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Strengthening the memory of struggling learners: Starting points

Howard Margolis

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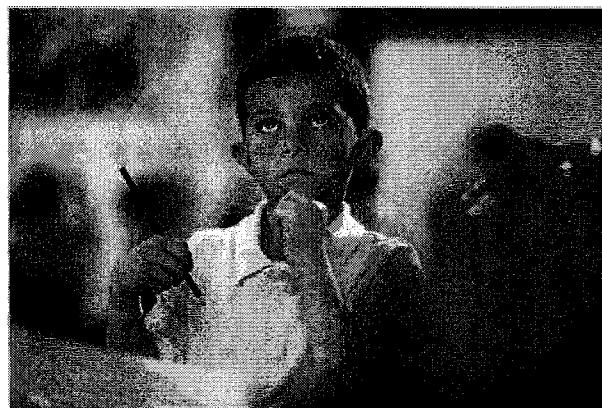
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No doubt about it. Most struggling learners have a strong propensity to forget, no matter how many times teachers and parents tell them something. This adds tremendous complexity and uncertainty to teaching while frustrating teachers, parents and learners alike.

So, how can you as a teacher (or parent or tutor) help struggling learners to remember fragile, fleeting, important information in working or short-term memory? How can you help them remember what's important — and remember it for years to come, so it becomes a building block for more advanced learning?



The start

At the start, make sure the struggling learners and all other students understand why it's essential that they remember the information. In other words, how will remembering and understanding it help them? How will forgetting it disadvantage them?

If they appear unmotivated to remember it, but it's important for them to do so, stress motivation strategies such as team participation, extrinsic reinforcement, and persuasive and encouraging comments. Why? Remembering can be hard work. To a large extent, it depends on motivation: the struggling learners' desire to remember something and their willingness to make the effort.

However, desire and willingness alone will not always suffice. Struggling learners need to use the right strategies. Here's where teachers (and parents and tutors) can help.

The prime strategy

From the start of your efforts to teach struggling learners and their peers how to strengthen their memory for what's important, encourage them to attend to what's *important*. Encourage them to keep concentrating on it, think about its meaning, think about how it relates to what they already know, and how it's similar or different from what they know.

In other words, how does it add, subtract or challenge what they knew.

Especially encourage struggling learners and their peers to put what's important to remember in their own words, to imagine it, to discuss it, and to even sketch and explain pictures of it. To encourage them to think about its meaning and importance, and apply what they're remembering, create numerous opportunities for them to use it with their peers.

As a teacher, you might use the OPIN (Greene) strategy to help them review and use vocabulary critical to upcoming lessons. As part of OPIN, students individually supply an important word that's missing from a blank space in a sentence, explain to their small team of peers why their choice best completes the sentence's meaning, discuss their peers' choices for the sentence, and help to pick their team's best choice — the one they'll later discuss with their class.

For three reasons, the earlier paragraph began with two italicized words: *especially encourage*. First, it tried to make clear that remembering requires ongoing work, work that struggling learners and many other students need to do. Second, it shows remembering is a complex process. It's a multidimensional process that over time, for important words and other memories, needs to be activated frequently.

Finally, it encourages you to create lots of opportunities for struggling learners and other students to think about and explain what they need to remember.

A structured strategy: Acronyms

When teaching struggling learners to remember something, you can teach them to use structured strategies. To avoid confusion, stick with one strategy until it's part of their DNA. In other words, wait until they're comfortable with it, and they use it automatically and effectively.

Acronyms are an effective, structured strategy for remembering key words that unlock networks of more elaborate meanings. They're shorthand, easy-to-remember cues for evoking important and more complex concepts.

Let's look at two acronyms in the sentence "Lots of M&Ms can make you FAT." As you'll see below, the meaning is straightforward and, for most people, the sentence and its two acronyms — M&Ms and FAT — are easy to remember and retrieve.

To help struggling learners quickly master the use of acronyms, take a few days to explain and illustrate the meanings of M&Ms and FAT, as described in the next two sections. Once they have a good handle on the meanings, ask them to slowly repeat this sentence five times:

- Lots of M&Ms can make you FAT.
- Lots of M&Ms can make you FAT.
- Lots of M&Ms can make you FAT.
- Lots of M&Ms can make you FAT.
- Lots of M&Ms can make you FAT.

As they repeat the acronyms, ask them to think about their meanings. Afterwards, ask them to form pairs and explain M&Ms and FAT to their partners. For the next few days, repeat a variation of this.

What does M&M mean?

M&M means "**M**eaning and **M**emory." If you want to increase your chances of remembering something important, make it meaningful to you. Make sure you know why it's personally important and meaningful. If you want to help your child remember something, help him (or her) make it personally meaningful.

If, for example, he needs to remember exercise improves learning, you can discuss it with him, write "good grades" under pictures of people exercising, briefly demonstrate how you frequently take breaks to walk up and down a broad plastic step when working on important projects.

If possible, every half-hour or so, interject three minutes of light exercise into his academic efforts. You might even show him and discuss an age-appropriate DVD about how exercise improves learning.

What does FAT mean?

FAT means "Focus your Attention on and Think about it." While focusing your attention on the most important aspects of what you want to remember, think about what you're focusing on and why it's important.

If, for example, you want to remember that the "I" in IEP stands for "individualized," look at the word in your state's special education code, read and think about the sentences and paragraphs it's in, then look at pictures of three different children you know. Make sure they're different in age, size and academic achievement.

Ask yourself, "Should the first-grader learn to read from 'A Tale of Two Cities' and the ninth grader from 'A Cat in the Hat?' Does each need remedial instruction to recognize third-grade words? Does each need to gain weight?"

Such questions should help you remember that federal law requires special education to be individualized and that the federal government defines special education as "specially designed instruction ... to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability" (Federal Register, 2006 August 14, § 300.39).

But to help you understand and remember, you might think about how the three examples illustrate the word "individualized." Even better, think about how the three students differ and how this supports IDEA's mandate to individualize all IEPs.

What is REMOS?

Much of what you've read in this article emanates from REMOS. REMOS is not a model, not a method, but an acronym that cues teachers (and parents and tutors) to keep taking critical actions that strengthen important, targeted memories of struggling learners. In contrast to instructional models, REMOS does not specify, sequence or prescribe sets of actions.

This has advantages. It gives you substantial control over the five REMOS factors: Repetition, Elaboration, Meaning, Organization and Spacing. It encourages you to individualize your REMOS plans, comments and activities to fit your preferences, and the maturity, readiness and preferences of your students.

If needed, it gives you flexibility and guidance for responding to the many unexpected opportunities that characterize teaching. But it does require knowledge of the REMOS factors illustrated in this and other articles.

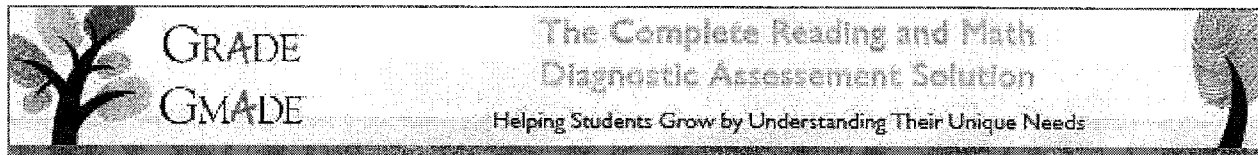
In a subsequent article, I'll discuss the REMOS factors in greater detail. In doing so, I'll start with three underlying forces: history, novelty and importance. Understanding and using these will often increase the power of REMOS, like advertising increases the sale of movie tickets.

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About the Author



Howard Margolis is editor emeritus of the Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties, founding editor of the Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, professor emeritus of reading disabilities and special education at Queens College of CUNY, and co-author of "Reading Disabilities: Beating the Odds" and "Negotiating Your Child's IEP: A Step-by-Step Guide." He has a consulting practice in southern New Jersey, outside of Philadelphia, where he consults to schools and families about special education, dyslexia and other reading disabilities.



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