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## Just Like Ogres, Core Language Has Many Layers

When someone from a school or clinic holds up a communication system and says, “We will start to teach your child Core Language, it’s the most functional approach.” You might think, “Umm, okay? I hope this doesn’t involve sit ups because I am so tired and sore already.” This core is a little bit different!

Some of the most common core language words include want, go, help, eat, play, stop, get, see, good, bad, all done, more, up, down and so on. The [AAC Language Lab](#) is one of my favorite lists. They did the work of combining all other lists for us in one resource!

From a school or clinical perspective, a communication system using picture symbols for core language is a great place to start because:

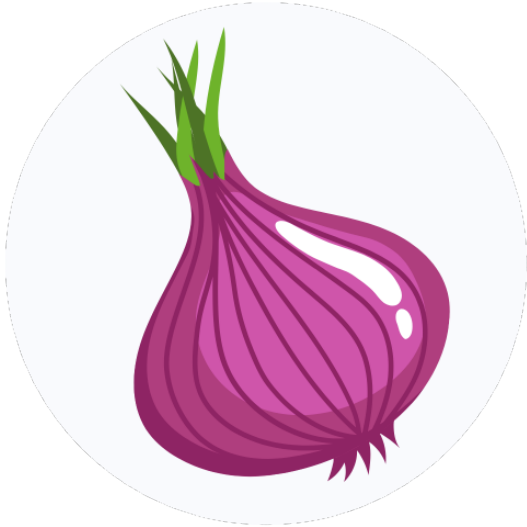
- Core words are about the 100 most common words in most languages, so you have a lot of chances to use them!
- Most of the words are highly functional.
- They overlap with sight words.
- They are easy to model.
- They are a great place to start or make the transition from a lower tech system.



Core language can get you pretty far during your day with an early communicator. Words such as, “Help!” “Stop” “More” and “All done” say a lot, but nothing is foolproof. When you are standing in the middle of a store trying to help a frustrated person who has a specific need, you might feel that other kind of core fatigue. This is where Personal Core comes in.

## Personal Core Layer

Personal Core includes words that are commonly used to meet the needs of the student, but aren't part of that first 100 list. They are highly functional and very motivational words. I have supported families and school teams in programming some of these words on devices. For example words like: "soy sauce" "red sucker" (it needed to be a single button, or it wasn't the same as red+sucker) and a page filled with classroom staff and students' pictures and names (so the student could tattle).



The ability to model and expand communication opportunities will be greater when you have more to communicate. The communication user has more to talk about when they have access to common, personal language on their communication device. It's tempting to only focus on the personal core layer. However, the downside to this is how many times during a day do you use soy sauce? Just like Donkey said, "This is another one of those onion things."

I encourage communication partners, educators, therapists, and parents to stick to the principles of core language and motor memory for emergent, alternative communication system users. In addition, model personal core during the day. Here are some examples of categories to target with personal core:

- Identity and Self Expression: This includes personal information like family members' and friends' names, preferences, personal history, and other information "about me."
- Self-Regulation: This includes feelings, body parts and ability to communicate discomfort or pain.
- Academic Access: This includes letters, numbers, written language, schedules, pre-reading and reading.

## Motor Memory Layer

The next layer to discuss is motor memory. We can learn to use buttons based on them staying in the same place. Remember when the iPhone updated, and it changed the settings menu? Me neither, I also use an Android. So, when the iPad menu changed and I had to find Accessibility Settings I was really lost!

The same thing happens if icons move around or displays change. A student has to rebuild motor connections in addition to learning new meaning, grammar, and social functions. This is one of the reasons

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your devices are set with considerably more vocabulary than you feel comfortable with initially. It's like buying shoes a size bigger than your kid will wear because they are growing so fast!! Important factors are taken into consideration like gross/fine motor capacity and visual acuity. We want to err on the side of giving the student access to the most language possible for long term motor planning purposes.

### ***What if this Onion has too Many Layers for My Child?***

Everything is based on each student's readiness, but we can always model core language and system communication. By 18 months, babies have heard 4380 hours of spoken language, but we don't expect them to be fluent speakers. If communication system learners only see core language modeled for communication for 20-30 minutes 2 times each week in preschool, school, or speech, it will take 84 YEARS for them to have the same exposure to this type of language. Work with your school team or clinical provider to determine how to meet your child's needs. Address the layers of Core Language and Personal Core and don't be afraid of the layers!

### ***But Onions and Communication Systems Make Me Cry!***

This is hard! Your child isn't developing like other children and you may see that difference most days. The small steps you see them take can be overshadowed by the tears and frustration. Breakdowns in communication can be so overwhelming. Every day there is something new to learn and keep track of. I suggest that you eat this onion one bite at a time (figuratively and literally, they are potent!!). Tackle one word at a time to target with your child and family. In my organization we call this strategy: Word of the Week or WOW! You can tailor the timeline based on your family's needs.

WOW gives you one thing to manage when it comes to communication. It also provides your child a target, instead of trying to learn 10 different words at a time. This can be difficult when you are also working on managing sensory information, new foods, transitions to new environments and tolerating sleep schedules. Instead, you are adding one functional word at a time.



Where do you start? Give them a way to get a break! "All Done!" Teaching "All Done" also lets you communicate when something has ended before transitioning to the next task. After this, I suggest teaching "More." You can move down the list from there. The key is to use the language in a way

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that is systematic and builds. Keep using the words you have already learned, just like verbal language. Introduce Personal Core as you are moving through words of the week.

## Communication is the Core

Teaching your child to use Core Language, including the personal vocabulary can seem overwhelming. Starting by modeling a word or two at a time, honoring the role of motor planning, and remembering children observe language for years before they use it, can decrease pressure on you as a caregiver.

## Resources

[The WOWSR Concept](#)

[AAC Language Lab](#)

[UPC and Assistive Technology](#)