Common Errors When Using PECS

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), developed at the Delaware Autistic Program by Andy Bondy and Lori Frost, is a no tech system for augmenting communication. It was developed with students with autism in mind and, therefore, has some unique features that make it a good choice of systems to use. With PECS, the first communications are about things the student is really interested in, so the establishing operation is high. It begins with errorless training. The student receives immediate and frequent reinforcement while learning the new task of exchanging a picture for the desired item.

The first phase of the training consists of teaching the student to initiate. The learner is “tempted” by seeing the desired item, but must remove the icon and give it to the communicative partner. With other systems, the student is often trained to respond to prompts such as “What do you want” or “Show me” with no training in initiation of communication. Later phases of PECS train the learner to respond to these questions, but the first step is to teach the responsibility for initiating communication.

Another strong feature of PECS is that it relies on the learner engaging a communicative partner rather than just requesting and hoping someone is paying attention as is often seen with picture pointing systems. With the exchange of the icon, the student may need to persist in gaining joint attention to get someone to receive the communication, whereas with a point the student could actually make the request and no one be aware a request has been made.

Because PECS is low cost, requires no prerequisite skills, and is easily accessible to schools, many service providers who work with students with autism have chosen to implement the system. Pyramid Educational Consultants, the service which markets PECS and the training workshops associated with it, have found several common errors trainers make when implementing PECS. These common errors follow.

You might not be doing PECS if…

- You always start by asking, “What do you want?”
- The student’s communication system stays in the speech room.
- You think phases are in reference to the moon.
- You use the communication system only to indicate what activity is happening next.
- You insist on speech.
- You take some pictures off when the items are not available.
- You carry the system around with you.
- You take the system away from the student.
**Phase 1: Learning to Initiate**
Are you attempting to use only one trainer for this portion? Remember you need a back prompter for the first two phases, but you should not be prompting the reach. The back prompter helps circumvent the possibility of prompt dependency.

Have you really identified powerful reinforcers the student will request? Is the reinforcer being delivered immediately upon request? Do not insist on speech.

**Phase 2: Learning to Nag**
Don’t skip this phase! It is about teaching the student to be persistent and to travel a distance to engage a communicative partner. Be sure to use multiple partners in multiple environments with multiple reinforcers across time. The system should be used all day long. Once again, do not insist on speech, but honor it if it is really done as an exchange and is the same mean length of utterance (MLU) as with the PECS. Do not reinforce minimal speech.

**Phase 3: Discrimination**
Use a highly reinforcing item paired with a non-reinforcing item. Use correspondence checks to see if the meaning is really there by physically holding out both items once the request has been made. The learner should take the item that has been requested. Use the Model-Prompt-Switch-Repeat (MPSR) four-step error correction technique (see box). Note that horizontal discrimination has been said to be more difficult than vertical. A sloppy presentation of the icons increases discrimination.

**Phase 4: Sentence Building**
Always fluctuate between the level of mastery and the level of training. Start with the “I want” icon on the strip, but soon have the student put it on the strip before putting on the requested item. Use physical assistance to guide left-to-right progression as the strip is filled. Add attributes as soon as the sentence strip is mastered. Do not insist on speech. Use the error correction technique of “back stepping” (i.e., go back to the last step completed correctly and provide prompts from that point).

**Phase 5: Responding to the Question “What do you want?”**
Continue to maintain spontaneous requesting during this phase, but build toward commenting. Don’t repeat the question when you have asked it. Be careful not to pause too long, so you are teaching question answering rather than delayed prompting. Once again, do not insist on speech but honor it if it is at the same mean length of utterance (MLU) as communication with PECS. If the student can use sentences with PECS, then speech also must be in sentences.

**Phase 6: Commenting “What do you see?”**
Start commenting by asking questions, but soon fade the question. Use the attributes that have been learned in the requesting phases. This is commenting not requesting, so you do not give the item that has been commented on. Intersperse opportunities to request and to respond to “What do you want?” by giving the item requested. Teach the discrimination skills for differentiating between the sentence starters “I want” and “I see.” Students usually comment on unique, unusual changes, so keep the training interesting.
Four-Step Error Correction

The four-step error correction technique of MPSR can be used up to three times consecutively. If there is no success after that, leave the session or drop the distracter and return to phase two. Give at least 30 opportunities for discriminating between an item not preferred and a highly preferred item over a 2-week period, but continue to reinforce for phases one and two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Instructor shows cookie picture</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prompt</td>
<td>Instructor holds open hand near cookie picture (Student gives cookie picture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switch</td>
<td>Instructor distracts with command like “Touch your nose” (Student touches nose)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat</td>
<td>Instructor offers both items (Student gives cookie picture. Instructor says, “Take it.” Student takes cookie.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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References

