Chapter 2: Defining and Organizing Language Learning Strategies

> In this chapter we will introduce you to 20 learning strategies that you can teach to your students to improve their learning of the foreign language.

As we emphasized in the preceding chapter, extensive research into learning strategies reveals the importance and relevance of this instruction for language students. However, as experienced teachers we know that incorporating a new approach into our instruction is not an easy task. This chapter focuses on preparing both teachers and students for learning strategies instruction. We begin by answering some of the most commonly asked questions about learning strategies. We also share the techniques and explain the importance of establishing a learner-centered environment in the classroom before beginning strategies instruction.

I. Answers to some of the Most Common Questions about Learning Strategies Instruction

At this point, you may be thinking, "Twenty learning strategies? How do I find the time to teach 20 learning strategies in my already full schedule of teaching language skills?" And even more importantly, you may be thinking about your students: "How receptive will they be to learning strategies? How do I prepare them for learning strategies instruction?" Explicit strategies instruction may entail not only a new experience for you and your students, but also new roles in the learning process. The purpose of this section is to respond to these important questions and provide suggestions for getting started with learning strategies instruction.

- ***What are Learning Strategies?***

Learning strategies are the thoughts and/or actions that students use to complete learning tasks. We all know that good teachers use numerous teaching strategies to help students learn. We use visuals to introduce new ideas, we direct students' attention to important elements, and we activate students' background knowledge before introducing a new concept.

Learning strategies, however, are the tools that students themselves can employ independently to complete a language task. For instance, a student who needs to learn a list of vocabulary words might draw a picture to remember each word.

It is important to distinguish between teaching strategies and learning strategies. Think about yourself in two different roles - as a language teacher and as a language student. Look at Table 1 below for examples of strategies you might use as a teacher and those you might use as a student.

A comparison of similar teaching strategies and learning strategies

Strategy	Teacher	Learner
Background Knowledge	Activate your students' prior knowledge in order to build new material on what they already know.	Think about what you already know about a topic to help you learn more about it.
Personalize	Through discussion, link new material to your students' experiences and feelings using guiding questions or other activities.	Link new material to your personal experiences and feelings.
Summarize	Have your students read a text, then summarize it to aid comprehension.	After you read a text, stop a moment and summarize the meaning to help your comprehension
Use Imagery	Create a meaningful context for your students by accompanying new information with figures, illustrations, and photographs.	Associate new information with a mental or printed image to help you learn it.

Learning strategies take different forms. Strategies like *Make Inferences*, in which students derive meaning from context, are mental processes that are difficult to observe. Other strategies like *Use Graphic Organizers*/*Take Notes* can be easily observed and measured. What is important for the purpose of this guide is that strategies can be learned.

- *What is Learning Strategies Instruction?*

Students who analyze and reflect on their learning are more effective learners; that is, they are more able to acquire, retain, and apply new information and skills. Yet students often use learning strategies in a sporadic manner, applying them inappropriately or overusing the limited number they know.

Learning strategies instruction is one means of improving students' acquisition of a foreign language. It gives them an explicit vocabulary to use in talking about their learning experiences so that they can build a repertoire of strategies. Students do not just acquire new strategies; they discover how and when to apply them. Their ability to use strategies effectively and to match them appropriately with tasks has broad implications for learning both content and language.

The goal of learning strategies instruction is for students to become independent learners with the ability to use strategies aptly in a variety of contexts. In the beginning, however, learning when and in what contexts to use particular strategies or groups of strategies requires direction and guidance from the teacher.

- ***How Do We Name and Organize Language Learning Strategies for Instruction?***

There are a number of different names and classification systems for learning strategies (for a very good review see Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). There are few "rights" and "wrongs" in learning strategies taxonomies, but specific ways of organizing the strategies can be useful for different teaching situations. Here, we have provided you a with list of 20 commonly used and effective language learning strategies grouped in a way that we think will help you seamlessly integrate strategies instruction into your FL classroom teaching. Students can use these strategies to master the 5 Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. They will improve their skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, mastering grammatical features, vocabulary, and learning content. In other words, the strategies are relevant to the foreign language teacher's emphasis on the 5 Cs and facilitate the integration of content and language objectives.

We have divided the 20 strategies into two categories: "Metacognitive" and "Task-Based." The Metacognitive Strategies can be used for almost any task and are based on reflecting on one's own thinking while the Task-Based Learning Strategies are more determined by the specific nature of the task and the resources of the student.

II. Metacognitive Learning Strategies

Metacognitive learning strategies are general learning strategies. Reflecting upon your own thinking and learning is *metacognitive* thinking. Once students begin to think about their own learning, they can then begin to notice how they learn, how others learn, and how they might adjust how they learn to learn more efficiently. We list four general metacognitive strategies:

-**Organize/Plan** Your Own Learning
-**Manage** Your Own Learning
-**Monitor** Your Own Learning
-**Evaluate** Your Own Learning

These metacognitive strategies follow the sequential order of the process a learner generally goes through in accomplishing any task. What do I do before I start? (*Organize/Plan*) What do I do while I am working on the task? (*Manage*) How do I make sure I am doing the task correctly? (*Monitor*) What do I do after I have finished the task ? (*Evaluate*) It is important to remember, however, that learners are not as linear as our models suggest. In reality, we go back and forth: planning, then monitoring, then planning again, managing, organizing, etc.
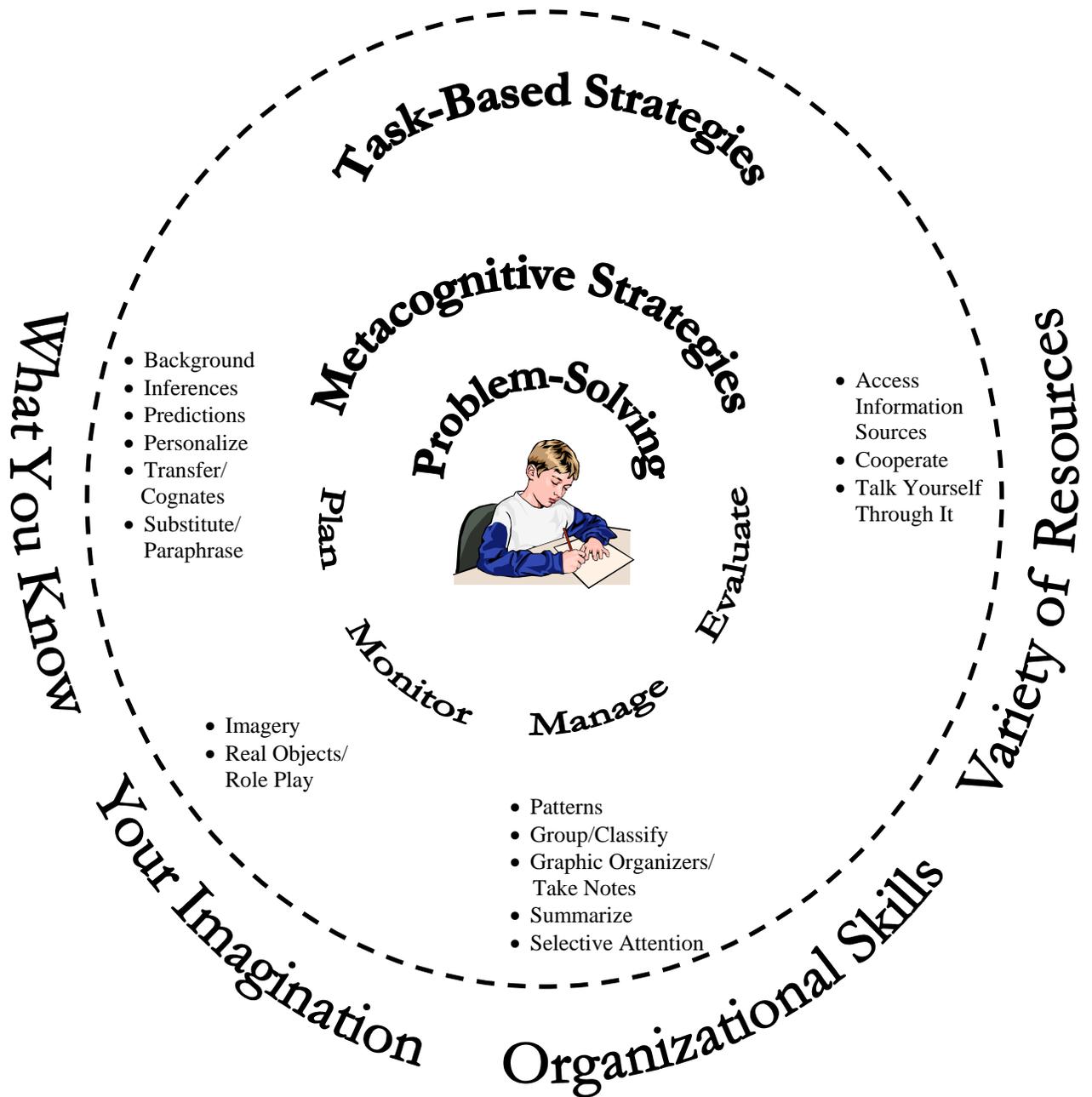
III. Task-Based Learning Strategies

The "Task-Based Learning Strategies" focus on how students can use their own resources to learn most effectively. There are 16 task-based strategies in the list. We have divided them into four categories that are grouped by the kinds of resources students already have, or can get, to help them complete specific tasks. By focusing students' attention on their resources, we emphasize their ability to take responsibility for their own learning.

-Strategies That **Use What You Know**
-Strategies That **Use Your Imagination**
-Strategies That **Use Your Organizational Skills**
-Strategies That **Use a Variety of Resources**

Within each of these four groups, you will find specific strategies that are examples of what the students can do with these resources to help them learn. For example, in the group "Use What You Know" we include *Use Background Knowledge, Make Inferences, Make Predictions,* and *Transfer/Use Cognates.*

The model in Figure 1, *Applying Language Learning Strategies*, illustrates the relationship between the Metacognitive and the Task-Based Learning Strategies. This image embodies the learner-centered nature of strategy instruction. Oliver, our student, is at the core, and has a language learning task to complete. He decides to use a strategic, problem-solving approach. He recognizes that problem-solving involves various stages, planning, monitoring, managing and evaluating. However, these stages are exhibited as a circle because Oliver may visit and revisit each of these phases throughout the task. During each phase, he is equipped with a variety of specific learning strategies that he can use (either alone or in tandem) to help him complete the task. The strategies have been categorized according to learner-friendly sections, (What You Know, Your Imagination, Organizational Skills, Variety of Resources), to help clarify how to use the learning techniques effectively.

Figure 1: Applying Language Learning Strategies

Task-Based Strategies

What You Know

Your Imagination

Organizational Skills

Variety of Resources

Metacognitive Strategies

Problem-Solving

Plan

Monitor

Manage

Evaluate

- Background
- Inferences
- Predictions
- Personalize
- Transfer/ Cognates
- Substitute/ Paraphrase

- Imagery
- Real Objects/ Role Play

- Patterns
- Group/Classify
- Graphic Organizers/ Take Notes
- Summarize
- Selective Attention

- Access Information Sources
- Cooperate
- Talk Yourself Through It

Looking through the list of strategies, you might think that people use learning strategies one at a time and that learning strategies are clearly delimited in function and in use. Reality, of course, is never that simple. Many learning tasks are accomplished using a number of different learning strategies, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes in sequence. However, teaching learning strategies one-by-one, giving each one a name and a definition, and using examples, gives you a way to talk to your students about thinking and learning. It gives the students a way to talk to themselves about their own thinking. You develop a common vocabulary that will then allow you and your students to talk about how to choose and integrate strategies for different kinds of language learning tasks.
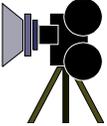
Below you will find the "Learning Strategies List for Students" that you can share with your students. This list outlines the language learning strategies discussed above; it provides names for the strategies, descriptions of strategies, a picture of a key concept related to the meaning of each learning strategy, and a keyword that might be used with students to help them remember the strategy. You will probably want to teach the names of the strategies in the target language. Learning Strategies Lists in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish follow the English language version.
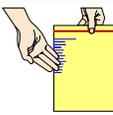
METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES	
Strategy	**Description**
Organize / Plan Calendar	-Plan the task or content sequence. -Set goals. -Plan how to accomplish the task.
Manage Your Own Learning Pace Yourself	-Determine how you learn best. -Arrange conditions that help you learn. -Seek opportunities for practice. -Focus your attention on the task.
Monitor Check	While working on a task: -Check your progress on the task. -Check your comprehension as you use the language. Are you understanding? -Check your production as you use the language. Are you making sense?
Evaluate I did it!	After completing a task: -Assess how well you have accomplished the learning task. -Assess how well you have applied the strategies. -Decide how effective the strategies were in helping you accomplish the task.

TASK BASED STRATEGIES: USE WHAT YOU KNOW

Strategy		Description
Use Background Knowledge	I know.	-Think about and use what you already know to help you do the task. - Make associations.
Make Inferences	Use Clues	-Use context and what you know to figure out meaning. -Read and listen between the lines.
Make Predictions	Crystal Ball	-Anticipate information to come. -Make logical guesses about what will happen.
Personalize	Me	-Relate new concepts to your own life, that is, to your experiences, knowledge, beliefs and feelings.
Transfer / Use Cognates	telephone/teléfono/ Telefon/téléfon	-Apply your linguistic knowledge of other languages (including your native language) to the target language. -Recognize cognates.
Substitute / Paraphrase	Spare Tire	-Think of a similar word or descriptive phrase for words you do not know in the target language.

TASK-BASED STRATEGIES: USE YOUR IMAGINATION	
Strategy	**Description**
Use Imagery Mirror, Mirror	-Use or create an image to understand and/or represent information.
Use Real Objects / Role Play Lights, Camera, Action!	-Act out and/or imagine yourself in different roles in the target language. -Manipulate real objects as you use the target language.

TASK-BASED STRATEGIES: USE YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

Strategy		Description
Find/Apply Patterns	Pattern	-Apply a rule. -Make a rule. -Sound out and apply letter/sound rules.
Group/Classify	Sort Suits	-Relate or categorize words or ideas according to attributes.
Use Graphic Organizers/ Take Notes	Notepad	-Use or create visual representations (such as Venn diagrams, timelines, and charts) of important relationships between concepts. -Write down important words and ideas.
Summarize	Main Idea	-Create a mental, oral, or written summary of information.
Use Selective Attention	Look for It	-Focus on specific information, structures, key words, phrases, or ideas.

TASK-BASED STRATEGIES: USE A VARIETY OF RESOURCES

Strategy		Description
Access Information Sources	Read all about it!	-Use the dictionary, the Internet, and other reference materials. -Seek out and use sources of information. -Follow a model. -Ask questions.
Cooperate	Together	-Work with others to complete tasks, build confidence, and give and receive feedback.
Talk Yourself Through It (Self-Talk)	I can do it!	- Use your inner resources. Reduce your anxiety by reminding yourself of your progress, the resources you have available, and your goals.

Below you will find The Learning Strategies Inventory with more detailed descriptions of each strategy. Each description includes a definition of the purpose of the strategy, a more in-depth description of the contexts in which it can be used, and an example of how a student might use it to complete an academic task. These descriptions will be particularly useful as you prepare to teach your students how to use a specific learning strategy or when you seek strategies to help them with a particular task.

Learning Strategies Inventory

METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES

1. ORGANIZE / PLAN
Purpose: Students make a plan of what they need to do and organize their thoughts and activities in order to tackle a task. This preparation helps them complete more intricate tasks than would otherwise be possible.
Context: *Organize/Plan* is helpful before starting any task. It is an especially important strategy for target language writing tasks.
Example: A student wants to write a thank you letter to his teacher for tutoring him after school. He has lots of ideas about what to write, but he is not sure how to put them in order. He jots the ideas down on some index cards and organizes them (trying out different orders, eliminating less important ideas, etc.) before copying them onto clean paper.

2. MANAGE YOUR OWN LEARNING
Purpose: This strategy is central to problem solving. Students reflect on their own learning styles and strategies. They regulate their own learning conditions to maximize achieving their goals. Students determine how they learn best, they arrange conditions to help themselves learn, they focus attention on the task, and they seek opportunities for practice in the target language. Manage also refers to the self-regulation of feelings and motivation. Independent learners must have a sense of how to manage their own learning.
Context: *Manage Your Own Learning* is an important part of problem solving on any task.
Example: To prepare for an exam, a student decides to make flashcards with main ideas to study with classmates rather than rereading her notes, as flashcards usually work best for her.

3. MONITOR

Purpose: Students question whether an idea makes sense in order to check the clarity of their understanding or expression in the target language. Students are aware of how well a task is progressing and notice when comprehension breaks down.

Context: *Monitor* is important for any task.

Example: If a student asks how to conjugate a new verb and the teacher tells her, "Yes, you may get a drink from the water fountain," the student who is monitoring would realize that her question did not communicate her intended meaning!

4. EVALUATE

Purpose: Judging for themselves how well they learned material or performed on a task helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses so they can do even better the next time. Assessing how well a strategy works for them helps students decide which strategies they prefer to use on particular tasks.

Context: *Evaluate* can help students after completing a task.

Example: A student who finds writing in the target language difficult thinks about what makes it hard for her. She knows she is good at communication but makes a lot of mistakes in grammar. She decides to pay more attention to grammar in the future. In chemistry class, a student uses *Use Selective Attention* to listen closely to directions while the teacher explains how to do an experiment. She tries to do it herself but does not succeed. She decides to look at her lab manual which has illustrations of the process. She tells her teacher that *Access Information Sources* worked better for her on this task than *Use Selective Attention.*

TASK-BASED STRATEGIES: Use What You Know

5. USE BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Purpose: Students reflect on what they already know about a task or topic so that it is easier to learn and understand new information. The strategy helps them see the connection between what they know and what they are learning.

Context: Students can *Use Background Knowledge* whenever they know anything related to a task or topic.

Example: Before reading a novel set in Victorian England, students can brainstorm to recall what they've learned in History class about the period. They can use this information to put the events in the novel in the appropriate context once they start reading.