AAC and Special Needs: *The Importance of Core Vocabulary*

What is Core Vocabulary?

 "Core vocabulary" refers to the small set of basic words in any language that are used frequently and across contexts (Cross, Baker, Klotz and Badman, 2006). Core words tend to be pronouns, verbs, and demonstratives because they represent words that generally do not change. These words are relevant across contexts and can have many meanings.

Core vocabulary words allow communicators to express themselves using a wide variety of concepts with a very small number of words. Research shows that 80% of what we say is communicated with only the 200 most basic words in our language (Baker and Hill, 2000).

The Paradigm Shift

Traditionally communication boards and AAC devices used little more than a series of nouns. A student would be given the core word "want" with a list of nouns such as "cookie, drink, or crayon" to choose from. This was thought to be an effective approach because it appeared to be easier to find pictures of nouns and to teach those concepts to students. For example, it is easier to find a picture of a school bus than a picture which describes the abstract concept "go" (Adamson, Romski, Deffenback and Seveik, 1992).

However, when a student knows what "go" means and that word is available on a communication board or assistive device, the impact on communication ability is far greater than that of accessing a series of nouns. The ability to use all language forms makes communication possible (Cannon and Edmond, 2009).

For most of us, the process of how we learn to use words begins with the expressions of our own intents. Initially, we use words, pictures, or signs to make our wants/needs known but that soon develops into social exchanges, conversations, stories and more. For students who communicate via AAC, the path to a rich lexicon is not so easy. Using a core vocabulary approach gives the student independence and the flexibility required to express their needs and wants, problems and opinions, and academic answers.

Getting Started (*taken from praacticalaac.org*)

Teaching vocabulary follows a systematic sequence of instruction as follows:

STEP 1: Introduce the new word(s) using focused aided language stimulation
STEP 2: Teach the new word(s) with explicit instruction activities
STEP 3: Elaborate on the new word meanings with engaging practice activities
STEP 4: Provide repeated exposure to the new word(s) on an ongoing basis
STEP 5: Check for understanding and reteach, as necessary

Lastly, it is important to remember that context is key when introducing new vocabulary. Real word learning doesn't occur in isolation. Experiential learning is critical, particularly for learners at the early stages of language development. Vocabulary must be taught in a multifaceted way. We don't learn new word meanings in a single activity. Rather it is a combination of exposure to new words in context, experiential activities with active participation, explicit instruction, and many opportunities for practice.

Teaching Core Vocabulary: Useful Resources

Teaching Core Vocabulary
http://praaciticalaac.org/strategy/teaching-core-vocabulary/

Direct Instructional Strategies for Teaching AAC
http://praacticalaac.org/strategy/teaching-core-vocabulary-with-direct-instruction-strategies/

Speak for Yourself AAC
http://www.speakforyourself.org

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