Using Padlet and S.M.A.R.T. Goals to Enhance Reciprocal Teaching Strategy: Success for English Learners

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Abstract
A teacher-researcher spent the year in Slovakia teaching English to high school students. Reciprocal Teaching Strategy (RTS) was implemented to engage the students in discussing their reading. RTS is a research-based, highly effective strategy encouraging students to participate at a higher level of thinking. It is aimed at increasing students' overall comprehension of the text being read but also challenging the reader to construct deeper inferences, arguments and ideas. When the students used the strategy while reading a text, they also had the luxury of working independently to become more metacognitively aware while also leaning on peers to challenge thinking and clarify any confusing parts. To increase engagement for RTS, Padlet, a web-based tool, was used for the students to write about their RTS roles, goals, and quality of responses to peers. Because Padlet lends itself well to shorter responses, the ELL students viewed the writing as less threatening while we, as facilitators and researchers, could respond to their writing with probing questions, praise points and teach points. Students set S.M.A.R.T. goals to improve the quality of work in the RTS groups.

Keywords
Reciprocal Teaching Strategy, English learners, Padlet, S.M.A.R.T. Goals, teacher research

This article originates from a case study, broad in scope, that examined Reciprocal Teaching Strategy (RTS) used with English Learners (EL) in Slovakia. The data sources for this publication were the open-ended responses to student surveys, students' journals, Padlet (2018) responses, S.M.A.R.T. goals set by the Slovakian students, and anecdotal notes kept by the teacher researcher. While the research studied EL students in a European country, the strategy, technology, and goal-setting were critical to increases in learning English—spoken, read, and written—thus having application to all learners, but, specifically, English Learners in classrooms across Kansas.

Readers will take an in-depth look at the value of RTS use in classrooms where students are learning the English language. This is done through the lenses of theorists and experts in the fields of literacy, engagement, and constructivism. To increase engagement in the strategy, students used the web-based tool, Padlet (2018), to write about their RTS roles, reflect on their success at enlightening peers about the text, and evaluate how their participation could improve. Additionally, S.M.A.R.T. goals were set to challenge students to use goal-setting as a means of improving their performance for discussions in RTS. Each of these components were important for students learning English, but can assist all students to improve learning.

Please note: Quotations from students (written and verbal) are as the students wrote them or verbalized them.

Participants

The Slovakian students attend a business academy, considered an average school, not overly prestigious, but certainly a respected school. Like other schools in Slovakia, about half of the first year high school students apply for the bilingual section. This means their first year in high school is primarily taught in English (although learning a third or fourth language is becoming a priority in Slovakia). Many students grow up listening to some English through music or television. For most students, though, formal English instruction has been limited. There were 15 students in the class with a wide range of skills and abilities.

Reciprocal Teaching Strategy (RTS)

RTS is a teaching strategy allowing students opportunities to deepen understanding, connections, and love for reading. Students are placed in small groups and assigned one of the four RTS roles: Predictor, Questioner, Clarifier and Summarizer. Within those groups, students independently reflect on their reading from the different role lenses. Then, they bring their analyses to group discussions. This increases overall comprehension through enriched conversation about the text.

RTS is considered to originate from the work of Palinscar and Brown (1986). Implementation requires students to use four important reading discussion strategies: predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing (Oczkus, 2010). RTS embodies elements of constructivist theory and the multiple meanings to be discovered and understood in order to construct meaning while engaged in social learning. Cambourne (2002) tells us that using collaborative groups within a constructivist classroom is a powerful way for students to learn. Cambourne (1995) described critical structures for collaboration to occur: transformation, discussion and reflection, application, and evaluation. These are elements inherent in RTS and not considered "add-ons," but critical parts of the framework when implemented.

This research based strategy encourages students to participate at a higher level of thinking. It is aimed not only at increasing students' overall comprehension of the text but also challenging the reader to construct deeper inferences, arguments, and ideas. Best, Row, Ozuro, and McNamara (2005) explain that comprehension at deeper levels occurs when students are able to use their inferencing skills to make connections while reading. Deep comprehension involves going beyond reading the lines of the text and requires students to interpret more than the sentences on the page (Best et al., 2005). When the students are using this strategy while reading a text, they have the luxury of working independently to become more metacognitively aware while also leaning on their peers to challenge thinking and clarifying parts that may be confusing to them. Importantly, RTS is "structured for success as students take on the role of the leader and learn to use the strategies on their own," working toward being successful at what a competent reader does in their head while reading text (Fogarty, 2007, p. 69).

The structure of RTS requires small, heterogeneous groups that consist of at least four members, one for each role. These members are responsible for doing their parts to contribute to the overall discussion and comprehension of the group. This interdependence is important for team building and holds students accountable for performing their role. Fisher, Frey, and Everlove (2009) describe this as an "interactive instructional process" (p. 30) designed to promote interdependence among group members. If the small group is to construct meaning of the assigned text, then each group member must do their part in processing beforehand and discussing with group members during RTS sessions (Fisher, Frey, & Everlove, 2009). Apart from teamwork being a necessary skill students must use in many aspects of everyday life, it is also a desirable skill they need to develop for post-high school, college, and career purposes. Students will surprise and enlighten each other with various perspectives, opinions, and questions and will challenge the team members' thinking.

During RT discussion, not only are students sparking new ideas and questions within their teams, they are building up a new sense of accountability and confidence. This strategy is designed to give students the driver's seat to their learning; they are in charge of their reading process from top to bottom. They no longer have a teacher standing at the front of the classroom reading a text to them and asking questions to one single student at a time. Instead, students read at their own pace, stopping and analyzing when it is appropriate for them, leading, answering and clarifying questions and ideas and, most of all, being engaged the whole time. When a teacher directs a class and asks the questions, and only one student is called upon to respond, we can only guarantee one student is overtly engaged. In the RTS model, we have engagement from start to finish, as students know the responsibilities for their role and must continue to actively participate. This is particularly important in an EL classroom. In order to make significant improvements in their language skills, EL students need to read, write, speak, and listen in English as much as possible. Because all students are within a group where the expectation is participation in the discussion, RT also improves the quality of the discussions within the classroom (Hashey & Connors, 2003). And, of course, confidence is truly a key for all EL students. The more opportunities they have to communicate with their peers, the more they will learn about these topics, broaden their vocabularies, and feel increasingly comfortable speaking often.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory about "Zone of Proximal Development" tells us students learn best when working in their "zone." This zone is somewhere between being able to work independently (actual development) and needing a teacher to assist (potential development) on a task. When students are within this zone, they develop the mindset to push themselves to the potential level with careful scaffolding from a teacher or another skilled individual until they are able to internalize a strategy independently (Vygotsky, 1978). As students begin to master RTS, their focus will be placed on the ideas and questions they developed from the text and the discussions they are having, led completely by students. The ultimate goal in RTS is to develop learners who can use skills to maneuver texts effectively in order to generate new ideas and arguments. These are communicated to others via speaking and writing to foster conversations that then challenge and develop those ideas further. Independent learners wonder, ask questions, make predictions, and are aware of when their comprehension has fallen and can use many strategies to reconstruct it.

Ostovar-Namaghi and Shahhosseini (2011) conducted a study with 120 freshmen ELL students. The post assessment demonstrated that RTS yielded significantly higher results than traditional teaching:

> Reciprocal teaching is more in tune with the heartbeat of language. Rather than being a unidirectional mechanism for receiving information, as it is supposed by the traditional [teaching] model, language is mechanism for constructing meaning in the dialogical process of negotiation and interaction with the text and with the others. (Ostovar-Namaghi & Shahhosseini, 2011, p. 1241)

The potential for increased classroom discussion is another hallmark inherent in RTS. Pressley and Allington (2015) note that current studies highlight how discussions led by the students assist them in understanding texts they are reading. And RTS, by its very nature, promotes in depth discussion thus increasing engagement through the peer-managed roles (Pressley & Allington, 2015). Comfort with the roles and the collaborative nature of the discussions serves students well "resulting in further consolidation of sound reading comprehension and monitoring strategies" (Fisher, Frey, & Everlove, 2009, p. 31).

In all, reading is the foundation of learning and every teacher is a teacher of reading. Therefore, by taking the time to introduce RTS to students, each is getting the opportunity to develop skills that will be used in all subjects and areas of life.

Classroom Implementation of RTS

The introduction to RTS needed to be detailed and methodical to avoid confusion for the students. They were introduced to RTS through a PowerPoint presentation illustrating the vocabulary used to describe the roles and expectations for each. The roles were then demonstrated using a text and think aloud by the teacher. Modeling included how to make *predictions* based on reading the title and the first few sentences, making sure to stop to *clarify* unfamiliar words and phrases to ensure comprehension was occurring. The teacher asked a couple of *questions*, and at the end of the first paragraph, a *summary* was given about the text. The students were then ready for the next scaffolded phase: Assignment to a team to work with once a week using the RTS strategy. Students assembled into their groups, decided the role that they were going to focus on, discussed RTS, and generated ideas about what it would look and sound like within their team.

In the next class session, students completed an exit ticket asking questions about their understanding of the RTS roles. This gave the teacher opportunity to clarify any misconceptions about the roles and expectations. The following week, the students read the article that the teacher had initially demonstrated RTS with and tried out another role of their choosing. Students met with peers having the *same* role to discuss what went well for them, how the role functioned, and what the role contributed to the team.

The following day, the whole class brainstormed expectations for RTS and co-created an anchor chart. Discussion included what RTS should look and sound like when working in groups based on the previous discussions. The students read a short biography about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and were asked to choose a new role and try RTS again. Role sheets were distributed to record important information for their role to help guide them and the ensuing discussions. The teacher moved around the classroom, helping to guide the groups, answer any questions, and take anecdotal notes on what was observed and heard. As scaffolding for the RTS groups continued, S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) goals were set, and Padlet (2018) was introduced to the students so they could record their thinking and progress with their roles.

Setting S.M.A.R.T. Goals

At the beginning of the academic year, there was a visible lack of accountability and intentional learning. This called for a tool to help students become more aware and in control of the growth students claimed they wanted but did not know how to achieve. This demographic of students could not translate how RTS was going to directly support their English skills. Since the S.M.A.R.T. goal model had been previously taught, it was an excellent technique to assist students in writing genuine goals that catapulted their progress utilizing RTS with the aim to carry over into other learning and aspects of life. The S.M.A.R.T. goal model is a sustainable way to not only track students' efforts but reinforce accountability as a learner. S.M.A.R.T. goal setting takes students beyond 'I want to get better at…' to helping "students set meaningful goals, provide support as they diligently work toward those aims, and congratulate them when they eventually achieve their goals" and work toward "positive sense of self" (McGlynn & Kelly, 2017, p. 23). By applying this structure in conjunction with RTS, specifically using Padlet (2018) where goals were posted as a constant reminder, the students became more intentional about how they were personally processing and relaying the information they were grasping from the texts. This newly adopted mentality--of intentionality--created a surge in their metacognitive functions which was evident in their weekly Padlet (2018) posts where they described their thinking about the text but also in how they were contributing to the discussion. They were becoming aware of not only their personal need to comprehend but also what their peers needed and how they could support peers to make that happen. Learning how to write S.M.A.R.T. goals paired nicely with RTS and was later applied to their lives outside English classes.

Introducing Padlet (2018)

Once RTS roles were understood by students, a way to have students record their thoughts and document progress was needed. As teachers, we know that, often, technology can be motivating to students and increase engagement. However, it was also critical for the technology to have accountability built into it so that it would be easy to collect, analyze, organize, and save responses for assessment. Padlet (2018), a web-based tool, was implemented to infuse technology for further engaging the students and met the requirements for accountability. It is an easy-to-use, free, online application where students can see boards having prompts and allowing responses directly to one another and their teachers. Infusion of this technology into the classroom made the assignments more enjoyable and relatable to students. It had the added benefit of allowing students a way to write about their goals, RTS roles, reactions, and reflections.

Each RTS role had its own Padlet (2018) so while the students were working within their RTS group, each student was only accountable for sharing their role with other people who had the same one. This had the effect of the "experts" role in the jigsaw strategy. The goal was that students could share their best work with the teacher, read other students' posts having the same role, learn from peers and increase ability to use these skills each week during RTS. This would also have implications and application for other areas of life outside of the classroom and reading assignments. The teacher posed questions within Padlet (2018) for students to respond to helping them deepen thinking about their particular role. Padlet (2018) seemed like social media posts among students because they could like one another's posts and add comments, as well. They knew that their work was going to be viewed by their classmates, so motivation to do their best grew without making them feel insecure or threatened about their English writing skills.

Careful introduction and scaffolding of RTS, setting S.M.A.R.T. goals, and using Padlet (2018) to reflect and extend resulted in students transitioning to independence in conducting the RTS sessions.

Results

The open-ended survey responses provided a great deal of insight into student thinking. Their comments spoke to how classroom community developed during RTS and how their peers clarified understanding during discussions. Their responses echo Pressley and Allington's (2015) assertion that student-led discussions promote engagement through peer-managed groups.

Predictor Role

The themes that emerged from the students' Padlet (2018) responses for the predictor role described the skills students were developing and using beyond predicting because of the other RTS roles they performed previously and their peers were modeling. They realized the importance of confirming their predictions and revising them when they fell short of being accurate. The students used text features to inform their predictions (e.g., "I saw a bunch of key words such as woman rights, a right to study, etc."). The researchers realized how carefully text must be selected for the RTS predictor role after students had difficulty making predictions for a text about *Romeo and Juliet*, a story they were very familiar with; there were numerous Padlet (2018) posts about already knowing the story so that prediction was nearly impossible.

Questioner Role

The questioner role was the favorite one for most students. They viewed this role as a leadership one, and quickly understood how critical this role was in promoting rich student-led discussions. The classroom researcher saw how discussions about text changed because the

questioner realized they should ask questions right away as groups began meeting, and the researchers noted the students transitioned to deeper levels of questions as they progressed through the semester. Students were candid about needing to improve their questioning skills and believed that the ability to ask questions was key to understanding a text. The ability to ask important questions was also a theme, as one student noted, "To ask questions you have to really understand the text. Especially so you are not just asking yes or no questions. So you have to know a deeper meaning."

Clarifier Role

        Prior to RTS , learning specific words in English for the Slovakian students was often a matter of looking up words in a translation dictionary and so often a precise translation was either not available or not a concern to the students. The clarifier role proved to sharpen their skills as they recognized the need for careful translation of words. While they still used digital dictionaries and translators to complete their work, they transitioned to having higher standards so that they could find the "best" translation. And, their work grew beyond mere translations to clarifying meaning within sentences and ideas. This work is demonstrated in a student's response:

> While reading the text I wrote down some words that I didn't quite understand or that I've never read before. Later, I opened the Slovak-English dictionary and searched those words and tried to find synonyms. I tried to use them in example sentences and if that didn't work I just told them the Slovak word for it.

They also realized that not only were they clarifying for themselves, but anticipating the needs of their peers. They initiated mini-goals and challenges for themselves.

Summarizer Role

        Summarizing tends to be a difficult skill for many students, and this proved challenging for the Slovakian students, initially. But, they were methodical and strategic in their approaches to summarizing, often beginning with a condensed summary sentence. They followed this with using other writing forms to summarize such as bulleted lists. They relied heavily on vocabulary to inform their work and mimicked the texts they were reading by bolding or italicizing the vocabulary words within text they wrote in their summaries. To assist their peers, they recognized a need to use "easy" words for "hard" words. By the third round of RTS, the students were comfortable stating their opinions while summarizing. An example that demonstrates this opinion writing followed reading a text about Ferguson, Missouri protests after the shooting of Michael Brown, "Mr. Wilson was racist and people didn't like it so they started protesting and I think that's the right thing."

Educational Importance of the Study

        Early in the study, the learners began to connect to schema within their RTS groups, much like Vygotsky's (1978) deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge. They restructured knowledge together, then elaborated upon it, especially in the Padlet (2018) reflective responses. Being metacognitively aware of how to use schema for building knowledge was a skill that grew throughout the study. Keene (2011) notes that when students "are aware of the way they learn and remember, they will carry those tools with them for a lifetime of learning" (p. 76).

        Experiences with RTS and Padlet (2018) can best be described as having a roller coaster effect. Initially, students struggled with the roles and were not very interested, but as they began to master both, they started to feel they could work independently and began enjoying the work with their peers. Interest waned again mid-semester when students thought they had mastered the roles and perhaps did not see the point of continuing them. The purposes of goal-setting were revisited

and their accomplishments and improvements in English and reading skills were pointed out to them. The students finished the semester strong.

As the students were observed using RTS skills throughout each of the sessions, they could be seen assisting one another when comprehension fell or were having difficulty articulating and adding to the group discussion. They talked with their teacher about how they used their RTS skills in other classes, at home while completing reading texts for school, and even for independent reading. When asked if they could use RTS at home, one student said, "Yes, I can! It is getting easier for me to clarify for myself." Another said, "It is like we are doing all this stuff in our own heads (predicting, summarizing, questioning, clarifying) but now we are practicing it out loud." The students understood they were articulating what they knew and their newfound skills, but in English!

A final positive note about RTS came, not from this classroom of students written about here, but peers being taught in another classroom using the traditional instruction common in the school setting. Several of these students approached the teacher researcher and asked if they, too, could learn about RTS. It became clear that the students using RTS were discussing their successes outside the classroom and impressing their peers with what they were learning.

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