

# Language Learning Strategies

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## Summary

This book lists strategies language learners can use to make the language learning process successful for them. The strategies are listed by the main function they help to achieve and are linked to specific techniques that implement them. This information can help you become a more effective language learner by helping you plan your activities effectively.

## Contents

OVERVIEW: Language learning strategies

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OVERVIEW

## Language learning strategies

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## Introduction

Developing good language learning strategies is one way you can become a better language learners. Research has shown that good language learners use a variety of strategies and use strategies appropriate to the task or situation. This book can introduce you to various kinds of strategies and show you how to use them in everyday life.

## In this module group

Here are the modules on language learning strategies:

- What is a language learning strategy?
- OVERVIEW: Comprehension strategies
- OVERVIEW: Memory strategies

- [OVERVIEW: Production strategies](#)
- [OVERVIEW: Communication strategies](#)

### See also

- [Keywords: learning strategies](#)

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## What is a language learning strategy?

### Definition

A language learning strategy is something you decide to do in order to learn a language better. Different strategies can be used for specific aspects of language learning. They are based on language learning principles. Many language learning techniques and activities are ways of implementing strategies.

### Examples

- You associate words with pictures to help you remember them.
- You mentally rehearse what you are going to say in a given situation.

### Kinds

Here are some kinds of language learning strategies:

- [OVERVIEW: Comprehension strategies](#)
- [OVERVIEW: Memory strategies](#)
- [OVERVIEW: Production strategies](#)
- [OVERVIEW: Communication strategies](#)

### See also

- [Keywords: learning strategies](#)

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OVERVIEW

## Comprehension strategies

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### Introduction

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Comprehension strategies are those that help you understand what you hear and thus take in new information. You do this by understanding messages and inferring meaning of new bits of information from the context. Language you can understand is what Stephen Krashen calls comprehensible input.

To make sure you are getting comprehensible input, choose activities that cause you to actually process language meaningfully, but where there is a new piece of information. Here are some specific strategies you can use when taking in new information.

### **In this module group**

Here are the modules on comprehension strategies:

- Selective Attention strategy
- Inference strategy
- Top-down Processing strategy
- Deduction strategy
- Analysis strategy
- Transfer strategy

### **See also**

- Keywords: comprehension

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## **Selective Attention strategy**

### **Description**

The Selective Attention strategy involves selecting just one aspect of a discourse to pay particular attention to at a given time.

### **Benefits**

The benefits of selecting just one aspect of a discourse to concentrate on at a given time is that you can focus on both the form and meaning of that aspect without having to pay attention to everything else that is going on, which might be overwhelming. In this way, you can focus on a particular structure or skill.

### **Example**

You decide to listen to someone listing items and concentrate only on the intonation.

You notice that the voice seems to go up at the end all of the items but the last, where the voice goes down. You decide to listen for other lists and just concentrate on the intonation.

### See also

- Keywords: selective attention

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## Inference strategy

### Description

Inference is filling in the blanks from the pieces you understand. In a way, it is a kind of principled guess at the meaning of something, which can be confirmed or disconfirmed by what comes next. When you use context, physical or linguistic, to help you understand something, you are probably using inference.

### Benefits

Inference is one of the very best and most useful language learning strategies. It forms the basis for learning from what Stephen Krashen calls "comprehensible input." Developing your skill at using this strategy wisely will pay big benefits.

### Example

You are in a restaurant or a train and see a sign saying *defense de fumer*. The word *fumer* reminds you of *fume* in English and what's more you notice that no one is smoking around you. You infer that *defense de fumer* means "no smoking" even though the word *defense* sounds like something else in English.

### See also

- Keywords: inference

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## Top-down Processing strategy

### Description

Top-down processing is a strategy whereby you use what you know of the topic or the general subject of a discourse to figure out the meaning of a particular utterance within it. It involves inference, using the big picture as the context.

## Benefits

Learning to use the big picture to help us interpret details is a skill we use every day. It takes the burden off us of listening carefully for every detail, because once we know the big picture we can predict most of the details. Of course, it takes time to build up an idea of the big picture in a new language and culture. The more different the new culture, the longer it takes to become good at top-down processing in our new language.

## Example

Once I know that someone is talking about the weather, I have a lot of advantages in understanding what is being said. For one thing, I can guess that there will be vocabulary like rain or snow or wind or hail or lightening rather than chairs and tables and sofas. Also, I can assume that they will be talking about something I have probably experienced. I may assume that they are talking about today's weather or recent weather or tomorrow's weather, although that isn't always the case. At any rate, I have a better chance of guess words I don't know than if I didn't know the topic.

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## Deduction strategy

### Description

Deduction is a strategy whereby you reason from a known principle to an unknown, from the general to the specific, or from a premise to a logical conclusion.

### Benefits

Sometimes knowing a general rule you can apply can be a big help in figuring out specific cases. It saves you for having to consider every case individually.

### Example

If I know that regular verbs in English form the past tense by adding *-ed*, and that *walk* is a regular verb, I can deduce that the past tense of I walk is *I walked*.

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## Analysis strategy

### Description

Analysis involves examining something and discovering the meaningful parts. You can use analysis in many ways in your language learning program, from analyzing discourses

to words and even analyzing your learning style. As a comprehension strategy, analysis is applied to language at different levels, from sounds, to words to discourses.

## Benefits

Since language is systematic, if you can analyze the system and find the meaningful parts you can relieve your memory of a great burden and give yourself the ability to recombine the parts.

## Example

You see the word hypertension for the first time. You don't know exactly what it means, so you start to analyse the word. You recognize the first part of the word hyper- as being the same as in the words hypersensitive and hyperactive, both of which you know. You figure out that hyper mean "too much." The second part of the word is tension. You think the word must mean too much tension.

**Note:** Your analysis is correct, even though it hasn't taken you all the way to understanding that the word hypertension is used to refer to high blood pressure. Combining analysis with other strategies, such as inference and top-down processing might help you figure out that part, but from your analysis you have gotten part way.

## See also

- Keywords: analysis

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## Transfer strategy

### Description

Transfer involves using knowledge about one language to help you understand another. It can be very helpful in learning a new language, especially one related to a language you know, but it also has its dangers.

### Benefits

Transfer can be very helpful in learning a new language, especially one related to a language you know, as it can help you guess the meaning of words and understand grammatical structures.

### Warning

Transfer can also cause problems, because sometimes words related to words you know

in another language can have developed a different meaning in the language you are learning. Cognate words with meanings different from those you expect are sometimes called *false friends*. Always be sure to check the meaning of a word you guess by transfer from another language.

## Examples

You hear the word *refrigerador* in Spanish and guess that it must mean "refrigerator."  
You are transferring this knowledge from English to Spanish, and you are right!

You hear the word *embarrasada* in Spanish and guess that it must mean "embarrassed."  
You are again transferring your knowledge from English to Spanish, but this time you are wrong! *Embarrasada* means "pregnant." (Aren't you embarrassed?)

## See also

- Keywords: transfer

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OVERVIEW

## Memory strategies

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### Introduction

Memory strategies are those used for storing information for later retrieval.

### In this module group

Here are the modules on memory strategies:

- The Word Association strategy
- The Visual Association strategy
- Action Association strategy
- The Grouping strategy
- The Imagery strategy
- The Contextualization strategy
- Repetition strategy
- Recombination strategy
- The Structured Review strategy

## See also

- Keywords: memorization

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## The Word Association strategy

### Description

The Word Association strategy involves creating mental links between one word you are learning and one or more others.

### Benefits

Some sets of words often occur together and learning them together can help you remember them better. Making associations helps you build up networks of words in your mind.

### Kinds

Here are some kinds of Word Association strategies:

- Associating a word with its opposite  
**Example:** Hot and cold
- Associating a word with another word it is commonly used with  
**Example:** Bread and butter
- Associating a word with other words in the same semantic domain  
**Example:** Paper, pen, stamps, envelopes

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## The Visual Association strategy

### Description

The Visual Association strategy involves associating a word or phrase you are learning with something you can see: a picture, an icon, or a written representation.

### Benefits

Associating new words with a visual stimulus gives a concrete image to attach the sounds of the new word to and creates a mental image of the new word. Some learners



particularly find this kind of association helpful.

### **Techniques using this strategy**

Here are the language learning techniques that implement this strategy:

- The Look and Listen techniques
- The Semantic Map technique
- The Color-coding technique
- The Symbol Association technique

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## **Action Association strategy**

### **Description**

The Action Association strategy involves associating a word or sentence you are learning with an action.

### **Benefits**

Actions, like visual images, help you form meaningful associations with the sounds of the words you are learning. Some learners, particularly those with a kinesthetic or tactile sensory preference find action association particularly helpful.

### **Techniques using this strategy**

Here are the language learning techniques which implement this strategy:

- The Physical Response techniques

### **See also**

- Keywords: action association

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## **The Grouping strategy**

### **Description**

The grouping strategy involves grouping words in a way that helps you remember them. The groups can be based on various kinds of similarity. Here are just a few:

- Grammatical function  
**Example:** Nouns of the same gender
- Topic  
**Example:** Words about weather
- Communication function  
**Example:** Apologies, requests, thanks
- Similar meanings  
**Example:** Hot, warm, tepid, scalding

### **Benefits**

Grouping words together gives you more associations for each word and helps you remember them. Find whatever kinds of grouping work best for you.

### **Techniques using this strategy**

Here are the language learning techniques which implement this strategy:

- The Semantic Map technique

## **The Imagery strategy**

### **Description**

The imagery strategy involves relating new language information to a mental image. The image can be of an object, a symbol, a situation, or the letters of a word.

### **Benefits**

This technique, like the Visual Association technique, makes use of images, but these images are in your mind, instead of on paper. The benefit is that you are not restricted to what you can draw or find pictures of, but only limited by the extent of your imagination.

### **Techniques using this strategy**

Here are the language learning techniques which implement this strategy:

- The Mental Image technique

### **See also**

- Keywords: mental images

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## **The Contextualization strategy**

### **Description**

The Contextualization strategy involves putting a new word or phrase into a meaningful context, such as a sentence, a conversation, or a story, that makes the word easier to remember.

### **Benefits**

This strategy takes advantage of similar processes as those you use in the inference strategy: you use what you know to help you remember what is new. Putting a new word into context helps you use it properly in other contexts.

### **Techniques using this strategy**

Here are the language learning techniques which implement this strategy:

- The Flash Cards technique

### **See also**

- Keywords: context

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## **Repetition strategy**

### **Description**

The Repetition strategy involves doing or saying something over and over again until it sticks in your memory. You can use this strategy with almost any technique.

### **Benefits**

Every time you repeat something meaningfully you are strengthening the association between the new word and its meaning. Meaningless repetition is not helpful.

### **Techniques using this strategy**

Here are some language learning techniques which implement this strategy:

- The Physical Response techniques

- The Look and Listen techniques
- The Production Practice techniques
- The Memorized Routines techniques
- The Pronunciation Practice techniques

### **See also**

- Keywords: repetition

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## **Recombination strategy**

### **Description**

The Recombination strategy involves taking words you have encountered in one context or combination and combining them in different ways, thus strengthening the memory links.

### **Benefits**

Recombining words in different contexts gives you flexibility and the ability to be creative with words. Every day we recombine the words in our first language in almost infinite combinations, and doing that in a second language helps us become truly proficient and also reinforces our learning

### **Techniques using this strategy**

Here are the language learning techniques which implement this strategy:

- The Physical Response techniques
- The Look and Listen techniques

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## **The Structured Review strategy**

### **Description**

The Structured Review strategy involves reviewing the same material first at short intervals and then at increasingly longer intervals. This seems to help get material into long-term memory, so that it becomes automatic.

## Benefits

The way memory seems to work, new items stay for only a short time in our short-term memory. In order to get them into long-term memory we need to review them frequently at first. Once they are in long-term memory, we need to remind ourselves less often.

## Techniques using this strategy

This strategy is not fundamental to the following techniques, but can be used effectively with them:

- The Memory Reinforcement techniques
- The Structure Practice techniques
- The Pronunciation Practice techniques

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OVERVIEW

## Production strategies

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### Introduction

What can you do, not only to remember what you have understood, but to be able to retrieve it and use it productively? You need, at some point, to practice saying things in the language, as well as comprehending it. Production requires more detail than comprehension, because in comprehension you can filter out all the redundant information, whereas in production you need to put in all the details. Production strategies are those used for retrieving and using stored information.

### In this module group

Here are the modules on production strategies:

- Mimicry strategy
- The Rehearsal strategy

### See also

- Keywords: production

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## Mimicry strategy

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## Description

The Mimicry strategy involves

- repeating what you hear a native speaker say
- monitoring yourself to see how closely you approximate the native speaker, and
- looking for feedback from the native speaker.

## Benefits

When you start to try to speak a language you may find that even though you can recognize a word and know its meaning, you still don't know exactly how to pronounce it. Mimicking a native speaker helps you to concentrate on the sounds of the language and to compare your pronunciation with the native-speaker model.

## Techniques using this strategy

Here are the language learning techniques which implement this strategy:

- The Pronunciation Practice techniques
- The Production Practice techniques
- The Memorized Routines techniques

## See also

- Keywords: mimicry

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## The Rehearsal strategy

### Description

The Rehearsal strategy involves practicing what you want to say before you try to use it in real communication.

### Benefits

Although you can never tell exactly what will happen in a real communication situation, there are some things that are more likely to happen than others in certain places. For example, if you are going to buy something in a shop you can rehearse the transaction so that when you get to the shop you are more confident and can come up with what to say more readily.

## Techniques using this strategy

You can use this strategy any time you have time to prepare, but here are some language learning techniques which specifically implement this strategy:

- The Memorized Routines techniques
- The Dialogue techniques

## See also

- Keywords: rehearsal strategy

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OVERVIEW

## Communication strategies

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### Introduction

Communication strategies are those used to communicate in conversation to make sure that the intended message is conveyed.

### In this module group

Here are the modules on communication strategies:

- Circumlocution strategy
- Message Adjustment strategy
- The Code-switching strategy

### See also

- Keywords: communication strategies

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## Circumlocution strategy

### Description

The circumlocution strategy involves describing a concept in other words, sometimes a whole phrase. It is used especially when you have limited vocabulary in a particular area.

## Benefits

The principal benefit of circumlocution is that you get your message across. A secondary benefit is that you may learn the vocabulary you are searching for, because your conversation partner supplies it.

## Example

One English-speaking woman was talking to a German car mechanic and couldn't think of the German word for tires. She said "I need those round things my car rolls on." She knew she had gotten her message across because the mechanic said, "Tires, Madam?" in English! It may have been a relief to my friend to know that the mechanic spoke English, but if he hadn't spoken English, and had supplied the word for her in German, it would have been even better for her language learning.

## See also

- Keywords: circumlocution

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## Message Adjustment strategy

### Description

The Message Adjustment strategy involves simplifying or omitting something you might like to say because you do not know how to say it in that way.

### Benefits

The benefit of the message adjustment strategy is that you can keep talking about *something*, instead of just stopping because you don't know how to say what you really want to say.

### Example

You don't know the word for *filly*, so you just say *horse*. Or if you don't know the word *horse*, you say *animal*.

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## The Code-switching strategy

### Description

The Code-switching strategy involves changing to your own language or another



language you and your conversation partner know, for a word or phrase.

### **Benefits**

The benefits of the code-switching strategy are similar to those of the other communication strategies in that it helps you get your message across and may also elicit from your conversation partner the word you are looking for.

### **Example**

You can't think of the word for plate in Spanish, so you say, " Por favor, traigame un *plate*." The other person may say, "Si, un plato."

### **See also**

- Keywords: code-switching

## Endnotes

### 1 (Popup - Popup)

Carol J. Orwig is an SIL International Trainer for language and culture acquisition. She served as the coordinator for language learning training within the Academic training section of Academic Affairs of SIL International (Dallas, TX 1992–1999). Prior to taking this position she did fieldwork in Mexico and Cameroon. She has been with SIL since 1973. She has frequently taught courses in second language acquisition in Dallas, Oregon, England, Cameroon and Mexico. She received an M A in linguistics from the University of Texas at Arlington in 1986.