SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF COMPUTER ENGINEERING

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

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ENTITLED

Conversation Station

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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Conversation Station

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

We built a mobile application that improves speed and personalization in conversations for people struggling with verbal communication. Many people diagnosed with autism, Down syndrome, and other disorders face daily challenges involving communication due to speech impediments. Existing solutions allow users to communicate via speech cards or typing on a keyboard. However, these solutions make tradeoffs between personalization and speed, compromising what it takes to have fluid, natural, and rewarding conversations. Our solution speeds up personalized communication by applying Machine Learning principles, Artificial Intelligence, and Natural Language Processing. Our project will predict how a user will respond based on natural language processing results of verbal input and some base-layer artificial intelligence rules, allowing the user to communicate quickly with their own voice.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Communication is essential to building relationships. A person who has challenges speaking will face a lifetime of roadblocks in building friendships, connecting with family, and meeting daily needs. In the United States, it is estimated that 1 out of every 68 children will be diagnosed with some level of Autism[1], and many of these children will face communication challenges or be rendered completely nonverbal, depriving these children of a voice. As this number continues to rise[2], finding ways for everyone to clearly communicate is essential to enhancing the human experience.

Today, nonverbal children such as those diagnosed with autism or Down syndrome communicate using many methods including gestures, sign language, and picture symbols. One of the most popular methods of communication is a device that generates speech. These devices come in many different forms. Some are similar to keyboards on which the child can type out what they want to say, while others have a list of buttons with pre-programmed messages from which the child can choose. Both of these options have also been incorporated into touchscreen devices such as the Apple iPad, so they are easily portable.

While the ability to type out any response gives a flexible voice to the children, it can be tedious to retype similar responses and frustrating for all involved due to the time it takes to construct responses using a keyboard. The solutions with pre-programmed messages solve this problem by speeding up communication, but they impede the expressiveness of the children by limiting their response options. These limitations do not allow subtleties in diction, syntax, and personal preference to be communicated, erasing the voice from the personality behind it.

[1] Maguire, Corinne. "Autism on the Rise: A Global Perspective." Harvard College Global Health Review. (retrieved October 7, 2016).

[2] Christensen, Deborah L.. "Prevalence and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years ? Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2012." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (retrieved October 7, 2016).

Using Machine Learning principles, Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing, we developed an application that makes conversations quick but also personalized, giving people their own voice. We propose a solution that listens to conversations and gives the child several quick options to speak. These options will be personalized to each child, so that they maintain their voice. Additionally, we will have the option to type out a response if the available quick options are not what the child wants to communicate. The typed answers will be used to help the system learn how the child responds, thereby improving future suggestions. We plan on testing this solution with nonverbal children at Hope Technology School in Palo Alto, California.

Our solution combines the benefits of both current solutions, while eliminating the problems. By having the system learn about the child on an individual level, this communication tool will allow children to share their voice with the world. The inclusion of the quick suggestions will drastically improve response time, easing the communication process both between children and between verbal adults, such as the teacher or parent, and the child. Communication is crucial to forming human connections. Our proposed solution allows for seamless, fluid communication, giving everyone a voice.

Chapter 2

State of the Field

Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of scientific research into communication products for nonverbal autistic children. Luckily, however, this field is closely connected to other fields that have a great deal of research, such as human-computer interaction, effective learning techniques of children with nonverbal autism and the effects of the disorder, and nonverbal communication. By combining these areas of related research with the current solutions in the field, an accurate depiction of the current state of the field can be built and used to further research in this area.

2.0.1 Related Research

Nonverbal Human Communication Research

While this research is not directed at those with autism, nonverbal human communication has been heavily researched and can provide key insights that may help influence the development of our application. Humans rely heavily on nonverbal communication in the forms of body language, tone, and gestures. It has been proven that there are patterns to nonverbal communication that can give incredible insights into the conversation. One study was able to take a small window of a group interaction and determine the social dynamic and map emotions to individuals by analyzing only nonverbal interactions [**?**]. By studying human-to-human nonverbal interactions, frameworks have been built that allow computers to read emotions and intentions based on only nonverbal input [**?**]. Since eye contact and facial expressions are difficult for nonverbal autistic children to both decipher and communicate, this research could be applied to our application in order to facilitate a more natural feeling conversation for the teacher or peer communicating with the autistic child or to help give the child context relating to the conversation that they otherwise may not realize.

Human-Computer Interaction Research

Human-Computer Interaction has also been heavily researched. Based on the large data set of human interactions, human-computer interactions have been developed that feel natural [**?**] and conversational models can be built from this data that assist in making computers seem more human-like. These frameworks can be applied to assist in human-to-human interactions as well [**?**].

Autistic Children Education Research

While research on the effects of specific products or applications on the education of children with autism is lacking, there is plenty of research on education techniques in general. Specifically relevant to our idea are claims that technology improves education for children with autism and that graphics are more easily understood than text.

1. **Autistic children learn more effectively through the use of technology.**
    - Moore and Calvert proved that using technology with children with autism is more effective than single teacher instruction with no technology [**?**].
    - Goldsmith and LeBlanc proved that technology is effective in treating the symptoms and social effects of autism [**?**].
    - Some teachers believe that technology levels the playing field between nonverbal and verbal students by making nonverbal methods of communication using technology more ?normal? or even more ?cutting edge,? changing the classroom dynamic and stigma around students with disabilities [**?**].
2. **Autistic children understand visual and auditory aids much more easily than text.**
    - Pictures improve reading and comprehension skills and increases engagement in students with disabilities [**?**].
    - Sound and visual effects engage autistic children more effectively in the classroom [**?**].
    - Some believe that the reason technology is so effective in educating and engaging children with autism is due to auditory and visual prompts, especially video [**?**].
    - The fading technique, which entails slowly removing contextual graphic cues until only a word is left behind, and found that children with autism who could initially use the logos eventually were able to use the orthographic symbols, or letters, proving that the visuals are effective in transitioning towards text [**?**].

2.0.2 Related Patents

Several related technologies and techniques have been patented in the United States. Below, we highlight two of the most relevant patents to our research and development of the application. We also discuss why we believe neither of these patents will conflict with our application.

Interactive systems employing robotic companions (Granted)

This patent covers an interactive robotic companion that could be used in any activity involving the user. While this is a fairly general explanation, the patent goes on to give examples of applications for this technology, one of which includes "a system for communicating with patients that have difficulties communicating verbally" [**?**]. While this is very similar to what we will try to accomplish in our application, our application will be created for a tablet or phone, while this patent suggests that the program would be run on a robot capable of touch and sensing its environment.

Method and system for communication using a portable device (Pending)

This patent covers a system of communication in which the first user is given a choice of options to select to communicate, and, upon the first user selecting one of the given options, the system communicates the message to a second user in another format [**?**]. This idea, which is still pending patent approval, would conflict with our product, but it is such a general patent that it would also conflict with almost every communication app on the market today. In addition to conflicting with other Augmented-Alternative Communication apps (AAC), even something as simple as the the word suggestions in Apple's iMessage application, or the stickers in Facebook's Messenger could be seen as conflicting with this patent. Because of its generality and pending status, we will ignore this patent for now and revisit it when we are closer to the release date in May.

2.0.3 Existing Applications

Look in My Eyes: Steam Train

The Look in My Eyes: Steam Train application is a fun game-based app that is supposed to help the user practice eye contact. It is designed as a non-competitive game and consists of multiple levels and mini-games that all focus on the same objective. The user interface, shown in Fig. fig:lookInMyEyes, is bright and graphical, making it easy to use for many age groups and cognition levels. The app is available on the Apple App Store for $2.99 [**?**].

Communicate Easy

This application aims to help users formulate sentences via a picture-based user interface (Fig. 2.2). It is successful in providing an easy learning curve for new users because of the simple user interface

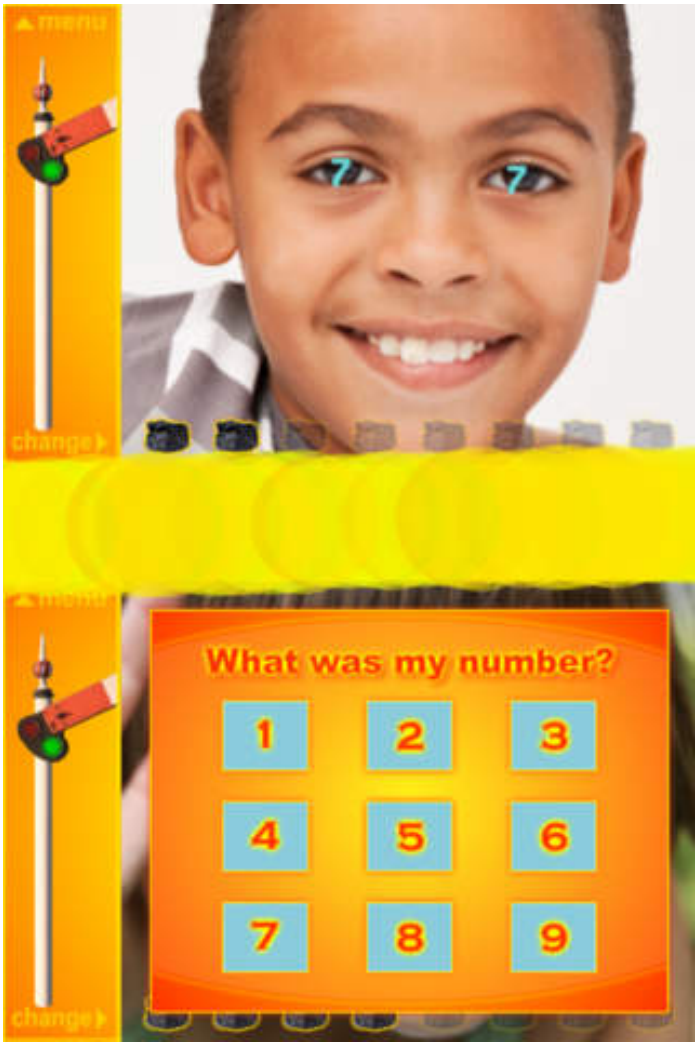

Figure 2.1: Screenshot of the Look In My Eyes: Steam Train application user interface

design. It includes the ability for a user to develop their own icons for the buttons that trigger the audio playback. This application is listed for $2.99 and is only available on iOS devices [?].

Keeble

Keeble is an iOS accessible keyboard for the iPad, iPhone, and iPod touch. The keyboard can be used within any app on an iOS device and is designed to enable people with physical or visual impairments to type more easily. It can be customized to the individual's preferences, as shown in Fig. 2.3, and offers word prediction, timing options, Select on Release, Select on Dwell, auditory feedback and other accessibility features. The keyboard add-on is offered for $24.99 on Apple's App Store [?].

Figure 2.2: Screenshot of the Communicate Easy application user interface

This application was featured in an Apple television advertisement of a young man who is both autistic and non-verbal, who was able to begin expressively communicating via apps on his iPad.

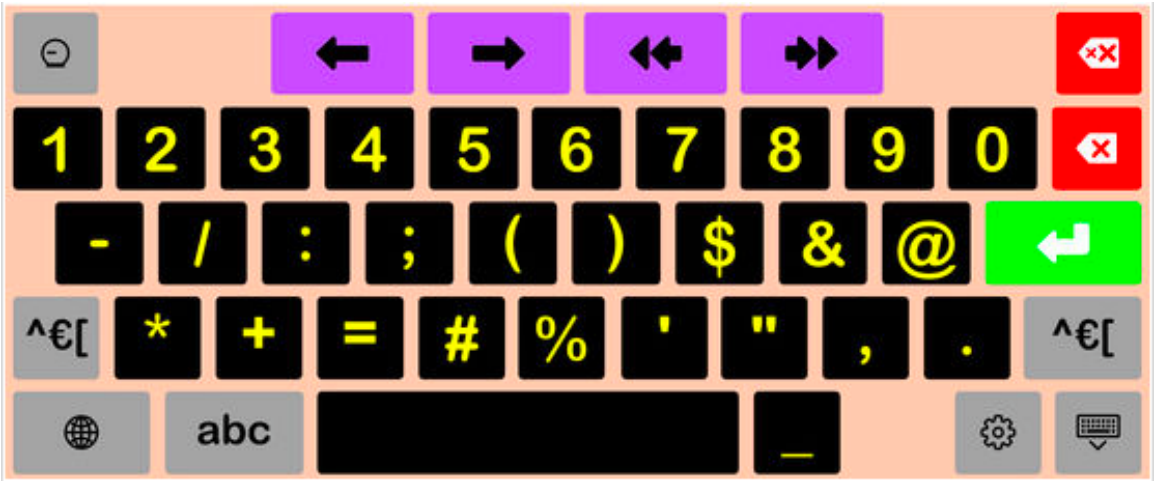

Figure 2.3: Screenshot of one of the Keeble keyboard configuration options

SPEAKall!

The SPEAKall! application, which is shown in Fig. 2.4, is a popular application for people of all ages living with autism. The application teaches vocabulary and sentence construction, while maintaining a fun and engaging user experience. It won the 2015 Outstanding Research of the Year Award from the Autism Society.

The application is only available on iOS devices and is listed at $39.99 on the App Store [**?**].

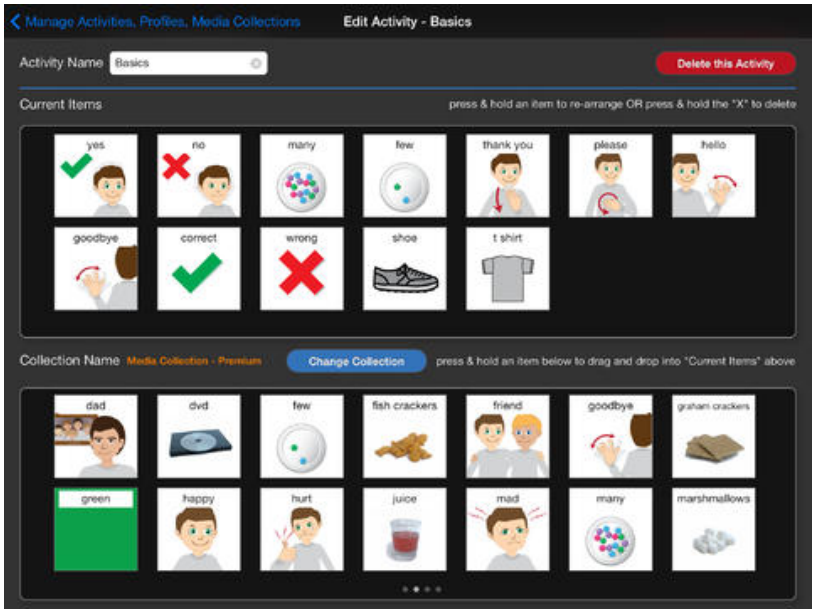

Figure 2.4: Screenshot of the SPEAKall! application user interface

Proloquo2Go

Proloquo2Go, shown on the Apple iPad in Fig. 2.5, is an award-winning symbol-supported communication app. The app is designed to promote language development in users at any level and grow communication skills through use. It allows users to quickly personalize the vocabulary and settings of the application, and it is listed for $249.99 on the App Store [**?**].

Figure 2.5: Screenshot of the Proloquo2Go application user interface

Chapter 3

Requirements

Listed below are the Functional Requirements, Non-Functional Requirements, and Design Constraints of the project as gathered during the Requirements gathering phase.

3.1 Functional Requirements

Critical:

- Provide input via the keyboard.
- Capture audio via device microphone.
- Speak through device speaker.
- Suggest responses based on voice input.

Recommended:

- Provide input options via picture cards.

Suggested:

- Say keyword to activate microphone and save battery.

3.2 Non-Functional Requirements

Critical:

- The system will be able to handle multiple users.
- The system's user interface will be intuitively designed.

Recommended:

- The system will be secure when storing private data.

Suggested:

- The system's user interface will be able to use graphics that are intuitive and familiar.
- The system will be unaffected in loud environments.

3.3 Design Constraints

- The system must consist of a mobile application that runs on iPad devices.

Chapter 4

Use Cases

Use case diagrams demonstrate how different users will interact with our system. In our case, a verbal user will be able to speak to the mobile device, and the nonverbal user will be able to formulate a statement and use the device to speak.

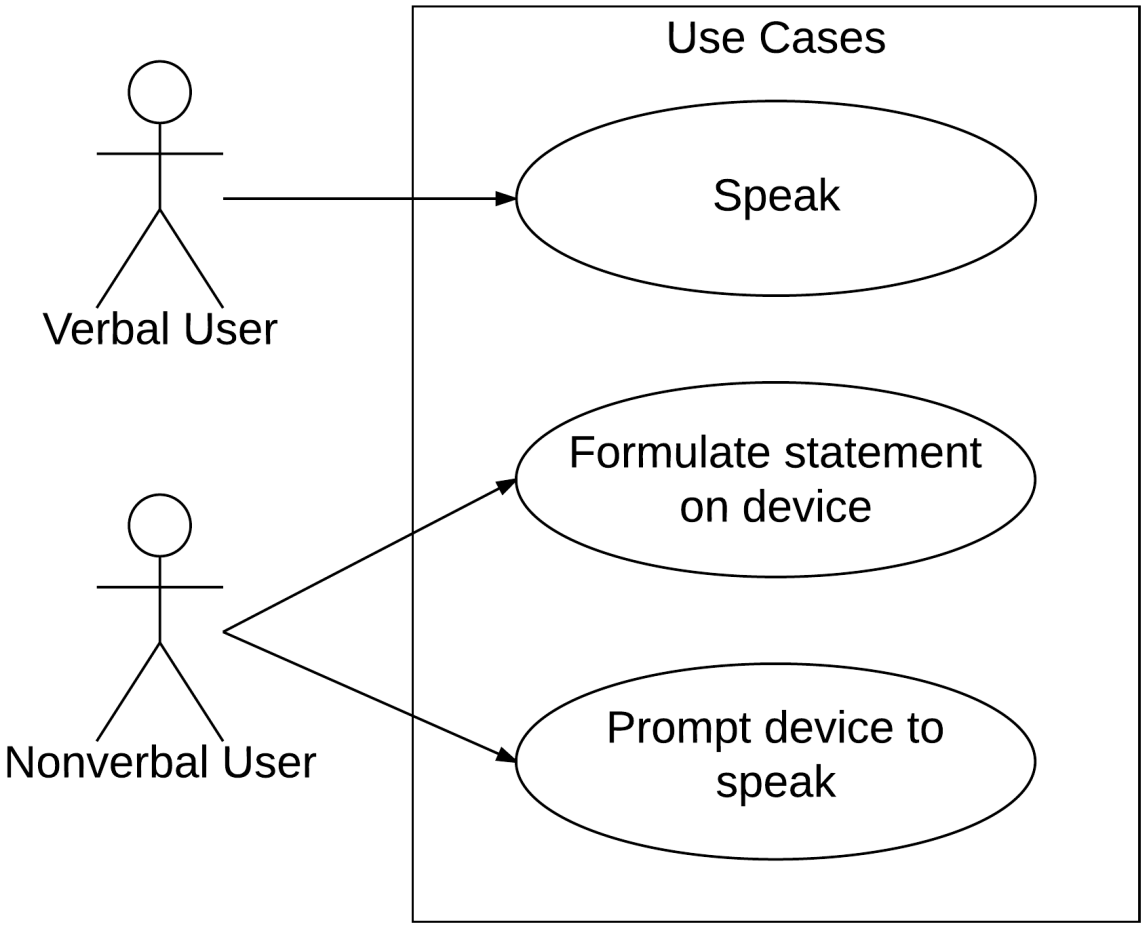

Figure 4.1: Use Cases

1. Speak
    - **Goal:** Ask a question for mobile device to record and process
    - **Actors:** Verbal User
    - **Pre-conditions:**
        (a) Application must be open on device
    - **Steps:**
        (a) Nonverbal user opens application
        (b) Nonverbal user presses button to record voice
        (c) Verbal user speaks and device records
        (d) Device translates audio to text and sends to server
    - **Post-conditions:**
        (a) None
    - **Exceptions:**
        (a) Application must have device permission to use microphone
2. Formulate Statement on Device
    - **Goal:** Create a statement to respond to or initiate with the verbal user
    - **Actors:** Nonverbal User
    - **Pre-conditions:**
        (a) Application must be open on device
    - **Steps:**
        (a) Open application
        (b) Uses keyboard or picture card to add a word
        (c) Add words until statement is complete
    - **Post-conditions:**
        (a) Application displays fully formatted statement

- **Exceptions:**
  (a) None

3. Prompt Device to Speak
   - **Goal:** Speak the statement that has been formulated by user
   - **Actors:** Nonverbal User
   - **Pre-conditions:**
     (a) Statement must be fully or partially made on device
   - **Steps:**
     (a) Open application
     (b) Formulate a statement (if necessary)
     (c) Press the speak button
   - **Post-conditions:**
     (a) Device will speak the statement
   - **Exceptions:**
     (a) Application must have device permission to use speaker
     (b) Device volume must be on or nothing will be heard

Chapter 5

Activity Diagram

The following flowcharts outline the workflow of both verbal and nonverbal users actions and interactions with the system. The diagram does not include the system actions, such as processing audible speech and displaying relevant suggestions.

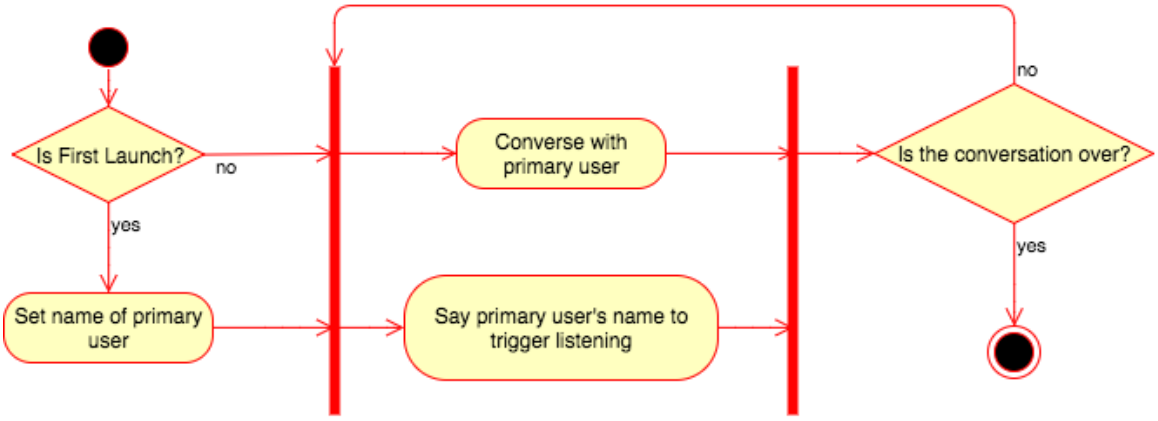

Figure 5.1: Work flow of the verbal, guardian user interacting with system

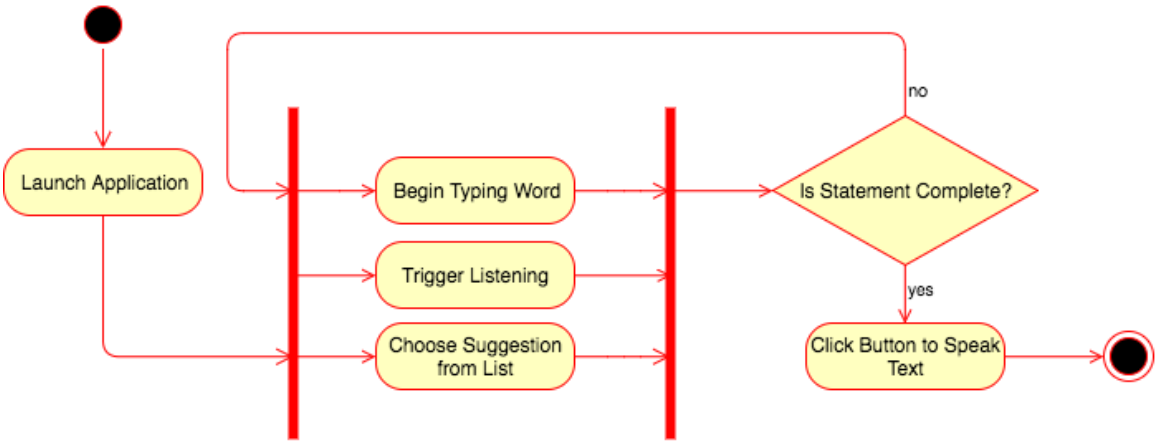

Figure 5.2: Work flow of the non-verbal, child user interacting with system

Chapter 6

Conceptual Model

Users will navigate to our application on an iPad tablet in order to use the system. Upon launching the app, they will be greeted with the keyboard view, as shown in Figure 6.1, which they can immediately start using to type what they want to communicate.

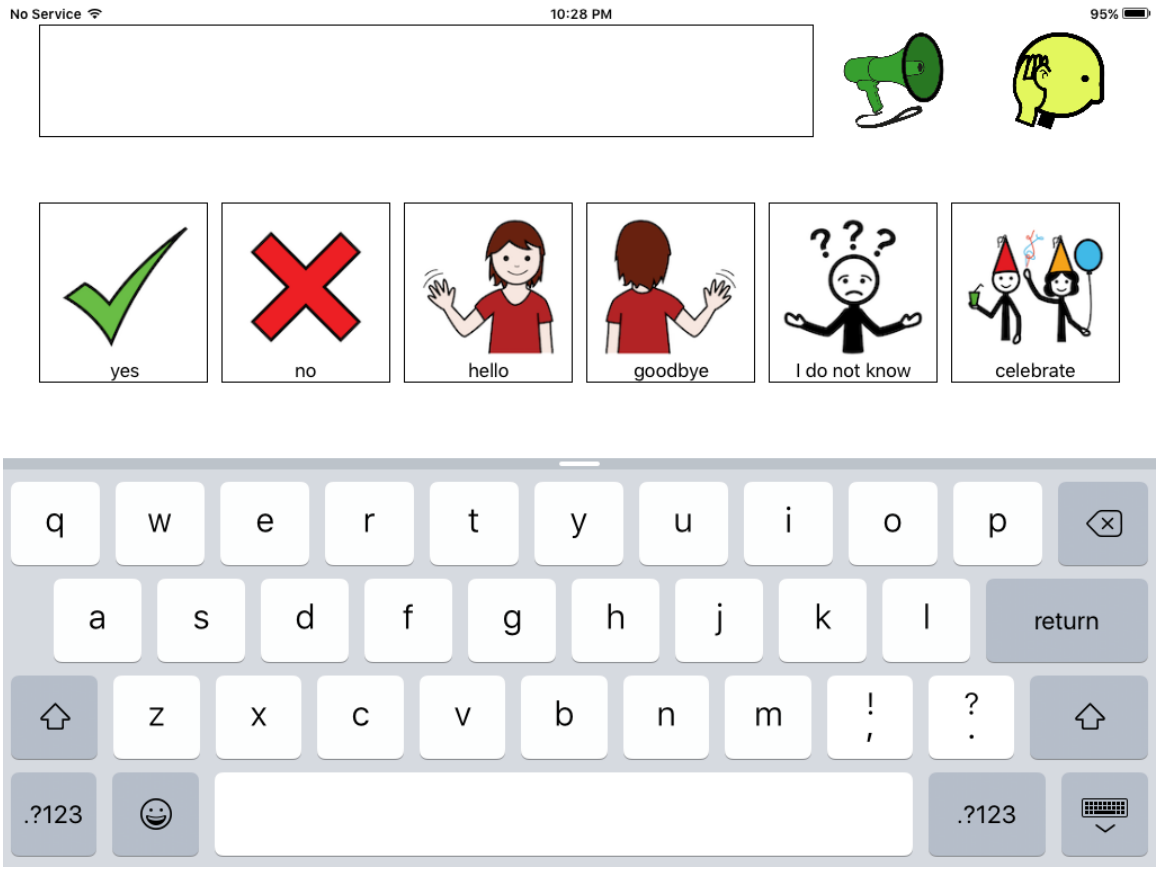

Figure 6.1: Initial Interface on Application Launch

Upon saying the nonverbal user's name, which is programmed into the application on the first launch,

or by clicking the listen button, the system will bring up the listening interface, shown in Figure 6.2, and begin processing verbal input.

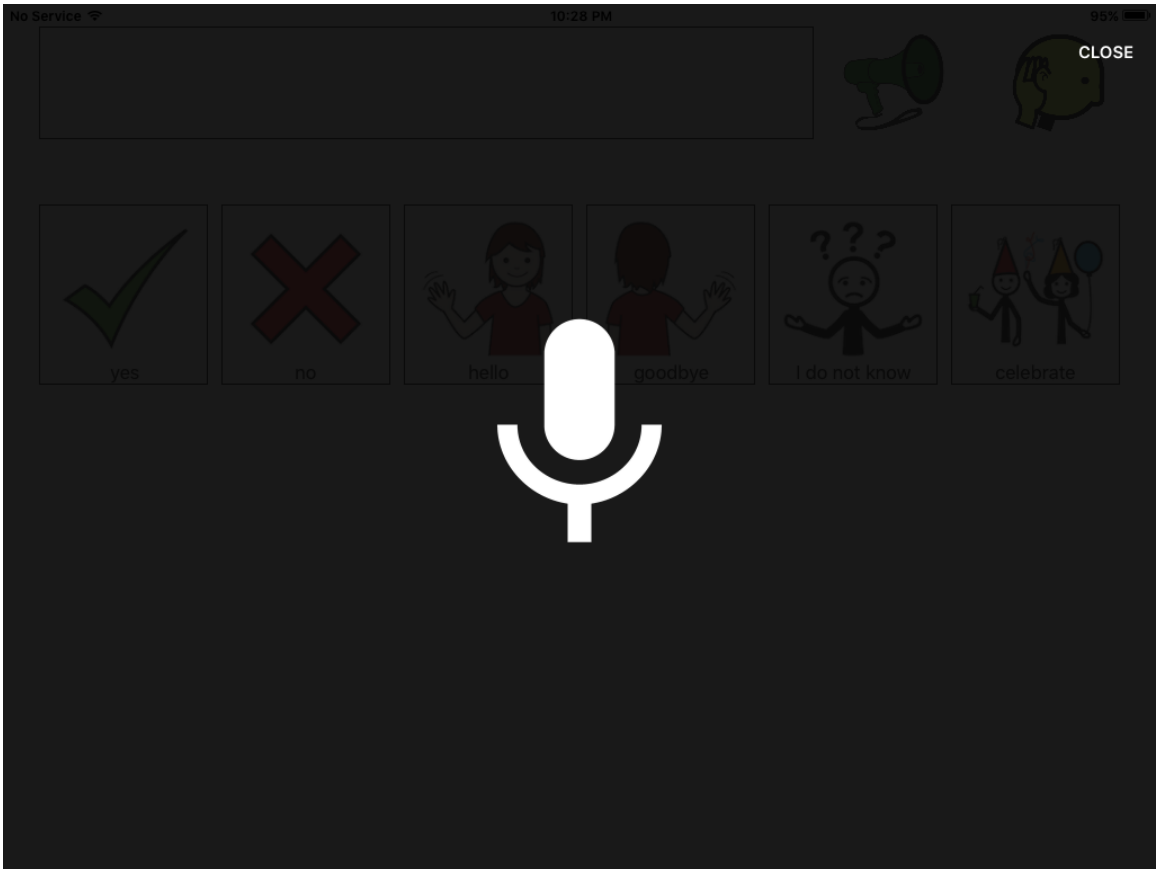

Figure 6.2: The Listening Interface

When the verbal user is done speaking, the app will finish processing the verbal input and decide which pre-populated category of picture cards to display above the keyboard. Figure 6.3 shows how the app would adjust if the verbal user said "How do you feel?".

At any point during the communication process, the nonverbal user can either press one of the picture cards to immediately speak the word or phrase beneath the card, or press the button on the right of the screen, which will speak what they have typed into the input box aloud.

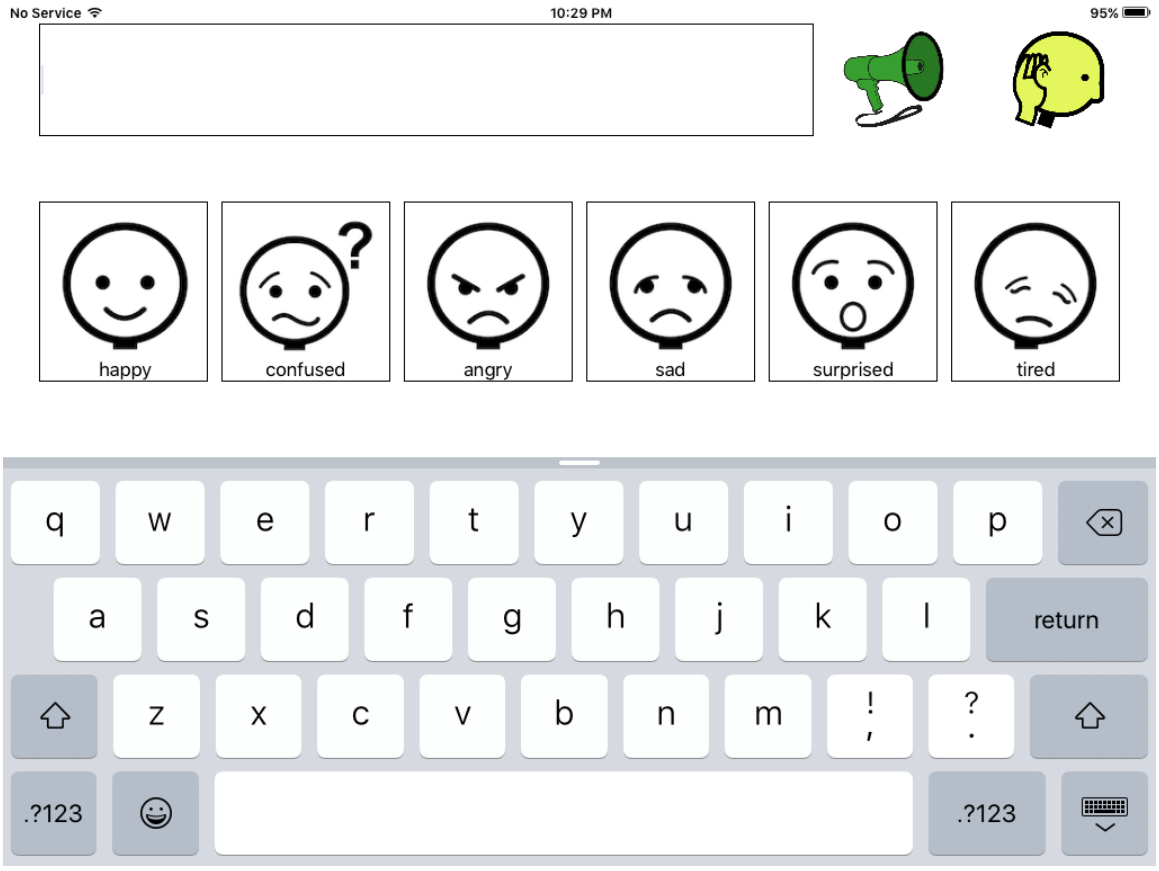

Figure 6.3: Demonstration of the Picture Cards adjusting to Dynamic Verbal Input

Chapter 7

Architectural Diagram

We plan to utilize a basic client-server architecture to complete this project as shown in Figure 7.1.

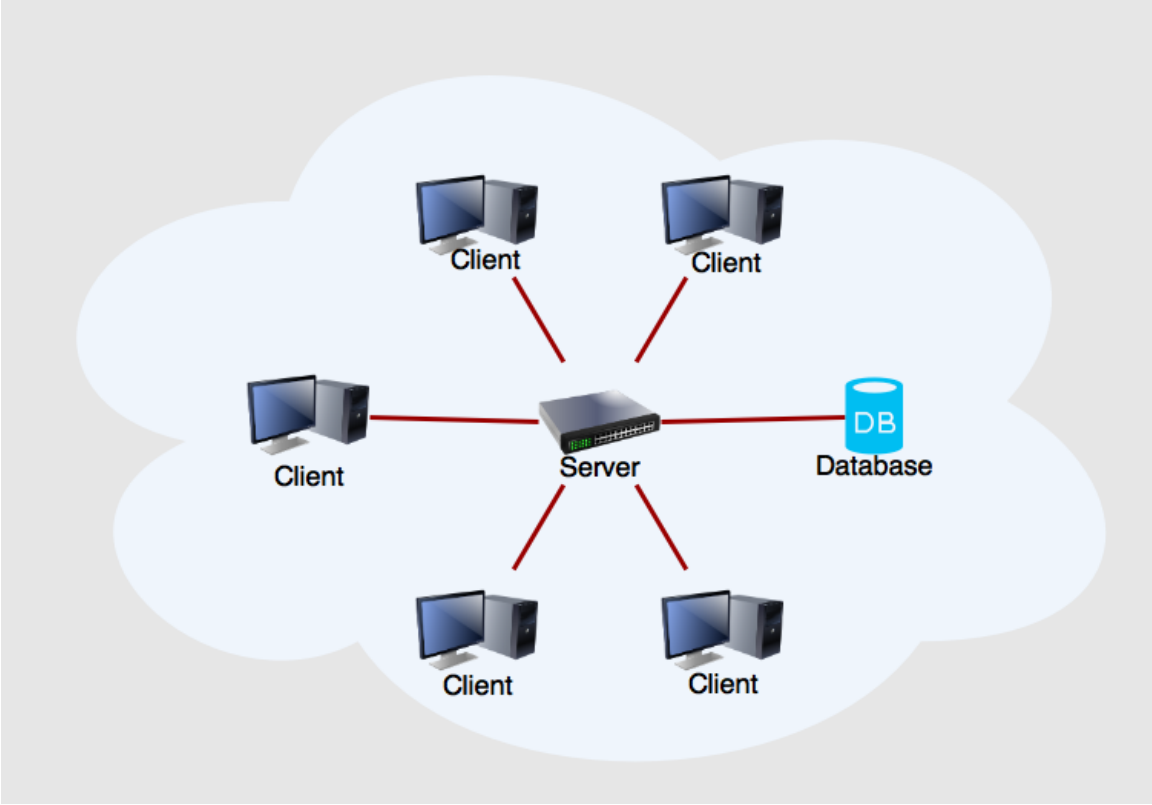

Figure 7.1: Client-Server Architecture

Users will be able to use our application on their mobile tablet, acting as a client, in order to access our site. The server in our system will be responsible for storing data for each child in the database, formulating a categorization response of the verbal input, and delivering these results to the client.

The database will be Google Datastore, and the Google App Engine server will write to and read from it order to access data.

Chapter 8

Technologies Used

Our system utilized the following technologies. Many of the technologies used were mandatory for the environment we were developing our application for (Apple iPads). The reasoning behind choosing these technologies can be found in Chapter 9.

- Hardware
  - Development
    - Macbook Pro
    - Macbook Air
  - Application Testing
    - iPads
  - Server Processing
    - Google App Engine
- Programming Languages
  - Swift
    - For iOS Programming
  - Python
    - For web server programming
  - JSON
    - For communicating with REST APIs

- IDEs
  - XCode
- SDKs
  - Nuance Developer's SpeechKit2 SDK[1]
    * Nuance Developer's SDK is included in our application distribution and supports Automatic Speech Recognition, Text-to-Speech, and Audio Playback. We chose Nuance Developer's SDK for our speech recognition and speech-to-text translation because of the speed and accuracy of their results, clear error messages, and online developer support. We experimented with using Nuance's Text-to-Speech in our application as well because it would allow us to customize the voice to the user's preference, but this feature was not a priority and was never completed. We also experimented with the SDK's Natural Language Understanding (NLU) product, which is currently in beta, but found the results to be unreliable and ineffective when compared to the other APIs we were testing.
- APIs
  - Google's Cloud Natural Language API[2]
    * Google's Cloud Natural Language API supplies analysis of text input using machine learning. Specifically, this API provides the ability to analyze entities, sentiment, and intent of the text provided to the endpoint. It utilizes the same underlying technology that Google uses in both its search engine and its personal assistant. We used this API for content classification in order to decide which picture cards to display to the nonverbal user. We chose this API after testing several because it gave the most consistent and accurate results.
- Database
  - Google's Cloud Datastore[3]
    * Google Cloud Datastore is a NoSQL database for web and mobile applications. We chose to use Cloud Datastore as our database solution because of its simple integration with Google App Engine.

[1] `https://developer.nuance.com/public/Help/DragonMobileSDKReference_iOS/index.html`
[2] `https://cloud.google.com/natural-language/`
[3] `https://cloud.google.com/datastore/`

Chapter 9

Design Rationale

We are leveraging a client-server model in order to minimize impact on the client mobile devices. In our model, a client will collect audial data and translate it into text using Nuance Developers SDK and send the text to the server. The server will use NLP tools such as Google's Cloud Natural Language API to process the text and generate suggested classification responses to send back to the device as a JSON object. Having the server do the processing will minimize the use of the device's battery life, and will also decrease the disk space our app will require to be stored on the device.

We are using iPads for our testing because that is what our partners, the Hope Technology School, primarily uses in their classroom. This will eliminate the need for us to buy iPads for beta testers to use; saving money, time, and scheduling complexity.

Making use of the existing APIs like Google's Cloud Natural Language allows us to avoid re-inventing the wheel and focus on how those tools can be used to fulfill our purpose.

We will develop the application in XCode, using the Swift language because it is the designated language compatible with iOS to make applications. We will use Python to design the web server because we have experience using Google App Engine to make web servers specifically in Python and the APIs are well documented for the language.

Finally, we will use Google Datastore to store conversation data for the user because it easily integrates with Google App Engine.

Chapter 10

Testing Procedure

Our testing process can be broken into three main sections: unit testing, an alpha release, and a beta release. Unit testing was done throughout the development process from Week 1 - 10 of Winter Quarter. Our alpha testing took place between Weeks 7 and 9 of Winter Quarter. At this point, the system was the first iteration of all the features of our application. The feedback from this stage helped us refine our interface and move into the beta, which took place from Weeks 1-5 of Spring Quarter.

Chapter 11

Risk Analysis

Table 11.1, shown below, depicts the risks and consequences involved in completing the system. The table also includes probability of the risk involved along with a severity ranking between 1 and 10. The probability and severity are then multiplied to receive an impact measurement. For each risk, there are at least two mitigation strategies that are included to avoid the issue.

Risk	Consequences	Probability	Severity	Impact	Mitigation Strategies
Illness	Team member(s) will not be able to work on project for a period of time.	.5	4	2	1. Get a lot of sleep. 2. Stay hydrated.
Insufficient Development Knowledge	The system will not be adequate and may not be finished on time.	.4	5	2	Get a lot of sleep and stay hydrated.
Insufficient Web Development Knowledge	The system will not be adequate and may not be finished on time.	.4	5	2	1. Use online tutorials. 2. Revisit past notes/projects.
Team Coordination Failure	The team will not finish the project or certain aspects of the projects in time.	.15	8	1.2	1. Keep an organized schedule of due dates. 2. Follow Development Timeline. 3. Hold team members accountable for what they need to get done.
Requirements are Incorrectly Communicated	Extra time gathering requirements. Customer doesn't agree with the end system.	.1	8	.8	1. Meticulously develop requirements with customer. 2. Regularly hold update meetings with customer to make sure on the right path.
Server Failure	The system will not have a server to host the client-server architecture and will therefore fail.	.02	10	.2	1. Research other hosting strategies in case of DC server failure. 2. Use local resources for backup storage and processing.
File Loss	Lost work up to the date of the file loss.	.01	10	.1	1. Use github to manage source code and versioning. 2. Update project tree after every development session.

Table 11.1: Risk Analysis Table

Chapter 12

Ethical Analysis

Even though our project can seem benevolent, there are several ethically ambiguous scenarios that must be considered and weighed prior to making decisions.

First, at an organizational level, our team has a couple of ethical dilemmas to consider. One such dilemma is how to ensure workload is being divided evenly among teammates. Like many problems, there seems to be a simple solution, by making a list of the work to be done and divide it evenly by number of tasks. But this process and judgment gets trickier with added complications, such as certain tasks requiring different amounts of time or team members missing deadlines. There are an infinite amount of potential situations to assess, so a global solution must be developed that can be applied across multiple scenarios. A good solution template would begin with a group discussion to try to work out the issue. If not everyone is satisfied with the results, we should schedule a meeting with our advisor to ask for him or her to mediate the discussion, allowing the experienced advisor to offer advice or make decisions for the team if necessary. Though this mediation strategy is generic it can be applied across multiple scenarios, which makes it a good basis for resolving ethical issues.

Secondly, concerning the social aspects of our project, there are many more ethical scenarios to consider in order to ensure that our application maximizes social benefits while minimizing concerns. One question we must consider is if we, as the developers, should have the power to control someone's voice. Our application will try to predict what a user will typically say and how he or she would respond to a question. This gives us the capability to influence what options the user will choose in speaking. This feature can be potentially misused to influence and control someone's voice in an extreme case. Questions determining the extent of control this application need to be evaluated to determine what kind of control the application should have in determining how a user will say

something or respond to a question.

Thirdly, we have to consider the ethical implications of how our product system will be implemented. Our application will need to save records of the user's conversations to remember the interests and voice patterns of the user. One situation to evaluate is the option to save that personal information locally on the user's device or on our servers in the cloud. Both options have their respective pros and cons, namely that the cloud storage will improve speed and battery usage, and local storage will improve security. These trade-offs will force us to evaluate the situation and have us weigh the priority of features to determine how secure we need to store the user's data. Likely, these priorities will be shifted as the application gets tested by users and they give feedback, so it will be important for our team to come back to this dilemma and re-evaluate the best storage option from time to time. The extent and implementation of features need to be evaluated and assessed in the development of our application with user safety in mind.

Chapter 13

Development Timeline

The development timeline shown below depicts the set of tasks that were completed throughout the year. We listed each task set by school quarter which roughly followed a requirements, design, implementation, then testing (RDIT) procedure.

- Fall Quarter
  - Initial requirements gathering
  - Research and design
  - Documentation
- Winter Quarter
  - Implementation
  - Testing
  - Demo with HTS representative
- Spring Quarter
  - Implement suggestions for improvement from demo
  - Final testing
  - Final documentation

Chapter 14

User Manual

14.1 Installation

14.1.1 Server Setup

None, the server is running at the URL hard-coded into the iOS mobile application. The server is already set up for you.

14.1.2 iPad Application Installation

1. Double click the Conversation Station.xcworkspace file to open it in Xcode.
2. Connect your iPad to the computer and select that iPad as the device to run the application.
3. Click Run from the menu to install the application and run it on the iPad.

14.2 Normal Use

1. Install and launch the app.
2. Set the "wake" name, which should be the first name of the nonverbal child user.
3. Choose any option from the below list and repeat in a cycle until conversation is complete:
    - Type a statement using the keyboard.
    - Speak the value of the input field over the iPad speakers.
    - Select a preset picture card to speak the associated word or phrase.
    - Select the listening button to trigger the device to begin processing verbal input.

- Verbal user can say the nonverbal child user's "wake" name to trigger the device to begin processing verbal input.

Chapter 15

Conclusions & Future Work

Over the course of this project we climbed over many walls to develop a consistent and finished product. Here are the lessons we learned that helped us in this project and that we will carry on towards future work.

1. **Be wary of dependencies.** The more outside tools that your project relies on, the more points of failure are induced. Be careful of using too many tools that are outside of your control, and be prepared for them to suddenly change or not work.

2. **Multiply estimated time by 5.** In most circumstances, whatever time you estimate a task to take, it will take longer. Planning for unexpected development time will provide for a more accurate time assessment.

3. **Seek feedback early and often.** To avoid unexpected changes of requirements and unnecessary implementations of features that the customer may not want, maintain continuous contact with the customer. The earlier along in the development stages you can get feedback, the easier it is to iterate on those changes.

4. **Build it up piece by piece.** Incremental design will allow for easy feature integration and natural divisions for unit testing. Building piece by piece will improve code understanding and reduce the number of unexpected errors.