

Learning Strategies: Definitions and Examples

Task-Based Strategies

Strategy	Purpose	Context	Student Strategy	Example
Use Background Knowledge	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.	Students can Use Background Knowledge whenever they know anything related to a task or topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about and use what you already know to help you do the task. • Make associations between new information and your prior knowledge. • Use new information to clarify or modify your prior knowledge. 	When beginning a Health lesson about public safety, students can tell each other what they already know about protecting themselves from strangers. They can describe how they recognize police officers and what they have been taught to do if they get lost.
Make Inferences	Using context clues, students manage to decipher new vocabulary or figure out the meaning of a text or speech. They make guesses based on pictures, headlines, surrounding texts, gestures and body language, or other information related to the task.	Guess! That's right: it's a problem solving technique that works at any stage of the learning process and is useful in numerous contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use context and what you know to figure out meaning. • Read and listen between the lines. • Go beyond the text to understand its meaning. 	To find the word for clean in German, a student reads the back of his classroom soap bottle instead of looking it up in the dictionary. He figures it will probably be on the "how to use this product" part of the label. Knowing it can be a verb, he finds clean easily. The time-honored traditions of "figure it out from context" and "making educated guesses" are both examples of Make Inferences.
Make Predictions	Students figure out what they can expect in a task based on their background knowledge and information about the task at hand. They prepare for the rest of the task and direct their efforts to completing it based on their predictions.	Make Predictions can be used whenever students have enough relevant background knowledge to be able to make reasonable predictions about the task. As they learn new information, they may refine or modify previous predictions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipate information to come. • Make logical guesses about what will happen in a written or oral text. • Make an estimate (math). • Make a hypothesis (science). 	A student chooses a book to read during silent reading time. The cover of the book shows a picture of a barn and some animal. Based on this picture, the student predicts that the story will take place on a farm.
Personalize	Students relate information to their feelings, opinions or personal experiences in order to remember and understand it better. They may associate it with someone or something in their personal lives.	This strategy is useful whenever a word or idea represents something personally important to students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relate new concepts to your own life, to your experiences, knowledge, beliefs and feelings. 	A student's parents take her to an Italian restaurant for dinner. Later, when she is learning vocabulary items in Italian, she remembers many of the words from the menu at the restaurant.
Transfer/ Use Cognates	By recognizing similarities between words or grammar in the target language and their native language, students can easily and quickly increase their vocabulary and construct sentences.	Transfer/Cognates can be used when words look or sound similar in the two languages or when knowledge of a language system, such as grammar, can aid in the understanding of the new language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply your linguistic knowledge of other languages (including your native language) to the target language. • Recognize cognates. 	A student reading a worksheet encounters the Spanish word telefono for the first time. She recognizes that it looks like the English word telephone and thinks it probably means the same thing. In context, it makes sense. The two words sound alike, too. She decides telefono and telephone are probably cognates.

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Substitute/Paraphrase	Rather than stopping at a dead end, students find different ways to say the same thoughts. Beginners may use simple words or structures instead of more complex ones they do not know yet. More advanced learners may replace a term with its description or by explaining it in the target language.	Substitute/Paraphrase helps at those otherwise awkward moments when students realize they do not know how to say exactly what they would like to say. It can also prove useful when writing as an alternative to constant reference to the dictionary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a synonym or descriptive phrase for unknown words or expressions. 	A student cannot think of the word la dinde (turkey) while he is speaking, so he says in French, "the big bird that Americans eat."
Use Imagery	Students use or create an image that helps them remember information. It can be as simple as a pencil drawing, or as complex as a "mental movie." An image also helps students recall vocabulary without translating from their native language. Complex images can help students check their comprehension; if there are inconsistencies, then they may need to review the information.	Use Imagery is well suited to any task that involves vivid images or where it is useful to put abstract ideas in concrete form.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use or create an actual or mental image to understand and/or represent information. Use or draw a picture or diagram. 	To remember idiomatic expressions, students create funny pictures that illustrate them.
Use Real Objects/Role Play	By acting out a concept with props or role-playing with a partner, students can get a better feel for the situational uses of language. Associating words and expressions with an object, a context and an experience helps students recall them-what is more, they have fun!	This strategy can be used with concrete concepts or with abstract concepts to make them more concrete. It can evoke daily situations and show the practical side of language learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act out a role, for example, in Readers' Theater, or imagine yourself in different roles in the target language. Use real objects to help you remember words, sentences, or content information. 	<p>Example 1: A student has been studying environmental conservation at school and notices that his parents recycle many items, including plastic containers. He explains to his teacher how to decide what to recycle by showing her some sample containers that can be recycled.</p> <p>Example 2: After learning food and restaurant vocabulary, students take turns playing the parts of customer and waiter at a restaurant in the target culture.</p>
Find/Apply Patterns	Students either use a rule they already know or create a new rule that helps them learn new information.	Find/Apply Patterns is useful in situations where students can generalize about a language structure, procedure or concept.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply a rule. Make a rule. Recognize and apply letter/sound, grammar, discourse, or register rules. Identify patterns in literature (genre). Identify patterns in math, science, and social studies. 	A student who knows how to conjugate the verb mettre in French wants to conjugate permettre. Since these verbs have the same ending, she decides that they conjugate the same way.

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Group/Classify	Grouping or classifying items according to their attributes helps students organize their thoughts and/or remember the items.	Group/Classify applies any time that a number of items share the same attributes and can be put into meaningful groups. It can serve to organize student's thoughts as they begin a writing or speaking task.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Categorize words or ideas according to attributes. • Classify living things; identify natural cycles. • Identify order and sequences in math, science, and social studies. • Sequence events in history. 	A student has a hard time remembering the names of furniture in Spanish, so she groups them according to where each item belongs in a house.
Use Graphic Organizers/ Take Notes	By writing down important words, students can remember key concepts and note their own ideas about information in a lesson alongside its new information.	Use Graphic Organizers/Take Notes is especially useful on tasks that involve listening since, without notes, students would not be able to keep a record of what they hear. It can also help students while they read and before they write.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write down important words and ideas while listening or reading. • List ideas or words to include in speaking or writing. • Use or create visual representations (such as Venn diagrams, time lines, webs, and charts) of important relationships between concepts. 	<p>Example 1: After watching a video on the history of Germany, students take time to draw a timeline listing all the events they can remember, including pictures, people, places, and dates they associate with the events.</p> <p>Example 2: An astronomer from Argentina comes to talk to a class about constellations in the Southern Hemisphere. She describes what types of stars make up the constellations and tells Argentine folktales about them. Students take notes while she speaks so that they can remember the important points after her presentation.</p>
Summarize	Making a mental, oral or written summary guarantees that students understand the gist of a task. It not only helps them judge how well they have understood and completed the task, but also helps them learn more from it.	Summarize is helpful periodically throughout a task or upon its completion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a mental, oral, or written summary of information. 	When a student listens to a song in the target language, she pauses her CD before each chorus so she can think about and summarize in her head the main point of the stanza she just heard.
Use Selective Attention	Concentrating on specific aspects of language or content makes it easier for students to find the information that is important to complete their task. They may concentrate on information they already know in order to understand or communicate better, or they may concentrate on key information such as times or dates.	Use Selective Attention proves particularly useful when the task requires students to sift through large quantities of information. It can also help when students need to give or acquire precise details to complete a task.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on specific information, structures, key words, phrases, or ideas. 	It is a classic technique for students to underline words they do not know in a text so they can look them up or ask the teacher about them later. For a new twist on this technique, students can underline sentences in challenging documents that they are sure they understand.

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Access Information Sources	Using reference materials such as dictionaries, textbooks, periodicals and the Internet, students can solve complex problems and complete difficult tasks independently. Students can look up words or expressions they do not know, as well as find target language cultural information.	Access Information Sources is especially handy when crucial information does not make sense to the students. However, it can be helpful any time students encounter questions, large or small, whose answers are found in reference materials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the dictionary, the internet, and other reference materials. • Seek out and use sources of information. • Follow a model. • Ask questions. 	A fifth grade student in a Spanish immersion school loves popular music and wants to learn more about popular music in Latin America. He listens to music broadcasts on Latino radio stations in the U.S., looks up information on the Web, and, in a letter to his Mexican pen pal, asks about what music is popular with young students in Mexico.
Cooperate	Working together, students gain confidence, share their strengths and complete tasks more easily. Most students enjoy the chance to work with a partner or in a group and friendly competition between groups often brings out top-notch work.	Cooperate can be used while students work on a specific task or during part of a larger task where students work separately. It can allow students to give each other feedback on their individual work and complete new tasks together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with others to complete tasks, build confidence, and give and receive feedback. 	Two students decide to work together to create a poster with zoo animals. They make a joint list and decide which ones to include. They then agree on the materials to use and collaborate on the artwork. They take turns drawing the animals and writing the names.
Talk Yourself Through It (Self-Talk)	Students tell themselves they are doing a good job and that they are capable of completing a task. This self-encouragement helps keep them motivated even when facing obstacles. While they work, students may explain to themselves, silently or out loud, exactly what steps they are taking to achieve their goals.	This strategy can help throughout any tricky or daunting task. It is especially useful on tasks that can be divided into parts tackled one at a time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use your inner resources. Reduce your anxiety by reminding yourself of your progress, the resources you have available, and your goals. 	When reading an entire book in the target language for this first time, students can reassure themselves that they are good readers. Though a bit intimidated, they may tell themselves, "it's just like reading three short stories in a row," or, simply, "I know I can do it!"