Colourful Semantics

What is Colourful Semantics?

Colourful semantics is an approach that was created by Alison Bryan and is designed to support children develop their understanding of sentence structure and expand the length of their sentences. The structure of a sentence (syntax) is colour coded and then these are linked to their meaning (semantics).

The aim is that children begin by focusing on sentences that contain 2 elements e.g. ‘who’ and ‘doing’ e.g. ‘the boy is running’. Each coloured section does not have to contain only one word but instead these are split into the information that they contain. As children become more confident they then move up through the stages, adding in more colours as they go. Most begin working at 3-4-part sentences but some children may need more support working on 1-2 word phrases. The different sections are generally added to a child’s sentences in the order below, although at the higher (e.g. adjectives onwards) this is less fixed. It is also useful to teach that not all of these need to be included in every sentence e.g. ‘the girl is reading in the kitchen’ does not contain the object element (although it could use ‘the book’).

Who (Subject) – Orange

Doing (Verb) – Yellow

What (Object) – Green

Where (Location)– Blue

Like/Describe (Adjectives) – Purple

When (Time) - Red

How (Adverb) - White

Connect (Connectives) - Pink

Who?

Doing?

What?

Where?

Note: When this system was first created, red was used for the location option, which was then replaced with blue. Most systems have now changed their location section to blue, but older documents may still have this coloured in red.

Children are encouraged to choose the correct item for each option and then place these on a sentence strip that grows as their experience with the system develops. These can be used alongside other visual supports such as Makaton/BSL signs to help reinforce the different concepts.

Generalising Colourful Semantics

They can be brought into the classroom throughout the day such as by underlining/highlighting passages of text in books that children are working on or colour coding elements of PowerPoint slides or documents. The more that children are exposed to these during the day, the more that they become aware of the importance of structuring and organising elements of their sentences.

If a child produces a response that lacks grammatical details then you can use the correct ‘wh-‘question to help them give a more complete answer e.g. ‘where was the boy running?’ to prompt for a location. Modelling these to the child can also help to develop these sentences and reinforce the different structures to them.

Who?

Doing?

Who?

What?

Doing?

Who?

Where?

What?

Doing?

Who?

What?

Doing?

Who?

Where?

Like?

What?

Doing?

Who?

Where?

Like?

How?

What?

Doing?

Who?

Where?

Like?

How?

When?

What?

Doing?

Who?

Where?

Like?

How?

When?

Connect