

Enabling Education

Anna Uhl Chamot explains how teaching learning strategies can be the catalyst for lifelong learning

Many students face challenges to academic achievement. These include English Language Learners (ELLs), Struggling Readers (SRs), and Standard English Learners (SELs). Not only must these students learn standard academic English, but they must do so while learning content subject matter and skills. In addition, all students are now expected to meet the same national and state standards and assessments as proficient speakers, readers, and writers of standard academic English. Challenging content-based language development and learning strategies help students achieve academic goals.

Why teach learning strategies?

One way to accelerate standard academic language learning for all students is to teach them how to learn more effectively and efficiently. Learning strategies are techniques for understanding, remembering, and using information and skills. Learning strategies are particularly important for students seeking to master both academic language and academic content simultaneously.

Learning strategy instruction can help students by:

- Showing them techniques for “how to learn.”
- Developing their independence and confidence as learners.
- Increasing their academic motivation by helping them become more successful in school.
- Developing their awareness of their own thinking and learning processes.

Research has shown that when students develop metacognition — the awareness of the learning processes and strategies that lead to success — they are more likely to plan how to proceed with a learning task, monitor their own performance on an ongoing basis, find solutions to problems encountered, and evaluate themselves upon task completion. All kinds of fiction, poetry, and informational texts provide students with models of academic and literary language. To make full use of these models, however, students need to comprehend what they read. Reading strategies presented in Longman Cornerstone and Longman Keystone (which I co-authored) are in boxes immediately before each reading text and provide detailed instructions on how to apply the strategy to the text they are about to read. These reading strategies will help students develop improved comprehension.

Many reading strategies have broader applications and can be used as learning strategies for listening, speaking, writing, and remembering both vocabulary and content information. Examples of such strategies are:

- **Prediction** — Anticipate what is coming next during a listening activity.
- **Visualization/Use of Visuals** — Make a mental image of the events and characters in a story you are writing; use or draw a picture, diagram, or other visual aid to learn vocabulary or new information.
- **Making Inferences** — Use the context of a listening activity and what you know about the topic to figure out the meaning of new words or ideas.
- **Asking Questions** — Ask the teacher or others to explain what you do not understand; after speaking or writing, ask yourself or others how well you communicated your meaning.
- **Scanning/Selective Attention** — Focus on specific content information, academic words, or literary words as you read, listen, speak, and write.
- **Taking Notes** — Write down important ideas as you listen and as you prepare to write.
- **Summarizing** — Create a mental, oral, or written summary of information you learn.
- **Classifying/Sequencing** — Classify new words and ideas according to their similarities; sequence events, directions, and steps to solve a problem.

Additional learning strategies that are especially helpful to ELLs, SRs, and SELs in acquiring standard academic English and content are the following three metacognitive strategies and a strategy for using prior knowledge:

- **Planning** — Set goals and identify steps needed to accomplish a learning task.
- **Monitoring/Identifying Problems** — While working on a learning task, check your comprehension or production and identify any problems you are having.
- **Evaluation** — After completing a learning task, assess how well you have done.
- **Using What You Know** — Use your own knowledge and experiences to understand and learn something new; brainstorm words and ideas; make associations and analogies; and write or explain your prior knowledge about a topic.

Guidelines for teaching learning strategies

Since learning strategies are mental processes with few observable manifestations, it is difficult to tell whether a student is learning how to use them. Here are some suggestions to help teachers make strategy instruction more explicit:

- Model the strategy by “thinking aloud” as you perform a task similar to the one students will perform.
- Use the strategy names and refer to them consistently by name.
- Tell students why the strategy is important and how it can help them.
- Remind students to use strategies as they read, listen, brainstorm, write, focus on grammar, learn vocabulary, and work on projects.
- Provide opportunities for students to discuss strategies — how they use them, other strategies used, and which strategies they prefer.

The instructional sequence developed for the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) has provided a useful framework for teaching learning strategies. The sequence provides a five-phase recursive cycle for introducing, teaching, practicing, evaluating, and applying learning strategies. In this approach, highly explicit instruction in applying strategies to learning tasks is gradually faded so that the students can begin to assume greater responsibility in selecting and applying their own preferred learning strategies. The cycle repeats as new strategies or new applications are added to students’ strategic repertoires. An important feature of the CALLA instructional sequence is that the needs and thoughts of students are central to all instruction. The sequence guides students toward increasing levels of independence, thus fostering attitudes of academic self-efficacy.

The five phases of the CALLA instructional sequence are:

1 Preparation

Students identify strategies they are already using and develop their metacognitive awareness of the relationship between their own mental processes and effective learning. By identifying students’ current use of the learning strategies, teachers can determine which additional learning strategies their students need. Activities in the Preparation stage can include class discussions about strategies used for recent learning tasks, group or individual interviews about strategies used for particular tasks, think-aloud sessions in which students describe their thought processes while they work on a task, questionnaires or checklists about strategies used, and diary entries about individual approaches to language and content learning.

2 Presentation

This phase focuses on explaining and modeling the new learning strategy. The teacher describes the characteristics, usefulness, and applications of the strategy. The most effective way to present the new strategy is for teachers to model their own use of the strategy by “thinking aloud.” Teachers can then ask students to recall and describe what they observed and can name the strategy and explain when and how to use it. This modeling helps students visualize themselves working successfully on a similar learning task.

3 Practice

Students now practice the new learning strategy with an authentic learning task. The practice will frequently take place during collaborative work with classmates. A group of students might read a story, for example, then describe the images the story evoked, discuss unfamiliar words encountered and infer meanings through context clues, and take turns summarizing the main points of the story. Strategies can be practiced with any content or language task and can involve any combination of language modalities. In a content-based academic language program, strategies can be used to understand and remember concepts and skills from curriculum areas such as science, social studies, and literature.

4 Self-Evaluation

Students evaluate their success in using learning strategies, thus developing metacognitive awareness of their own learning processes. Activities that develop students’ ability to evaluate themselves include