structure of the written language and meaning of concepts. Interesting reports come from a
mainstream class in northern part of Sweden including two children using Bliss and typically developing children with 15 different mother tongues. The class teacher chose to use Bliss as an educational tool to teach all the children in the class. Probably the many workshops given regularly since the start of Bliss in the 1980ies not only through SPSM give professionals the insight needed to feel comfortable using Bliss in teaching. A recent study shows that young typically developing children from 3 - 8 years catch the essence of Bliss when presented in less than 30 minutes (Jennische/ Zetterlund 2015).

There are a few schools for adult education, Furuboda in the south of Sweden and Sunderby in the north and activity centers as Frösunda in Göteborg who give semester long courses or summer activities for adult Bliss-users. Among all other activities and vocational training, their communication aids are updated and the teachers are well informed about Bliss.

Blissymbolics Communication International (BCI, http://www.blissymbolics.org) which up to 2008 was located in Canada has moved to Sweden. Since 2007 Blissymbolics AV has undergone a substantial revision through the work of BCI to establish a complete and continuously maintained web based Blissymbol vocabulary resource. The Vocabulary has been expanded (now >5500 Bliss-words) to include new vocabulary covering core vocabulary and fringe vocabulary from themes as internet and computer terminology, body organs, nature etc. On request from the teachers a large group of indicators have been included for the purpose of teaching grammar and morphology according to specific languages. The whole AV with translations into all available languages is now provided as a free internet resource from the BCI website (Blissymbolics Authorized Vocabulary. Retrieved from www.blissymbolics.org/comunity, from www.blissonline.se, or Språkbanken - http://spraakbanken.gu.se/karplabb/). Clear licensing conditions for both free and proprietary commercial use have also been established. This allows software developers and providers to offer a Blissymbol option for an increasing number of AAC products, such as Bliss Online, Widgit products, Sensory Software’s The Grid 2, TalkingTiles app, CCF-SymbolWriter for LibreOffice/OpenOffice etc (Lundälv/ von Tetzchner 2015). Many school-children today use Bliss on Tobii-computers to communicate and write.

References:


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