

2018 CAAC DISCUSSION FORUM DISCUSSION

Theory-based Vocabulary Research and AAC Issues

Filip Loncke, University of Virginia

This Discussion Forum aims at raising and exploring some fundamental issues related to the existing best (or chosen) practices of vocabulary introduction and exposure for AAC users. The discussion should (1) lead to a theory-based inspection of some of the underlying assumptions and reasoning more apparent, and (2) provide information (or viewpoints) that are contributions to cognitive and psycholinguistic sciences (beyond AAC).

For decades, within psycholinguistics and developmental psychology, there has been a fascination around the question “where do words come from”? Are the first words also the first manifestation of an internal linguistic growth, or are words expressions embedded in proto-linguistic structures. Recent research (Carvalho et al., 2018) suggests first word emergence can be highly influenced by individual visuo-motor experiences (and not solely by joint attention). This is one more point of evidence that describes that the task of lexical development lays within the child exploring (and labeling) the environment and structuring the interactive experience. Children identify (often through fast mapping) words in meaningful events and build a lexicon. Within a few years, the child’s lexicon resemble that of an adult, with a limited number of high frequency (core) and highly functional (also core) words and an ever growing body of (ultimately thousands) of less frequently used words. This relationship between high and low frequency words had been described back in the 1930s by Zipf (Zipf’s law).

It is important to note that the statistical prevalence of a relatively limited number of high frequency words is not the result of a preconceived educational curriculum that is steered by parents or caregivers. The distinction between high frequency words and low frequency emerges in a natural way.

Within AAC intervention, we are faced with a number of questions: (1) Can children who rely on AAC follow the same developmental course as typical children and develop a wide lexicon within which the distinction between core words and non-core words is a natural outcome of frequency of use and functionality, (2) Does the use of AAC imply a limitation of the number of words that are available and learnable (and is this a good thing), (3) Does the use of AAC necessitate to modify the roles taken by learner/developer and caregiver, as a result of which word acquisition becomes the result of a pre-planned lexical curriculum conceived by the educator and programmed within the used AAC tools?

These questions need to be addressed in two ways. Firstly, are they valid? (do they represent a reality?). Secondly, if valid do they fundamentally modify the conditions of lexical development in children who use AAC?

The answers to these questions may be helpful in assessing our clinical practices when it comes to vocabulary in AAC as well as lead to more specific linguistically posed hypothesis testing for research.

Carvalho, P., C. Vales, C. Fausey, & L. Smith. (2017). Novel names extend for how long preschool children sample visual information. *Journal of Exceptional Child Psychology*.

Zipf, G. (1935). *The psycho-biology of language: an introduction to dynamic philology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.