

Chapter 2:

TEACHING STUDENTS TO THINK ABOUT LEARNING

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Use a story, personal anecdotes, or play to teach your students about strategic thinking.
- Use techniques that establish a learner-centered classroom.

How Do I Introduce My Students to Strategic Thinking?

You will need to devote some class time to telling your students about strategic thinking. Although the introduction will take time away from your usual instruction, it will allow you to begin the conversation about thinking and learning which will continue throughout the year in the context of your language and content lessons.

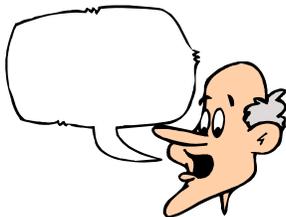
We suggest that you introduce Strategic Thinking in a concrete manner that is appropriate to the age of your students, and that you have some sort of visual aid posted in the classroom to help them remember the concept and the various learning strategies. In immersion classes, the language of learning strategies instruction should always be the target language. You might want to call the concept “How We Think” or “How We Learn” with younger students, or just “Thinking” or “Learning” with students of any age.

Through reflecting on Strategic Thinking, your students will begin to develop an awareness of how they learn in different contexts and for different tasks. Introducing self-reflection at the beginning of the year establishes a climate that encourages continual investigation into how we learn. Remember to participate in these reflective activities with your students and to share your own successful (and unsuccessful) learning strategies.

Below are three suggestions for ways that you can introduce the concept of Strategic Thinking in the elementary foreign language immersion classroom: Stories, Personal Anecdotes, and Play.

• Stories

We find that storytelling—either fictional or anecdotal—is an effective way to introduce Strategic Thinking to students. By the time they enter Kindergarten, children have been listening and responding to stories for some time. Stories engage them both emotionally and intellectually. Bettelheim (1976) claims that children sense from stories “that to be a human being in this world of ours means having to accept difficult challenges but also encountering wonderful adventures.”



Psychologist Erica Helm Meade (1992) further suggests that “the action and images [of stories] speak more directly to the young child than abstract explanations. Stories are one of the more gratifying means of learning.”

Stories are a natural and powerful way to present children with a model of the world and of themselves. They show children how they can affect their surroundings, achieve goals, and complete tasks. In addition, many stories contain a natural and powerful potential venue for introducing learning strategies.

There are four main criteria for selecting stories that can serve students as illustrations of strategic thinking:

1. The protagonist of the story must have a goal to achieve or a task to complete.
2. The story should indicate that the protagonist uses strategic thinking to achieve the goal or complete the task.
3. Chance, fortune, magic, or the supernatural must not play a major role in contributing to the protagonist's successfully achieving the goal or completing the task.
4. The story should portray some setbacks or problems for the protagonist.

Ensuring that the story's protagonist has a specific goal or task to accomplish allows you to draw parallels between students' goals in the classroom and the protagonist's goals in the story. Goals may include winning the princess' heart, meeting the demands of the king of the jungle, or protecting one's house and siblings from an evil wolf. The protagonist's goal or task must be clear to the students so that they can relate it to their own learning goals.

The second and third criteria are as important as the first. Many children's stories may have a strong protagonist with a definite goal to reach or problem to solve, but who may not do so through strategic thinking. Instead, he or she may succeed through physical prowess, by magic, or thanks to supernatural force. These stories would be inappropriate models for strategic thinking and the learning process. An effective story shows it is the protagonist's wits that lead him or her to a successful conclusion. Strategic thinking is often alluded to in these stories by indicating that the protagonist "thought about what he or she would do" or "planned what to do." Look for clues like these when examining stories to use with your students.

Finally, the story should not create the illusion that the protagonist's road to success is effortless. Instead, the story should include serious challenges for him or her. Setbacks and problems demonstrate to students that, when trying to accomplish any challenging task, whether it is completing a classroom assignment or finding the pot of gold, difficulties may arise which can be overcome using strategic thinking.

One story that can be used to introduce Strategic Thinking is "Anansi and the Stories: A Story from Ghana." As you read this story below, keep in mind the four criteria outlined above and consider how the story meets them.

Anansi and the Stories: A Story from Ghana

Tiger was king of the jungle. When he roared, the other animals shook with fear. When Tiger spoke, the animals ran to obey him. Tiger was big and brave, proud and powerful.

Anansi the spider was little and timid, humble and weak. The animals took no notice of him at all. When he spoke, nobody listened.

So one night, when all the animals were together, Anansi said, “Tiger, you are the king of the jungle. All the animals do as you say. You own everything. You know everything. Will you give me one little thing?”

Tiger flipped the end of his tail back and forth. “What do you want, Anansi?” he asked.

“I want the stories,” Anansi said.

“The stories?” Tiger asked.

The other animals looked afraid. How dare Anansi ask for the stories? The stories were important! Whenever the animals came together, they told stories to each other. The stories helped them to understand the world. The stories told them who was wise and who was foolish. The stories told them why things happened. The stories told them how to live their lives.

Tiger looked past Anansi as if he wasn't there. He growled a little. Then he said, “What do you want with the stories, Anansi?”

“I want you to call the stories Anansi stories,” Anansi said.

The animals gasped in surprise.

Tiger decided to make a fool of Anansi and keep the stories for himself. He said, “Very well, Anansi, we will call the stories Anansi stories.”

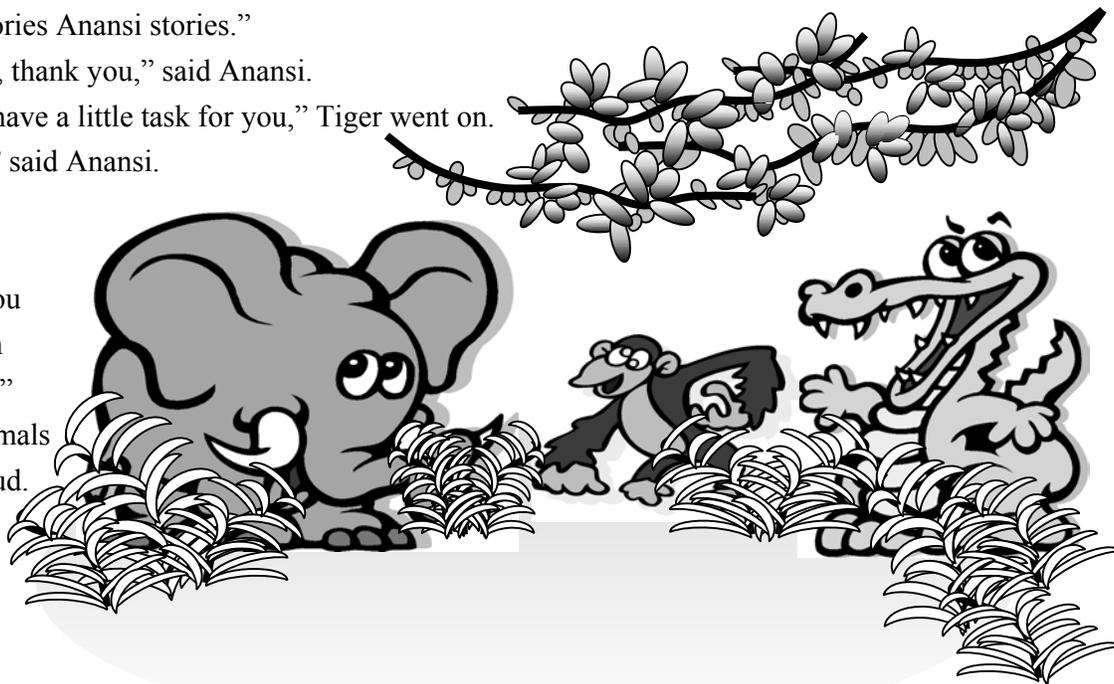
“Thank you, thank you,” said Anansi.

“But first I have a little task for you,” Tiger went on.

“Anything,” said Anansi.

“You must catch Snake,” Tiger said. “You must catch him and tie him up.”

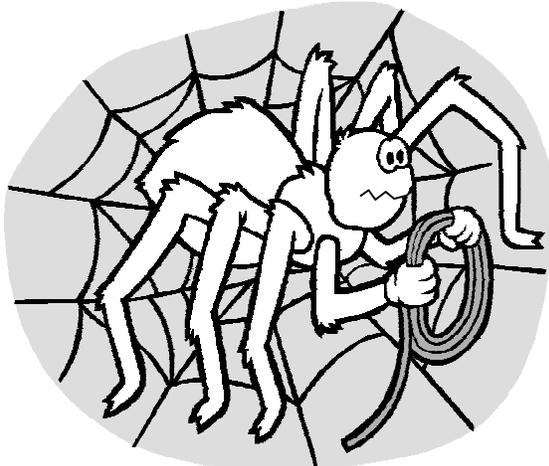
All the animals laughed out loud. That was impossible!



Anansi looked worried, but he also wanted the stories very much. He said, "I will catch Snake for you, Tiger."

The other animals laughed. Silly Anansi! Clever Tiger!

The next day Anansi tried to trap Snake, but Snake got away. The day after that, he made another trap, but Snake escaped again. Then Anansi went away and thought very hard.



That night Anansi met Snake in the bamboo grove. "Good evening, Snake," Anansi said. "I'm sorry you are not the longest thing in the forest anymore."

"What do you mean?" Snake asked.

"Tiger says the bamboo is longer," Anansi said. "See? Here is a long piece of bamboo. I'm sure it's longer than you are."

Snake sniffed. "We'll soon see about that!" he said. He wound himself around the bamboo.

Anansi ran up and down the bamboo. "I cannot see which is longer," Anansi said. "I think you are moving up the bamboo."

"I'm not moving," Snake said.

"Maybe not," Anansi said, "but I cannot say for sure that you are longer than the bamboo. Sorry." Anansi turned away.

"I know," said Snake. "Tie my tail to the bamboo. Then you know I cannot move."

Anansi came back. "All right," he said. "Perhaps that will help." So he tied Snake's tail to the bamboo. Then he ran up to Snake's head. "You're almost there!" Anansi said. "Stretch, Snake, stretch!"

Snake stretched. "I'm going around the bamboo," Snake said. "That makes me look shorter. Please tie my middle to the pole, Anansi. Then I can lie on the bamboo. I will not have to go around it."

Anansi did as he was asked, and tied Snake's middle to the pole. The other animals came to watch. They saw Snake lying on the bamboo pole. He was nearly the same length.

"Stretch, Snake, stretch!" the animals called. Snake stretched. His head didn't quite pass the top of the pole.

Anansi said, "If I tie your head to the pole, you'll be longer than the bamboo."

Snake said, "I am longer than the bamboo pole. I know it! Tie my head to the pole."

Anansi tied Snake's head to the pole. Tiger walked into the clearing. There was Snake, all tied up. The other animals watched Tiger.

Tiger smiled and said, "The stories are yours, Anansi." He did not want the other animals to see he was angry. To this very day, people tell the Anansi stories to remember how clever little Anansi captured Snake and won the stories from Tiger.

Special thanks to Dr. Kristina Anstrom for adapting this story from the traditional folktale

Does this story meet the four criteria? Anansi has an important and explicit goal he wants to achieve—he wants the stories, despite the fact that he must stand up to Tiger in order to win them. This goal is particularly well suited for the immersion classroom since having stories to call your own is similar to making a language your own. Learning a language involves learning a culture as well, and learning a culture involves learning the “stories” of that culture.

There is evidence in the story that Anansi achieves his goal through strategic thinking rather than by chance, fortune, or magic: “The next day Anansi tried to trap Snake, but Snake got away. The day after that, he made another trap, but Snake escaped again. Then Anansi went away and *thought very hard*” (italics added). It is only after he *thought very hard* that Anansi was able to come up with his *ingenious plan* to capture Snake. The same excerpt demonstrates how the story meets the fourth criterion. We understand that Anansi's first attempts to capture Snake by trying to trap him were unsuccessful. These setbacks highlight for students that through persistence, planning, and careful thinking we can usually overcome difficulties and achieve our goals.

“Anansi and the Stories” is effective for introducing the concept of Strategic Thinking; however, you can make Anansi’s strategic thinking more explicit for students by revising the story to specify examples of how Anansi engages in strategic thinking. The revisions do not change the plot; rather they add insight into Anansi’s thinking processes and provide concrete examples of Strategic Thinking. Our suggested revisions are highlighted in bold print in the “Anansi and the Stories: Learning Strategies Version” in Appendix B. Once you have selected a story, you may want to make similar modifications.

There are many excellent stories that can be used to introduce Strategic Thinking. Use the four criteria listed above to evaluate the appropriateness of stories you consider. The story should also be appropriate to the age and interest of your students. For example, a participant in one of our workshops pointed out that for her students in first grade, she might elect to adapt “The Three Little Pigs” since the students were already familiar with it. By using familiar material, she could more easily focus them on the story characters as strategic thinkers.

• Personal Anecdotes

While children’s stories have proven to be successful tools for communicating the concept of Strategic Thinking, some teachers prefer using personal anecdotes such as a narrative about beginning an exercise program or making a cake to illustrate the concept. Personal stories are effective for two main reasons. First, by sharing a personal story, the teachers become more involved and can transfer their own excitement to students. Second, students enjoy learning about their teacher and listen attentively to personal stories that involve their teacher outside of class. Personal stories, like traditional stories, are powerful means to explain strategic thinking.



As you tell your story, use guiding questions to help the class brainstorm ideas and provide cues to elicit answers that students might not otherwise come up with on their own. Following is an example of a personal anecdote.

ROLLERBLADING: A PERSONAL ANECDOTE

Begin a class discussion by explaining that you made a decision to take up rollerblading: “Last summer, I noticed the rollerbladers beside me on the sidewalk seemed to be having a great time. Many of my roller-skating friends have started to rollerblade, and they said it’s easy to figure out if you already know how to roller-skate well. So I made the decision to start rollerblading, too. I was glad I’d be able to *Use Background Knowledge* from roller-skating. Still, I wanted to be more specific in planning how I’d learn my new pastime.

Plan: First, I needed to use the strategy *Organize/Plan*. What are some goals I could have set? (Elicit examples: *To learn to go straight, turn left, and turn right. To keep control of the rollerblades, so practice is safe. To be able to rollerblade on one leg or to be able to do jumps by the end of the summer.*) I also needed to *Organize / Plan* to determine a routine. What did I need to consider before I began? (Elicit examples: *Will I buy rollerblades or borrow them from a friend? Where will I go to practice? How often will I practice? Will I ask a friend to help me learn or try to do it on my own?*)

Manage: I also needed to think about how I learn best and arrange the situation so that I could do the things that help me learn best. This is the strategy *Manage Your Own Learning*. I learn best by watching others and then trying something new. So before I started rollerblading I spent some time watching my friends. How do you learn best? (Elicit answers like, *learning by doing, by reading about a new activity, by watching videos.*) When I learn a new sport, I like to start slowly and then build up to harder things. So, with rollerblading, I started on easy paths and then gradually built up to paths with slopes. How about you? What kind of learner are you? How does this affect how you approach learning?

Monitor: Now that I rollerblade, how can I check my progress? Are there certain elements that I can pay attention to, such as my body position, speed, etc (*Use Selective Attention*)? Can I ask myself how I am doing (*Monitor*)? How can I keep track of my progress? (Elicit examples: *Keep a log that describes how comfortable I feel on rollerblades. Count the number of times I slow down, stop, or fall during each practice in order to track my progress. Decide if I feel confident rollerblading.*)

Evaluate: How can I decide if my program is successful? Have I reached my goals? (Elicit examples: *Am I comfortable rollerblading now? Am I still rollerblading or have I returned to roller-skating? Can I do various turns and jumps? Do I have as much fun as I expected?*)”

- **Play**

Another way to help young students reflect on their learning is to make them aware of the strategies they use when they play. Have you watched puppies play with a ball, or kittens with yarn or a toy? We call this "play," but if you watch closely, it looks a lot like "practice." Is the "play" of kittens and puppies chaotic, or is it strategic? Look closely. It is strategic. They stalk their prey, they wait silently, and then, when the ball of yarn has been immobile for several seconds, they pounce and attack fiercely.

Have you watched young children play? Tag? Pretend? Dolls? Cars? Puzzles? Cards? Do they use strategies? Yes, of course they do. Think of your favorite games/play and which strategies you use - and/or watch others use.

Making the jump from "play" strategies to "learning" strategies is not very hard. In reality, they are the same basic strategies. An easy way to introduce learning strategies to young children is to help them be aware of the strategic thinking they use in play, and then help them apply the same strategic thinking in a setting where they are learning in an academic task.

Make Inferences is an enjoyable strategy to teach to young children. It involves using clues from what is around you, and what you already know, to make intelligent guesses about something you don't know. Our lesson plan "**Mystery Bag**" describes how a teacher can teach students to use this strategy to improve their FL learning.

For more examples of play activities, see the chart in Appendix E.



TEACHING FL LEARNING STRATEGIES THROUGH PLAY

MYSTERY BAG

Objective: Students will be able to use inferential reasoning to comprehend text at their instructional level in the FL.

Language: All **Level:** Grades 3-5

Materials: A cloth or paper bag, small identifiable objects to put in the bag, an attractive, interesting book at students' instructional level, and a handout with 3 – 5 interesting, provocative questions about the story that require inferential reasoning to answer.

Preparation: Students work in pairs. Each pair has a bag. Each student has a selection of small objects - unknown to the other student. They take turns with one student putting an object in the bag and the other student guessing what it is, only by feeling the bag. The teacher asks students how they are able to identify the objects, and helps students articulate the idea that they are using "clues" even though they cannot see the objects.

The teacher shows students the book to be read and the page with inferential questions, and then asks students if they know all the words. (If the book is at the instructional level the answer should be "no.") The teacher then asks the students how they might read the book anyway, understand the story, and answer the questions. Lead students to make the connection that one way is related to how they identified objects in the bag - guessing from clues.

Presentation: The teacher models - or asks a student to model - using clues - picture, word, title, or text clues - to make guesses about the story and/or the meaning of vocabulary words. (*"I don't know what this word means, but I can guess from the picture that it is the word for 'elephant.'*) When students understand the process, explain that this strategy is called "Make Inferences" (you might want to call it a shorter name like "Guess") Explain that we make inferences all the time. Elicit examples of when we make inferences in normal life and in play (eg: if someone is wearing a heavy coat we assume it is cold, if your friend has a big smile, you assume he is happy.)

Practice: Ask students to work in pairs or small groups to read and answer the inferential questions about the story. You may want them to either develop the answers verbally, or to write down the answers in the target language. Move from group to group and ask them what clues are helping them understand the story and/or vocabulary. Encourage students to make inferences - and to check the inferences as they progress through the story.

Evaluation: As a group, discuss the story and the answers to the inferential questions. You will be able to determine if the students were able to comprehend the literal meaning of the story by making inferences. If students made inferences successfully, ask them to describe what clues they used and how they made their guesses. Ask the students if making inferences helped them to understand the story. If students' answered the questions on paper, collect the papers for further evaluation.

Expansion: Whenever you give students a text to read in the FL, remind them they can use the strategy Make Inferences to help their comprehension. A poster on the wall listing the learning strategies can serve as a good, time-saving reminder.

Strategic Thinking and the Learner-Centered Classroom

When you explicitly teach learning strategies, you share responsibility for the students' learning with the students themselves. The students take on greater responsibility for their own learning and gain greater independence. This is known as the learner-centered approach to instruction. It is characterized by (1) a focus on how students learn, (2) explicit instruction in learning strategies, (3) explicit goal setting by students for themselves, and (4) student self-evaluation.

As teachers, we may tend to focus more on how we teach than on how our students learn. Learning strategies instruction forces us to examine not just what we do to teach effectively, but what our students do to facilitate their own learning. When we think about curriculum, lesson design, or even how we respond to student questions, learning strategies instruction helps us focus on the **how** of learning rather than the **what**. In a classroom that incorporates learning strategies instruction, the teacher and the students attend to the learning process and consider how to improve it.

Teaching Tip

Encourage students to understand the strategies they already use and to learn to use new ones.

A good way to start planning learning strategies instruction is by examining your own beliefs and practices about language instruction.

How do you currently organize your classroom and your students' learning? Do you operate from a learner-centered perspective, or is your classroom more teacher-centered? Are you willing to spend instructional time helping students understand the strategies they currently use and guide them to learn and use new ones? Are you willing to focus on the process of learning rather than the product? In a learner-centered classroom, both the teacher and the students must share the responsibility of learning. Both must believe that by focusing on learning strategies, learning will be enhanced.

- **Goal-Setting**

Giving students the opportunity to set their own personal goals helps them invest in learning and is a step towards creating a learner-centered classroom. Defining and practicing how to set goals will also help students distinguish between long- and short-term goals. Whereas long-term goals provide motivation for learning, short-term goals help us feel a growing sense of accomplishment. One useful activity is to have students brainstorm their personal goals.

Teaching Tip

Ask students to brainstorm their personal goals. Record their goals on poster paper, and review them throughout the year.

Short-Term Goals: Help us feel a growing sense of accomplishment.

Long-Term Goals: Provide motivation for learning the language.

- **Self-Assessment**

Tied to setting personal goals is the self-assessment of progress. In traditional classrooms, students expect the teacher to evaluate them. They, therefore, tend to look outside

Teaching Tip

Share your learning strategies with your students. Show them how strategies work for you.

themselves to determine progress. With learning strategies instruction, students begin to take more control of their own learning and, with guidance from the teacher, to assess their own progress. Students can use rubrics and scales representing varying levels of achievement in order to represent their progress graphically. (See the Sample Self-Assessment Rubric below.) Unless they self-assess, learners are often unaware of the strategies they use. Learning strategies questionnaires are self-assessment tools that can help students become aware of their strategy use.

Sample Self-assessment Rubric: Cooperative Group Work

Name: _____ Date: _____

Activity: _____

How often did you do the following things in your group? Circle the word that best describes your level of participation and cooperation.

1. **I asked questions for information or clarification.**
not at all rarely sometimes often

2. **I offered my opinion.**
not at all rarely sometimes often

3. **I listened to the other group members.**
not at all rarely sometimes often

4. **I commented on the ideas of other group members.**
not at all rarely sometimes often

5. **I encouraged others to participate.**
not at all rarely sometimes often

6. **I fulfilled my role in the group as assigned by the teacher or group.**
not at all rarely sometimes often

7. **What I liked best about working with this group:**

8. **What gave me the most difficulty when working with this group:**

Questionnaires can also help teachers identify the strategies students already use and those which may need to be taught. An excerpt from the NCLRC Learning Strategies Questionnaire is below. A complete copy of the questionnaire can be downloaded from our web site: <http://www.nclrc.org/products/index.htm>
The questionnaire should, of course, be written in the target language.

Learning Strategies Questionnaire Excerpt

Directions: Listed below are some things that you might or might not do to help you understand what you are listening to. For each one, circle whether you do it Almost Never, Sometimes, or Almost Every Time. Tell what you really do, not what you think you should do.

L1. Before you listen in class, do you try to figure out what the person will talk about?



Almost Never



Sometimes



Almost Every Time

L2. When you listen to a story in class, do you imagine pictures in your head or imagine you are part of the story?



Almost Never



Sometimes



Almost Every Time

The activities described in this chapter are only a few among many that can be used to create a learner-centered atmosphere and prepare students for learning strategies instruction. A student-centered atmosphere represents the foundation of learning strategies instruction. You and your students will work together to make the **how** of learning as important as the **what**.

In Chapter Three you will see how to teach learning strategies and in Chapter Four how you can develop your scope and sequence for learning strategies instruction.

Chapter 3:

TEACHING LEARNING STRATEGIES

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Write a learning strategy lesson using the CALLA framework
- Introduce and review a learning strategy with your students.

Now that you have prepared students for learning strategies instruction by helping them reflect on the learning strategies they currently use and by introducing them to strategic thinking, your students are ready for explicit instruction in learning strategies.



How Do I Begin Strategies Instruction?

Many students are not accustomed to focusing on how they learn. If they have not already experienced strategies instruction, most of their educational experience has focused on *what* they learn, not *how*. The scope and sequence in Chapter 4 can be used as a general guideline to help you determine strategies that are appropriate for students' grade and language level; yet, it should be used only as a general guideline. In determining strategies to introduce, the most important factor is your curriculum—the content and language you teach. Referring to the curriculum enables you to select strategies that will help students learn the necessary content, language concepts and skills.

The first step in strategies instruction is to draw up a plan based on the following three factors: the scope and sequence, the content, and the curriculum. Your plan may include teaching just two or three new strategies in a semester. This is sufficient, as you will want to allow time for review and practice. Although the plan may change as you progress, having an outline of the strategies that matches students' cognitive level, content tasks and language skills prepares you for the job.

What Procedure Should I Use to Teach Strategies?

The goal of learning strategies instruction is for students to become independent learners with the ability to use strategies appropriately in a variety of contexts. In the beginning, however, learning when, how, and in what contexts to use particular strategies or groups of strategies requires direction and guidance from you, the teacher. You will find it helpful to use a framework such as the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) to explicitly teach learning strategies (Chamot et al., 1999). **CALLA** is a language and content learning approach that specifically incorporates learning strategies instruction, and thus it is appropriate for immersion settings.

CALLA involves **5 phases** of instruction:

- (1) Preparation
- (2) Presentation
- (3) Practice
- (4) Self-Evaluation
- (5) Expansion

You most likely already employ these or similar steps as you teach. Below, we outline how you can use these five phases of instruction to integrate learning strategies instruction into your existing lesson plans.