

Florida Center for Reading Research

Smart Tutor: Reading

What is Smart Tutor: Reading?

Smart Tutor: Reading, developed in 2002, is a web-based supplemental/intervention reading program for students in grades K-5. It may be used during school hours or in an after school program. This program provides 1500 tutorials and practice activities in phonemic awareness, phonics, sight words, vocabulary, and comprehension. Program developers recommend students utilize *Smart Tutor: Reading* for 60 minutes per week in 20-30 minute sessions or for a total of 30 hours across the school year.

The overall scope and sequence begins with phonemic awareness and continues with phonics, sight words, vocabulary, and comprehension skills. Not every aspect of each of these components is addressed by *Smart Tutor: Reading*. The instructional sequence is clearly delineated for teachers in the 'Lesson Library' section of the 'Instruction' tab. During the initial session each student completes a diagnostic reading assessment developed by Let's Go Learn called LGL Reading Assessment. This assessment collects student performance data on the reading components addressed by *Smart Tutor: Reading* and immediately places the student at the correct instructional level of the program. A typical lesson begins with an interactive tutorial that introduces the focus of the lesson and allows the student to practice with feedback. After the tutorial one or more non-graded practice activities are completed to provide additional practice opportunities. The final activity for each skill concept is a graded activity that assesses a student's mastery of the skill. Students are shown their percent correct on this task and the teacher may access this data through the reports feature. The tutorials and non-graded activities range in length and number of sessions per skill depending on the complexity of the concept. Positive reinforcement is utilized after each task within each lesson such as a cheering sound or character moving across the screen to indicate a correct response. In order to retain active student engagement during a session, the presentation of each reading component lesson is rotated. For example, after a student finishes a sight word lesson, he or she might then be directed to a comprehension or vocabulary lesson and then on to a phonics lesson. The progression of skill building remains consistent within a reading component, but students are regularly engaged in different content in an attempt to maintain motivation and interest.



All teacher and student materials are on-line. Materials are well organized and easy to locate via 'tabs' on the home page. Teachers may view particular lessons in the 'Instruction' tab, view student data arranged by class, individuals, and parent reports in the 'Report' tab, organize students under the 'Student' tab, and access a teacher's manual, program research, etc. under the 'Resource Center' tab. Progress reports are also provided in summary or detail formats divided into the following types: intervention, cumulative performance, lessons completed, usage, and reading standards mastered. Upon initial teacher log-in there is a window that posts any new announcements or program changes a teacher would need to be made aware of to use the program.

How is Smart Tutor: Reading aligned with Current Research?

Smart Tutor: Reading addresses four of the five components of reading identified by the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension. The scope and sequence of skill instruction is systematic with opportunities for students to observe models and then practice skills with feedback. However, when a mistake is made by a student in some lessons the feedback is not always corrective. Comments like 'try again' cue a student to select a different response, but do not help students understand why the item first selected was incorrect. The introduction of skills is systematic, but practice words or texts are not always controlled for what has been taught in the current or previous tutorials. For example, students may encounter letter-sound relationships or words in practice items that have not been formally introduced by the tutorial portion of the program (e.g., s-blends are used in lesson 2 during the introduction of the beginning consonant 's', but not formally introduced until lesson 31). Predictable texts are often used for student practice. The characters who narrate the activities guide students to utilize context clues to determine missing letters or words in the practice activities. This may be confusing to struggling readers who have difficulty with letter-sound patterns and guessing from context is not an effective strategy for teaching students to read (Gough, 1996).

Phonological and phonemic awareness instruction begins with larger chunks of sound (sentences and syllables) and moves to individual phonemes. Phonics instruction is synthetic with students receiving instruction in letter-sound correspondences and then practicing in context by reading words. Sight word practice, using the Dolch and Fry word lists, is incorporated through levels K-3.

Vocabulary words and comprehension strategies are taught in each level of *Smart Tutor: Reading* using a game format (e.g., matching and sorting words) and/or text as a basis for instruction. A large portion of the vocabulary words are high frequency reading words or commonly used words organized by categories. Upper level vocabulary instruction in affixes support more extended vocabulary acquisition. Comprehension strategies such as monitoring comprehension, answering questions, recognizing story structure, summarizing, predicting, and drawing conclusions are addressed. Definitions of strategies are provided before a reading activity, with text demonstrating the use of the newly introduced skill. The strategy is modeled for students and then students are provided the opportunity to answer questions on the same text using the new skill.

Smart Tutor: Reading has professional development training provided by Account Managers and Client Support representatives to assist in accurate implementation. Two types of face-to-face trainings are available: System Administrator and Teacher. The System Administrator training is a one-hour training with the school-based individual who will be responsible for managing the needs of the school in regards to the program. Training covers how to set up and manage system information, run reports, and provide support to teachers. The teacher training is divided into two sessions: the introduction to *Smart Tutor: Reading* and a follow-up booster training. The introductory training lasts one and a half hours and provides information regarding how the program works, what instruction is provided, directions for using the online Teacher application, and how to run reports. This training and the System Administrator training may be provided on-site or online. The follow-up teacher training is a 30-minute hands-on training conducted with teachers in groups of 3-5. It occurs shortly after students have completed the initial online assessment.

This training allows teachers to run reports and change settings using their own student data. Throughout the school year Account Managers are available for implementation assistance. They visit their assigned school periodically to answer questions and may be asked to visit when necessary. Virtual support via telephone, email or fax is offered during normal business hours.

Research Support for Smart Tutor: Reading

There have been a few attempts to examine the efficacy of the *Smart Tutor: Reading* program. However, these studies are not included in this report because they did not meet FCRR's standards for research that are designed to examine program effectiveness: http://www.fcrr.org/FCRRReports/PDF/Research_Criteria.pdf.

Conclusion

In sum, the *Smart Tutor: Reading* program provides web-based tutorials and practice in phonemic awareness, phonics, sight words, vocabulary and comprehension for struggling students. However, we were not able to locate any studies meeting the FCRR research standards that evaluated the impact of the program on reading growth. Thus, empirical evidence of the effectiveness of *Smart Tutor: Reading's* specific program components is not yet available.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Smart Tutor: Reading*:

- Web-based software allows for ease of student use from any location (e.g., classroom, computer lab, after school program).
- Content is linked to the Florida Sunshine State Standards for Language Arts.
- Teacher reports are user-friendly and easy to generate.
- Teachers have the option to assign particular tutorials if they feel students require additional practice in a skill area.
- Teachers are able to form skill groups with students to match small group instruction within the classroom.

Weaknesses of *Smart Tutor: Reading*:

- Not all aspects of reading component elements in practice activities are first encountered in the initial instruction (e.g., letter-sound relationships).
- Font sizes and the visual display of information appear to be immature for older students. Upper elementary students read the same font sizes and visual displays as younger students working on similar reading skills.
- Reinforcement graphics (e.g., cheering sounds and characters running across the screen) in between the presentation of each practice item within a lesson diminishes valuable practice time for students.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Smart Tutor: Reading?

Brevard	321-631-1911	Manatee	941-708-8770
Broward	754-321-2600	Seminole	407-320-0006
Dade	305-995-1430	St. Lucie	772-429-3925

For More Information

<http://www.learningtoday.com>

References

Gough, P. B. (1996). How children learn to read and why they fail. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 46, 3-19.

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. NIH Publication No. 00-4754. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

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Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does **not** constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

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