

Empowering Language Learning Strategies Online

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Abstract

English language educators faced challenges unique to their discipline as well as difficulties shared with all teachers as they suddenly adjusted to 100% online learning environments in 2020. Language learning strategies (LLS), which are proven strategies for improving language learning as well as building self-efficacy and peer support (MacArthur et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2018), are presented here as tools to navigate this new challenge. The article opens with a brief review of several acute current needs of online learners that critical pedagogy and learning strategies may address. Next, the author provides concise definitions for language learning strategies and summarizes the historical and theoretical basis for LLS. A classroom-based case study of language learning strategy instruction (LLSI) then follows. Finally, online tools and methods for two key strategies, goal-setting and peer review, are provided with recommendations for applying these strategies in a variety of settings.

Keywords

language learning strategies, critical pedagogy, self-regulation, peer review, goal-setting

Background

In my English as an Academic Language writing class, comprised entirely of multilingual learners, peer review days are among the liveliest. I remember one instance in February 2020, the jostling of chairs and laughter, attentive reading, and friendly conversations; everyone participated that day, even those faltering on their research-based persuasive essay. This demonstrated the self-regulated language learning strategies (LLS) I taught, which research has long documented are effective and teachable (e.g., Cohen & Griffiths, 2015; Dörnyei, 2005; Rubin, 1975). Among my colleagues and I, strategy instruction is frequent in our breakroom chats, with questions like: How can I creatively teach peer review? What helps struggling listeners more: attending to intonation or to key terms?

Then came March 2020 and an abrupt shift to 100% remote instruction amid COVID-19. I'll never forget when Joe (pseudonym) appeared with disheveled hair and a blank look in our online classroom in early April. Typically, he was a meticulous, successful student, so I contacted him. He said: "Honestly, I can't sleep . . . I can't work. I'm just having a hard time. My flight home has been cancelled several times, and my family is worried, so I don't leave my room." Suddenly, what seemed important as educators was reduced to: get through the curriculum the best we can and support ourselves and our students' urgent needs. L2 learners in the U.S., and many globally, have experienced exponentially the losses of this pandemic: lost connection with family, future security, sometimes the respect of their community amidst anti-foreign racism (Lingnan University, 2020).

Though it may seem counterintuitive, distance teaching amid this crisis highlights the value of language learning strategy instruction (LLSI). Strategy-based instruction can help us attend to

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two critical human needs right now: the need for control and the need for community. First, the need for control: As Davidson (2020) wrote, the first priority of educators during COVID-19 should be: reckon with the trauma, which she explained “means thinking about access in all its dimensions: technological, intellectual, personal, financial, medical, educational. And cognitive. Distraction is the single biggest deterrent to learning. Physical and emotional distress are the single biggest causes of distraction we have” (para. 5). One simple way to address the acute stress is by teaching strategies that increase a sense of self-efficacy (Artino & Stephens, 2009; Mastan & Maarof, 2014; Nguyen & Gu, 2013).

Second, the need for community, for genuine human connection that involves laughter and trust as well as skill development, is acute for most of us these days. Creating that online is not easy. In *Minds Online*, Miller (2014) cited research that dispels the myth that online interaction necessarily divides us. Conversely, Miller emphasized recent research which demonstrates that online communication clouds the emotional aspects of communication and tends to foster insensitive behavior due to the perceived anonymity of remote communication. The book explained how educators should scaffold strategies for avoiding these pitfalls of teaching online. LLS, from embodied tactics to culture-conscious peer review, can foster supportive relationships and a trusting atmosphere. These strategies can ease the self-consciousness intensified online which might block the freedom to make mistakes.

Perhaps this disruption invites us even to relinquish some aspects of our control in the classroom, to move toward critical pedagogy’s aim of critiquing power structures in society and in the classroom (Norton & Toohey, 2004). This could mean small changes in our behavior that communicate respect instead of control, such as our gut reactions when a student enters class late or makes repeated mistakes (Weaver, 2020). Or L2 instructors may consider broader implications of applying Freire and later proponents’ ideals through critical language pedagogy (Morris, 2017). For instance, students can be systematically led to identify and select their own learning strategies; learning outcomes could be allowed to emerge throughout the course.

Whether to attend to current student needs or to take a more radical approach to student-led curricula, LLSI offers practical, evidence-based approaches (Chamot & Harris, 2019). This essay will explain and demonstrate learning strategies essential for this moment. The section “Defining Terms in Context” provides a clear definition of LLS and briefly reviews the history and theory that undergird it, including a graphic task-based model. “Case Study of LLS” reviews the key outcomes of a classroom-based case study I conducted which applied a LLSI method in an L2 writing course. “LLS in Practice Online” is practical, describing online activities and tools for two learning strategies: goal-setting and peer review. In the conclusion, I offer implications for teaching in a variety of contexts.

Defining Terms in Context

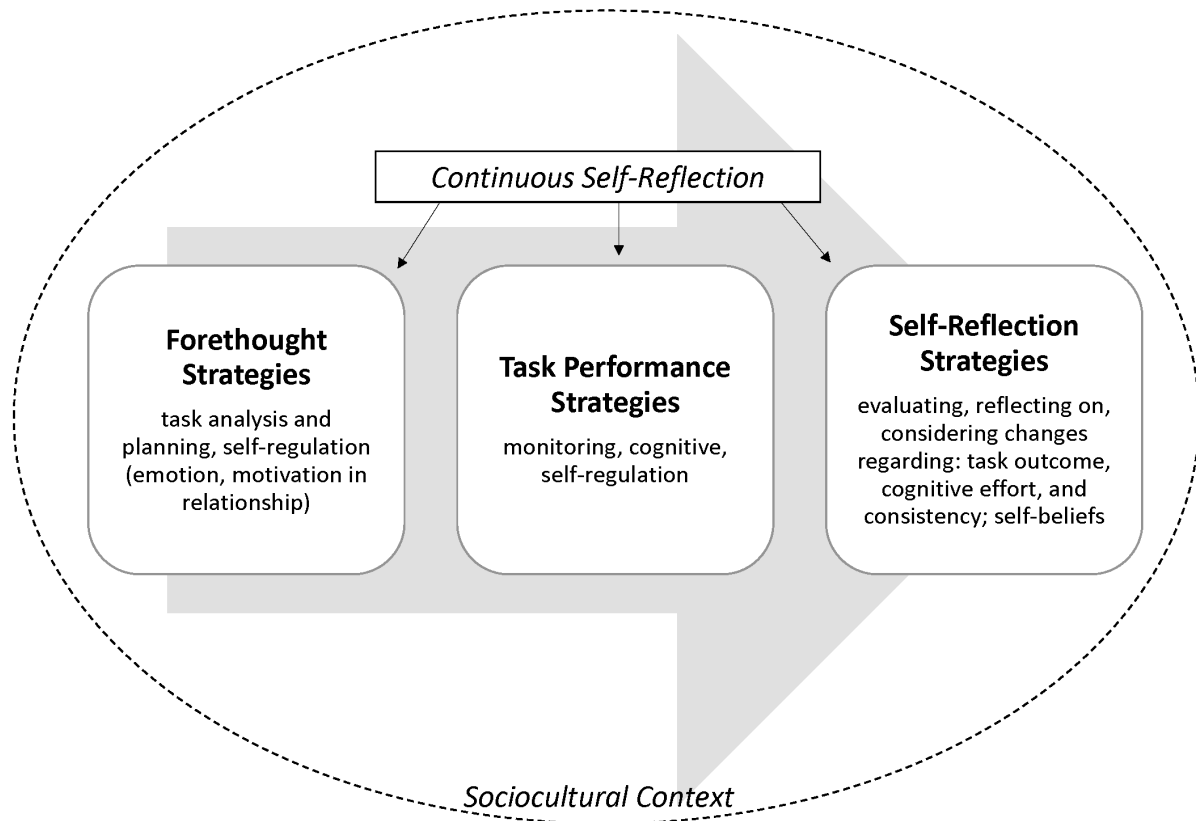
One common critique of LLSI is simple: a lack of common definitions. In fact, the terms learning strategy/self-regulation/meta-knowledge are ill-defined buzzwords in many communities today. This confusion led Oxford to conduct a content-analytic study of more than 30 respected LLS definitions. Based primarily on this study, she composed the following definition:

L2 learning strategies are complex, dynamic thoughts and actions, selected and used by learners with some degree of consciousness in specific contexts in order to regulate multiple aspects of themselves (such as cognitive, social, and emotional) for the purpose of (a) accomplishing language tasks; (b) improving language performance or use; and/or (c) enhancing long-term proficiency. (Oxford, 2017, p. 48)

This definition adds that learning strategies may be mental or behavioral, are learner-chosen, creatively applied for various contexts, and are teachable. While linguists continue to debate the definitions (Rose et al., 2018), I often return to Oxford’s comprehensive definition; while long, it is clear and precise, unifying the best insights of nearly 40 years of scholarship and practice. Just as important, it suggests the complex domains and theory undergirding thorough LLS instruction. Learning strategies “are part of complex systems—the contexts inside us and the contexts outside, all operating dynamically” (Oxford, 2017, p. 170). This complexity has led linguists to develop models for LLS. A widely respected taxonomy in K-12 schools in the U.S. is CALLA, the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach developed by Chamot and O’Malley (1994). The strategy model I prefer is Oxford’s S²R model, pictured in Figure 1 as applied to a language learning task (Oxford, 2017, p. 75; adapted with permission). Two emphases should be apparent in this model: the importance of the social and inner context of the learner, and the importance of meta-strategies.

Figure 1

LLS as Applied to a Language Learning Task



Language learning strategies have been explored by teachers and scholars for more than three decades. In the 1970s, when cognitive pedagogy accelerated focus on the learner, Rubin (1975) famously launched a focus on successful behaviors of language learners. Steady interest in LLS has continued in part due to educators’ intuitive desire to teach how, not just what, to learn. LLS scholars have increasingly explored: what works in the classroom? In the last 15 years, a growing body of research has confirmed that LLS can be taught (Chamot & Harris, 2019; Plonsky,

2019; Rose et al., 2018), and that context and methods matter. In a meta-analysis of 77 individual studies of LLSI among 7,890 learners, Plonsky (2019) drew the following conclusions: that self-regulation strategies should be emphasized; larger effects were observed for learners beyond the beginning level; and learners should be encouraged to select and develop their own strategies. The recent volumes by Oxford (2017) and the edited collection by Chamot and Harris (2019) provide comprehensive overviews of LLS, including ongoing critiques and future directions.

Theoretical Frameworks for LLS

Key theories that underly LLS are cognitivism, constructivism, and sociocultural theory. Each of these theories point to questions posed below that can guide instruction online today:

Cognitivism

This learning theory was prevalent when LLS began in the 1970s and 80s, which analyzes how learners process new ideas, sounds, and experiences as well as how they process information. Cognitivism also posits the importance of prior knowledge and effort and in the 1990s led to the popularization of self-regulation. Since 2000, insights from neuroscience have been added, for example how learners remember, attend to, and process information (Miller, 2014). **Questions for online teaching:** What are the key mental distractors for your students? How can your curriculum elicit and build on prior skills and knowledge and make students aware and confident in that?

Constructivism and Sociocultural Theory

These often refer to the work of Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky and his colleagues (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Constructivism explains that learning is an active process of constructing knowledge, dependent on the learner's experience and self as well as current context. Related is the well-known zone of proximal development, commonly defined as the distance between an individual's current learning and their potential with assistance of key sources; and scaffolding, or gradually withdrawing assistance as the learner becomes more successful. Also rooted in Vygotsky's work is sociocultural theory, which he posited as a radical new way to look at human psychology. He argued that the distinctive aspect of human consciousness is a person's capacity for self-control through the tools of language, logic, and other cultural/mental skills that she can use to mediate her relationship to the world (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). **Questions for online teaching:** What is the social and cultural context that needs to be elicited at this time? How do I leave some space in the curriculum for the unexpected due to the ongoing process of learners constructing knowledge?

Case Study of LLS

My 2019 classroom-based case study yielded new observations regarding the effectiveness of some LLS. I explored the results of integrating new self-regulated strategy instruction into one instance of an L2 academic writing class. The course was an intensive English academic writing course (35 classroom hours in eight weeks) with nine students, ages 19-35, four males and five females representing five nationalities. The instructional method was adapted from "Supporting Strategic Writers" (SSW; MacArthur et al., 2015), a curriculum which had proven success in a quasi-experimental study with 13 instructors and 276 students at two universities (MacArthur et al., 2015; Traga Philippakos et al., 2018).

Method

From the SSW curriculum, I adapted and embedded explicit writing strategies I had not taught in detail before, such as: modeling by instructor; guided brainstorming, outlining, and drafting, scaffolded for increasing independent writing; and instructed/modeled peer review. The self-regulation strategies comprised a range of strategies such as goal setting, task management, monitoring of progress, and reflection.

Case studies generally are intended to focus on qualitative detail and context in one scenario. This approach allowed me to address several criticisms of LLSI research: the need for descriptive detail about instructional methods (Chamot & Harris, 2019), and for qualitative analysis of learning strategies such as peer review, especially for persuasive writing (Mitchell & Pessoa, 2017). My research methods included two quantitative measures. First, I adapted the [pre/post writing self-efficacy survey](#) from the SSW curriculum which consisted of 27 questions, answered on a Likert scale, addressing motivation and attitude about writing. Second, I designed a comparative analysis of final student essays paired with completed peer reviews, all anonymized; these were scored (independently by a colleague and me) for significant improvement in areas related to the peer review. Students utilized a [peer review rubric](#) to conduct peer evaluations. The qualitative measures were student journals and my participant-observer journal. I had two research questions:

1. Do some aspects of strategy- based instruction show impact on student self-efficacy and/or on writing revision skills?
2. Is this methodology efficient (not overly time-consuming) for the instructor?

Results and Discussion

Regarding my first question, there were limited positive results. The first quantitative method, the pre/post survey yielded insignificant results, and therefore are not reported in detail here. Less than half of the eight participating students increased their confidence and attitude scores by 1 or more points on at least half of the questions. For example, 4/8 students expressed increased confidence in correcting their grammar and in finding ideas to write about. On the question “I can tell when to use different writing strategies,” only one student increased her score; the majority scored the same. This may have been due to a limited time period (eight weeks) for self-observed change or to a poorly-matched survey (not designed for L2 writers).

The comparative analysis of the peer reviews showed more positive results, but not consistently related LLSI. Two evaluators who compared peer reviews to improvements in anonymized essays found the following: two thirds of the essays showed writing improvement related to the peer review, but only in a few areas (a clarified topic sentence or an added supporting detail); the same essays ignored other appropriate peer suggestions. Notably, the essay with the most relevant positive changes had received a peer review with detailed, clear suggestions.

The qualitative data of student reflective journals and my participant-observation journal showed positive results about my second question (efficiency of the methodology for the instructor), and positive results in student perceptions of LLS. In their reflective journals, most students (7/9) perceived strategy instruction as significant and positive. These comments were not prompted, but rather open-ended questions about their learning throughout the course. For example, seven out of nine appreciated the journal-writing (one strategy) as giving them “more freedom” or “more confidence,” and planned to continue it as a new habit. Positive comments about other LLSI included: “peer review helps me to see how others write”; “modeling out loud by the teacher helped

me to avoid some mistakes.” In my participant-observer journal, I also noted positive results. Compared to teaching this course without the LLSI, there was much less frequent writer’s block or confusion about writing, and more frequent collaborative problem-solving. With that added efficiency, I found that increasing LLSI did not add to my time in preparation or classroom activity.

In sum, my case study confirmed other research that a systematic approach to incorporating strategies is efficient for the instructor and perceived as effective for learners (Cohen & Griffiths, 2015; MacArthur et al., 2015; Nguyen & Gu, 2013). Regarding peer review, my students’ perceptions echo many studies that suggest that peer review is a positive, socially grounded language encounter and that conducting peer review enhances learning (Ahmed, 2020; Yu & Lee, 2016). However, my brief case study failed to show a causal relationship between peer review and writing improvement nor contextual data about differences among reviewers and reviews. To extend my observations, research should explore LLSI in context: how various types of virtual tools might work and for what kinds of learners (gender, age, professional or educational background, for example). Finally, my students’ self-reflective journals confirmed the value of teaching and researching self-regulation and hopeful mindsets. Even though my pre-post-survey was ineffective, with a longer time period I recommend such an instrument to raise awareness in learners and provide data for instructors. An accessible instrument is Gkonou and Oxford’s (2016) questionnaire which presents scenarios that elicit attitudes and emotions about language learning.

LLS in Practice Online

As I have argued throughout this essay, teaching a system of learning strategies is ideal (Oxford, 2017); yet in any stressful environment, simplicity is wise. To this end, I conclude this article with approaches—focused on practical methods and tools—for two LLS for empowering learners in a global crisis: goal-setting and peer review. Several principles for effective LSSI should be recalled when incorporating these activities online (Artino & Stephens, 2009; Chamot & Harris, 2019; Miller, 2014):

- Apply an iterative process: like a spiral, strategy instruction follows a pattern that repeats at least twice: instruction, practice, self-assessment (with instructor feedback) and changes, if needed; repeat.
- Explain the purpose of the strategy and accept doubts/ suggestions for changes.
- Collaborative and multi-modal approaches tap more learner domains and critical needs today, the motivational/ social as well as cognitive.
- Purposefully select tech tools. They should fit the objectives and be accessible to you and your students, prioritizing simplicity; suggested tools below.

Multisensory and Self-Regulated Goal-Setting Lesson

Background

LLSI research emphasizes that goal-setting is most effective when it is self-monitored, with explicit definition of the purpose, modeling, and feedback to encourage competence. A meta-strategy that can access mind and heart, goal-setting develops agency and hope (Oxford, 2017).

Lesson and Timing

I created a 20-minute interactive [presentation to instruct the key meta-cognitive skill of goal-setting](#). Ideally taught synchronously, the lesson covers student experience with goal-setting; purpose in this course; images for reflection; student written or aural goal-setting. Typically, I

follow this pattern in the course: instruction and goal-setting week one; reflection and modification of goals: mid-course; reflection on goals and future goals: final week.

Instructional Feedback

In week one, I provide a brief encouraging comment on each student's initial goals and the following day, share an example of any goal that was NOT correct (no name), and ask all students to revise their goals if needed, based on that example. I also ask them to share their goals with one classmate (which they report on in their goal-setting document). Mid-course: I only skim their re-iteration of their goals and share a few positive examples during class. Final week: The overall assignment gets a complete/incomplete score at the end, with a final short comment from me (again non-evaluative, e.g., "I noticed your improvement . . ."; Glad to hear this felt productive").

Tools

For student responses (at least 3 times in the course), the tool needs to be shareable between student/teacher, allow for repeated viewing and commenting (begin/mid/end of course), and ideally multi-modal, allowing for audio or visual responses. In our Learning Management System (LMS) which is Canvas, I use either the assignment tool or the embedded Onenote; these allow for student-teacher private posts or whole-class interactions, and easily integrate audio or even video responses which I encourage.

Peer Review Lesson

Background

My top goal for peer review is peer learning which develops essential transferable skills (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012) and meets critical needs for community. Promoting peer learning requires a willingness to share authority, not easy for most educators (Morris, 2020). Virtual learning may apparently discourage peer learning but has many creative tools that can boost it, particularly for less confident or less extroverted learners (Miller, 2014).

Peer review as a language-learning strategy offers benefits for the reviewer and the reviewed (Yu & Lee, 2016). If written or oral dialogue is involved, especially in a dual-language, cross-cultural classroom, peer review can foster authentic communication skills such as asking for and receiving feedback (Ruecker, 2011). For instructors, effective peer review can save instructional time while still providing feedback that is specific and frequent (Oxford, 2017).

However, my experience agrees with several cautions regarding peer review, especially for L2 learners; it is ineffective if students don't apply effort to the task; and cross-cultural misunderstandings can occur. In a recent adult professional writing class, for example, I was asked to intervene when one student felt that her peer had insulted her in his comments on her writing.

Two practices have improved my use of peer review online. First, I provide in-depth instruction and scaffolded oversight. For example, I present one aspect of Meyers' intercultural communication global comparison tool (Meyer, 2015) which compares differences across cultures in giving and receiving negative feedback. Second, I apply tools that enable flexible yet clear approaches, inviting student choice and leadership.

Lesson and Timing

To instruct peer review in any course (speaking or writing), I have developed a playful yet purposeful [introductory peer review presentation](#). This can be presented synchronously or through

a video, inviting responses. In a pluri-lingual context, instruction should address possible cultural conflicts; and discuss when to focus on global aspects of writing (organization/clarity of ideas/coherence) and when to drill down for grammar/mechanics.

Aiming for at least three experiences of peer review per course, I have developed simple rubrics and tools. For the first peer review assignment, I explain and briefly model how to use the rubric. Before the second assignment, I invite leadership by asking for any suggestions to change the rubric or even to redesign it (for credit). For the third peer review, students can opt to use the rubric or omit it, giving only holistic feedback. In all three assignments, tools invite students to give audio/visual feedback as well as written, and I elicit feedback from students about the assignment.

Instructional Feedback

Some instructional monitoring/feedback of peer review, at least at first, is needed both to motivate students and to correct misinterpretations. I aim to give timely and specific feedback, but I want this to be a low-stakes, friendly and peer-driven assignment, so I minimize my teacher-footprint on it. For the first assignment, I read each completed peer review and give completion credit; the following class, I take five minutes to: share a few examples to the whole class, without names, of effective feedback and if necessary, ineffective. For a second peer review assignment, I would only skim each one; in class, I would prompt reflection with the question: what went well with the peer reviews, and are there questions or suggestions? Lastly, in a final reflection assignment, students are asked to assess the peer review process: What worked for you as a reviewer and being reviewed? What didn't work, and how could it be improved?

Tools

Rubrics should be simple but should closely imitate the rubric used for grading. Tech tools: My preferred method is having students meet synchronously online; they complete the peer review documents, prepared in advance, during their meeting or prior; and then talk together for 5-15 minutes about one another's work. For an L2 course, every opportunity for multi-modal language use is ideal, as it integrates language skills as well as peer relationships. Our LMS (Canvas) has rubric tools and a peer review app that are versatile; they can be used anonymously/ non-paired or paired with discussion face-to-face online. Other options: video/audio tools like Flipgrid or VoiceThread are designed for peer comments, engaging, and user-friendly; a sophisticated tool is Peerceptiv (I have not reviewed).

Conclusion

"It's like to be on a boat, but on a wild ocean, like with no control. It is a rush of emotions and fear, to have no idea what I'm doing." Written by my student regarding L2 academic writing, her metaphor seems apt for all online teaching and learning in 2020: facing distress from within and without, with seesawing emotions we nevertheless aim for a place and seek to arrive there with a group. Thoughtfully instructing learning strategies can help everyone in the boat to arrive.

Returning to critical language pedagogy, linguist Coyle (2019) described a vision for "co-created strategic classrooms...where learners and teachers work in partnership for successful learning to take place" (para. 5). Building on Freire's critical inquiry, Coyle's pedagogy emphasizes the social and cultural construct of language that is shaped by and shapes its context. This classroom (online or face-to-face) has the following characteristics:

- It is pluri-lingual and highly collaborative.
- Teachers and learners co-construct goals and assessments.
- Self-directional strategies are frequently fostered.

Genuine connection and effective language learning online can be enhanced by selecting a few key learning strategies and teaching them well. Yet the pandemic also invites us to consider a paradigm shift, as Coyle and other practitioners of critical pedagogy envision (Plonsky, 2019; Weaver, 2020). Language learning strategies as simple as goal-setting, reflection, and peer review can enable students to take control of their own learning outcomes (my case study reported above; Artino & Stephens, 2009; Mastan & Maarof, 2014; Nguyen & Gu, 2013). They can also open the course to more fluid learning, possible in virtual contexts when instructors and students strategically reflect and communicate about their goals and effective assessment.

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