

“and I’ve got my Penfriend on, Miss!”

This is the usual retort in my classroom when I ask if everyone’s lap-tops are ready. All of my pupils know that I expect them to have Penfriend on.

I teach in a school for children with physical and complex difficulties including learning difficulties and/or language problems; some are on the autistic spectrum; others have specific learning difficulties. Each child has to have their own combination of technology and learning approach to enable them to access the National Curriculum, sometimes modified, to suit individual needs. Technology covers such items as a VOCA (voice output communication aid), lap-tops with Intellikeys, or a range of switch access devices combined with Clicker 4 (at present, although it may be 5 sometime soon!), Penfriend and Wordbar. Why? Because they complement one another perfectly. Until recently, I used Penfriend XP but I now have the benefit of Penfriend XL.

Raymond tries very hard every lesson but, at 15, he is not a functional reader. Raymond tried to use the XP keyboard but, unfortunately, the keyboard letters were difficult to read because the upright of the letters was almost in line with the edge of the box. The new Penfriend XL has a wonderful keyboard with clearly defined letters in the centre of the cell. Raymond can see them clearly! He is now able to focus on the screen without losing concentration by moving from

lap-top keyboard to screen. This is so much easier for Raymond; he is practising spellings and sounding out his attempts. Also, we use a Raymond-friendly voice; he finds it easier to listen to and understand.

Similarly, Terry struggled with the Penfriend keyboard but much prefers the Penfriend XL. Terry has very limited mobility; he is unable to move his arms independently and therefore uses a Kensington Orbit rollerball to move the mouse and so access his lap-top. Terry loads his work, with Wordbar along the bottom, Penfriend predictor at the side and the keyboard on the screen. Using his small rollerball sitting at his fingertips, he moves between the Wordbar cells, keyboard and Penfriend predictor. The phrases and vocabulary in the Wordbar cells have been agreed between Terry and myself, loaded in as a joint exercise, recalling parts of the story and character names that will be needed for the task. We use vocabulary that Terry determines. With this combination of software and peripherals, Terry is producing extended writing with very little adult intervention. His spelling has improved significantly as he sees his attempts supported by the predictor. His choice of vocabulary is extending because he can put more effort into thinking about his choice of words not in the individual spellings.

“ Penfriend XL has a wonderful keyboard with clearly defined letters

Also, he can write so much more with the pre-determined Wordbar cells combined with the predictor speaking out to allow him to think in complete sentences. Furthermore, he really enjoys the facility on the XL of selecting a voice rather than that monotone with an American accent! His work has moved from level 2 to level 4 within the last year. He is likely to achieve the highest level at Entry Level Certificate at the end of his course next year.

I have also recently discovered the screen reader option. This is going to be very useful with my pupils who have a visual impairment. One in particular has had severe problems learning to read because of the complexity of his visual difficulties and the complications resulting from his cerebral palsy. He is making significant progress using the large screen reader with the Penfriend and his Intellikeys; the screen reader will enhance this process.

I am still exploring Penfriend XL but I think the improvements are just that. I can see this version making a difference to all of my pupils and I am still exploring it!

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