

Tests have always played an important role in the lives of our children, but with alignment, chunk testing, and the ACTAP form of standardized testing, resulting from the NCLB Act, today as never before students * and schools for that matter * are being evaluated directly from test performance. Also, tests that our students are presented with today are not cut and dry, ABC, mark the best answer formats as we saw in the past, but have a greater emphasis on essay, opinion, and interpretation, requiring higher order thinking skills and organization. A writing test, for instance , may consist of only one or two open response prompts for the student to explore and expand. With a limited cue requiring so much performance, each word counts.

(slide 2-) With this format, not only does the student need to be aware of the content and facts, but it is imperative that a student comprehends big picture, that is the point of the question: what it is test question asking, where it is going , how can I best organize my thoughts and ideas, and how do I respond properly for maximum benefit.

It is my experience with 5th through 8th grade students with language learning differences, that students with language impairments frequently do not accurately interpret chapter and test questions. When asked to compare

a tornado to a hurricane, a student may respond with a unilateral answer such as “ a hurricane has 125 mile per hour winds”, or “ a hurricane has 125 mile per hour winds , and a tornado doesn’t. When a student is asked to evaluate a book, they may begin describing the characters or plot in detail, but not understand that the question is asking them to provide the strengths and weaknesses or positive and negatives about the book. Missing the point of the question dramatically reduces the ability of a student to succeed in the test situation regardless of familiarity with the subject matter.

Several years ago I began working with test word activities with 7th and 8th grade students, which I felt totally justified in doing because by I certainly believed by these middle school grades, these students should be somewhat facile in using these words and concepts. However when I moved to intermediate school, I wondered if the activities were still appropriate, especially due to poor performances on pretests.

(slide 3)To evaluate the efficacy of working with students on these concept words, I interviewed several 5th grade teachers, who said they certainly would expect these words to be in their students’ working vocabulary. I also spoke with my literacy coach who produced several lists containing these words, and many more that are designated for 5th and 6th grade. Then I decided to conduct a limited experiment with a sampling of

approximately 45 5th and 6th grade students in the regular education setting to see if they also struggled with test word prompts. I distributed two questions to each student with strict instructions to the teacher to offer no assistance in the activity. Because I was evaluating the responses of students based on test prompt words, not the factual material, I made the questions very general from material with which any student would be familiar. (slide 4) I chose the test prompt words: define, illustrate, justify, predict, compare, contrast, classify, trace, and evaluate. The same prompts were distributed to a small sampling of special education students. (slide 5)

My findings demonstrated a remarkable difference in the ability of regular education students to understand and interpret test questions. For the most part, regular education students easily answered the questions in the direction that the question was intended: for instance:

So how to teach students to recognize, comprehend, and apply open response action words. I developed an approach that I would consider to be multisensory with emphasis on questioning, visualizing, and developing memory strategies.

(slide 7) I begin with identification: pass out words, match to definition

Match to answers with real life situations. – cafeteria

Any review games, board games, etc, where you can match words to definitions.

To assess comprehension: “ If a test question asks you to _____ would _____ be a complete answer?”

(slide 8) I have students make concept cards with their own pictures to show compare/ contrast/define, etc. One autistic student I have...

And finally I like to wrap up with a Jeopardy/ game activity that will ask the student to remember, define, comprehend and apply.

100 – match the student’s concept card to the word

200 – student tells the definition, or chooses the definition from 2 or 3 choices

300 – Student answer “It a test question asks you to ----- would _____ be a complete answer?”

400-500 - Answer questions that begin with test words.

In conclusion , all students are exposed to “test word” prompts in daily instruction, in text books and in curriculum and standardized testing, but it is clear that special education students do not always absorb the meaning of

these higher order thinking words as part of their working vocabulary and that specific sequential instruction can be beneficial and even essential to success in the classroom.