

Chapter 3: Teaching Learning Strategies in the Learner-Centered Classroom

In this chapter, we demonstrate how you can teach your students to make their learning more efficient and effective by thinking about their learning and how you can use establish a learner-centered classroom.

I. Teaching Students to Think About Their Learning

How Do I Introduce My Students to Strategic Thinking?

It is worth devoting some class time talking to your students about Strategic Thinking. The introduction will allow you to begin the conversation about thinking and learning which will continue throughout the year in the context of your language and content lessons. After this introduction, you should be able to integrate learning strategies instruction seamlessly into your class without switching topics or wasting time.

We suggest that you introduce Strategic Thinking in a concrete manner and that you have a visual aid posted in the classroom to help them remember the concept and the various learning strategies. The language of learning strategies instruction should, of course, be the target language, whenever possible.

As Andrew Cohen (2003) states, “The most efficient way to heighten learner awareness is to provide strategy training—explicit instruction in how to apply language learning strategies—as part of the foreign language curriculum.” Below are suggestions for introducing the concept of Strategic Thinking in your classroom.

Explicit Identification of Learning Strategies

You can help your students to reflect on their learning in two ways: by modeling how you yourself reflect on your own learning and by making them aware of the strategies they use to complete language tasks.

- Teacher Modeling

Here is an example of a teacher modeling her reflections on her own language learning.

TEACHER REFLECTING ON HER LEARNING

I am studying French. I am very frustrated because I cannot understand the radio broadcasts of the news. What can I do to improve my listening? What would help me understand these broadcasts better? I'll use the learning strategy "Using Resources." I know that the radio station has a website. I can go to the website and listen to the news program more than once. I can also find a transcript of the news program on the website. Using these resources will help me to improve my understanding of news programs.

- Teacher Eliciting from Students

Secondary Education language learners are already using strategies to learn language and to learn in other subjects. However, many of them are not conscious of the techniques they are using. By explicitly identifying learning strategies as learners use them, you can empower learners to use these strategies more effectively and in a wider context. Highlighting and presenting learning strategies through students' own work will create an easier segue into introducing new, valuable learning aids.

Exemplifying the strategies learners are already using is enjoyable and inspirational because it illustrates students' abilities in a real context. You can do this by walking the class through an activity such as reading a newspaper story, preparing an oral presentation about an artist, or studying for a test. Ask them questions designed to identify the processes they used to complete the assignment. See an example below.

TEACHER PROMPTING STUDENTS

Teacher: Here is an article I found this morning in the very popular Italian daily newspaper *Il Messaggero*. I would like you to read it. It's a new article that you haven't seen before. What are you going to do first?

Student A: I am going to look at the title and the illustrations to see what it's about.

Teacher: Good! You will be using a very useful learning strategy called *Making Predictions*. What will you do next?

Student B: I'll try to remember if we've ever talked about this subject in class.

Teacher: Yes! You will then be using the strategy *Activating Background Knowledge*. That's a very effective strategy to prepare you for what you will read and it should make the reading easier.

Through reflecting on Strategic Thinking, your students will begin to develop an awareness of how they learn in different contexts and for different tasks. Introducing self-reflection at the beginning of the year establishes a climate that encourages continual

investigation into how they learn. Remember to participate in these reflective activities with your students and to share your own successful (and unsuccessful) learning strategies.

Occasionally you might want to provide your students with a form like the one below to encourage them to reflect on their strategic thinking.

Using Strategic Thinking to Complete a Task

Name _____ Date _____

Task _____

Plan

What are some goals I can set before beginning the task?

How can I plan to complete the task (materials, time, etc.)?

Monitor

How can I check my progress?

Manage

What are some possible problems I could face, and how can I solve them?

Evaluate

How can I decide if I have completed the task successfully (i.e. Have I reached my goals)?

Expand

What are some other activities in which we use these four processes?

II. Teaching Strategic Thinking and the Learner-Centered Classroom

When you explicitly teach learning strategies, you share responsibility for the students' learning with the students themselves. The students take on greater responsibility for their own learning and gain greater independence. This is known as the learner-centered approach to instruction. It is characterized by (1) a focus on how students learn, (2) explicit instruction in learning strategies, (3) explicit goal setting by students for themselves, and (4) student self-evaluation.

As teachers, we often focus more on how we *teach* than on how our students *learn*. Learning strategies instruction forces us to examine not just what we do to teach effectively, but what our students do to facilitate their own learning. When we think about curriculum, lesson design, or even how we respond to student questions, learning strategies instruction helps us focus on the **how** of learning rather than the **what**.

Teaching Tip

Encourage students to understand the strategies they already use and to learn to use new ones.

In a classroom that incorporates learning strategies instruction, the teacher and the students attend to the learning process and consider how to improve it. In a learner-centered classroom, both the teacher and the students must share the responsibility of learning. Both must believe that by focusing on learning strategies, learning will be enhanced. Learning strategies instruction requires a learner-centered approach to teaching.

Goal-setting

Giving students the opportunity to set their own personal goals helps them invest in learning and is a step towards creating a learner-centered classroom. Defining and practicing how to set goals will also help students distinguish between long- and short-term goals. Whereas long-term goals provide motivation for learning, short-term goals help us feel a growing sense of accomplishment. One useful activity is to have students brainstorm their personal goals.

Teaching Tip

Ask students to brainstorm their personal goals. Record their goals on poster paper and review them throughout the year.

Purpose of Distinguishing Short- and Long-term Goals

Short-Term Goals: Help us feel a growing sense of accomplishment.

Example: *I want to write an e-mail to my Spanish penpal.*

Long-Term Goals: Provide motivation for learning the language.

Example: *I want to be able to speak Spanish well enough to go to Mexico and make friends there.*

Self-assessment

Tied to setting personal goals is the self-assessment of progress. In traditional classrooms, students expect the teacher to evaluate them. They, therefore, tend to look outside themselves to determine progress. With learning strategies instruction, students begin to take more control of their own learning and, with guidance from the teacher, to assess their own progress. Students can use rubrics and scales representing varying levels of achievement in order to represent their progress graphically. (See the Sample Self-Assessment Rubric below.) Unless they self-assess, learners are often unaware of the strategies they use. Learning strategies questionnaires are self-assessment tools that can help students become aware of their strategy use.

Teaching Tip

Share your learning strategies with your students. Show them how strategies work for you.

Sample Self-assessment: Cooperative Group Work

Name: _____ Date: _____

Activity: _____

How often did you do the following things in your group? Circle the word that best describes your level of participation and cooperation.

1. **I asked questions for information or clarification.**
not at all rarely sometimes often
2. **I offered my opinion.**
not at all rarely sometimes often
3. **I listened to the other group members.**
not at all rarely sometimes often
4. **I commented on the ideas of other group members.**
not at all rarely sometimes often
5. **I encouraged others to participate.**
not at all rarely sometimes often
6. **I fulfilled my role in the group as assigned by the teacher or group.**
not at all rarely sometimes often
7. **What I liked best about working with this group:**
8. **What gave me the most difficulty when working with this group:**

Questionnaires can also help teachers identify the strategies students already use and those which may need to be taught. An excerpt from the NCLRC Learning Strategies Questionnaire is below. You may download a complete copy of the questionnaire in PDF format if you go to the NCLRC website at <http://www.nclrc.org>. Choose Resources and then Download Library. The questionnaire is in English but should, of course, be written in the target language for more advanced learners.

Learning Strategies Questionnaire Excerpt

Directions: Listed below are some things that you might or might not do to help you understand what you are hearing. For each one, circle whether *you* do it Almost Never, Sometimes, or Almost Every Time. Tell what you *really* do, not what you think you should do.

L1. Before you listen in class, do you try to figure out what the person will talk about?

Almost Never

Sometimes

Almost Every Time

L2. When you listen to a story in class, do you imagine pictures in your head or imagine you are part of the story?

Almost Never

Sometimes

Almost Every Time

A learner-centered environment represents the foundation of learning strategies instruction. You and your students will work together to make the **how** of learning as important as the **what**. The following chapter you will offer practical suggestions on how to integrate learning strategies instruction into your language lessons using three lesson-planning categories.