Core Vocabulary and Descriptive Teaching in AAC

Classes typically cover a wide range of topics each year. It can be useful to think about what words will be most useful for our students using AAC, and how we can support them to join in discussion about the varied topics that arise.

What is core vocabulary?

Core vocabulary refers to high frequency, re-usable common words. Approximately 80% of the words we use daily are drawn from a core of fewer than 400 words. These words are relatively consistent across groups of people, activites, places, and topics. Core vocabulary is primarily made up by pronouns, verbs, adjectives and prepositions, with a relative absence of nouns. While many may be considered simple words, they can be combined to communicate more complex sentences. Core vocabulary words overlap a lot with other high frequency word lists used by teachers such as the Dolch list.

Other words which make up the remaining 20% of our messages may be referred to as fringe or content vocabulary. These words, including a high proportion of nouns, vary depending on the topic or activity.

(Van Tatenhove, 2009, Witkowski & Baker, 2012)

Core vocabulary is an important part of an AAC system, and crucial for students learning to combine words into sentences. Most comprehensive communication systems include both core vocabulary and fringe vocabulary.

A number of core vocabulary word lists are available online
http://www.vantatenhove.com/papers.shtml

Want to see the power of core vocabulary?
Watch this video clip for an example of how much can be communicated using only core words
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqfVAPuGzpI

indigo.

What is descriptive teaching?

> **"Using a descriptive style, the teacher mentions and references the context-specific words, then teaches concepts behind the words using high frequency, re-usable, common words" (Van Tatenhove 2009).**

A **referential approach** to teaching is common in many classrooms, with a focus on critical concepts and topic specific vocabulary. Students are encouraged to demonstrate learning by responding using curriculum content words (eg. Herbivore). When working with students using AAC this places a high time demand on staff either programming in new words to a student's device or making extra vocabulary sheets. This approach also means the student is frequently having to learn the location and symbol of many new words, which may be less likely to be used again outside of this classroom topic.

An alternative is to take a **descriptive teaching approach** which has students participate and demonstrate learning using common words to describe (eg. green things), define (eg. eat plants), or predict (eg. not eat me). This approach has a focus on using high frequency, core vocabulary which is already available in a student's comprehensive AAC system. This develops a student's familiarity with navigating to existing vocabulary which will be reusable in a range of contexts, and significantly reduces the programming load for school staff.
We can use a descriptive teaching approach with our students who use AAC by modelling and teaching high frequency core vocabulary available in their device to help explain key concepts, and by asking more open questions when we assess our students' learning.

(Witkowski & Baker, 2012)

Referential Style	Descriptive Style
Need large vocabulary of words rarely needed daily	Need smaller vocabulary of words used daily
Requires least amount of thinking – rote memory	Requires creative thinking re: concepts and vocabulary
Highest memory demand with the least pay off	Focus on info in the lesson, not new pages and symbols

(Van Tatenhove, 2009)

Below are some examples of different class topics with examples of referential style questions, and possible alternative descriptive questions and answers:

A science class are learning about states of matter:

Referential Style (closed)	Descriptive Style (open)
Q. Name 3 states of matter	Q. Describe something when it is a solid
A. solid, liquid, gas	A. hard, keep shape

A class is going on a bushwalk to learn about native plants and animals:

Referential Style (closed)	Descriptive Style (open)
Q. What animal did we see on the path?	Q. What can you tell me about the bandicoot?
A. bandicoot	A. Small, brown, soft, long nose, run, go fast

A primary school class has dinosaurs as their theme for the term:

Referential Style (closed)	Descriptive Style (open)
Q. Is the Tyrannosaurus Rex a herbivore, omnivore or carnivore?	Q. What does the Tyrannosaurus Rex eat?
A. Carnivore	A. eat meat, eat other animals

Planning

When planning for a new classroom topic, we can think about the key concepts we want the students to learn and how these can be described by using higher frequency words they have available in their AAC system.

When teaching, we can both introduce the key concept words, and use and model the associated descriptive language on the student's AAC system.

For example, consider the plan below for an English lesson analysing stories, showing the key content words, and core vocabulary description for two different language levels.

Content Word	Core Vocabulary Description – Emergent Language	Core Vocabulary Description – Advanced Language
Compare	(what is) same	Talk about what is the same between two things
Contrast	(what is) different	Talk about what is different between two things
Author	(he/she) writes	The person who writes the story
Setting	Place (for) story	The place where the story happens
Plot	What (story) about	What the story is about
Character	Person (in story)	The person or people in a story

(Witkowski & Baker, 2012)

You may find it useful to use the format in Appendix A when you are planning a class topic. Identify the key content words or concepts for the topic, see what vocabulary is available in the student's device to describe these concepts, and plan some descriptive style (open) questions you can use when you review the topic.

Want to read more about descriptive teaching?

Gail Van Tatenhove's 'Aided Language Stimulation and the Descriptive Teaching Model' handout
http://www.asha.org/events/convention/handouts/2008/0904_van_tatenhove_gail/

Gail Van Tatenhove's 'Start Talking in Class: Helping Students using AAC Devices' handout
http://www.liberator.net.au/js/fontis/tiny_mce/plugins/filemanager/files/liberator_au/Start%20Talking%20in%20the%20Classroom.PDF

Kate Ahern's blog post on the Descriptive Teaching Model
http://teachinglearnerswithmultipleneeds.blogspot.com.au/2015/09/descriptive-teaching-model-dtm.html

Beyond Calendar Time: AAC Implementation in the Classroom by Janet Lehr
http://www.alabamashaa.org/files/Handouts%202015/Lehr-BeyondCalendarTime.pdf

References

Van Tatenhove, G. (2009). Building Language Competence with Students Using AAC Devices: Six Challenges. *Perspectives on Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 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 Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 21*, 74-81.

Appendix A
Descriptive teaching – topic plan

Topic: _____

Key content words or concepts	Core word description (Words available in the student's device)

Descriptive style (open) questions to review or assess this topic:

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"Using a descriptive style, the teacher mentions and references the context-specific words, then teaches concepts behind the words using high frequency, re-usable, common words" (Van Tatenhove 2009).