Augmentative and Alternative Communication: Vocabulary Types

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When programming an augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) device or creating a communication board, it is important to distinguish between different types of vocabulary. By carefully planning or programming a device, parents and speech-language pathologists (SLPs) enable children to produce a variety of meaningful phrases and sentences.

Vocabulary Types

Core Vocabulary: Core vocabulary refers to words that speakers use frequently across multiple settings, such as the park, school, and home. These high-frequency words bridge topics and environments, and children can easily combine them to form meaningful phrases and sentences. Core vocabulary words are typically pronouns, verbs, and demonstratives, such as *it, go, want, eat, I, this,* and *no.*

Fringe Vocabulary: Fringe vocabulary refers to a specific set of low frequency vocabulary words that are specific to a particular person or activity. Fringe vocabulary words are typically nouns. Examples of fringe vocabulary words include *bat, home run, base,* and *pitcher.* Again, these words are highly specific to a single activity and are generally only useful when talking about baseball.

Why does it matter?

Because a single page on a device or board contains a limited amount of space, SLPs and parents must carefully choose vocabulary.

A student can use core vocabulary words to talk about a variety of topics for different purposes. For example, a student may have no, *you, I, want, go,* and *more* programmed on his device. How many messages can this student make? The student can combine words to make requests, such as "I want more," or "I want it." The student may also combine words to make rejections, such as *"No more."* Finally, a student can attempt to make directives, like *"You go."*

The context of a core vocabulary word determines the meaning of the message. If a student says *"I want to go"* in the context of a board game, he is indicating that he would like a turn to play. The same message in the context of a conversation regarding the grocery store indicates that the student physically wants to go to the store. In the context of a non-preferred activity, a student might use the same phrase to indicate that he is ready to leave.

A communication device/board that contains mostly fringe vocabulary may include words such as *paper, pencil, crayon,* and *glue*. How many messages can this student produce? This vocabulary set severely limits the child to making one-word requests and labeling objects.

When programming an AAC device or creating a communication board, it is important to find a balance between flexible core vocabulary words and appropriate fringe vocabulary words. By meaningfully and carefully selecting both core and fringe words for a device or board, parents and SLPs open the door to strong communication skills.

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Resources:

Cannon, B. & Edmond, G (2009, April 14). A Few Good Words: Using Core Vocabulary to Support Nonverbal Students. The ASHA Leader.

Core Vocabulary (n.d.). Retrieved June 11, 2014 from https://aaclanguagelab.com/resources/core-vocabulary

Grether, S. (2011) Recognition and Response: Application for Augmentative Communication in Preschool Settings. Presented at Annual Conference for the American Speech, Language, and Hearing Association, San Diego.

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