

LEARNING TO LEARN

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October 31, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *LEARNING TO LEARN*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=63678>

Learning to Learn

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Cognitive Psychology, Educational Psychology, Metacognition

1. Core Definition

The concept of **Learning to Learn** (L2L), or "learning sets" as initially termed in experimental psychology, refers to the acquisition of improved proficiency in mastering novel tasks or material as a result of prior, repetitive engagement in similar learning processes. It describes a phenomenon where the continuous practice of a specific skill or type of learning activity facilitates the subsequent ability to rapidly and efficiently acquire new, often related, skills or knowledge. The fundamental mechanism involves the transfer of generalized strategies, procedural knowledge, and cognitive schemas developed through repetition, rather than the mere transfer of specific content knowledge. For instance, as noted in foundational psychological observations, the repeated act of learning a musical instrument not only improves dexterity and auditory processing related to that specific instrument but critically enhances the overall capacity of the individual to approach and master a different instrument or highly structured sequential skill set.

L2L transcends simple rote memorization or declarative knowledge accumulation; it is inherently metacognitive. It signifies a qualitative shift in how the learner approaches the task of acquisition itself. Instead of starting from scratch with every new challenge, the experienced learner employs established mental frameworks--or "rules of the game"--that dictate effective problem-solving strategies, efficient resource allocation, and appropriate error correction methods. This enhanced efficiency is often attributed to the automatization of lower-level cognitive processes, freeing up working memory for higher-order thinking and strategic planning related to the new domain. The resulting fluency means that the effort required to internalize new information decreases exponentially with the amount of prior, structured learning experience, demonstrating a robust positive feedback loop between experience and competence.

In contemporary educational theory, L2L is often framed as one of the essential key competencies for lifelong learning. It emphasizes the development of adaptable skills--such as critical thinking, organization, self-assessment, and time management--that are transferable across various contexts, environments, and academic disciplines. A learner who has successfully acquired the ability to "learn how to learn" possesses an optimized internal toolkit for knowledge acquisition, making them resilient to informational overload and highly adaptable to rapidly changing professional and intellectual landscapes. This definition shifts the focus from 'what' is learned to 'how' the learning process is managed and executed by the individual, positioning L2L as a prerequisite for intellectual autonomy and continuous professional development.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The rigorous study of Learning to Learn originated in experimental psychology, most notably through the pioneering work of Harry Harlow in the 1940s and 1950s. Harlow conducted extensive experiments with rhesus monkeys involving repeated discrimination tasks. The monkeys were presented with hundreds of unique stimulus pairs and were required to identify the correct stimulus to receive a reward. Crucially, Harlow observed that while the monkeys initially took many trials to solve the first few problems, their performance rapidly improved over subsequent, unrelated problems. This improvement was not due to remembering the specific stimuli but to learning a general approach--a "rule" or "set" for solving discrimination problems efficiently. Harlow termed this phenomenon the formation of **learning sets**.

Harlow's work demonstrated that an organism could learn how to solve a class of problems, rather than just solving individual problems. This concept was groundbreaking because it offered measurable, behavioral evidence for higher-order cognitive processes previously deemed inaccessible to empirical study. The formation of a learning set represented an abstract rule acquisition: the monkeys learned to ignore irrelevant cues and focus on the dimensions that determined the reward, essentially optimizing their internal hypotheses testing mechanism. This established the foundation for understanding L2L as a crucial element of intelligence and adaptability, moving the field beyond simple stimulus-response models toward complex cognitive strategies.

Following Harlow, the concept was integrated into human learning theory, broadening its scope from behavioral tasks to complex academic skills. In the latter half of the 20th century, L2L became closely associated with the burgeoning field of metacognition--the awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes. Theorists like John Flavell emphasized that L2L is largely driven by the learner's ability to monitor, regulate, and assess their own comprehension and performance. The modern pedagogical application of L2L focuses heavily on teaching students explicit metacognitive strategies, such as planning (setting goals), monitoring (checking understanding), and evaluating (reflecting on outcomes), ensuring that the process is intentional rather than merely incidental.

3. Key Characteristics

One of the defining characteristics of L2L is its inherent **transferability**. Unlike domain-specific knowledge, which is confined to a particular subject area, the skills acquired through L2L--the ability to structure information, manage effort, and utilize organizational tools--are domain-general and can be applied across disparate academic subjects (e.g., applying critical analysis skills developed in literature to problem-solving in engineering). This high degree of far transfer makes L2L a powerful mechanism for intellectual growth, enabling learners to adapt rapidly to entirely new

domains without requiring retraining in fundamental cognitive strategies. The successful learner develops an efficient schema for processing novelty, reducing cognitive load when encountering unfamiliar material.

A second key characteristic is the **exponential improvement curve** observed in performance. Initial learning requires significant cognitive effort and numerous trials. However, once a robust learning set is established through repeated exposure and self-correction, the time and effort required for subsequent, analogous tasks diminish dramatically. This pattern suggests a shift from effortful, controlled processing to more automated, procedural handling of learning challenges. The efficiency gained is cumulative: the more effectively one learns a new skill, the more reinforced the underlying learning strategy becomes, leading to accelerating returns on subsequent learning investments. This phenomenon underpins the argument for prioritizing strategic instruction early in educational curricula.

Finally, L2L is inextricably linked to **self-regulation and self-efficacy**. Effective learning how to learn requires the learner to actively manage their own cognitive processes, emotional states, and environmental context. This includes monitoring motivational levels, adjusting study schedules based on performance feedback, and seeking appropriate external resources. As learners successfully navigate complex tasks using their internalized L2L strategies, they build robust self-efficacy--a belief in their own capability to succeed in future learning challenges. This boost in confidence further fuels motivation and persistence, creating a virtuous cycle where effective strategies lead to success, which in turn reinforces the use of effective strategies.

4. Cognitive Mechanisms

The efficacy of Learning to Learn is rooted in fundamental cognitive and neurological processes. Primarily, L2L relies heavily on the formation and refinement of cognitive **schemas**. A schema is an organized unit of knowledge or a pattern of thought that structures information and relationships in memory. Through the repetition of similar learning tasks--such as mastering a musical instrument or solving similar algebraic problems--the brain constructs generalized, efficient schemas for handling that type of input. When a new, related task is presented, the existing schema is accessed and adapted, rather than building a new structure from scratch. This process of schema induction and refinement is central to the observed rapid improvement characteristic of learning sets.

Furthermore, L2L involves the transition of knowledge from declarative (explicitly recalled facts) to **procedural memory** (implicit knowledge of how to perform tasks). Initially, a learner might consciously apply a checklist of steps or rules (declarative). With sufficient repetition and practice, these steps become internalized and automatic--a function of procedural memory. The source content explicitly highlights repetition of a single act, such as playing an instrument, which strongly

correlates with procedural learning. This automatization significantly reduces the load on the working memory, enabling the learner to dedicate cognitive resources to higher-level challenges inherent in the new material rather than grappling with the mechanics of the learning process itself.

At the neurobiological level, the mechanism of L2L is supported by the concept of **neural plasticity**. Repeated engagement in structured learning activities strengthens the synaptic connections associated with effective cognitive strategies. The brain literally optimizes its structure to handle the demands of learning more efficiently. When a learning set is formed, the neural pathways related to abstract reasoning, pattern recognition, and hypothesis generation are reinforced. This structural modification means that subsequent learning is conducted along these pre-optimized pathways, resulting in faster information processing and retrieval. The biological foundation confirms that L2L is not merely an abstract pedagogical concept but a measurable outcome of adaptive neural reorganization driven by experience.

5. Applications in Educational Settings

In modern educational settings, L2L is integrated across the curriculum not as a separate subject, but as a framework for strategic instruction. Teachers are encouraged to move beyond mere content delivery to explicitly teach the underlying skills of organization, critical evaluation, and reflective practice. Curricula designed around L2L principles often employ project-based learning and inquiry-based methods, which necessitate that students manage complex, ill-defined problems, thereby practicing the metacognitive skills required for true learning transfer. For example, instead of simply memorizing historical dates, students are taught how to organize, synthesize, and critique historical evidence, skills transferable to analyzing data in scientific contexts.

A primary application involves fostering **self-regulated learning (SRL)**. SRL is the practical realization of L2L in the classroom, teaching students to be agents of their own learning process. SRL involves three cyclical phases: forethought (planning, setting goals), performance control (monitoring progress, strategy usage), and self-reflection (evaluating outcomes and adjusting future strategies). Educators utilize tools such as graphic organizers, thinking routines, and reflective journals to make these internal processes visible and actionable for students. By explicitly labeling and practicing these regulatory skills, students internalize the process of effective learning, transforming incidental repetition into intentional strategy refinement.

Moreover, L2L informs the design of teacher training and professional development. Effective instruction in L2L requires educators to model these strategies openly. A teacher who masters L2L principles understands that providing constructive, specific feedback focused on the *process* of learning--rather than just the final *product*--is essential for skill development. This feedback loop helps students identify where their learning strategy broke down (e.g., "You organized your

sources effectively, but your synthesis step was incomplete") and empowers them to self-correct and refine their learning set for the next task, reinforcing the connection between effort, strategy, and outcome.

6. Significance and Impact

The significance of mastering Learning to Learn extends far beyond academic success; it is a fundamental requirement for **lifelong learning** and adaptability in the knowledge economy. Rapid technological and societal shifts mandate that individuals continually acquire new skills and discard outdated knowledge. An individual proficient in L2L is equipped to handle professional pivoting, retraining, and continuous upskilling efficiently. This capacity for sustained adaptation ensures economic resilience and personal fulfillment throughout one's career trajectory, making L2L a vital twenty-first-century skill necessary for navigating complexity and uncertainty.

The mastery of L2L also has a profound impact on cognitive efficiency and intellectual capacity. By automating the foundational processes of information acquisition and organization, the learner conserves cognitive resources. This resource conservation allows for deeper engagement with novel, complex material, fostering true innovation and creative problem-solving. Studies have shown that learners with strong metacognitive skills are not only faster but also more flexible in their approach, utilizing a broader repertoire of strategies when faced with obstacles, demonstrating a superior capacity for abstract thought and critical analysis.

Psychologically, L2L significantly boosts individual **agency and motivation**. When learners understand *how* they learn best, they transition from passive recipients of information to active participants who control their outcomes. The repeated success derived from applying effective strategies reinforces the internal locus of control. This sense of control is highly motivating, encouraging learners to tackle more difficult challenges and persist through failure, viewing mistakes not as endpoints but as essential feedback for strategy refinement--a crucial perspective for sustained intellectual development and personal growth.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its widely accepted importance, the concept of Learning to Learn faces several critical debates, primarily concerning the scope and limitations of **transfer of learning**. While the theoretical promise of L2L is that skills are highly transferable (far transfer), empirical evidence often suggests that learning remains somewhat domain-specific (near transfer). Critics argue that true, radical transfer--applying a learning strategy from music theory to quantum physics without significant modification--is rare. Many generalized strategies require substantial contextual adaptation, suggesting that the "learning set" is often more narrowly defined than broad L2L proponents claim, challenging the ease with which these skills can be leveraged across entirely

unrelated disciplines.

Another significant challenge lies in the **measurement and assessment** of L2L proficiency. Unlike content knowledge, metacognitive skills are difficult to quantify objectively. Assessing whether a student has truly improved *how* they learn, rather than just improved their outcome on a specific test, requires complex, often self-report measures (like reflective diaries or strategy inventories) which are subject to bias. Developing reliable and valid instruments to track the longitudinal development of learning sets and metacognitive abilities remains a persistent methodological hurdle in educational psychology research, complicating efforts to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of L2L interventions.

Finally, there is a pedagogical debate regarding the optimal time and method for teaching L2L skills. Some educators argue that metacognitive strategies should be taught explicitly and separately (a "skills course"), while others advocate for integrated instruction, where the strategies are taught implicitly within the context of specific subject matter (e.g., teaching note-taking while studying history). The concern is that explicit instruction might divorce the strategy from its meaningful context, leading to superficial application, while implicit instruction might fail to make the underlying mechanisms clear enough for the student to intentionally transfer the skill to a new domain. Balancing the explicit instruction of generalized strategies with meaningful, contextual application remains a key tension in L2L pedagogy.

Further Reading

[Harry Harlow](#) (Wikipedia)

[Metacognition](#) (Wikipedia)

[Key competencies for lifelong learning](#) (Wikipedia)

[Working memory](#) (Wikipedia)