

## Lexical versus Language Development: Their Roles in AAC

Bruce Baker  
Dan Phillips

Standardized tests in the field of speech and language exert pressure on professionals to emphasize nouns. Tests for young children focus on noun identification. Basal or entry scores often require five or more consecutive noun identifications. Functional core vocabulary, however, is not noun rich. Clinicians are systematically directed toward noun teaching as opposed to language teaching to prepare students for success on standardized tests. Core words are rarely used as stimuli or responses. A noun focus may be appropriate for typically developing children but may ignore both the needs and the abilities of augmented communicators.

Analysis of toddler and preschool language reveals that 80% of a child's speech is made up of core vocabulary. This vocabulary has limited noun usage. Pronouns (I, me, mine, you, your, it) and demonstratives (this, that) perform diverse pragmatic and semantic functions including social control, affirmation, and establishing joint attention. Over 90 percent of toddler vocabulary is represented by fewer than 30 core words (Banajee, 2003). One hundred core functional words comprise 73 percent of preschool language usage (Beukelman, 1989). Recorded conversations of adolescents about food use only 2.2 percent unique fringe vocabulary (Balandin, 1997).

Speech Pathologists (SLPs) are trained to work with individuals who demonstrate a delay in language development or disorders of language. Depending on the work environment, an SLP can work with a variety of clients from young age to older clients, from developing language skills to traumatic brain injuries to stroke patients. In working with preschool children, many SLPs might work in tandem with a school or early start program, utilizing vocabulary and concepts directed by the teaching staff.

Typically, standardized assessments are used not only to qualify a student or client for therapy, but to direct therapeutic intervention and goal areas. A review of standardized assessments in the field of speech and language reveal that there is a strong emphasis on noun labeling as an early stage of language development, *e.g.*, *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test* (Dunn, 1997) and *Preschool Language Scale* (Zimmerman, 2002). Despite the fact that core vocabulary often comprises a large portion of a preschooler's vocabulary, many commonly used assessment tools for young children focus almost exclusively on noun identification and labeling. The references contain many other commonly used standardized tests which exhibit a strong emphasis on nouns. Core words are rarely used as stimuli or responses, in fact use of circumlocution and describing a noun often results in a decrease in a student's score.

The noun emphasis in standardized tests does more than fail to measure the language skills of an augmented communicator. It also directs the attention of clinicians and teachers toward noun instruction and away from core vocabulary. Core words are essential in the mastery of semantic roles,

early syntax (1 and 2 word phrases), basic morphemes, and question structures -- Brown's Stages I through III (Brown, 1973).

A clinician working with an augmented communicator must be aware that assessments may not reveal a student's full language potential and instead may misdirect instructional goals toward context-specific nouns. Noun development cannot be ignored, but it is crucial to address a student's need for core vocabulary, an area that may not be reflected in commonly used assessment batteries.

### **Bibliography**

American Guidance Service, Inc. (1997); *Expressive Vocabulary Test*, AGS, 4201 Woodland Road, Circle Pines, MN

Balandin, S. & Iacono, T. (1999); Adolescent and Young Adult Vocabulary Usage, *Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)*, Volume 14, No. 3, September.

Banajee, M., Dicarlo, C., & Stricklin, S. B. (2003); Core vocabulary determination for toddlers. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)*, Vol. 19, No. 1

Beukelman, D., Jones, R., Rowan, M. (1989); *Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)*, Vol. 5, No. 4

Brown, R. (1973); A First Language, *The Early Stages*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts,

Coplan, J. (1993); *Early Language Milestone Scale*; PRO-ED, Shoal Creek Blvd., Austin, TX

Dunn, L. M.; Dunn, L. M. & Dunn, D. M. (1997); *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – Third Edition*; AGS 4201 Woodland Road, Circle Pines, MN

Newcomer, P. L. & Hammill, D. D. (1991); *Test of Language Development*; PRO-ED, 8700 Shoal Creek Blvd., Austin, TX

Rossetti, L., (1990); *The Rossetti Infant-Toddler Language Scale*, LinguiSystems, Inc., 3100 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. East Moline, IL

Wiig, E. H., Secord, W., & Semel, E. (1992); *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals – Preschool*; The Psychological Corporation, 19500 Bulverde Road, San Antonio, TX

Zimmerman, I. L., Steiner, V. G., & Pond, R. E. (2002); *Preschool Language Scale – Fourth Edition*; The Psychological Corporation, 19500 Bulverde Road, San Antonio, TX