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The impact of strategy training on strategy use and reading in L3 Spanish: The results of a ten-month study of 11-year-old learners

In today's competitive and globalized world, in which plurilingualism is the norm, many students learn not just one, but two foreign languages in the primary school. One of the ways to facilitate L3 learning is to enable learners to refer to their prior experience, and show them how they can use prior language knowledge (usually the mother tongue and English) to their advantage. The aim of this paper is to present the results of a pre-test post-test study investigating what impact a programme of strategy training had on 11-year-old learners' reading strategy use and reading ability in L3 Spanish. The intervention included cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies. The data was collected by means of think aloud protocols, strategy questionnaires and reading tests. The results of the study suggest that after the training learners still employed a limited number of strategies, which may be attributed to their developing metalinguistic awareness. Yet, strategy training positively impacted the overall reading test performance of high- and average-achieving students, but not those who were low achieving.

Keywords: L3 learning, transfer of training, learning strategies, reading comprehension

Słowa kluczowe: przyswajanie J3, trening strategii, strategie uczenia się, czytanie ze zrozumieniem

1. Introduction

There are more and more students who begin learning an L3 at an early age. To ensure that the process is as effective as possible, it is crucial to identify possible solutions that can support young learners in the process of acquiring a new language. One promising approach is to encourage students to use their whole linguistic repertoire to learn a new foreign language. By drawing on one's knowledge and skills, it is possible to establish connections between languages (Erler, Finkbeiner, 2007). Transferring strategies from learning L2 onto L3 learning is not only effective, but it also raises students' awareness of linguistic diversity (Mokhtari, Sheorey, 2002) and interconnectedness, leading to the improvement in overall learner competence.

In learning a consecutive language, the process does not necessarily have to start from scratch. Prior experience in language learning, referred to as multilingual competence (Cenoz, Gorter, 2011), can be a resource that students may draw on in learning another foreign language. Learners can use their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and language structures from previously learned languages to make connections and facilitate comprehension in the new language. This process of transfer of knowledge enables learners to recognize patterns, deduce meanings, and apply strategies that have been effective in past learning experiences. By building on these existing competences, teachers can encourage students to develop a more interconnected linguistic repertoire, boosting their confidence in language learning overall.

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a study related to the impact of reading strategy training on the L3 reading ability of 11-year-old learners. It was carried out over the period of a school year among three primary school learners. The study was conducted in L3 (Spanish), which was an additional foreign language introduced to students at age 11, subsequent to English.

2. Literature overview

There is an abundant body of research related to learning strategies, including L3 learning, yet it typically addresses adults (e.g., Oxford, 2011, 2017; Griffiths, 2018; Pawlak, Kiermasz, 2018). As far as young learners are concerned, the prevailing number of studies are related to CLIL contexts, in which there is an intensive amount of exposure to language (e.g., Xanthou, 2011; de Zarobe, Zenotz, 2017; Milla, Gutiérrez-Mangado, 2019). These studies emphasize the role of metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies

in prompting comprehension and language transfer across L1, L2, and L3. For instance, Milla and Gutiérrez-Mangado (2019) explore how bilingual children use prior linguistic knowledge to facilitate reading in the L3, observing a reliance on, for example, translation strategies. Interestingly, gender, proficiency and age factors were also taken into consideration when analyzing the language learning strategies employed by primary school learners. The results of the study show that the first two factors had no significant influence on the choice of strategies. In the case of age, a minimal difference was observed between grades five and six of primary education (students aged 10-12) in terms of strategy use. Similarly, de Zarobe and Zenotz (2017) observe that CLIL enhanced young learners' strategic reading abilities, by means of specifically chosen texts, and explicit strategy instruction, enabling a cross-linguistic comparison. Although the study was conducted over a period of only 7 weeks, the experimental group showed a marked improvement in their reading competence, in comparison to the control group. The positive effect of strategy instruction was maintained over a period of 2 years. In another study, Xanthou (2011) highlights how vocabulary knowledge impacts reading comprehension in the L3, particularly in explicit strategy instruction. Providing young learners with targeted training in reading strategies—such as summarizing, predicting, and using graphic organizers—significantly improved their ability to decode and comprehend L3 texts. These findings suggest that young learners benefit from structured and interactive strategy instruction, which not only improves their reading skills but also fosters broader cognitive development and metalinguistic awareness.

The importance of strategy instruction cannot be underestimated in L3 learning. Its main benefits include managing and optimizing students' cognitive resources, contributing to more effective language acquisition (e.g., Pressley, 2000; Veenman, et al., 2006; Zhang, 2008). Studies (e.g., Oxford, 2017) have shown that training in the use of certain strategies, such as planning and evaluating one's learning, has a positive impact on learners' autonomy and self-regulation. Apart from this, strategy training creates favourable conditions for students to transfer knowledge and skills from the L1 and L2 to L3 (Cenoz, Gorter, 2014). Effective strategy implementation may positively influence learners' motivation and language retention, which play a significant role in the process of acquiring additional languages (Griffiths, 2018; Kummin, Rahman, 2010). Taking into account the benefits that strategy training brings, its implementation in foreign language classes should be systematic and integral, ensuring that learners are equipped with the tools to enhance their language acquisition, autonomy and transfer of skills across languages.

The framework that further supports the development of linguistic multicompetence in respect of reading is FREPA (Candelier, et al., 2012). The Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures was designed to support education that is aimed at fostering intercultural and multilingual competences among learners. The key features of FREPA are directly connected to reading strategies. For instance, the framework stresses the importance of prior linguistic and cultural knowledge in acquiring additional languages. Teachers can use FREPA to encourage young learners to make use of their multilingual repertoire, such as recognizing cognates, or comparing grammatical patterns in the L1, L2 and L3. These strategies are particularly important in reading in the target language. Another important aspect is related to developing metalinguistic awareness, which translates into understanding how the languages function. Reading strategies such as decoding unfamiliar words, recognizing text structure, and identifying language-specific features are strongly connected with this competence. For instance, teaching learners to notice similarities and differences in syntax, word formation, or punctuation between the L3 and previously learned languages can make reading more accessible. Last but not least, FREPA promotes the development of attitudes such as valuing linguistic diversity and motivation for learning. Young learners' confidence in L3 reading is often influenced by their perception of multilingualism. FREPA encourages teachers to portray L3 learning as an extension of the abilities that students already possess. By integrating FREPA's pluralistic framework into the teaching of reading strategies for L3 acquisition, educators can create a favourable learning environment that aligns with both theoretical aspects and practical outcomes in multilingual education.

To sum up, most studies on L3 language learning strategies were conducted in a CLIL setting, where exposure to the target language is quite intensive and students are, in most cases, already bilingual. To our knowledge, no other study was conducted among children in a formal setting where there is limited exposure to a foreign language.

3. The study

The present study aims at exploring reading strategies employed by 11-year-old learners while learning L3 Spanish. It is part of a larger project that focuses on learning strategies used by upper primary school learners in the process of learning L3. Since participants were beginner learners of Spanish, strategy training was conducted in one particular language skill - reading. The reason for concentrating only on this was the fact that it is a receptive skill

and is developed from the early stages of novel language learning. Through reading, students broaden their knowledge, not only about the world but also about the language and its grammar, structures, and lexis. This skill also provides them with meaningful input, which is especially important for the beginner learners of a language (Chodkiewicz, 2016).

The study addresses the following research questions:
1. What was the impact of explicit reading strategy instruction on the strategy use and L3 reading performance of 11-year-old learners after the 10- month intervention?
2. What were the reading strategies employed by 11-year-old learners before and after the introduction of explicit reading strategy training?

In the study, a pre-test and post-test study design was used. In order to address the first question, the strategies that students employed in the pre- and post-test were compared. The data was collected by means of questionnaires that students were asked to fill in after they completed the reading tests.

The second research question was aimed at shedding more light on the type of strategies students employed before and after the intervention. The strategies that were employed before the strategy instruction were collected on the basis of the questionnaire, whereas the strategies that were used after the strategy instruction were recorded by means of think aloud protocols. The strategies identified in their questionnaires and think aloud protocols were categorized with reference to Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies.

3.1. Participants

There were 3 students who took part in the present study. They were private primary school students aged 11. They had learnt English for 6 years, and Spanish for 3 months. Their level of English oscillated between A2 and B1, whereas their level of proficiency in Spanish was A1. They attended Spanish classes two times a week. The criterion that was taken into account when selecting the participants of the study were the results on an English language test at the end of the school year, which enabled the researcher to classify students as low-performing, average-performing and high-performing.

3.2. The research tools

There were two basic tools that were employed in the present study: a questionnaire and think aloud protocols. The first tool was the questionnaire which was aimed at gathering the quantitative data regarding the use of reading strategies. It was administered in Polish, for practical reasons, as the students had not reached a level of proficiency in Spanish that would allow them to fully understand each question. The reading strategies questionnaire contained 16 questions. Students were supposed to state how many times they employed a given strategy. The strategies were divided into three categories: before, during and after the reading process. This research tool was based on Kucharczyk's questionnaire (2018: 380-381), regarding reading comprehension in French among students aged 15. It was, however, modified to fit the context of a Spanish class.

The second research tool was a think aloud protocol, which enabled the researcher to gather qualitative data. After the post-test, participants were asked to describe their use of reading strategies while they were completing the tests. Their answers were recorded and transcribed. The strategies were then classified with the use of Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies. These strategies are divided into direct strategies (involving the language directly) and indirect strategies (supporting language learning without direct interaction with the language).

3.3. The procedure

The study started in September 2020. Its first stage consisted of a reading test accompanied by the questionnaire. It was conducted before the strategy training and was aimed at identifying the strategies students employed while they were completing a reading task. What followed was a 10-month reading strategy training embedded into the students' Spanish classes. Figure 1 presents the plan of the strategy training course, i.e. the types of strategies that the students were exposed to between the language tests.

The strategies that were included in the study were divided into two broad categories: those that can be used before reading a text and those that can be employed while reading it. The reasons for such a division were inspired by the questionnaire prepared by Kucharczyk (2018). In his research instrument, the organization of strategies into before- and while-reading enabled students to reflect on their use of strategies in a logical order.

Reading strategies
Test 1
1) Careful analysis of the reading instruction. 2) The use of translanguaging (references to Polish, English and other languages)
1) Identifying the main topic of the text. 2) Identifying the type of text.
1) Paying attention to the relationships between different parts of the text. 2) Paying attention to the context to understand the meaning of unknown vocabulary items.
Test 2
1) Re-reading parts of the text 2) Guessing 3) Underlining key words
1) Paying attention to particular parts of the text 2) Evaluation of the text
Revising the use of strategies
Test 3

Figure 1. The plan of the strategy training (own study)

Each stage of the strategy instruction was followed by a test and think aloud protocols conducted among the three students. Their answers were recorded and transcribed. Then, the strategies employed by the learners were underlined and classified according to Oxford's taxonomy (1990) of learning strategies.

As far as the strategy training is concerned, Chamot's model (2005) was followed. It consists of six steps:

a) The preparation stage involves the teacher identifying the strategies learners already use before the training. Through student self-reports, the teacher can find out whether learners can transfer reading strategies from their L2 to their L3, and create a plan for future strategy development.

b) The presentation stage, during which the teacher introduces and explains the use of the new strategy. Students are then asked to share their experiences with this strategy and discuss how they are going to apply it to the new task.

c) During the practice stage, students use the newly introduced strategy in practical tasks. In the beginning, the practice is guided by the teacher, and later, students are encouraged to use the strategy on their own.

d) The evaluation stage allows students to assess the effectiveness of the strategy they have used.

e) Expansion activities enable learners to transfer the strategy they have mastered to a new task.

f) In the assessment stage, the teacher evaluates to what extent the new strategy has impacted students' overall performance.

The reason for choosing Chamot's model (2005) was the fact that it is recursive – whenever any phase needs revision, the teacher or instructor can easily repeat it.

4. The results

The data provided in Table 1 presents the number and types of strategies reported by the high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP), and low-performing (LP) students before and after the ten month- intervention of strategy instruction, according to the questionnaires.

Table 1. The use of reading strategies by high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP) and low-performing (LP) students in pre-test and post-test strategy questionnaire (own study)

Strategy	Students	Pre-test	Post-test
TRANSLANGUAGING	HP	5	7
	AP	4	9
	LP	2	3
RE-READING	HP	2	5
	AP	3	4
	LP	1	1
UNERLINING KEY WORDS	HP	1	1
	AP	1	0
	LP	0	0
GUESSING	HP	2	5
	AP	3	5
	LP	0	1
IDENTIFYING THE MAIN TOPIC	HP	1	1
	AP	1	0
	LP	0	0
IDENTIFYING THE TYPE OF TEXT	HP	0	1
	AP	0	1
	LP	0	0

Strategy	Students	Pre-test	Post-test
ANALYSIS OF THE INSTRUCTION	HP	1	1
	AP	1	1
	LP	0	1
PAYING ATTENTION	HP	4	4
	AP	2	6
	LP	3	3
EVALUATION	HP	3	4
	AP	2	3
	LP	3	1
LACK OF UNDERSTANDING	HP	2	1
	AP	2	1
	LP	4	3
DOUBT	HP	3	6
	AP	2	4
	LP	2	3

The pre- and post-test strategy questionnaire results showed a general increase in the use of strategies across all the students, with the most notable improvements observed among average-performing learner. While the high-performing student showed enhanced improvement, the low-performing student exhibited lower gains in strategy use. The employment of certain strategies, such as translanguaging, guessing, and re-reading, significantly increased, whereas other strategies like underlining key words and identifying the main topic remained underutilized.

Translanguaging emerged as the most popular strategy across the students, with the high-performing student increasing their usage from 5 to 7, the average-performing student from 4 to 9, and the low-performing student from 2 to 3. In a think-aloud protocol, the AP student said: "The word looks like 'comunicación' in Spanish. I think it means 'communication,' so I'll read the sentence once again to check it". This indicates that student used their linguistic repertoire effectively to guess the meaning of the word, in this particular example based on the recognition of a cognate.

Re-reading showed notable improvement in the high-performing student (from 2 to 5), slight improvement for the average-performing student (from 3 to 4), but no change for the low-performing student (remaining at 1). In a think-aloud protocol, the AP student said: "I need to go back and read it again to guess what is meant by 'amarillo.'" This reflects an intentional use of re-reading to clarify ambiguities and foster comprehension of the text.

The use of guessing improved notably for the high-performing student (2 to 5) and the average-performing student (3 to 5) and showed slight increase for the low-performing student (0 to 1). In a think-aloud protocol, the AP student said: "I don't know this word 'viento', but I think that maybe it means something related to weather. It sounds like something connected to the weather." This demonstrates that students were able to guess meanings using contextual cues and background knowledge.

Paying attention is another strategy employed by the learners. The high-performing student showed an enormous increase in using this strategy (from 2 to 6). As far as the average-performing and the low-performing students are concerned, no notable gains were reported. In a think-aloud protocol the AP student said: "I need to focus here—the text is describing the steps for something, so I need to read it more carefully." This indicates that the average-performing student benefitted from strategy instruction in terms of improving the ability to focus on important part(s) of the text.

Doubt usage increased notably for the high-performing student (3 to 6) and the average-performing student (2 to 4), demonstrating a growing ability for a more evaluative approach to text analysis. In a think-aloud protocol, the AP student said: "I wonder if they are making an assumption here."

What was interesting to observe were the strategies that had a limited impact on the learners. An example includes underlining key words, which is the strategy that remained unchanged for the high-performing student and declined for the remaining students. Identifying the main topic and identifying the type of text are the strategies that showed minimal improvement among the participants, indicating a need for more targeted instruction to promote their use.

The findings underscore the importance of explicit strategy instruction in promoting the use of reading strategies, particularly with the average-performing student, who demonstrated the most consistent improvement
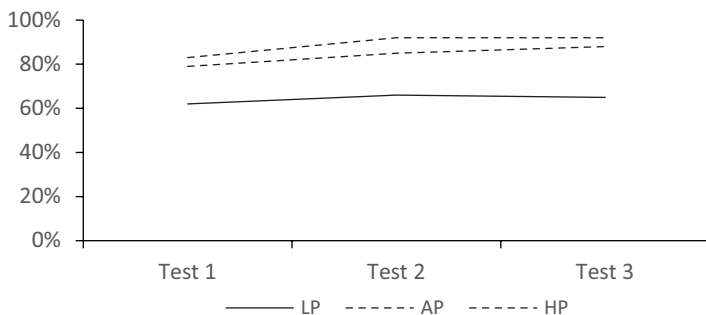

Figure 2. The results achieved by high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP) and low-performing (LP) students in 3 reading tests (own study)

in their use. The high-performing student showed continuous increase in strategy use, suggesting that strategy instruction strengthened already effective approaches in their strategy use. In contrast, the low-performing student showed limited but meaningful improvements, particularly in the use of basic strategies such as translanguaging and guessing.

Figure 2 presents the results achieved by the high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP), and low-performing (LP) students across the three reading tests.

The high-performing student achieved high scores in the reading tests, beginning at 83% in Test 1 and increasing to 92% in both Test 2 and Test 3, demonstrating consistent high-level performance. The average-performing student showed marked improvement over the three tests, starting at 79% in Test 1, rising to 85% in Test 2, and later to 88% in Test 3, reflecting continuous progress. The low-performing student displayed modest gains, improving slightly from 62% in Test 1 to 66% in Test 2 but then decreasing to 65% in Test 3, indicating limited progress.

5. Discussion

5.1. The impact of explicit reading strategy instruction on the strategy use and L3 reading performance of the primary school learners after a period of 10 months

The data indicates that explicit reading strategy instruction had a positive impact on the L3 reading performance of the primary school learners over a period of 10 months. However, the extent of improvement varied depending on the participant.

The high-performing student showed consistent improvement during the tests, increasing their score from Test 1 to by Test 2, and maintaining that level in Test 3. This suggests that explicit strategy instruction helped to enhance their reading skills. The average-performing student demonstrated the most notable progress, improving from 79% in Test 1 and reaching 88% in Test 3. These results highlight the effectiveness of strategy training in improving their reading abilities and suggest they were able to apply the strategies effectively. The low-performing (LP) student showed slight improvements, increasing from Test 1 to Test 2, but decreasing in Test 3. While progress was limited, it indicates that the strategy instruction had marginal impact on the learner, possibly due to the fact that he needed more time and practice with the use of strategies.

The findings align with studies by Xanthou (2011) and Milla and Gutiérrez-Mangado (2019), which highlight the role of explicit strategy instruction in improving reading performance in additional language learning contexts. Xanthou (2011) emphasized that strategy instruction enhances metacognitive awareness and enables learners to process texts more effectively, which may explain the notable improvements observed in the average-performing learner in the current study. In the case of the low-performing learner, whose progress was not so marked, Milla and Gutiérrez-Mangado's (2019) observation that language achievement can influence the effectiveness of strategy instruction may be relevant. For this reason, less proficient learners should receive more support in the process of learning the target language. All in all, the findings appear to reinforce the importance of explicit reading strategy instruction as a beneficial tool for improving L3 reading skills, particularly for learners of differing proficiencies.

The results demonstrated that explicit reading strategy instruction notably enhanced the use of certain strategies for all of the three students. These strategies were translanguaging, re-reading, and guessing. The most substantial gains were observed among the average-performing learner, indicating that this student benefitted the most from structured and explicit instruction. The reason for this might be the fact that the student had enough background knowledge to engage with strategy instruction effectively, but they may have lacked the metacognitive awareness that was observed with the high-performing learner. The high-performing student improved his use of strategies, gaining broader knowledge relating to the use of learning strategies, while the low-performing student showed modest but noticeable improvement.

Explicit instruction appeared to enhance metacognitive awareness, enabling the learners to understand how to use the strategies effectively. For example, translanguaging turned out to be a particularly important tool for the learners, who were able to draw on their linguistic repertoire to foster comprehension in their third language (L3). The use of re-reading and guessing strategies also improved, reflecting the learners' growing ability to monitor comprehension. However, strategies such as underlining key words and identifying the main topic remained underutilized, suggesting that some strategies may require additional practice or adaptation to the learners' needs. This aspect might be related to the fact that strategy training was a relatively new approach for the learners, and they may need more time, practice, and explicit guidance to integrate these strategies effectively into their learning processes.

5.2. The reading strategies employed by the 11-year-old learners before and after the introduction of explicit reading strategy training

The pre-test questionnaire data revealed that the most commonly employed strategies were translanguaging, paying attention, and evaluation among all the students. However, their usage was still rather limited. For instance, the high-performing student occasionally used translanguaging to deal with new vocabulary, but the average-performing and low-performing students relied less frequently on this strategy. Re-reading and guessing were used to a limited extent, particularly by the low-performing student, who tended to struggle with comprehension problems. Strategies requiring higher-order thinking, such as identifying the type of text or analyzing instruction, were rarely used. This might be attributed to the fact that students aged 11 are still developing their metalinguistic awareness, and the use of such strategies requires a more developed cognitive maturity.

The post-test results revealed a notable shift in strategy use, with learners employing a wider range of strategies. Key changes included the increased use of translanguaging, a greater reliance on guessing and the adoption of re-reading to deal with comprehension issues. Despite these improvements, strategies such as underlining key words and identifying the main topic saw minimal gains, suggesting possible problems with their use, or limited utility during the tests.

The results align with the study by de Zarobe and Zenotz (2017), which emphasized the value of integrating explicit strategy instruction during language classes, particularly in CLIL contexts. However, there is a significant difference between the context of that study and the present study, which focused on learners in a formal, limited-exposure setting, revealing that even with only 2 hours of Spanish classes a week, structured strategy instruction can lead to meaningful improvements.

6. Limitations of the study

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of only three students (one from each performance level—HP, AP, and LP) limits the generalizability of the findings. While a detailed analysis provides an insight into individual use of learning strategies, broader trends in strategy adoption across larger and more diverse learner populations remain unexplored. Second, the reliance on a questionnaire as the primary data collection tool poses certain challenges, particularly given the participants' age and still devel-

oping metacognitive awareness. Eleven-year-old learners may struggle to accurately reflect on their strategy use. This could lead to inconsistencies in their responses, potentially affecting the validity of the findings. Future research would benefit from incorporating other methods, such as interviews or observational data, to complement the questionnaires in the initial stages of the research and provide a more comprehensive picture of strategy use. Additionally, the limited duration of the study leaves the questions related to the long-term effect of the strategy instruction and the transferability of the strategies unanswered. Addressing these limitations in future studies would provide broader understanding of the role of strategy instruction in L3 learning and its applicability in other educational contexts.

7. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that explicit strategy instruction had a positive influence on the use of reading strategies among the primary school learners, especially the average-performing learner. These findings highlight the potential for frameworks like FREPA to guide strategy-based interventions that enhance multilingual competence and metalinguistic awareness. Future research should explore the long-term effect of these strategies on various linguistic contexts.

The study has important implications for other L3 teachers. The key in L3 learning should be the need to emphasize the similarities between languages, an approach that can serve as a foundation for learners at the initial stages of L3 acquisition. By highlighting similarities between the languages in such aspects as vocabulary or grammar, educators can help students in improving their linguistic repertoire and treat it as a resource, rather than obstacle in the process of learning a new language. For example, drawing attention to cognates in L1, L2, and L3 impacts not only students' overall motivation, but, above all, their comprehension. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of multilingualism as a resource in achieving educational success.

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