

Q: I work with several students on my caseload who are using Minspeak devices. Each of them is also able to spell and they seem to spend more time spelling what they want to say rather than using the Minspeak codes. I know Minspeak is much more efficient than spelling, but how do I help them shift to using Minspeak codes instead of spelling?

A: This answer is a compilation of ideas contributed by Celeste Helling (USA), Janet Lehr (USA), Tracy Kovach (USA), Jutta Herrmann (Germany), and Gail Van Tatenhove (USA).

Spelling is an important skill to have when you have complex communication needs, but as you pointed out, spelling is an inefficient way to communicate compared to Minspeak codes. Minspeak is the most efficient way to communicate core vocabulary words, while spelling and use of word prediction is a useful way to communicate infrequently used fringe (extended) vocabulary. To support your students, you need to do these 5 things: Complete a LAM Analysis, Teach and Model Critical Core Words, Emphasize Efficiency, Promote Self-Teaching, and Utilize Device Features.

Complete a LAM Analysis

Is the Language Activity Monitor turned ON? If not, get it turned on immediately and collect a language sample of your student over approximately a 1 – 2 month time period, downloading and checking the samples weekly. Analyze these samples and address issues related to spelling and use of Minspeak codes for core words.

1. What does the student like to talk about? Are those subject-specific words in the Minspeak device? If not, get those words added with a Minspeak code or into the appropriate activity row (first row preferred.) If, in the early stages of learning Minspeak codes, the student has to shift to spelling to talk about his/her most frequent and important topics, he/she is likely to stay in spelling to continue to talk about those topics.
2. What are the core words that the student is spelling? Make a list of those words and put them on your TOP PRIORITY TO TEACH word list. Especially look for core words that are being spelled which IMMEDIATELY follow any core words that were retrieved using Minspeak codes. By focusing on these words, you are encouraging the student to stay in Minspeak and not shift to spelling.
3. Look for any repeated “dialogs” that the student says which are being generated using spelling, rather than Minspeak codes. Focus on teaching these dialogs using Minspeak codes, rather than spelling. Essentially, you will be teaching toward what the student generally talks about, encouraging him/her to use those core words and Minspeak codes frequently. Look at the time markers for these dialogs and demonstrate to the student that, when using Minspeak codes, that he/she is much faster talking. Do “time trials” with rewards for “faster talking” if that reinforces the student.

Teach & Model Critical Words

You have to get to “critical mass” with knowing and being automatic with Minspeak codes to make it worthwhile to stay in Minspeak and not shift to spelling to talk. That means you have to really focus on words and word phrases that are most frequently used in natural conversation.

1. Does your student know the pronoun-preverb patterns? Focus on these patterns in order to get maximum language output for the least number of keystrokes. Teach the LONGEST OUTPUT before you teach the individual words. For examples, teach, “I am going” before teaching “I am,” or “going” or “I.”

2. Is your student producing verb phrases with Minspeak codes? A verb phrase is often the key part of a sentence and a lot can be said with simple verb phrases. Focus on verb phrases that use common verbs along with prepositions (e.g., go in), adverbs (e.g., go away, go there, go now) and determiners (e.g., get that, get some). Look at the LAM sample and focus your work around things that will have immediate application to what the student wants and needs to say.
3. Work on the pronoun patterns (subject, object, possessive pronouns) because they play a huge role in the production of language. If the student knows the preverb phrases, can build verb phrases, and uses pronouns with Minspeak, he/she will be well on their way to staying in Minspeak codes and not spelling.
4. Are you using Aided Language Stimulation when working with your student? If not, you need to be modeling the language you expect him/her to produce with Minspeak by being able to produce that language **yourself** using Minspeak codes. Make it a goal to be able to carry on simple dialogs with the student using Minspeak codes. Not only is this a psychological shift for the student, but also the modeling of codes is an efficient way to help teach those codes.
5. Are you giving the student the “big picture” for codes? Minspeak codes are organized into Icon Families and by teaching codes based on these icon families, you can create a semantic architecture that helps the student better remember the codes.

Emphasize Efficiency

Using Minspeak codes is 99.9% more efficient than spelling letter-by-letter or using word prediction. Emphasizing the time and even the energy efficiency of Minspeak may be a way to help the student understand the value of using Minspeak codes over spelling.

1. Set aside a short period of social chat time with the student (only 5 minutes), telling the student when you will be around to talk to him/her and that you only have a few minutes to talk. The agenda of what to talk about should be set by the student and important to the student so that, if he/she wants to speak with you, the student will need to shift from spelling to Minspeak codes in order to complete the conversation.
2. Do a version of the show “Name That Tune,” changing it to “Build That Sentence in _____ hits.” Write out simple sentences with the target words (target word = “where” - sentence examples = “Where is it?” “Where are we going?” “Where did you put it?” “Do you know where it is?”) A game format would be especially good for schools or facilities where there are several students with devices. Most people enjoy a little competition, so this encourages them to learn the codes to become more efficient communicators.
3. Music can be a fun way to practice learning your Minspeak codes – and always a strategy for emphasizing speed and efficiency because music is all about tempo and rhythm. Try using musical lyrics and song lines, having the student retrieving the codes for key words while the song is playing. The student has to use codes quickly in order to “say/rap” the words in time with the music.

Promote Self-Teaching

The more that the student can take personal responsibility for learning the Minspeak codes, the more he/she can be proud of acquiring a new skill. Learning to spell might have been a major accomplishment for the student, and learning Minspeak can be an equally valuable personal achievement.

1. Is Icon Tutor turned ON in the device? Encourage the student to use Icon Tutor to “look up” words he/she wants to say with Minspeak codes. Reinforce self-teaching so that the student takes more responsibility for making the shift from spelling to Minspeak.
2. Does the student have any kind of visual support materials to help him/her learn Minspeak codes? Use the PASS software and develop materials for the student to use as homework. You can check the LAM data to find out if the student has done his/her homework. Also, there are products on the market, such as visual wall charts, that show the top 300 – 400 core words and their Minspeak codes. Gail Van Tatenhove sells one product called Natural Aided Language Boards for \$50 for a CD. You could print any board on the CD and post it in the student’s home environment, encouraging him/her to self-teach more Minspeak codes.

Utilize Device Features

There are features and settings in a Minspeak device that can make spelling easier/harder as a primary language representation method. Generally, we want to make going to/from spelling a fast and easy process for individuals who primarily communicate with Minspeak. But, for students who are overly dependent on spelling, we want to make it more inconvenient to spell core words.

1. What are your settings for Auto-Spell and Spell-One-Word? By turning Auto-Spell OFF, the student is required to select GO TO SPELL to start spelling. By turning Spell-One-Word ON, the device will shift back to Minspeak after the student spells one word, encouraging the student to go back to using Minspeak codes. Find “windows of time,” mutually agreed upon by the student, when you disable auto-spell.
2. Is the student continuing to spell select core words, even though you know he/she knows the code? Does the student usually get these spelled core words through Word Prediction? If yes, consider turning OFF word prediction, or as a last resort, removing these words from the Word Predictor. Again, consider mutually agreed upon windows of time to turn off Word Prediction.
3. During teaching times, consider hiding the GO TO SPELL key, thus preventing the student from being able to shift to spelling. This has been used as a last desperate measure in order to re-train motor patterns for going to spelling. Also, moving the GO TO SPELL key to a different location on the device helps break the motor pattern. A shift in the motor pattern makes the student think about going to spelling instead of unconsciously spelling.
4. Vocabulary Builder is a fantastic feature available in the Vantage Lite (version 5.05) and Eco2 (version 2.06) that allow you to focus on specific vocabulary that is available in the Minspeak application program being used. Using the LAM data, you could create a Sequence Set for all the words spelled by the client in the previous day, week or month. The student can turn Vocabulary Builder on or off independently to practice the targeted spelled words.