Partner Skills: Descriptive Teaching

Using core words to support decision making

Core vocabulary

- High frequency, reusable, recyclable words
- All languages have a core group of ~400 words that make up ~80% of what is said
- Primarily action words, pronouns (I, he she...), describing words, and words referring to location (up, down, in...)

Fringe Vocabulary

- Low frequency words which are different depending on the topic
- Primarily nouns

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems

- Robust AAC systems using stored whole words will include a mix of:
  o Core vocabulary
  o Fringe vocabulary
  o Alphabet
  o Phrases.
- The availability of some core vocabulary is consistent across most AAC systems

Descriptive approach

This is a way of teaching language by describing key concepts using every day and core words

Through this approach, individuals are invited to participate differently by having other ask open questions or making comments that could be added to in lots of different ways

For individuals who use AAC this has the effect of:

- Helping individuals express their ideas in words that are available in their system
- Reducing programming demand
- Reducing navigational demand (by using words that are familiar)
- Improving problem solving and strategic competence

Referential approach

This is an approach which is very common in many classrooms. There is typically a focus on critical concepts and specific vocabulary

For individuals who use AAC, this can create the need to learn the location of lots of new words that may never be used again

Communication Partner Skills: Descriptive Teaching

Planning to succeed

Step 1 – Content words

- Write a list of content words as they appear in curriculums or relevant documents
- Planning ahead of time is key

Step 2 – Dictionary definition (optional)

- Find a dictionary definition or write an agreed upon definition of the word
- This can often make Step 3 easier, especially if there is more than one definition of the content word

Step 3 – Core definition

- Using core vocabulary lists and/or the individual's AAC system, write a core vocabulary description
- This can sometimes be harder than it appears – get other people to help

Step 4 – Use it

Use the core vocabulary descriptions when talking and asking about the content words

Examples

Content word (+ dictionary definition)	Core word definition
Dream *a cherished aspiration, ambition, or ideal.*	Something I want to do How I want to be
Capacity *the ability or power to do or understand something.*	Things I can do Things I know

Examples of opportunities to use a descriptive approach:

- Starting a new topic at school or university
- Starting a new job or new role at work
- Engaging in a planning meeting
- Providing opinions on different topics
- Any time there are topic specific words which may be new or challenging to use for someone with complex communication needs

Consider

- The words available on the individual's specific AAC system (or whether an AAC system is available)
- The individual's current communication skills and strategies

Resources

- Online core vocabulary lists
- Online dictionaries
- Descriptive teaching planning documents
- Descriptive teaching examples

References

Van Tatenhove, G. (2009). Building Language Competence with Students Using AAC Devices: Six Challenges. Perspectives on AAC, 18(2), 38-47.

Witkowski, D., & Baker, B. (2012). Addressing the content vocabulary with core: Theory and practice for non-literate or emerging literate students. Perspectives on AAC, 21, 74-81.