

A SMART APPROACH TO READING . . .

This article by Doug Buehl, a Madison East High School teacher in Wisconsin, was originally published in the Wisconsin Education Association newsletter. Doug has granted us permission to share it with you here.

What is it about effective readers that sets them apart from students who struggle with reading? One major difference is that effective readers carry on an internal monologue while they read. It is as if effective readers operate with a split personality. One personality is hard at work with the task at hand--reading a textbook chapter for instance. This is the personality concerned with cognitive activities such as selecting what's important in that chapter, organizing this information in conjunction with what is already known, and preparing to answer a series of questions on the material. It is this personality that gets most of our attention as teachers. We are able to observe the student at work and assess the results. This is the student we see sitting at a desk, interacting with print.

But it is a second personality that separates effective from less effective readers. This second personality works in the background, directing and evaluating all those cognitive activities needed to successfully learn. This personality represents that "inner voice" that issues commands during reading: "Slow down! This is pretty tough going!" "Hold it here! This doesn't make any sense. Better re-read." or "This stuff doesn't look very important, I'll just skim quickly over it and get into the next section." Effective learners talk to themselves.

Researchers call this internal monologue metacognition--the ability to think about your thinking. Metacognition involves a self-awareness of what one is doing and how it is going. It also reflects an ability to switch gears and try something else when things break down, such as when a reading passage is proving particularly difficult. Ineffective readers approach print passively and continue to plow ahead, even if nothing is making sense. But effective readers can also be taught how to activate the control center in their minds that directs their learning.

One strategy that triggers students to think about how their reading is proceeding is SMART

(Vaughan and Estes, 1986). SMART is an acronym for a Self-Monitoring Approach to Reading and Thinking.

THE STRATEGY

SMART is based on the premise that successful reading begins with recognizing what you did and did not understand from a passage. The strategy involves the following steps:

Step 1: Select a passage of four or five paragraphs that you can use to model how you think as you read. Ask the students to follow along as you think aloud about your reading. It may help to enlarge the passage and place it on an overhead transparency. After reading a couple of sentences or a paragraph, comment aloud that you understand this section and make a check mark in the margin. Continue on, and model a part that seems confusing to you. Write a "?" next to this sentence or paragraph. Note to the students that here is something you do not fully understand.

Step 2: When you have finished the entire passage, model how you can paraphrase the material in your own words so that it makes sense to you.

Step 3: Then take a second look at each "?" you recorded in the margin. Brainstorm with the students what you could do to make sense of those parts too. Observe that some of the "?" may now make sense after you have read the entire passage. Change them to check marks. Then list and discuss the students' suggestions for dealing with the remaining question marks.

Step 4: Introduce the SMART protocol to students (see "Read SMART!" box, next page). Model the troubleshooting steps with the passage you are modeling and have the students help you as they use their books. Emphasize that there are strategies you can try before you need to ask for help, and that successful reading means that you clear up each "?".

Step 5: Now have the students read a passage on their own, using the check mark and question mark system. As the students finish, have them work through the SMART protocol with a partner, verbalizing what they understood and didn't understand, and working together through any problems in understanding. Emphasize that

before asking for help, students should be able to (1) specify the source of their problem (an unfamiliar word, an unclear sentence, a need for more examples, etc.) And (2) explain what they did to try to solve their problem.

ADVANTAGES

SMART offers a number of advantages as a teaching strategy:

*Students are provided with a system that helps them actively monitor their reading success.

*Students learn to verbalize what they do

and do not understand in a reading.

*Students are encouraged not to be satisfied until an entire reading makes sense, and they are given specific steps to try to clear up trouble spots.

*Students become involved in putting the material into their own words thus helping them to remember as well as understand it.

*This strategy is adaptable to most subject areas and is appropriate for elementary through high school age students. It is especially effective in cooperative group or tutorial settings.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Vaughan, J. & Estes, T. (1986) *Reading and Reasoning Beyond the Primary Grades*, Allyn and Bacon.

Read SMART!

1. **Read.** Read a section of the text. With a pencil lightly place a “✓” next to each paragraph that you understand. Place a “?” next to each paragraph that has something you do not understand.
2. **Self-Translate.** At the end of each section, stop and explain to yourself what you read, *in your own words*. You can look back at the text as you go over the material.
3. **Troubleshoot.** Go back to each “?” you have made. Try to see if you can now make sense of this paragraph.
 - a. **Re-read** the trouble spot to see if it now makes sense. If it still does not make sense--
 - b. **Pinpoint** the problem by figuring out why you are having trouble:
 - Is it a difficult word or unfamiliar vocabulary?
 - Is it a difficult sentence or confusing language?
 - Is it about things you know very little about?
 - c. **Try** a Fix-Up Strategy.
 - Use the Glossary or some other Vocabulary Aid.
 - Look over the Pictures or other Graphics.
 - Examine other parts of the chapter (Summary, Review Section, Diagrams, Other Features)
 - d. **Explain** to yourself exactly what you do not understand or are confused about.
 - e. **Get Help.** Ask the teacher or a classmate.

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