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Optimizing Strategy Training in Primary Education: Enhancing Learning Outcomes for Young Students

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Abstract

Strategy training is one of the most effective ways to enhance the process of foreign language learning. Nevertheless, it is not a particularly popular method that is employed among primary school teachers. The reason for that might lie in the inability to conduct it or simply lack of time during foreign language classes to manage such an intervention. Strategy training brings a lot of benefits, including: raising students' awareness of the way they learn best, greater ease with connecting prior knowledge with the new information, and an increase in students' autonomy. Owing to the positive aspects of such training, it seems to be an effective way to facilitate the process of consecutive language learning. The aim of the present paper is to propose a possible way to optimize strategy training so that it is suitable for primary school learners. The suggestions will be based on the strategy training, which was conducted over the period of two years in the primary school context. The emphasis would be placed on the language of instruction, the choice of the model for strategy instruction, the explicit or implicit character of the strategy instruction, and prior language experience.

Keywords: strategy training, L3 learning, young learners, learning strategies



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1. Introduction

Learning foreign languages from an early age is increasingly popular all around the world (Savić, 2016). Eurydice's report on Key data on teaching languages at schools in Europe – 2023 edition indicates that the age at which students start learning foreign languages has been lowered in many countries. The result is that most of the learners start L2 learning before the age of 8, and in some countries, at the age of 6. During this period, they learn FL (foreign language) mainly implicitly and with the use of interactive games, listening activities, and vocabulary practice. However, mastering a single foreign language is not sufficient. In Polish schools, in accordance with the European Union policy, the process of learning a second foreign language starts in the 7th grade of primary school. In some schools, L3 learning starts even earlier to maximize learning outcomes. In order to enable a more effective and independent learning strategy training might be employed.

The present study aims to investigate how strategy training can be optimized within primary education to improve young students' learning outcomes. By exploring various models for strategy training, techniques, and instructional methods, the research seeks to identify the most effective approaches that help primary school students develop skills for better comprehension, application, and transfer of new knowledge. The study is based on the effects of strategy training that was introduced among 11-year-old learners who started their L3 Spanish learning. The ultimate goal is to provide evidence-based recommendations for educators to implement more impactful learning strategies, potentially leading to enhanced academic performance and greater engagement in primary school settings.

2. The overview of research

The primary source of interest in relation to strategy instruction is its impact on various groups of learners. This aspect was widely researched in the context of L2 learning. Special attention was paid to various skills and language subsystems (Afflerbach et al., 2008; Ma & Oxford, 2014; Vandergrift & Baker, 2015), individual differences, including motivation (MacIntyre, 2002) and proficiency level (Green & Oxford, 1995) or the use of specific group of strategies, such as cognitive and metacognitive (Oxford, 2011; Vandergrift, L. & Goh, 2012) or affective (Dörnyei, 2005). As far as learning strategies and strategy training in L3 are concerned, research on this topic remains scarce.

In the context of multilingual education, it is interesting to observe the influence of the languages spoken by the learners on the choice of strategies and its possible consequences in different contexts. One of the most remarkable studies was conducted by Jessner and Török (2017). Its aim was to find out what strategies participants apply when dealing with unknown systems. To be more specific, students were supposed to decode the text in Romanian and at the same time, describe the strategies they used while doing the task. The results showed that multilinguals displayed greater cognitive flexibility in their use of strategies in comparison to monolinguals and bilinguals. What was observed was the evidence for the M-factor – the factor that enables multilingual to develop their abilities in another foreign language.

The study by Carvalho (2021), on the other hand, offers insight into L3 acquisition by means of various language learning models. Depending on students' prior language learning experience, students benefitted more from different types of instruction. For instance, L2 Spanish bilinguals demonstrated a preference for explicit instruction and rule-based training in the process of learning another foreign language, whereas heritage Spanish bilinguals tended to rely on implicit instruction techniques. These observations might be directly linked to the instruction that they received in the past, which differed and affected their choices in the context of subsequent language learning.

Ruiz de Zarobe and Zenotz (2018) investigated the influence of strategy training on Spanish-Basque bilinguals. For this purpose, the experiment was conducted in which the group received strategy training that lasted 7 weeks. Then, the results were compared for the experimental and control groups indicating

that the former benefitted from the intervention in terms of greater strategy awareness and use. However, no significant differences were observed in reference to the number of strategies employed by the experimental and control groups. An additional benefit of strategy training was the effect it exerted on participants – its positive impact was detected even after 2 years. In a similar vein, Spinelli (2017) investigated the impact of plurilingual pedagogies on writing and reading abilities in the multilingual classrooms. The study was conducted among students who had prior experience in Romance languages and attended an Intensive Elementary Italian course. As a result of the intervention, students' writing and reading skills improved. What is especially remarkable is the fact that improvement in writing skills significantly affected reading comprehension.

In summary, these studies demonstrate the enormous value of strategy training including, awareness-building around learning strategies and cognitive flexibility for L3 learners. An important aspect that should be taken into consideration is how to conduct it so that it brings positive effect.

2.1 Strategy training – models

One of the most significant aspects of learning strategies is that they have their practical use in language learning. In other words, they are teachable by means of strategy training. When planning this process, there are several aspects that should be taken into account, including the language of instruction, the model of strategy training, the implicit or explicit character of the instruction.

Numerous attempts have been made to classify and organize language learning strategies, which has led to a growing need for guidance to help teachers effectively incorporate these strategies into their lessons. Given the importance placed on strategy training, researchers such as Chamot et al. (1999), Cohen (1996, 1998), O'Malley & Chamot (1990), and Oxford (1990) developed comprehensive instructions for using these strategies in L1 and L2 learning. Despite varying emphases across these models, they share key similarities, especially in the importance they place on the teacher's role in modeling desired behaviors for students. Additionally, they emphasize promoting student autonomy, allowing learners to practice and personalize new strategies (Chamot, 2005).

Table 1. *Models of language learning strategy instruction.*

Chamot (1999)	Cohen (1998)	Grenfell and Haris (1999)
(1) Preparation	Various roles of the teacher are emphasized:	(1) Awareness raising
(2) Presentation		(2) Modelling
(3) Practice		(3) General practice
(4) Evaluation		(4) Action planning
(5) Expansion activities		(5) Focused practice
(6) Assessment		(6) Evaluation

Table 1 presents the main models for strategy instruction selected for this study due to their shared focus on identifying learners' initial use of strategies as a foundation for further instruction. The models included are those by Chamot et al. (1999), Cohen (1998), and Grenfell and Harris (1999).

Based on over a decade of research, Chamot's Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) is a six-stage, recursive model designed for English language learners. It begins with a Preparation phase where teachers assess students' current strategies for completing familiar tasks in L1 or L2. This is followed by a Presentation phase, where students are introduced to new strategies, supported by explanations and guidance on when and how to use them. The Practice and Evaluation stages provide students with opportunities to apply strategies independently and reflect on their effectiveness. Expan-

sion activities help transfer strategies to new tasks, and the model concludes with an Assessment phase, where teachers evaluate the impact of strategies on overall performance.

Cohen's (1998) approach contrasts with Chamot's (1999) model by focusing on the various roles of the teacher rather than step-by-step instruction. Cohen (1998) emphasizes flexibility, encouraging teachers to adapt their roles—such as Diagnostician, Language Learner, Trainer, Coordinator, and Coach—based on students' needs. This model allows teachers to guide strategy training while being responsive to learners' individual progress.

The model by Grenfell and Harris (1999) shares similarities with Chamot's (1999), such as the practice phase, but emphasizes stages like Awareness Raising and Modelling, where the teacher introduces strategies and demonstrates their use. Focused Practice aims to make strategy use automatic, followed by Evaluation where the effectiveness of the strategy is assessed and new goals are established.

Although these models were developed some time ago, they contain elements that remain relevant today. Detailed initial assessments of students' existing strategy use, along with practice and assessment stages, are essential aspects of effective strategy instruction and can be adapted to current learning environments.

2.2 The language of instruction

Apart from the models of strategy instruction, it is also important to take into account the language in which the instruction is going to be presented. There are three approaches that are prominent: the use of the target language in the instruction, the use of learners' native language, and the combined use of L1 and FL. Macaro (2001) strongly promoted the use of L1 in strategy instruction, as it enables the learners to grasp the abstract concept without the need to fully comprehend the target language. It can be beneficial, especially for lower-proficiency learners, who might be unable to understand the instruction in a foreign language. The same view is maintained by Chamot (2005), who claims that without fully comprehending how the strategy works, it is not possible to apply it in the target language. The second approach is connected to the use of only the foreign language in strategy training to immerse learners into authentic language use. Such an attitude is supported by Swain (2000) and Oxford (2011), who claim that the target language serves as a bridge between strategy use and language tasks. However, it can only be considered effective if learners reach a certain level of proficiency in the foreign language. Last but not least, it is possible to combine the use of L1 and target language for the purpose of strategy instruction. Griffiths (2013) argues that teachers should be flexible when choosing a language of instruction. It should be, above all, based on students' current needs and their ability to comprehend and apply strategies to a new task. Lee and Macaro (2013) advocate the use of L1 at the beginning of the intervention, for instance, to present a new strategy and explain how it can be used. The target language can be introduced later to reinforce specific aspects of the use of a given strategy.

To sum up, in the choice of a language of strategy instruction, there are several factors that should be taken into account. The pivotal one is the level of proficiency in the target language, which highly affects the understanding and retention of new strategies. Apart from this, the complexity of the strategy instruction and the goal of the training should also be taken into account.

2.3 Explicit and implicit strategy instruction

There are two major approaches to strategy training: implicit and explicit. The former approach refers to indirect guidance related to the use and application of a strategy. In this method, the strategies are not labeled. Instead, teachers often model their use and prepare the activities in which the strategies might be applied (Nunan, 1997). The main benefit of implicit strategy instruction is that it allows the learners to pick up the strategies by practicing and observing their use, which supports a more naturalistic way

of learning (Rees-Miller, 1993). Explicit strategy training, on the other hand, implies instructing students directly on how to apply the strategies. The process involves: naming the strategy, employing it in the new task, and assessing their own use of it. An important aspect is also related to raising students' awareness of the fact that learning strategies can be transferred to another task (Chamot, 2004). Explicit strategy instruction may be beneficial for learners who value clear guidance. There are many researchers supporting this approach including Oxford and Leaver (1996) and Shen (2003).

2.4 Prior experience in language learning

An important factor that was not taken into account in the studies related to L2 strategy training is the impact of prior language learning experience on the strategy training in L3. There is no denying that when students learn their second foreign language, they already have some experience that they can rely on.

It is said that for more experienced language learners, it is easier to learn another foreign language and that they may have more language learning strategies at their disposal than monolinguals and bilinguals (Mititis, 2015). However, the research in this area was largely inconclusive. For instance, Jessner (1999) who investigated the impact of L2 on L3 learning found out that the strategies that bilinguals and trilinguals employed were different. Later, she came to the conclusion that the influence of previously acquired languages on new language learning is complex and depends on many factors, including the rate of L3 learning (Jessner, 2008). Similar observations were made by Cenoz (2001) and De Angelis (2007).

Interestingly, at the beginning of L3 learning, it might be natural for the students to rely on their prior language learning experience. In the study conducted by Moore (2006), the participants were asked to decode the text that was written in the language they did not know. What was observed was the fact that students displayed metalinguistic awareness in approaching the task. To be more precise, they looked for the similarities and differences between the languages that they knew and the new language. They also managed to employ the strategies that they acquired while learning their L1 and L2. The study has important implications as it shows that it is natural for the learners to rely on their prior language learning experience and this fact should be taken into account in the process of L3 learning.

To sum up, it seems that prior language learning experience exerts an enormous influence on L3 learning as students use their repertoire of the languages at their disposal when learning another foreign language. This fact should be taken into consideration in order to help the students in the process of learning.

3. The study

The main aim of the study was to find out how to structure strategy training for young learners so that it enhances learning outcomes. To be more specific, the emphasis was placed on the following aspects: the language of instruction, the model of strategy instruction, the implicit or explicit approach towards strategy training, and the impact of prior language learning experience on strategy instruction.

3.1 The description of the study

Based on the literature review, the decision was made related to the use of L1 as a language of instruction. It was dictated by practical reasons – students were at the beginning of L3 learning so it was not possible to conduct strategy training in the target language. Apart from this, Chamot's (1990) model of strategy instruction was employed due to its recursiveness and the clarity of each stage of instruction. As far as the choice of the strategies is concerned, it was based on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies. During the strategy training, the following groups of strategies were introduced: cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, affective, and social strategies.

3.2 Participants

The study included a group of 10 primary school students, all aged 11, who participated as subjects. They attended private primary school where the process of a third language learning starts relatively early – in sixth grade, whereas in most Polish primary schools, it is introduced in the seventh grade. The students already had experience in learning English as a second language (L2) and Spanish was their third language (L3). Their English proficiency ranged from A2 to B1, while their Spanish proficiency was at the beginner level, classified as A1. The participants attended Spanish classes twice a week and during this time, the strategy training was introduced.

3.3 The research tool

The primary research tool for this study was a detailed teacher's journal, maintained consistently over the two-year period of strategy training among 11-year-old students learning Spanish as their third language (L3). This journal served as a qualitative data source, capturing both the teacher's observations and reflections on student engagement, the effectiveness of different strategies, and emerging patterns in student responses. Entries were recorded weekly and included structured prompts focused on key areas, such as the language of instruction, the impact of English on the process of L3 learning, or the influence of the strategy instruction model on the process of learning Spanish. The journal also documented adjustments made to the strategy instruction based on observed outcomes and student feedback, providing a comprehensive, evolving record of the intervention's progression.

By using this tool, the study gained insights into not only the outcomes of strategy training but also the nuances of student learning processes. The teacher's journal was particularly valuable in identifying the effectiveness of various strategies in real-time, allowing the instructor to adapt the training methods responsively, thus tailoring support to the unique needs of each student group.

3.4 Data analysis

Since the objective of the study was to find out how to optimize the strategy training for primary school learners, it was necessary to identify the key areas in the teacher's journal that would be explored. For the purpose of the research, the following aspects were analyzed: the language of instruction, the implicit and explicit language learning instruction, the influence of other languages on L3 strategy training and the model of strategy instruction.

4. The Results

The results of the two-year strategy training program highlighted significant improvements in students' use of strategies. The most general observation is that at the start of the study, students exhibited minimal use of metacognitive strategies in language learning, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own progress in L3 learning. However, by the end of the training period, a marked increase in strategy use was observed, as evidenced by journal entries detailing students' growing strategy awareness and autonomy in language use.

It was observed that some students applied strategies that were aimed at helping them to decode new lexical items in the text. They included: guessing the words from the context or looking for similar words in Polish and English. Such strategies were not frequently employed. However, they might be indicative of their prior experience in language learning and possibly, an attempt to transfer the strategies from L2 to L3 learning.

Students who engaged actively with the training demonstrated an enhanced use of strategies, especially in receptive skills. This observation may be connected with the fact that at the beginning of the process of L3 learning, the emphasis was put on listening and reading, as students were not yet able to produce longer utterances or elaborate texts in Spanish. The journal entries also indicated that students developed better self-regulation skills. For instance, if students felt that their reading skills were not sufficient to understand the texts from the coursebook, they planned further practice outside the classroom setting.

Additionally, notable improvement was observed in sentence construction, which may be attributed to the fact that the instructor emphasized similarities and differences between L1, L2, and L3 in this area. Therefore, it was easier for students to utilize new structures in the target language.

The study also highlighted differences in the effectiveness of the strategy training across several key factors:

1. **Model of Strategy Instruction:** Chamot's model was selected, emphasizing stages such as preparation, practice, and evaluation. This model appeared effective for the students in this study, although certain limitations emerged when applied to younger learners with limited L3 proficiency. For instance, it was difficult to move from the presentation to the practice stage. It might be due to the fact that for some students, it was difficult to use a given strategy independently in the task. Therefore, learners were allowed to work in small groups and then gradually move to individual practice.
2. **Language of Instruction:** Given the students' low proficiency in L3, Polish was used as the primary language of instruction, which facilitated comprehension and allowed for more complex strategy explanations. Even after the period of two years, the strategy was conducted in the native language. The decision was dictated by the complicated nature of some of the strategies and still developing proficiency in L3 Spanish.
3. **Implicit vs. Explicit Instruction:** Due to the students' developing metacognitive awareness, explicit strategy instruction was prioritized. This approach provided clear guidance, allowing students to understand and practice strategies within a structured framework. The decision was made not to introduce too complicated labels for the strategy, such as its category, but the priority was to focus on its use and application to the task.
4. **Influence of Prior Language Learning (L1 and L2):** The study observed that students frequently relied on their prior knowledge of English (L2) and Polish (L1) when learning L3, particularly in pronunciation and vocabulary transfer. To illustrate it with examples, students could not get used to graphic accents that are marked above the vocabulary items in Spanish, and for this reason, the intonation patterns that they used were similar to those in their native language. Another important observation was that students often relied on their experience in learning English, especially to compensate for their inability to recall the word in the target language. For this reason, the lexical items from English were employed, such as "ball" instead of "pelota" or they were adjusted to sound and look like L3 lexical items, such as "travelers" instead of "viajar".

5. Discussion

The results of the present paper will be discussed in reference to the following aspects: reliance on prior language repertoire, the language of instruction, explicit versus implicit strategy instruction, model of strategy instruction, and transfer of strategies from L2 English to L3 Spanish.

Reliance on Prior Language Repertoire

The findings echo Jessner and Török's (2017) research on the "M-factor," which suggests that multilingual learners can make use of their knowledge of previously acquired languages to enhance L3 acquisition. Similar to the multilingual learners in Jessner and Török's study, the students in this study applied previously learned strategies from English and Polish, particularly for decoding unfamiliar vocabulary and managing complex sentence structures. This finding supports Moore's (2006) argument that multilingual learners display heightened metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to adapt and transfer existing strategies to new linguistic contexts.

Language of Instruction

The choice to use Polish as the primary language of instruction was informed by Macaro's (2001) argument that L1 usage in the early stages of L3 learning helps students understand abstract strategies without language barriers. Similarly, Chamot (2005) advocates using L1 to ensure students understand strategy fundamentals before applying them in L3. For younger learners with beginner-level L3 proficiency, using L1 minimized cognitive load, allowing them to focus on mastering the strategies themselves rather than struggling with the L3 language demands.

In contrast, Swain (2000) and Oxford (2011) advocate for using the target language to bridge the gap between strategy instruction and authentic language use, particularly once learners achieve a basic level of proficiency. In the current study, using L3 for strategy instruction could be considered at later stages, but L1 proved advantageous for foundational strategy development.

Explicit vs. Implicit Instruction

Due to the students' developing metacognitive awareness, explicit strategy training proved beneficial, aligning with findings from Chamot (2004), Oxford and Leaver (1996), and Shen (2003) that emphasize direct instruction in strategy use as a critical factor in fostering independent learning. While implicit instruction, which allows students to naturally acquire strategies through modeled behavior, has benefits for older or more advanced learners, explicit instruction suits the needs of the younger students by providing structured guidance and reducing ambiguity.

This choice of explicit instruction aligns with Spinelli's (2017) findings, where students in multilingual classrooms demonstrated improvements in writing and reading comprehension through structured, strategy-based interventions. Similarly, Carvalho's (2021) study underscores the impact of explicit instruction for learners with different language backgrounds, suggesting that explicit strategy teaching is particularly beneficial in the early stages of L3 acquisition.

Model of Strategy Instruction

Chamot's (1999) model was selected due to its comprehensive six-stage approach, covering preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion. While Chamot's model provided structured support, elements from other models, such as Cohen's (1998) emphasis on adaptive teacher roles and Grenfell and Harris' (1999) approach to modeling, could offer flexibility when adapting strategy instruction to younger learners.

The detailed stages related to strategy instruction included in Chamot's model were effective in fostering independent learning, as reflected in the students' increased self-regulation and goal-setting skills. Chamot's model, with its structured practice phases, directly contributed to the development of self-regulation skills, supporting Chamot's (2005) argument that structured strategy stages foster independence among young learners.

Transfer of English Language Knowledge to Spanish

The students often relied on English to understand Spanish vocabulary and sentence structures, particularly in terms of pronunciation patterns and cognate recognition. This transfer aligns with Ruiz de Zarobe and Zenotz's (2018) observations that bilingual learners often apply familiar linguistic strategies from L2 to L3 learning contexts. While not all examples of transfer were beneficial, the ability to identify cognates and familiar structures facilitated early L3 learning stages, especially for low-proficiency learners.

The tendency to use English-based strategies confirms Mititis' (2015) observations that prior language experience provides multilingual with a broader strategy repertoire, making it easier to learn additional languages. This strategy transfer supports Cenoz's (2001) findings on cross-linguistic influences in L3 learning, highlighting how linguistic distance and prior knowledge shape strategy use.

Conclusion

The results of this study emphasize the importance of preparing strategy instruction that would be suitable to the specific needs of primary school learners and underline the critical role that prior language experience plays in developing effective language learning strategies. The findings suggest that using an explicit instruction model, adapted to students' developmental stages and language proficiency of the learners, can significantly improve L3 learning outcomes. Moreover, raising students' awareness of previously acquired languages supports the development of cognitive flexibility and strategy transfer, which are essential skills for multilingual learners.

This study contributes valuable insights into optimizing strategy training for primary school learners, particularly within multilingual education. Future research could explore further modifications of strategy instruction models to account for developmental differences among young learners and investigate how multilingual students' language preferences and backgrounds influence strategy transfer in more diverse L3 contexts.

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