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Implementing SBI in the foreign language classroom – mission (im)possible?

1. Introduction

Language learning strategies (LLS) have attracted researchers' attention for a few decades and, although there are still many issues that arouse controversy like whether LLS should be perceived as general or specific, behavioural or mental, researchers concur in that strategies should play an important part in the process of foreign language learning. It is also believed that one of the ways to make learners more cognizant of the value and effectiveness of LLS is by implementing strategy training, also referred to as learning strategy instruction or strategy-based instruction (SBI). In fact, it is frequently stressed that teaching the target language (TL) may be simply not enough to guarantee students' linguistic development and that more emphasis should be placed on promoting autonomous learning thanks to strategies, especially since, to quote Rubin: "often poor learners don't have a clue as to how good learners arrive at their answers and feel they can never perform as good learners do. By revealing the process, the myth can be exposed" (1990: 282). Therefore, thanks to broadening their knowledge about LLS, learners have a chance to become more independent and, equally important, more responsible for their process of learning the target language. Oxford also believes it is vital to provide students with knowledge concerning LLS because "L2 learners, no matter how autonomous they wish to be, are not born knowing all the strategies and tactics they need. They must learn about these strategies (...)" (2008: 54). Another researcher who stresses the value of and the need for

strategy-based instruction is Michońska-Stadnik. In one of her articles devoted to strategy training she states that teaching strategies is a vital component of every language course (2008).

The following article will focus on the notion of strategy training and the conceptual issues connected with it. The author will also present the results of a research project aimed at examining Polish L2 teachers' views on strategies and their implementation in the foreign language classroom. The study was conducted among 121 teachers working at primary schools, junior high and high schools, as well as at private language centres.

2. Strategy training

The reason why strategy training has received a considerable amount of attention from researchers is the fact that it helps language learners become more effective and linguistically resourceful. By learning about the application of different strategies learners are highly encouraged to take the initiative and look for possible solutions on their own rather than to rely solely on the teacher as the counsellor, guide or the main source of information. This way responsibility is shifted onto the learners (Cook 2008).

What is more, Tseng et al. (2006) are of the opinion that students equipped with the necessary tools, i.e. strategies, are in fact more efficient and creative. Additionally, they adjust to new situations much easier and are better at acquiring the target language. Michońska-Stadnik (2008) adds that students who are able to personalize and make use of a wide range of strategies will have a better command of the target language than students who did not undergo strategy training.

It is also worth mentioning that thanks to the training language learners more often monitor their linguistic performance and the progress that they make throughout their language course. They notice their mistakes more often and take steps in order to avoid them. As a result, they are more aware of their learning processes. Furthermore, by showing the right strategies to their students, teachers also strengthen the cooperation in the classroom, which is essential if effective learning is to take place.

When talking about strategic intervention it should be stated that it may take on different forms. It may be, for instance, direct or embedded. As far as the former is concerned, learners are cognizant of the aim and the frequency of the intervention, while in the latter they do not know anything about the purpose of the training. Although some researchers opt for the embedded training, the vast majority regard direct training as the most beneficial one. One of them is Chamot (2008) who says that explicit strategy instruction is more helpful than instruction embedded in classroom activities deprived of the necessary explanations. Oxford states that "strategy [instruction] that fully informs the learner (by indicating why

the strategy is useful, how it can be transferred to different tasks, and how learners can evaluate the success of the strategy) is more successful" (1990: 207).

The training may also be separate or integrated into regular L2 classes. Opinions concerning the superiority of one of the two types of training differ greatly. There are many researchers who succeeded in preparing and conducting separate training programmes (Ellis and Sinclair 1989, Flaitz and Feyten 1996, Rubin 1996, Paige et al. 2006, Cohen and Weaver 2006). Separate strategy training, also known as "learning to learn" courses (Oxford 2011) may be in some cases advantageous. First of all, not many teachers have the necessary time or knowledge to implement strategic intervention and integrate it with the regular classroom materials (Chamot 2004). What is more, there are students, particularly adult and highly motivated ones, who might favour this type of training (Wenden 1986). They are usually pressed for time and want to achieve their linguistic goals as quickly as possible. Thus, many of them would value a short term and separate training. It is also believed that focusing only on the improvement of strategic processing skills may be more effectual for students. However, to quote Oxford,

even with these potential advantages, if the learner is taking an L2 course at the same times as a separate "learning to learn" course, it would be helpful if the two teachers communicate and provide scaffolding across courses for the necessary application to take place. (2011: 179)

On the other hand, opponents of separate training argue that it does not give students the opportunity to apply strategies in authentic learning tasks (Grenfell and Harris 1999, Chamot 2004). Furthermore, if students are not fully cognizant of their L2 learning processes, "they might not be able to transfer what they learn in a separate "learning to learn" course. In such cases learners benefit from having direct strategy instruction woven into their regular L2 course" (Oxford 2011: 180). O'Malley and Chamot claim that

learning in context is more effective than learning separate skills whose immediate applicability may not be evident to the learner and that practising strategies on authentic academic language tasks facilitates the transfer of strategies to similar tasks encountered on other classes. (1990: 152)

Another contentious issue appertains to the language in which the training should be conducted. Chamot (2005) believes that L2 students presenting an elementary level of advancement will fail to comprehend instructions and explanations in the target language. On the other hand, postponing the training until such students reach more advanced levels might simply be too late. Therefore, in such cases the researcher implies using the learners' L1. The only requirement that needs to be met is that the teacher as well as all the students share the same mother tongue. Empirical studies conducted in this area failed to provide a clear answer to the question which language, L1 or L2, should be the main language during the training (Ozeki 2000, Chamot and Keatley 2003). Hence, as Chamot

(2005) suggests, adjusting the language to the specific context and the students' needs would seem the most beneficial solution. The teacher may start the intervention by employing the learners' L1 and then gradually, as students feel more confident and more linguistically advanced, resort to their L2.

Whatever the form of the training is, its effectiveness in promoting more autonomous behaviour among language learners has been empirically proven. However, despite such results and the numerous advantages associated with the training, not many L2 teachers decide to implement it during their lessons. Oxford (1990) argues that one of the greatest obstacles hampering progress in this area is teachers' beliefs connected with SBI. Teachers are used to playing the leading role in the classroom. Therefore, many of them are rather reluctant to be perceived as guides and not as managers because this might imply losing their authority in their students' eyes. Lack of necessary knowledge about strategic intervention is also to blame. Unfortunately, many practitioners simply do not have the necessary time or the opportunity to expand their knowledge concerning strategy training and its beneficial effects on learners' linguistic development. These issues will be addressed in further parts of the article.

3. Research into strategy training

There have been numerous studies investigating the efficiency of strategic intervention in the foreign language classroom. Due to space limitations, the author will briefly present only a selected number of these research projects. One of them includes a study conducted by Cohen and Apek (1980) who provided their L2 Hebrew learners with training concentrating on learning new vocabulary through associations. The results revealed that creating associations was immensely helpful in vocabulary recall tasks. Lack of association, on the other hand, often led to incorrect recall. In a different project, Tang and Moore (1992) examined the impact of cognitive and metacognitive strategies on reading comprehension. The study revealed that the training produced satisfactory effects in terms of comprehension. The results of a study conducted by Carrier (2003), who implemented listening comprehension strategies among high school ESL students, also revealed that the subjects made considerable progress as far as listening comprehension was concerned. In a different study, Trendak (2012) investigated the impact of direct and integrated training in cognitive and metacognitive strategies on the acquisition of a grammatical feature among a group of 40 Polish students at an advanced level. The results demonstrated that the training proved effective. The experimental groups managed to maintain high results on the immediate and delayed post-test, even six weeks after the end of the treatment.

Another researcher examining the value of strategic intervention was Kitajima (1997). In one of his projects he wanted to see whether strategy training drawing

students' attention to referential processes would enhance their comprehension of a Japanese narrative. There were 28 American college students learning Japanese who took part in the project. The experimental group received strategy training that addressed dealing with referential difficulties and using discourse and syntactic cues. The control group focused on comprehension activities and translation tasks. The study demonstrated that the experimental group scored higher on the post-test as far as comprehension and the rate of referent identification were concerned.

Another study worth mentioning is the one conducted by Kusiak (2001). She focused on metacognitive SBI among Polish secondary school ESL learners. The author wanted to investigate the relation between increased metacognition and reading comprehension and the influence of metacognition and comprehension on competence in L2. The training was also aimed at raising the subjects' metacognitive awareness. The results demonstrated an upsurge in reading comprehension. Moreover, the subjects' evaluation strategies also improved.

As can be seen from the examples mentioned, there have been a few attempts to examine the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction and its impact on learners' progress. Although in the majority of cases researchers agree as to the beneficial role of the training, there are certain misgivings concerning the reliability of some studies (McDonough 1999). Rubin et al. (2007) state that there are not many purely experimental studies that is studies that would include at least one experimental and control group. Furthermore, there is a preponderance of studies that focus on older rather than younger learners. When commenting on the studies into SBI, Rubin et al. believe that what is required is "additional and rigorous intervention studies with a variety of language students, including children in foreign language immersion and non-immersion programs, school-aged students in bilingual and second language programs, older students with differing educational levels in their native language, and students in different learning contexts around the world" (2007: 155). Additionally, there is a need for studies that would focus on the long-lasting effects of the training.

Rubin et al. (2007) are of the opinion that more emphasis should be placed on thorough descriptions of strategy training and the methodology used. The information about the strategies employed, the way in which they were introduced, the type of intervention, its intensity or data analysis is what needs to be presented in a more comprehensive way. It would also be advisable for researchers to explicate how the strategies introduced were adjusted to the subjects' characteristics like, among others, age, linguistic proficiency, previous experience, etc.

4. The study

When examining the research projects conducted into the area of language learning strategies one can see that they focus predominantly on the subjects'

application of LLS in relation with certain L2 skills. However, there are still too few studies that would take into consideration L2 teachers', rather than students', view on the implementation of language learning strategies in the foreign language classroom. It is for this reason that the author decided to conduct a study that would include L2 teachers' opinions pertaining to LLS and SBI. Another aim was to see whether Polish L2 teachers have sufficient time throughout the school year that they could devote to introducing and practising language learning strategies with their students.

4.1. The instrument

In order to garner the pertinent data the author made use of a questionnaire that she designed herself. The reason why this particular type of instrument was selected was the fact that the author could obtain qualitative data on L2 teachers' attitude towards strategy training in a relatively quick way. The questionnaire was sent electronically to over 2000 schools across Poland. It was forwarded to primary schools, junior high schools, high schools and to private language schools.

Since the questionnaire was aimed at teachers of various languages, the author resolved to administer it in Polish. The instrument comprised two basic parts. In the former the author wanted to learn more about issues such as the teachers' sex, age or their title: probation teacher, contract teacher, nominated teacher or certified teacher. Additionally, the teachers were to provide information appertaining to their degree, job seniority, workplace and the language that they were teaching. The latter part of the questionnaire included twelve questions that addressed the notion of language learning strategies and strategic intervention. The author wanted to gain insight into the subjects' experience connected with strategy-based instruction and their attitude towards it. In order to shun any possible misunderstanding, the author supplied the subjects with rudimentary information about LLS and SBI at the very beginning of the questionnaire.

The questions required the following answers: *yes, definitely yes, rather, hard to say, not really, definitely not*. There were also a few that needed a yes/no answer. There were no open-ended questions, however, the teachers were free to express their own opinions concerning strategy training at the end of the questionnaire.

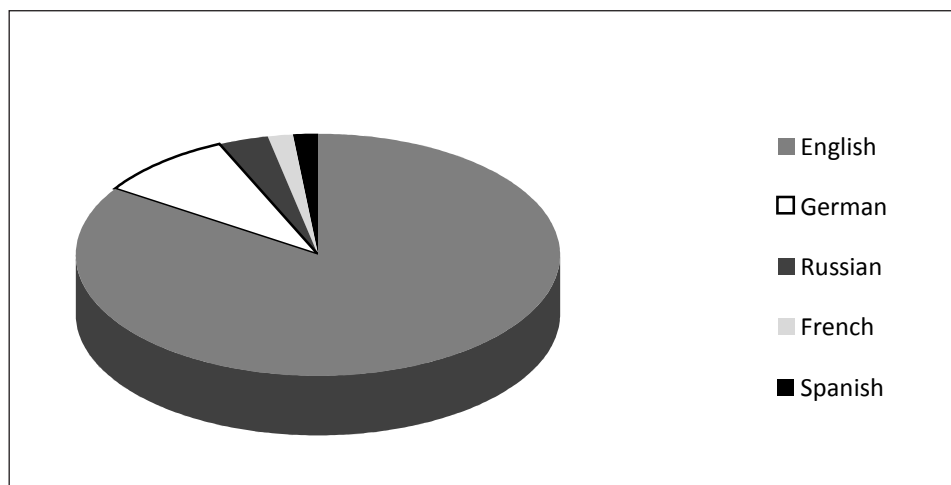
4.2. Subjects

Altogether there were 121 subjects participating in the project, 14 men and 107 women. Within this group one could distinguish 10 probation teachers, 38 contract teachers, 25 nominated teachers, 22 certified teachers, 11 teachers employed at a private language school and 4 academic teachers. 102 (84%) teachers had an

M.A., 15 (12%) held a B.A. degree; there were also 4 (4%) teachers with a PhD degree.

As far as the subjects' workplace was concerned, the majority of them (41) were employed in high schools, private language schools (38), primary schools (37), junior high schools (27), university (10), private primary schools (6), private high schools and middle schools (5), private colleges (3). Additionally there were 3 teachers working in vocational schools and 2 in comprehensive schools. Many teachers worked in more than one school.

Another issue that the questionnaire addressed was job seniority. The average duration of language teaching was 10.18 years. The average age was 33.74 years. The findings (Fig 1) also revealed that as many as 102 practitioners were teachers of English, 11 were German teachers, 4 Russian teachers and 2 French, Spanish and Russian teachers. At this point it is seems essential to add that it was not the author's intention to focus exclusively on English teachers. The questionnaire



was sent to foreign language teachers with no preference given to any specific language.

Figure 1. Languages taught by the subjects

4.3. The results

The study has demonstrated that 84% of the subjects were acquainted with the notion of a language learning strategy. The majority of them encountered this term during their studies, but also during workshops and various conferences. Surprisingly, 62% of the teachers questioned never heard about strategic intervention. This result may seem somewhat befuddling, especially if we bear in

mind how many subjects declared their knowledge about LLS. In the next question the subjects were asked whether they conducted strategy training during their foreign language classes. It appeared that only 46 practitioners implemented SBI. Within this group there were predominantly contract (20) and certified teachers (12). There were 6 nominated teachers, 4 working at a private language school, 2 academic and 2 probation teachers. The training implemented by these teachers was mostly one-time training and focused on a selected learning strategy and its application. It lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, although there were six cases where the intervention was a long-term one. The training was typically separate and indirect. The teachers who conducted the training confessed that it entailed a discussion about the most and least frequently applied LLS.

The subjects were also asked whether they found the training advantageous. Out of those who introduced the intervention, 34 practitioners reported that the training produced satisfying results. 11 teachers found it difficult to say and only one person failed to perceive any positive results of the training.

The subjects were also asked to say whether, in their opinion, foreign language learners can benefit from strategy instruction. As many as 98 teachers said yes and 23 found it difficult to answer the question. Optimistic as they are, the results also raise certain misgivings since, as the previous question demonstrates, 62% of subjects were not acquainted with SBI and still they believed that it could exert a positive impact on foreign language learners' performance.

Another issue addressed in the questionnaire was the students' attitude towards participating in the training. The findings revealed that 74 practitioners were of the opinion that their students would be fond of participating in the intervention. Only 4 believed their students would be reluctant to join in, while as many as 43 found it difficult to answer the question.

Slightly more than half of the teachers questioned were thinking about implementing strategy-based instruction in their L2 classes and 29 teachers rejected such an idea. These results might seem disturbing and point to a certain lack of consistency on the subjects' part. It is confusing to learn that 98 teachers find the training beneficial, 74 think their students would gladly take part in the training but only 62 are considering its introduction. The factors that could have affected the teachers' choices will be elaborated on in further parts of the article.

In the questionnaire the author also wanted to know whether the syllabus allowed the subjects to introduce any additional forms of practice like, for instance, strategy training. Only 66 (54%) teachers admitted that it was possible to introduce SBI and 52 (43%) found it unfeasible. On the one hand, such results might seem optimistic as they demonstrate that the preconception about incessant dearth of time in the L2 classroom is invalid. On the other hand, though, we can talk about cautious optimism only, as there are still a great many teachers who are pressed for time and who unremittingly struggle to cover the required material. In fact, some of the teachers questioned admitted that the very limited, in their opinion, amount

of time they had during the school year precluded them from implementing SBI, which shows that, although possible, introducing strategy training in the foreign language classroom is still a difficult undertaking.

Another issue that seems worth mentioning is the fact that numerous subjects claimed that they were compelled by their directors of studies to follow the imposed programme. Such a situation was connected with the appraisal of teachers' success at the end of every year. This evaluation was based on, in this case, the results achieved by students on their junior high school exams. That is why, many teachers struggled to cover the required material throughout the school year. Obviously, there was no time that could be devoted to extra tasks. Another problem mentioned by some teachers was the dearth of strategy-oriented workshops organized by schools. One of the practitioners admitted she felt she did not have the essential tools thanks to which she could implement SBI.

The next question was also related to the introduction of SBI. The author wanted to investigate the subjects' readiness to focus on the training during extra and unpaid language lessons. The reason why this particular question was included in the study was the author's interest in whether, in the face of limited time during the school year, the subjects were willing to engage in extra practice with their students. The results are sanguine as almost 58% of the respondents were keen to implement strategic intervention. Such a situation is a sign of commitment and great interest in students' linguistic development. There were 29 subjects who, sometimes even strongly, objected to the idea and 22 who found it difficult to provide an answer. A few practitioners were indignant at being asked this question, saying that correcting tests, checking essays and preparing classes occupied a sufficient amount of their free time and that there was no need for further commitment on their part.

The study also disclosed that nearly 90% of the subjects talked to their students about language learning strategies and their value. Engaging in discussions about the role and application of learning strategies may encourage students to employ them more frequently and, hopefully, in a more effective manner. In order to make such discussions even more natural, some subjects shared with their students the strategies that they themselves employed when they were learning different foreign languages. In addition, almost 80% of the subjects talk to other language teachers about how to make it easier for their students to learn the target language. Not only do such results show the teachers' eagerness to cooperate with others and exchange their ideas but they also point to the subjects' great interest in their students' linguistic progress.

The last question also yielded optimistic results. The subjects were asked whether they would like to improve their knowledge of strategies and strategy training by means of, for instance, participating in conferences, workshops or by reading professional journals. As many as 116 practitioners expressed their

willingness to learn more about this field. In fact, some teachers even asked the author for more information about LLS (book titles, upcoming conferences, etc). Surprisingly, there was one teacher, with thirty-four years of practice, who openly expressed her disregard for strategies and perceived them as utterly irrelevant in the foreign language classroom.

In the light of the obtained results, it may be concluded that the questionnaire helped to learn more about L2 teachers' attitude towards strategic intervention. However, the obtained findings are far from flawless. Firstly, the number of subjects was insufficient to yield conclusive results. Secondly, some questions were in fact too general. As a result, certain answers lacked precision. The questions should have also focused on issues such as the type of training, its intensity, the language chosen, etc. What is more, some answers lacked consistency, which could have resulted from incorrectly formulated questions.

5. Conclusions

Despite the numerous limitations of the study, it managed to provide insight into Polish L2 teachers' attitudes towards strategic intervention. The questionnaire demonstrates that teachers are cognizant of the positive role that language learning strategies can play in the foreign language classroom. They are also ready to broaden their horizons in this particular area, which is a highly reassuring finding. Although only slightly more than half of the respondents declared their willingness to introduce the training, it shows L2 teachers' interest in making their students more autonomous and responsible learners, cognizant of their linguistic strengths and weaknesses. When conducting the training, it would be advisable to make it direct and long-term, which may lead to better and long-lasting effects.

Many teachers expressed their keen interest in reading scientific journals and in attending conferences devoted to strategies. Such findings prove that there is a need to conduct more studies into strategies and strategic intervention. Organizing a greater number of workshops could also help teachers to expand their knowledge pertaining to the effective application of LLS.

The study also reveals another, probably more disturbing issue, namely lack of time during the school year. Forced to follow the imposed curriculum, many teachers simply cannot commit more time to additional forms of practice. However, it should be also borne in mind that devoting extra time to strategy training can in fact save more time in the future, as students who are equipped with the necessary tools, i.e. LLS, tend to, among others, be more self-confident, solve linguistic problems more effectively and, generally, fare better in the foreign language classroom than students who were deprived of strategic intervention. That is why, it is the author's firm belief that thanks to SBI, however time- and energy-consuming at the beginning it may be, teachers can shift, at least some,

responsibility onto their students and this way make them more cognizant of their learning processes and more effective.

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