High Quality Vocabulary Instruction for Learners with Complex Communication Needs

Many learners with complex communication needs do not use speech alone to express themselves.

Many learners with complex communication needs use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems, with or without speech, to communicate with others.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Everyone has a right to a reliable and preferred method of communication. As schools become more diverse, teachers are more likely to interact with students who use AAC. In fact, in a national survey, special educators reported that 18.2% of their students used AAC.

Students with complex communication needs are more likely to experience disheartening adult outcomes than peers who use speech as their primary mode of communication.

It is important that students with complex communication needs receive inclusive, high quality English Language Arts and literacy instruction to promote positive adult outcomes.

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE AND AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATION?

Spoken language is not necessary to communicate effectively with others. Augmentative and alternative communication is any medium of communication used to replace or supplement oral speech. (Da Fonte & Boesch, M. C., 2019). AAC is effective across ages and mediums (Hollyfield et al., 2017).

There are many types of AAC, including:

Unaided communication, in which individuals use their bodies to communicate (e.g. facial expressions, gestures, pointing, manual signs)

Aided communication, which are tools or equipment individuals use to communicate. Aided communication can be: "Soft" or "Light" Tech tools, which require no electronics (e.g., picture cards, sequencing boards, communication books)

-Mid Tech, electronic or battery-operated devices with static output (e.g., GoTalk device, recordable buttons or switches)

-High Tech, speech-generating devices with dynamic output (e.g., TouchChat, LAMP, ProLoQuo2Go)
Teaching AAC users is highly individualized. It is key that all stakeholders including teachers, parents, speech-language pathologists, and other related service members collaborate.

**Checklist for AAC Vocabulary Instruction** (adapted from Geist & Erickson, 2021)

**Vocabulary Selection**
- Did I select high frequency (core) words to model from the student’s AAC?
- Are target academic (fringe) words easily described or accessed from the students AAC?
- Did I include kid-friendly definitions of target words in my lesson plan?

**Instructional Activities**
- Did I model the target words using the student’s AAC device?
- Did 80% of my models include the target words in comments?
- Did I provide multiple examples of the target words in different sentences, contexts, and activities?
- Were activities tied to familiar contexts?

**Assessment of Student Knowledge**
- Can the student describe academic words using their core vocabulary on their AAC device?
- Can the student use the new words in a familiar sequence on their AAC device?