Computer system gives ears to those who cannot hear

Rachel Browne

A SYSTEM that allows deaf students to fully take part in mainstream education is being trialled in a Sydney school. About 10,000 Australian children with hearing loss stand to benefit.

Under the system, the teacher wears a lapel microphone that transmits the audio to a captioner who uses a voice-to-text program to send the words to the student's laptop in under seven seconds.

Deaf students and disability experts say it could revolutionise how those with hearing loss are taught in secondary and tertiary education. The system, Access Innovation Live, was developed over three years by the Sydney company Access Innovation Media.

It's being trialled at Robert Townson High School in Lalley in Sydney's south-west, and the company is expanding the pilot scheme nationally.

"It is something that every deaf student could use," said the chief executive of Access Innovation, Tony Abraham.

"It will give these kids a future."

Deaf students in mainstream schools usually rely on an interpreter to relay information to them in sign language.

A lot of the time students couldn't understand the interpreter because the interpreter didn't understand physics, for example," said Abraham. "And how do you sign Machu?"

How is a student going to get the finger spelling of all these important words, absorb it and translate it in their own heads?

Yet, somehow they're expected to have the same literacy level as students who are hearing all this stuff.

"It's like trying to teach English in French but without using anything written down. So there's no surprise that deaf kids are falling behind."

The Access system costs between $30,000 and $40,000 a student each year, compared with the current cost of $100,000.

"The question should not be how much does this cost," said Abraham. "It should be how much does it cost not to do it? It will pay itself back in a very short time frame.

Lisa White, 15, and Rabia Muhamad, 16, have already been reaping the benefits of the pilot program at Robert Townson High School.

"It's like trying to teach English in French but without using anything written down."

Tony Abraham, Access Innovation Media

"I think that it has made us learn more as part of the classroom environment," said Abraham. "It has made us feel part of the conversation between the teachers and the other students, so we're learning more.

Lisa's marks have already improved substantially and she is considering a career in art or photography. Mohamad is thinking of studying science at university.

Their support teacher, Sally Pape, said the system, which featured on ABC TV's The New Inventors last month, also helped improve literacy.

"Their grammar is improving, their written responses are improving, their engagement in the learning has improved. They have both shown themselves to be excellent students."