Suggestions for Expanding Communication beyond First Words

By

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1. **Teach new words in a new setting or with a new communication partner (Novelty Effect)**. Break up the routine. Some individuals may get comfortable using the same words in the same activities in the same environment so introduce novelty. If successful, then work on generalizing the new words by having the traditional therapist or teacher go to the new environment and do the same words then use them in the classroom. Or you can have the new communication partner introduce the new words in the original environment where they were stuck. Vocabulary builder could be used briefly.

2. **Add video modeling across all environments**. The individual should watch videos of themselves learning new words in different settings. First, he should see the entire image of himself and the listener in a communication exchange. Make sure his hand movement is noticeable in the video so that it's clear he's using the device to talk. Then videotape other people modeling the same behavior. Finally, videotape the exchange from the device user's perspective with only his hand accessing the device and the response of the communication partner. WordToob was developed because of the power of video modeling. It allows for the randomization of these videos to generalize the skill. See attached video. The young man in this video needed to be prompted to learn to give the complement. He enjoys doing it but watch how much more joy he gets out of watching himself do it. Wordtoob.com

3. **Provide many open-ended opportunities to communicate** where we react to the expressive communication. Make it a game: Have them say a word then you spell it, or say a rhyming word, or sing it. Or even say why did you say? Many times a day we should be giving opportunities for open communication: "I am listening to you. What do you want to talk about?" Do very little to no testing. Don't ask, "what color is this?" but rather "What color coke do want? (Choice not test) Choice has positive outcomes on general education students' motivation in activities and academics (Cordova & Lepper, 1996;Patall, Cooper, & Wynn, 2010). Research also found choice can improve maladaptive behavior (Peterson, Caniglia, & Royster, 2001) and improve academic behavior (Koegel, Singh, & Koegel, 2010).

4. **Novel toys and activities**.

5. **Peer modeling**. Let peers use the device across all environments. Having a second device for modeling is great. You could use an iPad to model the words or smart board. If a second device

isn't available, have peers model single words using a paper overlay. If the device user is at a sequenced level, make sure the paper overlay shows the motor plan. A good reference for peer modeling is Egel, A. L., Richman, G. S. and Koegel, R. L. (1981). "Normal Peer Models and Autistic Children's Learning." Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis, 14: 3–12.

6. **Short and positive**. Keep session very short and end on positive note when introducing new words.

7. **Turn LAM on** and make sure device and new words are being introduced across environments. Letting the team know that the monitor is on and the goal is that the device user become more communicative and use more words, may in itself improve performance. "The **Hawthorne effect** (commonly referred to as the **observer effect**) is a form of reactivity whereby subjects improve or modify an aspect of their behavior, which is being experimentally measured, in response to the fact that they know that they are being studied, not in response to any particular experimental manipulation." - Wikipedia

8. **Respond to miss-hits**. The individual must see talking like a slot machine the more I talk the more likely I get things. (Dunlap, G. (1984). "The influence of task variation and maintenance tasks on the learning and affect of autistic children." *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*. 37, 41-64.)

9. **Provide visual supports in the environment**. Add screen shots to the environment and prompt with screen shots. Peers could also use screen shots in class activities. Icon sequences in books and when labeling environment must be the actual sequence showing the motor plan. (http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/sites/autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/files/VisualSupports_Overview.pdf)

10. **Utilize visual supports on the device**. Color code and hide icons around the target word. If this does not work, use Vocabulary Builder for a few trials.

11. **Provide access to many words**. Make sure the device has more words available than the learner knows on it between sessions. Only use VB when teaching a new word. Don't create different word lists for different environments prescribing the communication. A reference to back up support the benefit of having access to a lot of words is McMurray, Bob. (2007). "Defusing the Childhood Vocabulary Explosion." *Science*, 317, 631.

12. **Know the vocabulary**. Make sure all the people who work with the individual know the vocabulary on the device. At a minimum they should know the 220 words that are in the transition level and the customized fringe words. Examples of items to be added and known by

everyone around the individual include foods, drinks, places, toys/interests, names, sensory seeking/avoiding words such as “stop,” or “tickle,” local interjections like “go hogs” or “bug off,” therapy materials and activities such as “swing” or “ball pit.” Everyone should have input on adding vocabulary. What words do the parents, teachers, after-school staff, friends, and therapists see as being needed.

13. **Know the device**. All the people who work with the student should be given an opportunity to explore and become comfortable with the device. All support staff should know how to turn on the device, charge the device, keep the volume at appropriate level, lock the device, find a word using icon tutor or word finder, understand how and when to hide and show vocabulary and add vocabulary. If a new word is added, have a way to document any changes. If not everyone is allowed to add words, they should have a way to request a new word in real time. Cheat sheets are available for all devices.

14. **Follow a prompt hierarchy**. We need to monitor all environments to make sure no one is over prompting. All team members should clearly be able to demonstrate and follow the hierarchy. If some are prompting too much, video the sessions and have them identify and their own mistakes. There is a prompt hierarchy chart in the LAMP manual.

15. **No unnatural sabotage**. If you cannot communicate, your entire life is sabotaged. Natural opportunities to communicate are everywhere in the students life. Gently sabotage is acceptable if the student does not become frustrated. Growling or agitation is a sign that the sabotage was not gentle. Lids getting tight, items up high, food in small portions are all examples of fake sabotage. Once the learner discovers that when you or the device appear things get difficult they will hate learning from the device and you.

16. **Provide a device devoted to communication**. Initially, for many individuals with ASD, it would be best if the device used for communication is *only* used for communication. Many have lost motivation to communicate because they prefer Angry Birds or YouTube. If you have to shut off your game, music, video to talk, you will not want to talk.

17. **Reinforce communication first**; worry about form second. If the student vocalizes, gestures, or signs, accept that form of communication then you can either gently prompt them to say it on the device or model what they just said on the device. “Oh, you said ‘bathroom.’ Here’s how you can say it on here.” Only do that if they don’t become agitated with having to say it again. You must recognize and acknowledge the act of communication first.

18. **Vary the response**. We should not try to have a consistent reaction to every communication act. Every time the individual says “eat,” they should not get the same food or activity. This must happen from the first session**.** (Dunlap**,** G**.,** & Koegel**,** R. L. (1980)**. “**Motivating autistic children through stimulus variation**.”** *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 13, 619-627.)