

Picture Exchange Communication System

Here is a detailed explanation of the **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)**, including examples and its relevance for use by **teachers in a special school** setting.

What is PECS?

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an evidence-based augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) system developed by Lori Frost and Andy Bondy in 1985. It is designed to teach functional communication skills to individuals who are non-speaking or minimally verbal, including many students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disabilities, or complex communication needs.

PECS uses pictures or symbols (typically on Velcro-backed cards within a communication book or board) that students exchange with a communication partner to express needs, wants, and eventually more complex ideas.

Why Use PECS in a Special School?

PECS is particularly effective in special school settings because it:

- Provides an accessible, concrete form of communication for students with limited verbal speech
- Helps reduce frustration and challenging behaviours caused by communication breakdown
- Encourages spontaneous communication, rather than reliance on prompting
- Is portable and adaptable to different curriculum areas, settings, and routines
- Promotes increased independence in requesting and interaction
- Can be used alongside other communication methods, including Key Word Sign, PODD, or speech development strategies

The Six Phases of PECS

Phase	Description	Classroom Example
1. How to Communicate	Student learns to exchange a picture for a desired item	Student hands teacher a picture of bubbles to receive bubbles
2. Distance and Persistence	Student uses PECS across settings and with different people	Student uses PECS with a teacher aide on the playground to request swing
3. Picture Discrimination	Student chooses from two or more symbols to request specific items	Chooses between picture of juice and water to request preferred drink
4. Sentence Structure	Student constructs simple sentences using a sentence strip (e.g., "I want + item")	"I want + playdough" placed on a sentence strip and exchanged
5. Answering Questions	Student learns to answer "What do you want?" using PECS	Teacher asks, student constructs response and exchanges
6. Commenting	Student learns to comment and respond (e.g., "I see," "I hear")	"I see + bird" during nature walk

PECS in the Curriculum and Daily Routines

a. Communication Goals

- Requesting toys, food, breaks
- Protesting or rejecting
- Gaining attention
- Commenting or sharing interests

b. Literacy and Numeracy

- Requesting books, counting items with number cards, labelling shapes or letters

c. Transitions and Schedules

- Requesting "toilet," "outside," or "quiet space" during transition routines

d. Social Skills

- Initiating interactions with staff or peers (e.g., “I want to play,” “Hi”)

Implementation Considerations for Teachers

- Use consistent language and reinforcement to support learning
- Model use of the symbols while the student observes
- Work with speech-language pathologists or specialist AAC teams for assessment and ongoing planning
- Keep materials accessible and relevant to student interests (laminated cards, portable books)
- Pair PECS with positive reinforcement to strengthen communication attempts

Summary

PECS empowers students with disabilities to:

- Communicate meaningfully
- Reduce frustration-based behaviours
- Access the curriculum
- Engage socially with staff and peers

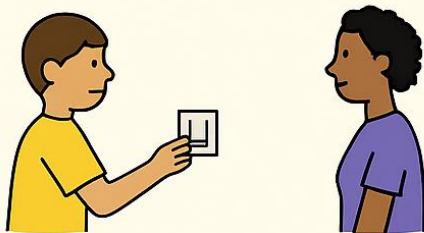
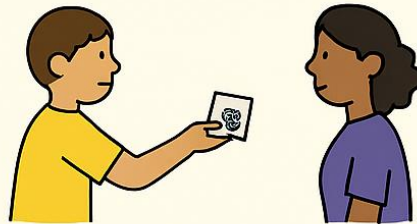
In a special school, PECS supports not only the development of language and communication, but also enhances engagement, emotional regulation, and independence—key outcomes in both individualised and curriculum-aligned education plans.

PECS PHASES

PHASE 1

HOW TO COMMUNICATE

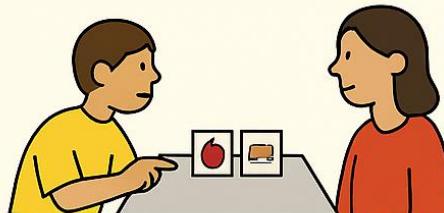
The student learns to exchange a picture for an item or an activity.



PHASE 2

DISTANCE AND PERSISTENCE

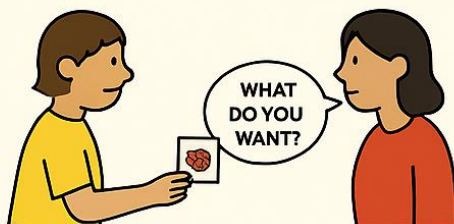
The student uses PECS in different locations, with different people.



PHASE 3

PICTURE DISCRIMINATION

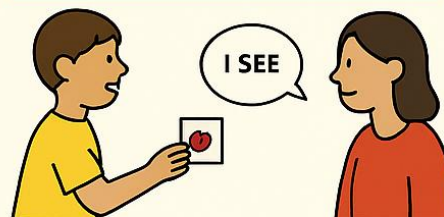
The student selects from two or more pictures to request something.



PHASE 4

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

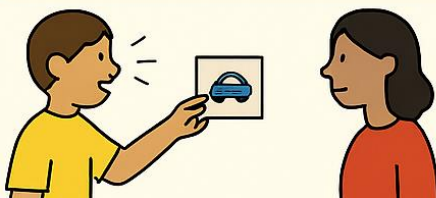
The student constructs simple sentences on a sentence strip.



PHASE 5

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

The student uses PECS to answer the question "What do you want?"



PHASE 6

COMMENTING

The student learns to comment about things in their environment.