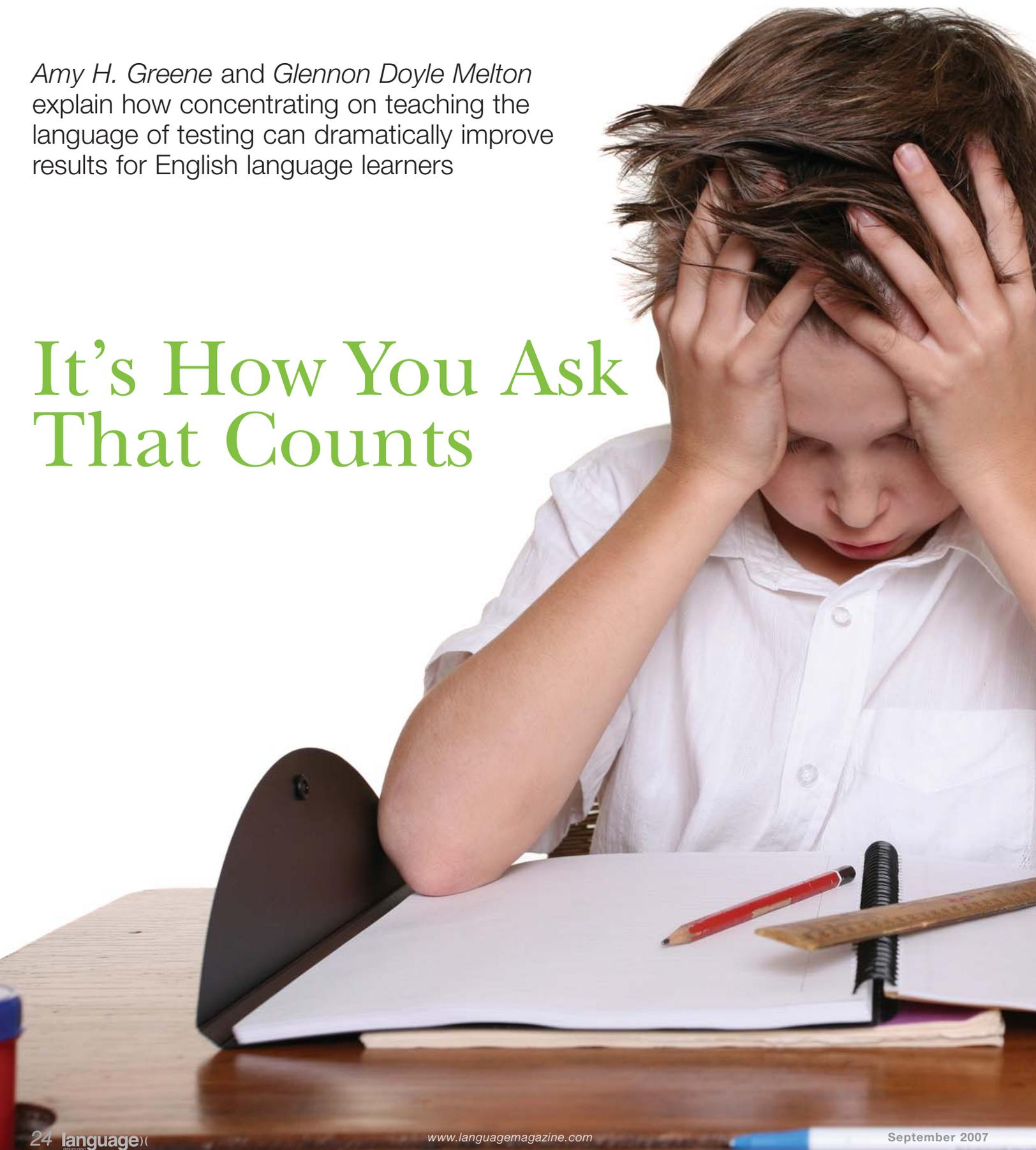


*Amy H. Greene and Glennon Doyle Melton* explain how concentrating on teaching the language of testing can dramatically improve results for English language learners

# It's How You Ask That Counts



### Standardized tests can be daunting for any student,

but for those who speak English as a second language, these tests can pose a set of overwhelming language challenges. By identifying and attacking these particular challenges one at a time, our staff developed an innovative and effective approach to helping ESL students find confidence and success on standardized tests.

A few years ago at Annandale Terrace Elementary, a top-notch Title One school in Fairfax County, VA, our staff learned that we had not made “adequate yearly progress” on our state’s standardized tests as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. This meant that if we did not raise test scores, our students’ parents could decide to bus their children to other schools. Our passionate and progressive staff was stunned and discouraged. We never doubted the potential or abilities of our phenomenal student body— 75 percent of which is made up of English language learners and recent immigrants. Our students are bright, capable, and serious about learning. We knew the problem lay elsewhere, and as a staff we decided to take a long hard look at the disconnect between our students’ abilities and what they were showing on the test.

The first question we asked ourselves was “Why do our students need to pass standardized tests at all?” After much soul searching, we had to admit that federal pressure was not the only reason students needed to learn to pass tests. Test taking is a life skill. While we believed the test was biased against our students, especially those who came from low-income families and/or spoke English as a second language, we also knew that much of their academic and professional futures would be determined by their performance on similarly flawed tests. Many would need to pass tests to get into college and to further their careers.

Professions from chef to certified public accountant to teacher require success on tests just to get a foot in the door. Our stu-

dents, especially those who had recently immigrated and had little experience with our culture, language, or testing system, needed us to help them beat these standardized tests in order to have the advantage they deserved.

After patching our wounded egos, we fell back onto our school’s mantra that we are learners as well as teachers, and interested staff members began meeting to explore the test and discuss more thoughtful test preparation. We chose to focus on the reading test, because our kids needed to pass it for NCLB, and because they were struggling with this test more than with math. We studied released items, took them home, and looked for patterns and challenges. We took the test as if we were students and imagined what they would be thinking as they studied each passage and possible answer. Early in our research one theme recurred... the language on the tests was very different from the language our students and teachers used in the classroom. We discovered that the reading test was hard — not necessarily because of the content being tested, but because of the language that the test writers used. The test was written in English, but not the same English that our students spoke or even the same English that we used to teach. Lucy Calkins calls this formal test language “hyper English.” As more and more of our focus began to shift to the language used on the test, we theorized that language was a strong emphasis in other areas of instruction, so why not in test taking? We taught kids many specific systems of language — for math, science, social studies, daily English language, even manners and etiquette — that were subject and audience specific. For example, our science teachers knew that if they asked a student to read directions for and perform a science experiment without teaching them that “hypothesis” is “science talk” for educated guess, the students would not get past the first direction. We needed to apply the same premise to test taking and teach our students to identify and translate the specific language of the test, which we labeled “Test Talk.” The good news was that translating a foreign language to a familiar one was a skill that most of our students had practiced in their daily lives for years, so all we had to do was show them how to transfer this skill to the test.

In exploring the idea of “test talk” further, we learned that the test writers not only assumed that students understood specific reading concepts, but that they knew myriad synonyms for each reading concept. For example, since our third grade students spent weeks in reading and writing workshops learning about author’s intent and persuasive texts, we were confused and disappointed to see how many of our ESOL students missed the questions on the reading test about persuasive texts. According to third grade test results, our students did not grasp this concept at all. Since our classroom assessments

indicated that they did know how to identify the author’s intent, we decided to take a closer look at the author’s intent questions, specifically the questions about persuasive texts.

We were shocked at what we found. One such question consisted of a passage, clearly written as a persuasive text, and the following question and answer choices:

## Assessment

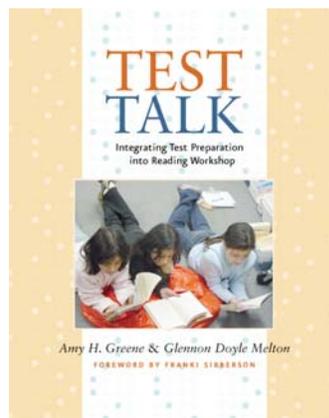
**What was the author/s' main purpose for writing this article?**

- a. To compare
- b. To entertain
- c. To influence
- d. To be humorous

Our students knew how to find the author's intent of a text...but did they know that author's main purpose is "test talk" for author's intent? Our students knew the characteristics of a persuasive text. But did they know that to influence is test talk for "to persuade?" No, we had not used those synonyms in our lessons and so our students were unable to show their knowledge on the test. We imagined their frustration as they read the text, identified it correctly as persuasive, and searched for the word "persuasive" in the answer choices only not to find it. This must have been incredibly defeating, especially for my ESL students who did not have flexibility with the language yet or a bank of synonyms to help them translate the test on their own. In terms of English academic vocabulary, our ESL students only knew the words that their teachers had taught them, and we had not taught them with the language that the test used. We did not even KNOW what language the test used, so of course we were not using it in our lessons!

As we researched our own and other state's tests further we were amazed at the command of the English language and extensive vocabulary that was required in order to answer the simplest of questions. The following list is a sampling of the words the test writers used to describe an author's intent on third and fifth grade reading tests: explain, teach, amuse, prove, encourage, express, advertise, negotiate, inquire, point out, inform, frighten, convince, warn, demonstrate, show, provide suspense, help understand, summarize, introduce, reveal, and define. This is seriously sophisticated vocabulary for elementary school students, and certainly not the type of language that young children, specifically those who do not speak English at home, will just "pick up." All teachers, especially those of ESL students, need to research their own state's test, learn the language it uses, and teach it deliberately and in context with the corresponding content areas. Because the truth is that every standardized test, regardless of its focus, be it math, social studies, or writing, is first a reading and vocabulary test.

As a result of these findings, we developed a new approach to preparing students for tests that helps all students and is particularly helpful for English language learners. The premise of our approach is that a standardized test is its own genre, complete with its own unique format and vocabulary, and that the test genre needs to be taught, explored, and practiced just like any other genre. "Test talk" lessons are woven into the genre unit of study during reading workshops, and by test time, the students are no more anxious about picking up a test and navigating it as they are about sitting down with a book of poetry or a favorite fantasy. In fact, because the lessons are based on concrete experiences and inquiry, our students now perceive test taking as a fun activity, while they used to see it as scary drudgery. How could they not with the dull drills we used to hammer them with in more traditional "test prep" programs?



Our book, *Test Talk* illustrates how to implement these exciting lessons seamlessly into reading workshops, and includes practical ideas to make test taking skills meaningful and fun for students. *Test Talk* also highlights numerous other ways to help ESOL students become more successful on tests, such as exposing them to as much non-fiction as possible to begin closing their gap in background knowledge and vocabulary, practicing specific "active listening" strategies since some ESL students

have the test read to them, and spending time reading over past tests together, discussing, and becoming familiar with the unique formats.

There are so many ways to empower our students on standardized tests, and it makes such a difference to them when, as teachers, we take the time and effort to do it. A fourth grader, Sindi, said it best on the first day of the Virginia SOL (Standards of Learning) test last year, "The test makes me feel how I felt about my soccer team. At the beginning of the season, I used to cry because I didn't know the rules or how to play. That's how I felt about the SOL test last year, too. I cried before I came to school. But this year it feels different. I'm not scared because I know what it's going to be like and I know what the words mean. I also know what to do if I get stuck. I feel excited instead of scared."

Our students went from viewing the test as a stressful mystery, to seeing it as an exciting challenge that they were confident enough to conquer. It was just a matter of their teachers giving them the right tools, and language, to use. **X**

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