Teachers' Corner

Strategies for Teaching Writing to Students with Extensive Support Needs

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Writing instruction can be difficult to teach since students with Extensive Support Needs often have speech language impairments as well. Getting students to generate ideas and sentences when they lack vocabulary or have impeding behaviors can be overwhelming. However, writing instruction is important and gives students an additional way to communicate their thoughts, opinions, feelings, and memories.

In planning effective writing instruction, teachers must differentiate between writing and handwriting. Writing is the communication of ideas while handwriting is the act of producing symbols on paper. If a student has fine motor deficits, this does not mean that they cannot engage in writing. Writing is simply using symbols to communicate; think hieroglyphics, emojis, and picture symbols even. Writing can be fun in the classroom since there are many ways to do it, while at the same time learning more about your students. Included are two strategies you can use in the classroom tomorrow to get students writing.

Cloze

Cloze procedures give students a sentence stem or a blank for the student to generate a response. It allows the student to take part in writing something more complex than they may independently generate (Bellon-Harn et al, 2004). Cloze can reduce the amount a student must generate in order to prioritize their contribution to the creation of a text. It also allows an instructional group to share a prompt and compare how different students complete a sentence. Cloze writing can be efficient to use in class and pairs well with other strategies such as predictable writing charts and the expanding expression toolkit (Hall & Williams, 2001).

In my unit on bears, students rewrote Brown Bear, Brown Bear by Martin & Carle (1984). I gave students two blanks to identify a color and corresponding animal of their choice, with response boards prepared in advance. For example, "I see a pink flamingo looking at me" (Figure 1).
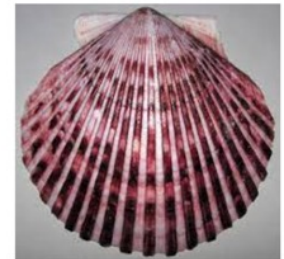

Figure 1

Example Student Product with Cloze Strategy

In our August unit on schools, we wrote simple sentences such as "I use (school item).". Students can fill in with any number of answers, even ones not on my response board. This process connects easily with the steps in predictable writing charts, which have students not just complete a cloze sentence but do more with it, like "be the sentence" where each student takes an index card or post it note and physically arranges the words/people to organize the sentence or making a book with their sentences over the year and creating their own illustrations for what they draft (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020).

Even students with more complex needs can participate in the cloze strategy by using tactiles to represent ideas they want included in the text. For one student with a profound intellectual disability, I used sensorial stems for him to write a paragraph about fall. For example, we presented leaves crunching and a football, let him interact with both items, then placed one at each of his response points (head and left arm). When he made a choice, we added that item

to the story. Figure 2 shows his final product scribed by the paraprofessional.

The cloze strategy gives students a chance to meaningfully engage in writing, while structuring it errorlessly gives

Figure 2

Student Example of Writing with Tactile Stimuli

> **In fall, I like to <u>walk</u> (head switch-shoe for 'walk' hand switch-blanket for 'sleep'). I play in the <u>leaves</u> (head switch-football, hand switch-leaves). I smell <u>grandma cooking</u> (head switch-grandma's voice for 'grandma cooking' hand switch-applesauce). It is <u>getting colder outside</u> (head switch-warmed toy for 'warm by the fire' handswitch ice pack for 'getting colder'). I see <u>pumpkins and falling leaves</u> (headswitch-pumpkin, handswitch-leaves) in autumn.**
>
> **-J___**

them a finished product they can use and practice with as a model of correct sentence structure.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are an evidence-based practice for organizing ideas and are effective across subject areas (Ault & Courtade, 2022). Many skills are embedded in the use of a graphic organizer such as the ability to summarize, categorize, and sequence.

One example of a graphic organizer is the four square. This easy to reproduce graphic organizer is just as it sounds, four squares. The Four Square Writing Method (FSWM) has been effective across grade levels and across content areas (Gould & Gould, 1999). The four squares are used to organize the writing, with the topic placed in the middle and details in the surrounding boxes. One way to use the FSWM is as a Frayer Model to learn vocabulary. A Frayer Model is a graphic organizer that supports learning and describing vocabulary words by examining definitions, characteristics, and example versus non examples (Frayer et al., 1969) (see Figure 3). Another way to use the FSWM is to plan a narrative text. In the center, list the topic along with details to include in an introduction, label the surrounding squares as "first," "next," "then," and "conclusion." Within each section students can list details and then expand them to sentences and paragraphs. For

even the most complex needs, a four square can be used to identify or match items that are included in a category. For example, a laminated file folder with "insects" in the middle and students can sort pictures into the four squares, this can be done errorlessly or to assess a student's ability to categorize (Figure 4).

Graphic organizers can also be virtual. Evmenova et al. (2020) have developed a web based graphic organizer with many supports embedded, including a way to auto-compile a student's writing within the organizer. Within Project WEGO's graphic organizer, students pick their own goals, self-check frequently, and type out their responses all in one place (Evmenova et al., 2018). The technology based graphic organizer (TBGO) they have developed, free for anyone to sign up and use, is focused on opinion writing and can include multiple prompts for student choice. One example of using the TBGO is from a middle school where we used an anchor text about December, seasonal darkness, and holiday lights. We asked students if they preferred the dark or the light and why. I did create additional response options for students as well as made a task analysis for the steps; but with these supports and the ones embedded in the TBGO, students picked an essay and personal writing goal for what they wanted to self-check within their writing, identified their opinion, reasons why they picked that,

Figure 3

Student Example of Scribed Four Square Product

and one to three explanations for that reason. The TBGO gives students an easy-to-follow visual representation with built in support to produce a complete writing piece. The most current version of the web based graphic orga-

nizer is at https://wego.gmu.edu/wego/graphorghtml/graphorg_p.php (Evmenova et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Giving students access to academic curriculum is certainly an important priority and access to writing instruction can and should be included with and embedded into that instruction. Making writing engaging and streamlined for students with extensive support needs is important in expanding their communication options. Try out these diverse ways to get students writing in your class today!

References

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Figure 4
Example of Errorless Four Square
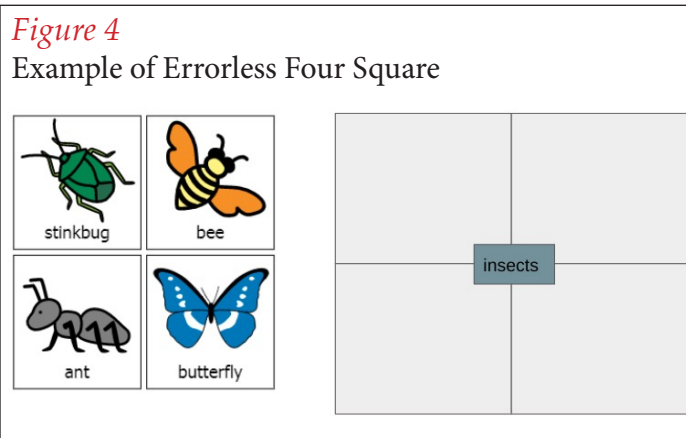
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