

## Vocabulary Selection and Simple Systems

Julie Maro, M.A. CCC/SLP  
aacintervention.com

Over the past several years, there has been an explosion of simple voice output systems that have come on the market at affordable prices. These devices range from single message systems to those capable of holding several overlays or levels of vocabulary. The lower prices of these devices make them an attractive addition to many equipment lending libraries. One of the significant factors contributing to the success of these trial loans is appropriate vocabulary selection.

Despite its importance, few professionals receive formal training in how to select appropriate vocabulary for augmentative communication systems. Therefore, many choose initial vocabulary reflective of a person's basic needs such as "eat", "drink" and "bathroom". On countless occasions, my colleagues and I have encountered equipment returned to our lending libraries with overlays containing these three vocabulary items. The consumer satisfaction surveys accompanying these returns almost invariably state that the trial was unsuccessful. Often the consumer is blamed for not being motivated to use the particular system. Based on these "unsuccessful" uses of voice output, individuals are often branded as "not appropriate" or "not ready" for voice output.

Although it is true that all of us have to eat, drink and go to the bathroom on a regular basis, how many of us announce this publicly to others? For the child or adult who has physical challenges, times to meet these basic needs are typically built into their daily schedule and happen regardless of whether they request them or not. Therefore, there is often little or no motivation to communicate these types of messages.

Motivation is one of the keys to successful vocabulary selection and use. Especially in the initial stages of trying an augmentative system, opportunities to engage in fun and meaningful exchange should abound. One of the ways to facilitate this is to sit down with the individual and those who know him or her well and brainstorm all the things that they enjoy. Each of these enjoyable activities can be written on an individual Post-It note. Once an exhaustive inventory of these items has been generated, they can be moved around and placed in priority order. Considerations when prioritizing should include: how frequently the activity occurs and the availability of staff/family support for teaching vocabulary use at that time.

Once the vocabulary has been selected, consideration should be given to the voice output system that will support it. Does the device allow for only a single message or will it hold multiple messages? Examples of motivating vocabulary with might occur on a single message voice output system for young children could include: tickle me, rub my back, bounce me up and down.

Devices that allow for sequenced vocabulary such as the Step-by-Step from AbleNet can be programmed with social scripts. An excellent resource for how to do this is the bookette *Can We Chat? Co-Planned Sequenced Social Scripts* by Caroline Musselwhite and Linda Burkhart copyright 2001. Information on this publication and concept can be found at [aacintervention.com](http://aacintervention.com) and [lburkhart.com](http://lburkhart.com). Social scripts include interactive vocabulary designed to allow individuals to engage in conversation. Scripts topics might include sequenced joke telling, story telling and sharing life experiences. For example, an individual may have the following on their sequenced system: "Hi, How are you?", "You look nice today", "What did you do last night?", "That sounds interesting", "See you later".

When selecting vocabulary for systems that accommodate multiple messages, consider whether the chosen vocabulary can be combined. Although this may look quite challenging when faced with a four-message system, it can be done very successfully. For example when selecting vocabulary for playing trucks, you might include: "truck", "go", "fast" and "slow". You can then show them how to use they system by modeling combinations such as: "truck go" and "truck go fast" and "slow truck" while speaking to them.

Showing the individual how to use the vocabulary is extremely important especially in the beginning stages. Think of how we talk to a baby for at least a year before ever expecting an intelligible word from them. Considering this normal language analogy, why then would we consider it possible to place an augmentative system in front of a child and expect them to use it without ever being shown how?

Showing clinicians, teachers, family members and caregivers how to select appropriate vocabulary for simple systems will greatly increase the chances that an individual will be successful with an augmentative communication system. One of the ways this can be done is to include example overlays with systems that get checked out of lending libraries. Providing these kinds of examples and using motivating vocabulary on simple augmentative communication systems is one of the keys to unlocking the communication potential of the individuals we serve.

**Note:**

The following page contains a single sheet that accompanies the Tech-Four when it leaves our lending library. This is the cover sheet to a set of overlays which are spiral bound together for possible use during a rental period.

# Tech-Four Overlays & Ideas

Greetings! In order to make your trial of this system more successful, I've included a number of sample overlays that you can copy and try out with your students. This is only a starting point. Any of these pages can be modified or changed to better meet the needs of your students.

Premises:

- Vocabulary is more motivating when it:
  - Represents different parts of speech
  - Can be combined
- Even simple systems can be used for a wide range of activities

When using these, please remember to:

- **Model** the use of the vocabulary for the students
  - Show them how fun it can be to communicate these messages!
- **Expand** student utterances
  - If students are using single messages, show them how to expand this by demonstrating the use of two symbols!
- **Collect Data**
  - Want to justify purchase of this system for your school and/or student? - There is no better way than proving it works by collecting objective data
  - How?
    - Make multiple copies of the overlay
    - Take out a fresh copy of the overlay and date it each time you use it
    - Develop a data keeping key e.g. "+" = correct unprompted response, "M" = correct after model

## HELP!!!

If you are having trouble with the system:





- Call Mayer-Johnson at: 1-800-588-4548 or
- Call AMDi at: 1-888-353-AMDI

Need additional intervention ideas?

Contact: Julie Maro @ CESA 10 715 720-2162 or  
[jmaro@cesa10.k12.wi.us](mailto:jmaro@cesa10.k12.wi.us) or [julie@aacintervention.com](mailto:julie@aacintervention.com)

Here is an example of one of the overlays which accompanies the Tech-Four loaner device:

Taking Attendance - idea from  
Linda Burkhardt's Book Total AAC in the  
Early Childhood Classroom

he 	she 
is here 	is not here 

These AAC materials are the property of the author and are not to be reproduced without permission.  
© 2002 Julie Maro, Ph.D. All rights reserved. For more information, contact Julie Maro at (415) 435-4942.  
Developed by: Julie Maro for the author of AAC in the Early Childhood Classroom