Technique 1

REJECT SELF-REPORT

OVERVIEW

Teachers frequently use phrases like "Does everyone understand?" or "Everybody got that?" while they are teaching. When they use them, they essentially acknowledge to themselves that they have arrived at a good place to pause and check for understanding. But such phrases usually mean they are doing the opposite—they gloss over struggle and provide false confirmation. Self-report questions, especially those that feel rhetorical, are a very poor source of data on how the class is doing, so it's useful to try to replace such phrases with something more productive.

This is especially true if students are about to embark on independent work. The more time you invest in a task and the more autonomous your students will be in completing it, the more important it is to *Reject Self-Report* and effectively check for understanding—sooner rather than later.

Reflection

What usually happens in your classroom when you ask a student or a group of them, "Got it?" or "Everyone understand?"

Write your own thoughts here before you continue reading our reflections.

Our thoughts (you may have had other thoughts as well): A few students may clearly indicate that they get it, but many may not answer at all, or may simply fall in line with the rest of their peers. As a result, we often come away with little idea of whether or not students understand the material in question. We pause a moment, then take students' silence as implicit permission to go on.

FUNDAMENTALS

You can improve your ability to check for understanding by engineering a short sequence of questions to provide dependable data about what your students know. If these are quick, carefully chosen, precise, and aimed at a strategic sample of the class, they can be useful in demonstrating the extent of understanding very quickly.

Avoiding the Pitfall of "Yes" and "No"

One general problem with yes-or-no questions is that half the time a guess is right, and this results in data of limited accuracy. Additional problems can emerge when you try to use yes-or-no questions to find out whether students understand. Students often think they understand when they don't. For example, a yes may really mean, "Well, I understand *something* about it." In other words, yes-or-no questions do little to call students' attention to specific skills or knowledge they are supposed to understand. This encourages them not to inquire but simply to say yes, and possibly to believe it themselves.

Phrases like "Got it?" and "Understand?"—phrases that ask for a yes-or-no reply where silence appears to be assent—are deeply embedded in most people's natural manner when talking to a group, and there's nothing wrong with that. No doubt we all say them in class, often at a point of transition to reassure ourselves about moving on.

But we can't depend on the answer as *data.* When you really need to understand what your class knows, strive to replace phrases like "Everybody got that?" with a handful of focused questions that help you answer the question objectively: "Why did Keith multiply by *y*?" "Why did France enter the war on our side?" This doesn't have to take long—often less than a minute.

blog

Find this blog post at teachlikeachampion.com/blog/coaching-and-practice/especially-reject-self-report/.

To appreciate how valuable and time-saving it is to get beyond self-report, read the entry "When (Especially) to 'Reject Self-Report.'"

Welcoming "No"

When we do ask yes-or-no self-report questions, we often signal that they aren't meant to be answered, by barely pausing before moving on to something else. This can signal that we don't really want an answer, and students learn not to speak up. Sometimes a student really will answer a self-report question with an honest "No" or tell you they "don't really get it." That's a critical moment in the life of a classroom. If we respond with exasperation or by simply repeating an answer for him, he is likely to learn to spare himself embarrassment next time and no longer admit what he doesn't know. If instead, we show that this is a good thing and engage the whole class in any review—"Ah, good. Let me quiz you guys a bit more then . . ."—we show that we welcome rather than punish students for revealing to us when they don't get it.

Draft some phrases you might use when a student responds to a self-report question with a no or a further question. We've started you off with a few examples:

- "Ah, good. Do you understand what's confusing you, or do you want me to ask you questions?"
- "Yes, this is tricky. Let's see if five more minutes can clear it up."

You might ask, is it possible that some students might also sometimes use "I don't get it" to deliberately slow a class? Sure. Take a moment to think through some possible responses. Again, we've started you off.

- "Great. That's good to know, David. Let's go back and have you summarize what you know from the top, and we'll fill in the blanks."
- "Great. That's good to know, David. With the class's help, I'll start a summary, and we can pause and ask you and some others to fill in the blanks."
- "Great. So glad to know that, David. I think we can take care of this during the last few minutes of class when we start independent practice. Let me see the hands of those who'd like a few extra problems."
- "Great. Let me see the hands of those who'd like a few extra problems. [Assume no other hands.] OK, David. Let me get them started, and I'll give you a few to work out on your own."

Improving Requests

Examine each of the statements that follow. If a statement requests self-report, replace it with a question that directs students to demonstrate their understanding in some way. If it's a yes-or-no question that should be changed into a more useful open-ended question, revise it. After you're done, compare your work with that of a colleague.

"You guys already know how to balance this equation, right?"

"Do you follow me on step 2 of this experiment?"

"Class, are we ready?"

"What's the answer? It's a verb."

"Was Virginia Colony formed before or after the one at Plymouth Rock? "

"Thumbs up if you get this; thumbs down if you don't."

"Let me know if I'm going too fast."

"How many of you are getting this logic?"

"Any doubts about why it's spelled with two *t*'s?"

Suppose you want to know whether the class understands what is meant by a "run-on" (or "run-together") sentence. Pose three questions you could ask to quickly test their knowledge:

Heading Off Self-Report

Examine an upcoming lesson plan. Does it include questions you plan to ask to check for understanding? If not, add several at strategic points. Also revise any self-report or rhetorical questions that you find.

THE NEXT LEVEL

As a supplement to (not a substitute for) your own checking for understanding, students can often monitor their own learning and understanding.

Revisit *Teach Like a Champion 2.0*

Under "A Look at Self-Monitoring," Doug cites this example. You may also want to revisit clip 1 from his book.

> Unlike self-report . . . , self-monitoring is very useful, so it's worth reviewing the differences between self-report and self-monitoring and exploring how (and maybe when) to encourage the latter.
>
> In a recent review of spelling words, Amy Youngman, of Aspire ERES Academy in Oakland, California, said to her students, "At the end we're going to vote on a scale of one to four about how confident we feel about taking our test tomorrow, so be thinking about that as you practice the words." You might ask, "Isn't this just a fancy version of self-report? One where you ask students to evaluate their own level of understanding?" Not quite. Amy, at the moment she says this, is also gathering objective data, quickly scanning and assessing her students' answers. She asks for their self-reflections not to assess their level of mastery—it's too unreliable for that—but to develop their own self-awareness, their skill, and their desire to think about whether they are approaching mastery. She advises them, "If you gave yourself a three or four, there's a sheet for extra practice you can take home." It's self-monitoring when students reflect intentionally on their own level of mastery. It's a good thing generally, and there are lots of ways to encourage it in the classroom—for example, asking them to reflect as you ask targeted questions, such as, "I'm going to ask you some questions now to get a sense of how ready you are to go on; if you're not getting all of these questions, it's a sign that you may need some extra practice. In that case, please come see me."
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> Of course, deliberate self-monitoring can be worked into a lesson in other ways, building synergy with effective CFU. You could, for example, take self-report—a yes-or-no question asking students to subjectively evaluate their mastery—and replace it with a session in which you give students time to look back at work they've done and select areas where they have questions. In doing this, you'd probably want to use language that assumes there are questions (for example, "What questions do you have? I'll give you some time to go back and look over the last five problems." You might then even help them reflect by saying, "You should know what I mean by *anaerobic,* and if not, should be ready to ask about it."). You'd probably want to do this activity consistently over time to allow students to build proficiency.

ACTION PLANNING

Use this action planner to continue your work with *Rejecting Self-Report.* (Find a printable version of this form at my.teachlikeachampion.com.) You know you're on the right track when you are . . .

- Weeding out self-report questions about understanding, or at least following quickly with better ones
- Planning questions to ask in class that will give you bits of reliable data about whether students understand

HOW AM I DOING?

Design one or more action steps for improvement. Decide on an interval by which you'll revisit this page to assess your progress.

Action Step 1

By when, with whom, and how you will measure your effort

By _____, I will . . .
Date

How Did I Do?

Successes:

Challenges:

Next steps:

Action Step 2

By when, with whom, and how you will measure your effort

By _____, I will . . .

Date

How Did I Do?

Successes:

Challenges:

Next steps: