

TEACHING LANGUAGE AND COGNITION USING THE “GREAT BRAIN”

“The Great Brain” is a strategy for teaching vocabulary using a thematic language approach. Memory skills are enhanced through this visually organized approach. I explain to the children that this board (see below) is a lot like how our brains organize incoming information. If we put the information in the correct “slot”, it can be more easily retrieved.

The following steps will assist you in making a great brain for your classroom:

1. Cut large poster boards of different colors in half and laminate them.
2. Attach them to a bulletin board or wall according to the diagram. (Use as many as you need according to the number of subcategories. Color coordinate the subcategories for memory assistance).
3. Write on boards with dry erase markers. For younger children, attach laminated pictures to boards, under the title word with tape.
4. Rearrange categories into different subcategories (e.g. arrange animal classifications as in the diagram and then rearrange them into animal habitats: desert, jungle, farm, arctic/Antarctic etc.).

I teach a thematic unit in this way:

1. Have students brainstorm items that fit in a given category and list them on the board.
2. Have students help subcategorize the category.
3. Take items off the list and put them in the correct subcategory.
4. Discuss functions, such as what do you do with a given item (e.g. Tools/hammer/ function is to pound nails).
5. Discuss associations, such as what goes with a given item (e.g. Musical Instruments/bow/ goes with a violin).
6. Discuss similarities and differences between subcategories.
7. Discuss (when appropriate) multiple meanings of words.
8. Discuss attributes of subcategory items.

Sometimes, we play a game called “I am thinking of...” using attributes of items that you list on a “chalkboard” (e.g. color, function, association, category, location, parts or components, size and shape, etc.)

Possible thematic units include:

1. Body (circulatory, skeletal, skin, nervous, muscle)
2. Musical Instruments (string, brass, woodwinds, percussion)
3. Transportation (land, water, air)
4. Tools (kitchen, sewing, custodial/cleaning, gardening, building and repair, etc.)
5. Plants (ferns, trees, grasses, flowers etc.)

ANIMALS					
FISH	REPTILES	AMPHIBIANS	BIRDS	INSECTS	MAMMALS
sharks	lizards	toads	owl	ants	man
goldfish	snakes	frogs	robin	moths	horse
halibut	turtle	newts	pheasant	ladybugs	giraffe