Symbol-Sentences

Part of the Symbols2Write toolkit for supporting pupils develop a range of language skills with linked resources using pictures, symbols and words.

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Symbol-Sentences is the first of a series of activities which has been specifically designed for pupils who have difficulties with early language. It starts from the very beginning of early language recognising elements in a picture, through to students constructing subject-verb-object sentences.

The series is based on ideas and materials created by Justin Drew. Justin is a Speech and Language therapist working for Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust (SWBH) in the West Midlands. Speech and Language Therapy is part of the Children's Therapy service.

This approach has been developed in Sandwell and is now used extensively with children and young people with a range of communication and literacy needs.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Symbol-Sentences

Symbol-Sentences is an app that supports simple sentence building for students with early language abilities. Through a variety of activities, it supports the introduction of subject, verb, object and uses a colour coding system described in the general guide for Symbols2Write. These activities are ideal for home, classroom and therapy use and have been developed in conjunction with education and speech and language professionals.

Symbol-Sentences starts from the very beginning of early language recognising elements in a picture, through to students constructing subject-verb-object sentences.

The activities in Symbol-Sentences have been designed with two levels of support to allow practitioners to differentiate them according to the needs of the users.

Each of the activities has 8 screens which are presented in a random order. At the end of each screen there is an animation of a character which progresses across the screen. An option to work with only 4 screens is also available.

At the completion of the activity the animating character re-appears in a scene and a reward certificate is displayed showing the achievement level Gold, Silver or Bronze. If you have access to air-printing facilities from your iPad, the Certificate with the activity level can be printed and there is space to write the student's name and the date.

Activities outlines

You can select the length of the activities according to the user's need, either four page or eight page length. In all activities incorrect selections are placed back in their original place with the spoken feedback "try again".

Level 1

Level 1 activities begins with basic sentence building skills where the user begins to understand the elements that construct a simple sentence.

Who?

Focuses on the subject in the given illustration. The user selects the correct subject from the symbolised choices.
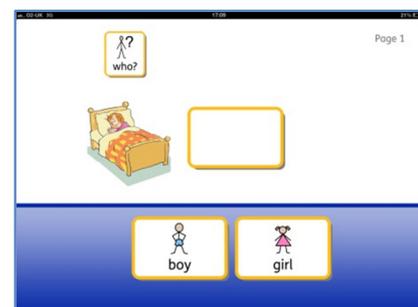
Doing?

The colourful illustrations depict a verb which the user identifies using the symbolised choices.
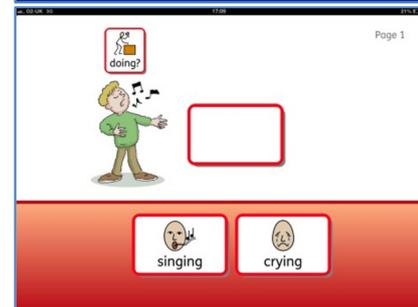
First Phrase

Combines the user's ability to identify the subject and the verb in the given illustration.
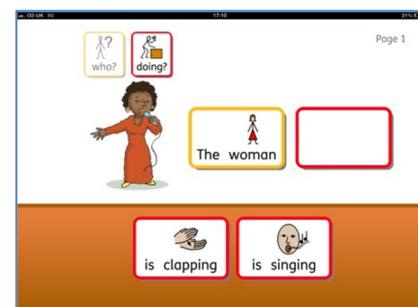
What?

Focuses on the object in the given illustration. The user selects the correct object from the symbolised choices.
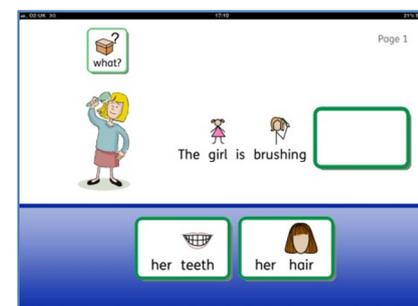
Level 2

Level 2 activities deepens the skill of sentence construction with the introduction of subject-verb-object sentences.

Sentences 1
Put the words in the correct order to make a simple sentence. This activity is marked at the end of each selection.

Sentences 2
Put the words in the correct order to make a simple sentence. This activity is marked after speaking the words, even if in the wrong order.

Sentences 3
Select the correct subject, verb and object to create a simple sentence. This activity is marked at the end.

Sentences 4
Create a simple sentence by selecting the correct subject, verb and object from a larger selection that includes distractors. This activity is marked at the end.
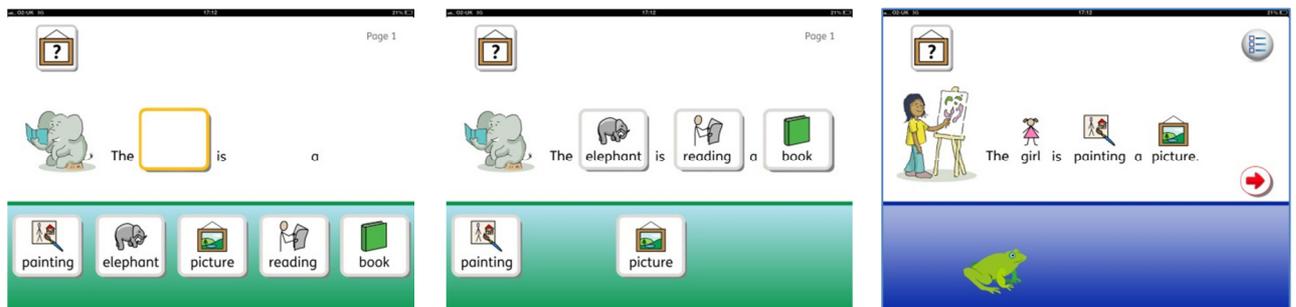
Writing Skills within the Primary Classroom

Symbol-Sentences can be used within the primary classroom to support the teaching and learning of simple sentences. It is the first application within the Symbols2Write series to support the teaching and learning of sentence structure and early language skills. Teachers and other practitioners can incorporate the application activities into their teaching sequence and differentiate the activities according to the needs of the user.

Pupils learn grammar as an integral part of learning to speak. The development of oral language is essential in its own right as well as being crucial for writing progress. In the course of development, children will use grammar in a wide variety of ways, often with a level of intricacy. Young children will imply meanings using single words in a range of grammatical ways. Older children often use complex linguistic constructions in speech which may not be appropriate as written forms. Children frequently encounter very complicated grammar in the speech and writing of others which they understand without difficulty.

Symbol-Sentences has been specifically designed to be used to develop the early skills of sentence construction and understanding. The activities correspond to the standard language levels of four to six year olds. This application can also be used by older pupils to practise these essential skills, where the practitioner has identified a specific learning need.

Before Symbol-Sentences is used with a pupil, it is suggested you:

- Use a range of practical hands-on activities linked to simple sentences.
- Develop the pupils ability to use simple sentences in their oral language.
- Ensure that the pupils have a secure level of oral language.
- Encourage pupils to apply their oral sentence skills in conversations.

For Symbol-Sentences to have the greatest impact on the user, it is recommended that they are immersed within a symbol rich environment. The symbols add meaning and context to any word. If signs, labels and notices are all symbolised, the user is familiar and confident in using symbols to support the meaning of

writing. This will enhance the user's ability to use the application but it is not essential.

Once the user has completed the activities in the application, they can practise and consolidate their new skills using a range of SymWriter environments. There are 5 activities included in the Example files that come with Symwriter 2. The environments provide structured grids where the user can build their own sentences using their knowledge and skills they have developed. These activities can be edited to extend the vocabulary using the language images included in the Widgit Pictures folder. You can also use your own photographs and the full Widgit Symbols Set.
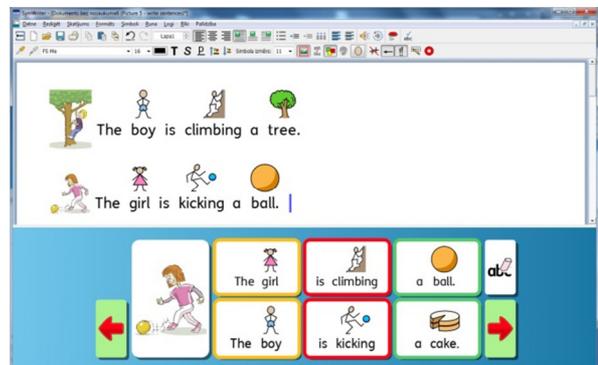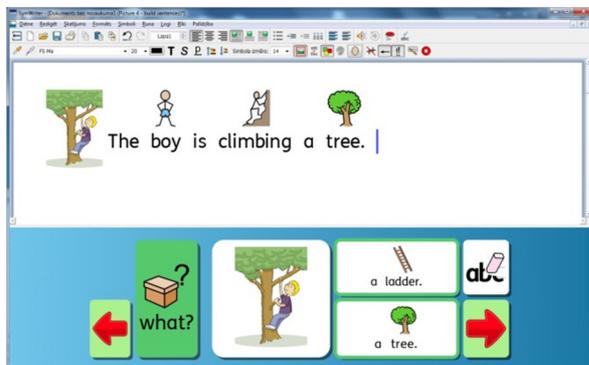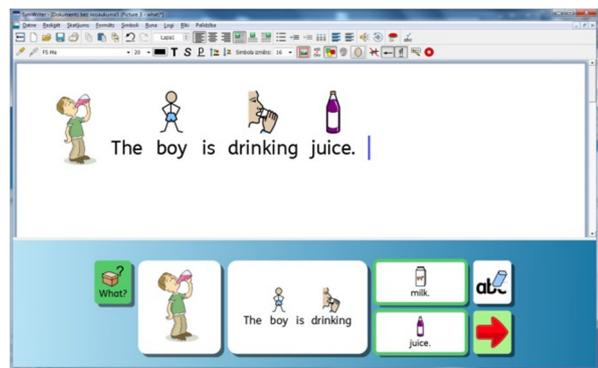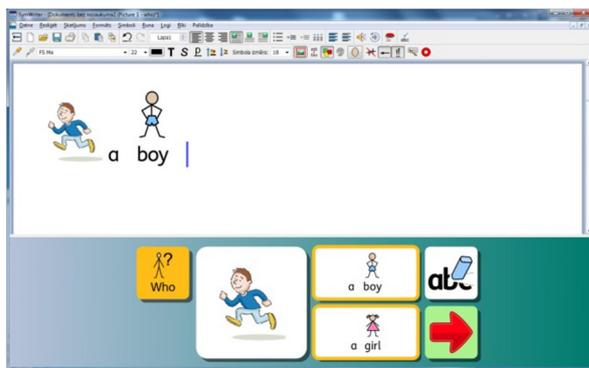
Assessment Opportunities

Symbol-Sentences can be used to assess the student's knowledge and understanding of early language skills. The application can be used in a variety of ways to provide assessment evidence for practitioners and parents. Baseline assessment is an essential evaluation process for any practitioner to understand the student's current level of skill. The application activities all focus on a specific language skill from recognition of different subjects (boy, girl etc) to contextual meaning of verbs. The student's independent level of understanding within the application can feed into the practitioner's baseline assessment of the student. Symbol-Sentences will support the teaching of any known skill gaps and can also be used to benchmark any intervention work carried out with the student.

Many of the early language assessments measure a broad range of expressive and receptive language skills in young children. Language assessments used with older students focus on measuring expression and language comprehension. Symbol-Sentences can support practitioners with these important assessments including:

Comprehension – Understanding of spoken language

Sentence comprehension	Understand sentences of increasing syntactic complexity.
Semantic decisions	Understand word meanings and how words relate to one another.

Expressive – Use of spoken language

Naming	Name a series of pictures of objects to examine expressive vocabulary knowledge and to investigate word-finding difficulties.
Syntactic formulation	Construct sentences and phrases and use language including nouns and verbs.
Word classes	Understand synonyms, antonyms and semantic classes.

Assessment opportunities within the Statutory EYFS Framework

The list below references the outcomes from the Statutory EYFS Framework linked to the activities within the Symbol-Sentences application.

Speaking

30 – 50 months	Questions why things happen and give explanations. Asks e.g. who, what, when, how.
	Uses a range of tenses (e.g. play, playing, will play, played).
	Builds up vocabulary that reflects the breadth of their experiences.
40 – 60 months	Extends vocabulary, especially by grouping and naming, exploring the meaning and sounds of new words.

Reading

40 – 60 months	Begins to read words and simple sentences. Uses vocabulary and forms of speech that are increasingly influenced by their experiences of books.
Early learning goal	Children read and understand simple sentences.

Writing

40 – 60 months	Attempts to write short sentences in meaningful contexts.
Early learning goal	Children write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others.

Assessment opportunities within the Primary Curriculum

The list below references the outcomes from the 2014 Primary Curriculum linked to the activities within the Symbol-Sentences application.

Vocabulary, grammar and punctuation

Year 1   Pupils should be taught to recognise sentence boundaries in spoken sentences.

Pupils should begin to use some of the distinctive features of Standard English in their writing.

Year 1 references in Appendix 2

Sentence   How words can combine to make sentences.

Punctuation   Introduction to capital letters, full stops, question marks and exclamation marks to demarcate sentences.

Developing Early Language Skills

Activities leading up to Symbol-Sentences

Symbol-Sentences moves through a hierarchical structure to help students develop understanding of simple sentence structure. Some students may benefit from a more interactive staged approach in readiness for using the Symbol-Sentences app. The following steps, devised with the Sandwell Speech and language team, have been used with children with language difficulties, to develop early language and speaking skills through one-to-one or small group work with the teacher or therapist.

When the student has a competent level of early language, the student will be able to access Symbol-Sentences with a level of confidence and independence.

In the initial approach used in Sandwell the main set of materials are picture and symbol cards printed from Widgit's Communicate: In Print. The cards are used as the basis for discussion working through the early stages in graduated steps in some detail. This gives the student practice in understanding the concepts as well as the symbols and words. As the confidence and language level increases the activities are less detailed, giving the teacher more freedom to improvise around topics that are of interest to the individual.

The first activity is a discussion to explore the vocabulary, followed by activities to reinforce understanding and develop sentence building skills.

Discussion

This will be one-to-one or small group work with an adult. A picture card is shown and the student is encouraged to describe what is happening. Symbols/word cards are then offered for the student to build up an appropriate sentence. The detailed description below will suggest a variety of ways that this can be enhanced.

The approach aims to develop understanding and responding to questions about a picture or event, such as who's in the picture and what's happening, for example "boy drinking".

This sentence can be developed in three stages:

     i.   Identify who is drinking.

     ii.   Identify what he/she is doing /what's happening.

     iii.   Build the full simple sentence 'boy drinking'/the boy is drinking).

The cards can then be used to aid recall. Once the sentence is complete, turn the cards face down and try to recall the information – i.e. from memory: once the student has talked about the picture and written a simple sentence, can he/she remember and recall what the picture was about?

Materials

For each session you will require:

A small number of illustration cards to describe, the appropriate symbol-word cards for these pictures and some additional cards to act as distractors.

A file with the vocabulary used in the Symbol-Sentences vocabulary is available to print from Communicate:In Print. This can be downloaded from the Widgit website .Print the symbols and pictures onto card, and possibly protected with plastic film.

You may want to make some Velcro sentence strips to hold the vocabulary cards as the sentences are made, or even a Resources folder to hold the Velcro strips and cards. Ready-made Velcro displays are also commercially available.

You may also like to use some sentence holders that have plain coloured squares to match the word colour as a prompt for the sentence structure.
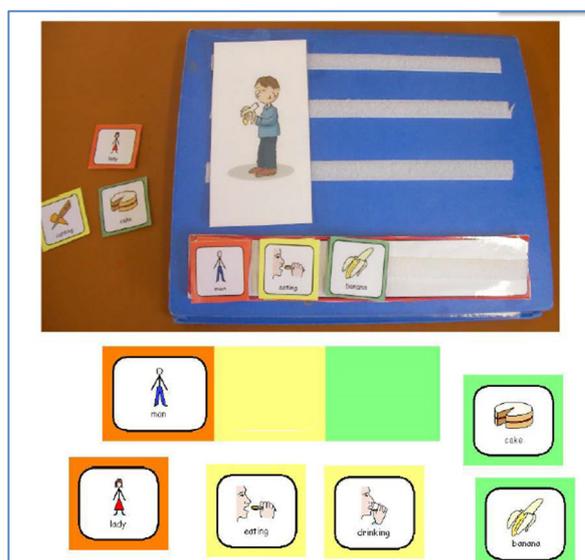
For each illustration:

Start by showing the picture and asking questions such as "Who is in the picture?" You may want to help by asking, "Is it a boy or a girl?" and support your language with signing, if appropriate.

Offer one or more symbol-word cards with possible answers and when the student has answered help them to put the required card onto the sentence area. After selecting the word, colour coding can be used to help the student attach the word to the correct part of the sentence strip.

Next ask "What is he/she doing" with similar verbal and gestural prompts and similar alternative cards for the action. When the two key words are selected, confirm the sentence to the student: "Yes. The boy is drinking."

During this stage you may need to model complete sentences E.g. the student may state 'Eat banana', and the teacher will model back 'Is the boy eating a banana or the girl eating a banana?'

The amount of choices should be dependent upon the students' abilities e.g. selecting the correct word from a choice of two symbols or three symbols. For those students who may find choosing one symbol from two difficult, you can just offer one symbol at a time. Offer signing support for the individual words where this is necessary. Once the sentence is complete, remove all 'symbol supported text' from the sentence strip and see if the student can re-build the sentence by themselves in the correct order.

Note: If building whole sentences is too difficult - use backward chaining. This is where the teacher assembles most of the sentence whilst reading the words and the student has to find the final word to complete the sentence in the examples above.

Follow up: To develop recall skills you could remove the illustration and cards from the strip and then just hold up one of the symbol-word cards – such as 'boy' and ask "What was the boy doing" and then confirm the reply showing the illustration again.

The iPad apps have developed from this work to allow independent practice in developing these early language skills. Each step in the app follows the steps described towards building simple subject-verb-object sentences.