

# Strategies in the ESL Classroom

**A handbook for teachers  
using strategies**



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## The importance of strategies

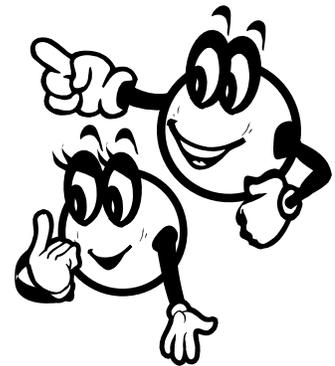
How often have we heard students say, “I can’t do it, so I’m stupid!” and then “I’m stupid, so I can’t do it!” It seems to be a vicious circle which engenders poor self-esteem and little learning. It is possible, however, to become a better learner.

Indeed, although many variables may influence learning success (psychological characteristics, affective variables, etc.), the active learning of strategies and content together will increase motivation and give students some control over their cognitive performance. Success is not an innate ability, and the strategic teacher should help students eliminate strong biased beliefs such as, “You have it or you don’t”.

The strategic classroom is learner-centered. Students are taught how to learn and how to help themselves in school so they can meet real-life demands once they are on their own. The teacher’s role is that of a motivator, guide and facilitator.

*...learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.*

(Rebecca L. Oxford)



## How to teach strategies

### Making students aware of strategies they already use

Rebecca Oxford suggests in Language Learning Strategies to have students try a language task without any training in the target strategy and then have them comment on the strategies they spontaneously used.

This is effectively what is proposed in the Elementary 3 *My first English class in English* task (Appendix 1). Students have already used strategies in their first language class. It is interesting to see which strategies they have transferred to the second language. They may come up with attention, resourcing and inferring. This exchange among students makes good strategies readily available to the class.

## Important steps to teaching strategies

Strategy learning is a long-term investment where errors are part of the learning process. By putting the emphasis on the thinking process however, good strategies make language learning easier.

Here are some important steps for teaching strategies:

### 1. Determine the students' needs

Students don't spontaneously use all the strategies in their first language. After first having the students think about what strategies they use, the teacher can anticipate the ones they will need for further tasks or have the students determine themselves what strategies they will need.

### 2. Select the strategy to teach and a significant context

The strategy to teach will depend on the program, its usefulness for most students, the material used in the classroom, the task, and its transferability to other language situations. To heighten motivation, teachers should focus on only a few strategies, making sure they are easy to learn but still challenging. They should choose different types of strategies to teach during the year (metacognitive, cognitive, socio-affective).

### Example

*Strategies:*

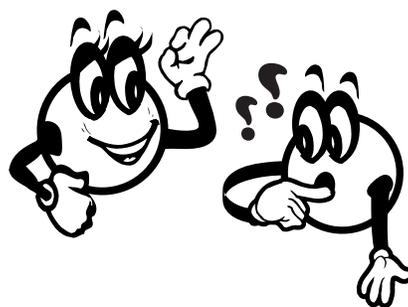
- asking for help or clarification

*Context:*

- animal Tic-Tac-Toe activity

*Useful material for teaching the strategy:*

- posters (appendix 2):
  - Help me, please! (#33)
  - Can you repeat, please? (#8)
  - How do you say...? (#14)
  - What's ... in English? (#14)
  - I don't understand! (#16)
- Interactive Grammar activity #2 (Appendix 3)



### 3. Present, explain and model the new strategy

- Which strategy will be demonstrated ?
- How can it be used ?
- When can it be used ?
- The teacher goes through the thinking process of the activity by thinking aloud and by using and applying the strategy.

## Example

The teacher writes the outline of the lesson on the board:

1. Uh- oh. I have a problem!
2. Animal tic-tac-toe

presents  
explains

Teacher:

*Today, we are going to play an animal tic-tac-toe. But, uh-oh, I have a problem! I have a big problem! I speak English just a little bit. Hum! Wait! I have an idea. I'll look at the posters.*

(The teacher shows the posters and reads them and mimes the expressions.)

*If I need help, I can say **Help me, please!** If I need clarification, I can say **Can you repeat, please?**, **How do you say...?**, **What's... in English?** or **I don't understand.** Now I can play.*

The teacher hands out the activity and explains the rules, the structure and expressions that will be used. He/she then shows the students how to play.

models

Teacher:

*X, would you like to be my partner?*

(The teacher could ask a bilingual student to be the partner.)

Student X:

Yes.

Teacher:

*I am a student. It's my turn.  
(Points to the bear) It is a, it is a...  
(scratches his/her head)  
Uh- oh, I have a problem! Oh, right,  
I look at the posters.  
(Points to the posters) Teacher, help me,  
please. What's **fort** in English? Strong!  
Thank you, teacher.  
(Points again to the bear) It is a strong  
animal. Now, it's your turn.*

The student points to an animal and describes it. The teacher pretends that he/she hasn't heard well and points to the posters.

Teacher:

*Can you repeat, please?*

The teacher may continue this way to model the use of the other expressions before the students start to play.

## 4. Guide the student's initial use of the strategy and provide plenty of practice with appropriate learning situations

- In a similar meaningful context, have students:
  - think aloud
  - explain their reasoning.
- Re-explain any aspects that were not well understood.
- Help students feel that errors are only normal; they are part of the learning process and, in fact, are a healthy indicator that learning is occurring.
- Provide as much practice as the students need in various appropriate learning situations.
- Use the strategy wherever necessary as an incentive to students: this lends credibility to the use of strategies.
- As learners use the strategy more effectively and efficiently, decrease the amount of teacher intervention.



*Expect to get it wrong  
and then to learn by  
figuring out why and  
fixing it rather than  
just getting it right the  
first time.*

(Unknown)

In the animal tic-tac-toe example, while the game is being played, the teacher should walk around the classroom, listen to the interaction going on in each group and encourage the students to use the strategies whenever they need help or clarification. If an expression is giving problems to many students, a quick intervention may be necessary to re-explain it to the class.

The teacher should also guide the students' use of these strategies during the following classes and activities, whether it be during group activities or during explanations. Here is a follow-up activity for the animal tic-tac-toe that will provide more practice for the two strategies focused upon.

The teacher has the students work in pairs to choose an animal and write down four clues, using sentences like the ones used in the tic-tac-toe activity. While the students prepare their sentences, the teacher encourages the students to use their strategies again to ask for the teacher's or their partner's help, to ask their partner or the teacher to clarify something, etc. The teacher then gathers the clues and prepares a modified jigsaw for the students to play

in groups of four.

A modified jigsaw is a cooperative structure where every member of the team has to contribute to complete the task.

When the modified jigsaw is ready, each member receives a card on which there are eight or ten clues. Each clue refers to a different animal. Taking turns, they read the four clues for the first animal aloud. They then decide together which animal is being described and write it on a sheet of paper. The team goes on to the second animal and reads the four clues.

### **Example**

Student #1,

clue #1: *It is small.*

Student #2,

clue #1: *It is grey.*

Student #3,

clue #1: *It is a quiet animal.*

Student #4,

clue #1: *It is a quick animal.*

Answer: *mouse*

The teacher reminds students again to use their two strategies while interacting with their teammates. Is there a clue that they don't understand? If so, they should ask their group or the teacher for clarification. Is there a word in a clue that they don't know? What expression should they use to get the meaning?

Motivation increases as the students become autonomous in using the strategy.



**5. Encourage students to reflect on their use of the strategy, on how well they are doing, and on their difficulties and their successes**

Students should be encouraged to reflect regularly on their use of the strategy. This individual reflection involves metacognitive strategies such as self-monitoring and self-evaluation. In addition to the individual reflection, students should have a chance to discuss with their peers or with the teacher the most appropriate or inappropriate use they made of the strategy during a lesson.

This moment of reflection and sharing is crucial to learning. It builds support for all students, whether they are already successful language learners or yet to be. Furthermore, it provides invaluable information to the teacher on the student's thinking and learning process which would stay with the learner otherwise.

At the beginning of Elementary 3, students are unable to talk about their use of strategies in English. The first discussions could therefore be conducted in French and followed by simple, easy to understand, personal reflection sheets in English.

**Example**

Questions to be asked in French:

- Qu'est-ce que tu as fait quand *tu ne comprenais pas*? Quand il y avait un mot que tu ne connaissais pas?
- As-tu eu d'autres problèmes?
- Qu'est-ce que tu as fait pour régler ton/tes problème(s)?
- Qu'est-ce qui t'as aidé?
- Que vas-tu faire la prochaine fois si tu as le même problème?

**Reflection sheet:**

A. Today, I asked for help in English:

From my teacher ( )

From my partner ( )

I forgot to use my strategy ( )

B. Today, I asked for clarification

From my teacher ( )

From my partner ( )

I forgot to use my strategy ( )

As students' proficiency in English increases, such discussions should be carried out in English.

This moment of reflection is also a very good opportunity to find with the students other language contexts the strategy could be transferred to. In our example, students would probably mention contexts such as when reading or listening to a story, when writing an invitation, or when playing another interactive grammar activity. In fact, asking for help or clarification is a basic strategy that can be used anywhere, whether inside the classroom or outside (while on a trip, for example).

## 6. Reflect on the way you presented the strategies to the students

- Was the material I used appropriate?
- Were the strategies taught appropriate for the age level of the students?
- Have I helped the students to transfer the strategies to new tasks in the classroom and outside the classroom?
- Can I learn from my errors and those of my students?
- Etc.

Teachers also have to reflect on how well everything went in class. They have to be easy on themselves just as they have to be easy on students who are learning to use strategies. Errors are normal, even for teachers! To avoid discouragement, two teachers could buddy-up and meet regularly in order to share their experiences in their classrooms and give each other help and support.

*An expert is someone who made all the possible errors there were to make in a certain field.*

(Unknown)

## Strategies in the ESL Classroom

**Here is a summary of the important steps for teaching strategies:**

Make sure students are aware of strategies they already use.



1. Determine the students' needs.
2. Select the strategy to teach and a significant context.
3. Present, explain and model the new strategy.
4. Guide the student's initial use of the strategy and provide plenty of practice using appropriate learning situations.
5. Encourage students to reflect on their use of the strategy, on how well they are doing, and on their difficulties and their successes.
6. Reflect on the way you presented the strategies to the students.



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