

Newsletter No. 4

Workshop in September

“Language Learning Strategies: The Teacher’s Best Friend”

Date: September 11th, 2021 9:00-12:15 (Zoom Meeting)

Presenter: Dr. Sara Cotterall
(Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand)



Dr Sara Cotterall has worked with language learners and teachers for many years in New Zealand, Australia, Europe, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. From 2005-2008 she was Associate Professor in the Department of English at Akita International University in Japan. Sara has conducted and published research in the areas of language learning strategies, learner beliefs, learner autonomy, academic writing and doctoral education. She is currently an Adjunct Research Fellow at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

<https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/sara-cotterall>

Abstract:

In this workshop we will explore how focusing on language learning strategies can boost students' motivation and enrich their learning. First, I will suggest five important benefits of integrating language learning strategies in your teaching. Next, we will investigate strategies you have used in your language learning.

During the second part of the workshop, I will introduce steps to follow when introducing strategies to your students. Then, I will invite you to work in groups to design one strategies-based activity to use with your learners. Each group will then be asked to share their ideas with the other participants.

The number of participants: 44



1. Interesting activities you might want to use in your class. Why?

- Through group discussions, I realized that strategy questionnaires are useful not only for students to reflect their own learning styles, but also for teachers to analyze leaning strategies for each student. The analysis will help teachers give advice to students on a learning strategy which is most beneficial for each student.
- I want my students to think about their own language learning experiences, and share their difficulties and actions they took then to overcome them with other members of the group.
- The prompts of language learning strategies should be cared well to create materials, assessment styles and rubrics to make students comfortable in classes. Sometimes I slipped my mind to take care of these points so the thinking and discussion time was fruitful foe me.
- I will use some of the strategies in my classroom. I think making learners more autonomous is a great method to try.
- I was glad to have been introduced to the COBUILD dictionary, which looks like a really valuable tool. Being mindful of word frequency in learning is useful strategy, and I'm glad to have been acquainted with more tools to do so effectively!
- Through the discussion, I believe that having students experience successes is one of the most important factors for them to keep learning. In order to do that, especially at high school, teachers may want to make a dialog with students directly or in directly, for example, using self-evaluation sheets.
- I've been trying to get my students to use less of their L1 when talking with each other in conversation activities, so I'm interested in cognitive strategies, like with the staple remover, and thingamajig.
- During a group discussion, we talked about ideas to utilize questionnaires and students' reflections to promote Language Learning Strategies. Administering a questionnaire could work well in my teaching context (college) because I think that it is a good time for students to reflect how they have learned English so far. Taking the questionnaire can help learners pay attention to their learning styles and think about what they are good at, which can be a great resource for teachers when planning a course as well. Also, sharing the learners' experiences and strategies with others would be a great option for a college class to raise awareness of different ways of learning. I am very glad that we had a lot of opportunities to share ideas with other teachers during the workshop. I learned a lot from them and I would love to try some activities involving the questionnaires.
- Administering a language learning strategies questionnaire and using it to spark a discussion with/among students about the strategies they use and think will help their peers

Why are LLS the teacher's best friend?

Because when learners use them, "these strategies have the power to:

- Increase attention essential for learning a language
- Enhance rehearsal that allows linkages to be strongly forged
- Improve the encoding and integration of language material
- Increase retrieval of information when needed for use."

(Oxford & Cohen, 1992, p. 1)

2. What you learned from today's workshop

- Benefits of learning strategies include:
 - making learning more effective,
 - boosting learners' motivation,
 - placing learners at the center of learning, and as result
 - helping them become an autonomous learner.
- To teach students the importance of language learning strategies. Learning foreign languages takes much time, patience, and energy. Students tend to give up continuing learning the languages because they have to keep making efforts to acquire it. So teachers should tell them the ideas of language learning strategies first to promote and help their learning effectively.
- Paying attention to learning strategies is important and must be centered in teaching contexts so I would like to take it consideration well and set up the tasks to make students autonomous learners especially outside of classrooms.
- It was good going over the benefits of language learning strategies, and considering how I might value them myself.
- It is effective to ask students about their learning goals. Then teachers modify their lessons to associate the goals with their real life situations. This will trigger students to learn outside the classroom.
- Thinking about the benefits helped me a lot about internalizing the idea of Language Learning Strategies. As in the quote of Oxford, Professor Cotterall introduced, LLS make learning easier and more enjoyable, but I learned that it can make teaching more enjoyable, as well. We teachers easily get preoccupied with teaching contents or covering materials, but I now think that by introducing LLS, we could pay more attention to each student and some other important elements in class. The idea of "LLS is a teachers' best friend" makes perfect sense to me now.
- Besides of course the importance of learning strategies, I had never heard of the Collin's dictionary before and I really like the idea of them marking words that are more frequent vs ones that aren't used so commonly, and I really like that idea. As a Gen Z teaching high school students I basically never use physical dictionaries and I rarely see students doing so either, we all use apps or e-dictionaries, but I do remember sometimes looking at the JLPT level or frequency level of vocabulary or Kanji I was learning. I want to look around my school and see if I can find a copy, and I also want to talk with my students more about this idea of learning mostly the most important words, and look into whether their dictionaries do something similar.

Benefits of LLS

- they place the learner at the centre of the learning
- they make learning more effective
- they help learners experience success which boosts their motivation
- they enable learners to continue learning independently outside of class

3. Questions and Answers

1) *I'd like to confirm if my understanding is right or not. It is:*

Before classes, teachers should plan which strategy they use in the class beforehand.

Teachers use different strategies in the different classes.

Students choose which strategies they like.

When each student likes different strategy, what should teachers do?

First of all, thank you for your question. My initial response is that there are no “shoulds” in the way that I work with language learners and teachers. We are all so different that I don't find it helpful to recommend that everyone follow the same procedure. Anything I said last week in the workshop was only a suggestion. I think you need to try things out and see what works for you and your learners.

But secondly, in order to provide some practical advice, let me answer your question by returning to what one of my teachers used to refer to as “first principles”. This involves asking myself a number of questions.

What are you/we/I trying to achieve as far as LLS are concerned?

I am trying to **raise awareness** with teachers of English and learners of English about the huge range of language learning strategies that are available to them as a means of supporting their learning and making it more effective, efficient, personalised and fun.

How might you/we/I achieve this?

- a. One way of doing this is to **find out which strategies the learners are currently using** and to have a discussion about the plusses and minuses of those strategies. (Remember that you don't have to use the possibly unfamiliar word “strategy”. Some teachers I know refer to them as “tricks”; others refer to them as “short-cuts”.
- b. Another way of doing this is to **expose the learners to a range of different strategies** in the context of different language activities, and then ask them to comment (afterwards) on how helpful they found the strategy. For example:

While reading a text in English with a group of students, ask them to use the strategy of “**guessing from context**” when they meet an unfamiliar word. Make sure they know the steps involved in using this strategy, and once they have guessed the meaning and you have commented on their guesses, or perhaps guided them into a fairly accurate guess, go back and ask them about their experience of using this strategy. You could ask if they ever use it when reading in their own time (do they read in

English in their own time?), how it differs from just looking a word up in their electronic dictionary, which kinds of words they use this strategy with etc. etc.

The goal is to build up their knowledge base related to each strategy. When to use it, why to use it, where to use it, how to use it, how to evaluate their success.

Similarly, before asking the learners to listen to a TED talk on New Zealand movies, ask them to **“activate their background knowledge”** by brainstorming everything they know about **NZ movies**: for example, the names of **NZ movie directors** (e.g. Peter Jackson (the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy), Jane Campion (“The Piano”), Taika Waititi (“Jojo Rabbit”, “Boy”, “Hunt for the Wilderpeople”, “Eagle v Shark”), the names of famous **NZ movies** (“The Piano”, “Once Were Warriors”, “Boy”, “The World’s Fastest Indian”, “Whale Rider” etc.), **NZ movie actors** (Jemaine Clement, Taika Waititi, Tamsin, Russell Crowe, Sam Neill, Anna Paquin, Martin Henderson, Rhys Darby, Lucy Lawless, Sam Neill, Danielle Cormack, Thomasin Mackenzie etc.) and make sure that they know the SOUNDS of all these words. Then play the TED talk and after you’ve worked on the content, ask the learners if the “activating background knowledge” strategy helped in any way.

N.B. Also be prepared for them to say “NO”. Remember – we are all different!

How might you/we/I respond if the learners all prefer different strategies?

If different students like different strategies, I would find this a perfectly natural response. Mostly, learners are going to be adopting strategies either in their independent learning, or invisibly in class. Therefore, if they are using different strategies from others in the group, there is no problem.

I think it would also be a wonderful thing if teachers added a time at the end of each lesson where they openly invite learners to comment on the strategies they used during that lesson and invite them to evaluate how successful they had been in using that strategy. Sometimes it’s necessary to prompt learners to EXPAND their strategy repertoire and to acknowledge that what they typically do may not be very efficient or successful. Having learners talk to each other about what they do is a great idea!

(If I have misunderstood your question, please come back to me with a supplementary question.)

2) I had a great time listening to Professor Cotterall’s ideas and sharing experiences with other teachers. I have been teaching most classes online now and faced a lot of difficulties changing the systems and ways of material development. I think that LLS are very important now more than ever, but

introducing them can be difficult under the online situation where it is not easy for teachers to monitor or take decent care of every student. I would like to know how Professor Cotterall has been managing classes online and it would be much appreciated if she can share her perspectives and approaches in online teaching.

Once again, thank you very much for your question.

This is a difficult question for me because I have not been teaching English during the last few years so have no experience of teaching it online. You are way ahead of me there! But I have a lot of colleagues at Victoria University of Wellington who have been teaching online since March 2020 and who have come up with some excellent ways of adapting to this new medium.

However, I can imagine using Zoom to raise awareness of online strategies in exactly the way I would do it in a face-to-face class. If I were starting at the beginning of a series of lessons on learning strategies, I would focus initially on raising awareness. So, I would probably administer a simple **brief¹** LLS questionnaire first of all (maximum of 10 items – maybe focus on just one skill?), sending it out to learners the day before and asking them to complete it prior to class. Then I would divide the class into groups, allocate them to rooms, and ask them to go through their responses to each item in the questionnaire, comparing notes. Ask them to nominate someone to report back and then see how the discussion goes.

Another thing I might do is to interview another teacher on Zoom about the language learning strategies that they use in using English. If the learners and the teacher share a first language, this can be particularly useful, because it is likely that at least some of the strategies which the teacher uses will be helpful or interesting for the learners. It is also good to remind your learners that you are still learning the language, along with them!

One other idea I have is to use a “think aloud” to demonstrate a particular strategy, once the learners have understood the idea of what strategies are and realise that they need to develop their own preferred repertoire of strategies. The idea behind using a “think aloud” is to try and show learners *what processes are going on in your mind* invisibly when you are interacting with the language.

The strategy of “guessing from context” is easy to demonstrate in this way. Let’s imagine the class is reading a text and they meet the word “topple” in the following context:

¹ You can access Rebecca Oxford’s Strategy Inventory (questionnaire) in her 1990 book *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle but I consider it MUCH too long. I suggest you select a number of relevant items from it.

The Kaikoura Earthquake of 2016

... When the earthquake struck, as well as causing huge damage to the land around Kaikoura, it also resulted in significant damage 250 kilometres away in Wellington. On the Terrace in Wellington, the main business street in the Central Business District, windows were shattered, buildings **toppled** down and huge gaps occurred in one of the main streets. This was a very severe earthquake, measuring 6.5 on the Richter scale ...

If I wanted to **model** the Guessing from Context strategy, I would read these two sentences aloud and then say out loud something like this:

"Ok, I know all the words here except the word "toppled". What on earth does that mean? Well, let's apply the 5 steps of the Guessing from Context strategy and see if that helps.

1. What is the **grammar** of the unknown word?

Step one is to work out what kind of word "toppled" is grammatically. Well, with an "ed" ending it looks to me as if it's a verb, and if it is, it's a past tense verb.

2. What words go (collocate) with the unknown word?

Step two is to look at the other words surrounding the unfamiliar word. So what have we got? After "toppled" we have DOWN. That's a preposition, so what other words can be followed by DOWN? Turned down, walked down, moved down, fell down, drove down etc. Ok, I'll come back to that in a minute.

3. Look at the wider context. What clues does this give you to the possible meaning of the unknown word?

Step three asks me to look at the wider context. OK. This text is obviously talking about what happened in New Zealand in a major earthquake. This particular sentence is describing damage in Wellington, which is a city, whereas Kaikoura is a rural area. The text says that windows were broken (shattered), a big gap appeared in one of the streets, and that something happened to the buildings – they TOPPLED down. So clearly what happened to the buildings was not good, it was a kind of damage. And it seemed to involve movement DOWNWARDS.

4. Make a guess (ensuring that your guess has the same **grammar** as the unknown word).

So, Step four asks me to make a guess and check that my word has the right grammar. My guess is that “toppled” means “fell”. If “toppled” is a verb, it’s in the past tense, so my word “fell” needs to be in the past tense too. It is, so that’s good.

5. Check your guess by placing the word you guessed into the place in the text where the unknown word currently is.

Now, I need to check that the word I’ve guessed “fits” in the gap. So let’s replace “toppled” with “fell” –

On the Terrace in Wellington, the main business street in the Central Business District, windows were shattered, buildings **fell** down and huge gaps occurred in one of the main streets.

6. Does it make sense?

Yes it does! Awesome! I’ve guessed correctly. This is a really useful strategy. But I don’t recommend you learn the word “topple” until you check in the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*² how frequent it is! 😊

I hope this gives you some idea of how I would introduce learning strategies to my learners using Zoom. I don’t think the online presentation is a problem. It might even be an advantage.

Wishing you all the best with your teaching. Thank you for your questions.

AR Discussion

Date: September 11th, 2021, 13:00-15:00

Title: Group discussion on action research

Advisers: Kazuyoshi Sato, Duane Kindt,
Juanita Heigham (NUFS)

The number of participants: 20

