Z BADAŃ

Magdalena Kolber

Uniwersytet Kazimierza Wielkiego
w Bydgoszczy
ORCID: 0000-0002-8227-5475

The relationship between language learning strategies and learned helplessness[1]

The intent of the present study is to investigate the relationship between language learning strategies and learned helplessness. For this purpose, a questionnaire was administered to 371 secondary school students (first, second and third-graders) learning English in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship. The results of this study showed there was a moderate, negative significant relationship between indirect strategies and learned helplessness and a slightly weaker, but still moderate, significant relationship between direct strategies and learned helplessness.

Keywords: didactics, foreign language learning, learning strategies, learned helplessness, self-directed learning, students' active involvement

Związek pomiędzy strategiami uczenia się języka obcego a wyuczoną bezradnością

Celem badania jest ukazanie związku pomiędzy strategiami uczenia się a wyuczoną bezradnością. Próbę badawczą stanowiło 371 uczniów klas I, II, III uczących się języka angielskiego w liceach ogólnokształcących w województwie kujawsko-pomorskim, a do zebrania materiału wykorzystano kwestionariusz ankiety. Okazało się, że w analizowanym przypadku możemy mówić o negatywnym, umiarkowanym i istotnym statystycznie związku pomiędzy strategiami pośrednimi a wyuczoną bezradnością oraz słabszym, ale również na poziomie umiarkowanym istotnym statystycznie związku pomiędzy strategiami bezpośrednimi a wyuczoną bezradnością.

Słowa kluczowe: dydaktyka, nauka języka obcego, strategie uczenia się, wyuczona bezradność, uczenie się samokierowane, aktywność uczącego się

---

[1] The article contains fragments of an unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled *Foreign language strategies and learned helplessness in the secondary classroom*, supervised by Prof. Ewa Filipiak.

References

Brophy J. (2004). *Motivating Students to Learn*. Mahwah, New Jersey, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Ciżkowicz B. (2009). *Wyuczona bezradność młodzeży*. Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego.

Dickinson L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Diener C., Dweck C. (1978). An analysis of learned helplessness: Continuous changes in performance, strategy and achievement cognitions following failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 451-462.

Droździał-Szelest K. (1996). *Language learning strategies in the process of acquiring a foreign language*. Poznań: Motivex.

Filipiak E. (2012). *Rozwijanie zdolności uczenia* się *(Developing the ability to learn)*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.

Filipiak E., Kosz J. (2011). The transformation of the contemporary school into a mutual learning culture. Possibilities-limits-necessity? The context of J.S. Bruner's socio-cultural theory. In: E. Kubiak-Szymborska (ed.), *Multidimensionality of Educational Contexts*. Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego.

Fisher R. (1998). Thinking About Thinking: Developing Metacognition in Children. *Early Child Development and Care,* 141(1), 1-15. Downloaded 25 October 2019. Site: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233466909_Thinking_About_Thinking_Developing_Metacognition_in_Children

Klus-Stańska D. (2018). *Paradygmaty dydaktyki. Myśleć teorią o praktyce*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Kossowska M. (2010). Bezradność intelektualna w szkole (Intellectual helplessness at school). *Psychologia w Szkole*, 2 (26), 14-19.

Ledzińska M., Czerniawska E. (2011). *Psychologia nauczania. Ujęcie poznawcze*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

O' Malley J.M., Chamot A.U. (1990). *Learning Language Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Oxford R.L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies, What Every Teacher Should Know*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers. Downloaded 25 October 2019. Site: Retrieved from https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1990-22243-001 (date of access 25/10/19)

Sędek G., Kofta M. (1990). When cognitive exertion does not yield cognitive gain: Toward an informational explanation of learned helplessness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58*(4), 729-743.

Sędek G. (1995). *Bezradność intelektualna w szkole*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologii.

Vosniadou S. (2001). *How Children Learn*. Downloaded 25 October 2019. Site: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu-practices_07_eng.pdf

Introduction

Success and failure in learning have been of interest to researchers and teachers for some time now. Some scholars focus on the factors accounting for these phenomena, some concentrate on the consequences of exposure to failure. Learned helplessness is studied as a consequence of repetitive failures and is frequently associated with the feeling of uncontrollability over future outcomes. This lack of control produces three deficits: motivational (decreased willingness to attempt to perform a task), emotional (irritability, feeling of hopelessness, fear) and cognitive (the belief that outcomes are uncontrollable) (Overmier & Seligman, 1967; Maier & Seligman, 1976; Rosenhan & Seligman, 1994, p. 386–403; Sędek, 2001; as cited in Ciżkowicz, 2009).

Learning strategies is a variable that is frequently taken into consideration in research on success. Such "learning tools" are defined as "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 1). R. Oxford expands this definition by saying that "learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferrable to new situations" (ibid., p. 8). The studies on this concept emerged from the interest in compiling a list of the characteristics of successful language learners. The characteristics of "good language learners" found in the literature focus on the personalities of good language learners, a cognitive style variable, as well as the learning strategies and techniques they use. The studies emphasise that such learners are aware of themselves as language learners and their learning process. Moreover, they indicate that good language learners are self-aware, self-critical, willing to experiment and take risks. Nor are they afraid of making mistakes. Last but not least, they are organised and actively involved in the learning process (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Skehan, 1989; as cited in Droździał-Szelest, 1997, p. 14–15). In contrast with students who successfully employ language learning strategies, helpless students do not believe in their capacity as learners. When facing some demanding tasks, they display certain tendencies. According to I. Butkowsky and D. Willows (1980), such students: (1) have low initial expectancies for achieving success; (2) abandon the task as soon as they encounter difficulties; and (3) attribute their failures to internal characteristics (e.g. abilities), and success to external circumstances (e.g. luck, easy task) (as cited in Brophy, 2004, p. 126–127). In their analysis of learned helplessness, M. Kofta and G. Sędek provide us with an information-processing explanation of this phenomenon. It is an uncontrollable and problematic situation that produces the feeling of helplessness. The inability to think of a solution during problem-solving attempts leads to a state of cognitive exhaustion manifesting itself in performance deterioration, negative mood, as well as a reduction in intrinsic motivation (Kofta & Sędek, 1990; Sędek, 1995).

Past studies on learned helplessness and the use of learning strategies were carried out by American scientists C. Diener and C. Dweck (1978). The children taking part in the experiment were classified as either helpless or mastery oriented.[2] Both groups were trained to solve discrimination tasks. After eight training trials,

---

[2] Mastery-oriented children attribute their success to their abilities. They believe they can increase their abilities through hard work.

a failure procedure was instituted, namely unsolvable tasks. In the face of failure, the helpless students stopped using learning strategies and formulated negative opinions about themselves: "I am getting confused", "I never did have a good memory". Instead of searching for a cause for their failures, most mastery-oriented children sought self-instruction and self-monitoring strategies. They made statements such as: "I should slow down and try to figure this out", "The harder it gets the harder I need to try" or "The harder it gets the more I should try" (1978, p. 451–460). C. Diener and C. Dweck's study revealed the differences in the statements uttered after failure by helpless and mastery-oriented students. The aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the phenomenon of learned helplessness in an English class.

Methodology

Evaluating the association between two variables, language strategies and learned helplessness, allowed conclusions to be made concerning to what extent the phenomenon of learned helplessness can interfere with the process of systematic and purposeful learning of a foreign language or to what extent the employment of the strategy can prevent the occurrence of the negative phenomenon of learned helplessness.

Two sets of instruments with 5-point Likert items, one being the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Version 7.0) developed by R. Oxford (1990), the other the Scale of School Helplessness constructed by B. Ciżkowicz (2009), were used to collect data from the subjects. The Inventory is based on R. Oxford's Taxonomy of language learning strategies (Figure 1). R. Oxford draws a distinction between two classes of strategies: *direct* and *indirect*, which are both subdivided into three groups. *Direct* strategies are needed to master new material, and they "require mental processing of the language" (1990, p. 37). The first group of direct strategies are memory strategies which enable students to store and retrieve a new language. Cognitive strategies help learners to understand and produce a new language in many different ways. Thanks to compensation strategies, learners use the language despite having knowledge gaps (ibid.). *Indirect* strategies involve strategies for the general management of learning (ibid., p. 15). They consist of three subgroups. The first one, metacognitive strategies, is responsible for coordinating the learning process. Affective strategies help learners regulate their emotions and motivations. Social strategies are useful in learning with others by using functions such as asking questions, cooperation and empathising (ibid., p. 135–136). The Inventory is a self-report instrument that examines the frequency with which language learners use different strategies during the learning process. The tool consists of 50 statements, nine of which refer to memory strategies (Table 1), 14 refer to cognitive strategies (Table 2), six refer to compensation strategies (Table 3), nine refer to metacognitive strategies (Table 4), six to affective strategies (Table 5), and six refer to social strategies (Table 6). The Scale consists of 20 items and is divided into three sub-scales concerning cognitive, motivational and emotional deficits. Seven items of the scale refer to the emotional deficit (Table 7), eight items concern the motivational deficit (Table 8), and five items refer to the cognitive deficit (Table 9). All the items are

scored from 1 to 5 (never or almost never true, usually not true, somewhat true, usually true, always or almost always true).

After constructing a Polish version of the Inventory, a pilot study was conducted in which 74 people were asked to identify unclear questions. Subsequently, a proper study was carried out. The respondents were informed that they participated in a survey about factors affecting the process of learning a foreign language, without pointing out learning strategies and learned helplessness. The allotted time to fill in the questionnaire was 30 minutes. In order to select a random sample, a multi-stage sampling design was used. Finally, six secondary schools were selected in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian district, and the questionnaire was administered to 371 first, second and third-graders in these schools.

Table 1

Items referring to memory strategies

1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
5. I use rhymes to remember new words.
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.
7. I physically act out new English words.
8. I review English lessons often.
9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board or on a street sign.

Source: own elaboration based on Oxford, 1990

Table 2

Items referring to cognitive strategies

1. I say or write new English words several times.
2. I try to talk like native English speakers.
3. I practice the sounds of English.
4. I use the English words I know in different ways.
5. I start conversations in English.
6. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.
7. I read for pleasure in English.

8. I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English.
9. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read it carefully.
10. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.
11. I try to find patterns in English.
12. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.
13. I try not to translate word-for-word.
14. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.

Source: own elaboration based on Oxford, 1990

Table 3

Items referring to compensation strategies

1. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.
2. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
3. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.
4. I read English without looking up every new word.
5. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.
6. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

Source: own elaboration based on Oxford, 1990

Table 4

Item referring to metacognitive strategies

1. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.
2. I notice my English mistakes and I use that information to help me do better.
3. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
4. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.
5. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
6. I look for people I can talk to in English.
7. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
8. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.
9. I think about my progress in learning English.

Source: own elaboration based on Oxford, 1990

Table 5

Items referring to affective strategies

1. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
2. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.
3. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
4. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
5. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.
6. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.

Source: own elaboration based on Oxford, 1990

Table 6

Items referring to social strategies

1. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
2. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.
3. I practice English with other students.
4. I ask for help from English speakers.
5. I ask questions in English.
6. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.

Source: own elaboration based on Oxford, 1990

Table 7

Items referring to the emotional deficit

1.	I feel ashamed when I do not understand something.
2.	I am afraid of getting called on.
3.	I lose confidence when I am learning.
4.	I am afraid of making a fool of myself.
5.	I am afraid to say anything.
6.	I feel sad and embittered.
7.	I feel as if I were about to visit the dentist.

Source: own elaboration based on Ciżkowicz, 2009

Table 8

Items referring to the motivational deficit

1.	I try to be active. (-)[3]
2.	I feel I waste time.
3.	I am terribly bored.
4.	I listen attentively to what the teacher is saying. (-)
5.	I follow all the teacher's instructions. (-)
6.	I cannot wait for the bell.
7.	I learn eagerly. (-)
8.	I daydream.

Source: own elaboration based on Ciżkowicz, 2009

Table 9

Items referring to the cognitive deficit

1.	I work on my own.
2.	I know the answers to the questions asked by the teacher.
3.	I understand what the teacher explains to me.
4.	It is easy for me to do tasks.
5.	I understand everything.

Source: own elaboration based on B. Ciżkowicz, 2009

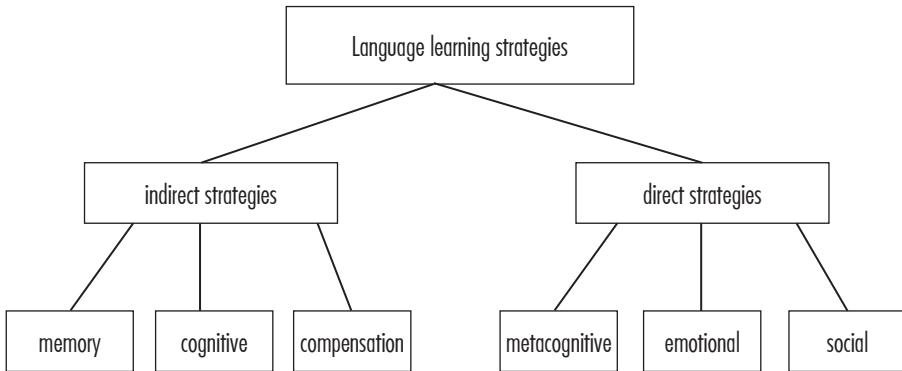[3] Items marked with the symbol (-) were reversely scored.

Figure 1. Taxonomy of language learning strategies proposed by R. Oxford (1990)
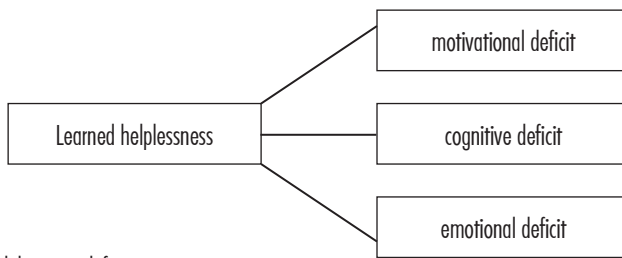

Figure 2. Learned helplessness deficits

Results and interpretation

To examine the strength of the relationship between learning strategies and learned helplessness, Pearson's linear correlation coefficient was used. The study revealed that there was a moderate, negative significant relationship between indirect strategies and learned helplessness ($rxy = -0.412$) and a slightly weaker, but still moderate, significant relationship between direct strategies and learned helplessness ($rxy = -0.336$).

The coefficient of determination (R squared) expressed as a percentage assesses how differences in one variable can be explained by a difference in a second variable. For the relationship between indirect strategies and learned helplessness, the coefficient of determination has a value of 16.97%, and for the relationship between direct strategies and learned helplessness, the value is 11.28%.

The most striking result to emerge from the data (apart from memory strategies and an emotional deficit) is that all strategy groups and learned helplessness deficits are significantly, negatively correlated

258

(Table 10). The strongest relationships include metacognitive strategies and a motivational deficit (-0.605), as well as metacognitive strategies[4] and a cognitive deficit (-0.509).

Table 10

Correlation between language learning strategy groups and learned helplessness deficits

Strategies		Emotional deficit	Motivational deficit	Cognitive deficit
memory	Pearson's correlation	.014	-.358	-.141
	Significance	.795	.000	.007
cognitive	Pearson's correlation	-.224	-.387	-.483
	Significance	.000	.000	.000
compensation	Pearson's correlation	-.050	-.098	-.188
	Significance	.341	.059	.000
metacognitive	Pearson's correlation	-.315	-.605	-.509
	Significance	.000	.000	.000
emotional	Pearson's correlation	-.118	-.234	-.042
	Significance	.000	.000	.423
social	Pearson's correlation	-.243	-.471	-.318
	Significance	.023	.000	.000

Source: own elaboration based on research

One may conclude that the procedures used to plan, monitor and review one's learning are associated with a motivational and cognitive deficit. It can also be concluded that purposeful action forms the basis for

---

[4] Metacognitive strategies include: centering one's learning (overviewing and linking with already known material, paying attention, delaying speech production to focus on listening), arranging and planning one's learning (finding out about language learning, organising, setting goals and objectives, identifying the purpose of a language task, seeking practice opportunities), evaluating one's learning (self-monitoring, self-evaluating) (Oxford, 1990).

learned helplessness prevention. It is metacognition whose deliberate nature many researchers emphasise. According to E. Czerniawska and M. Ledzińska, metacognition refers to reflection on one's cognitive processes (2011, p. 50). Metacognition pertains to skills such as intentional goal setting, planning, monitoring during task execution and is part of self-regulation (Borkowski et al., 2000; Kahneman, 2003; Kitchener, 1983; Kuhl, 2001; Nelson, 1996; Nelson, Kruglanski & Jost, 1998; as cited in Czerniawska & Ledzińska, 2012, p. 59). Metacognitive development in children varies widely. In poor learners, metacognitive development is delayed (Campione, 1987; Watson, 1996; as cited in Fisher, 1998, p. 7). Their metacognitive awareness is typical of younger children. Moreover, they are not successful in trying different approaches, nor do they realise that similar problems can be solved in different ways (Sternberg, 1985; as cited in Fisher, 1998, p. 7). Students with learning difficulties are unsuccessful because fail to use the knowledge and skills they have, as well as they are unable to plan, use strategies and monitor their progress. (ibid.).

Similarly, school helplessness occurs when a learning goal is known but the tools for achieving it are unknown. The student, despite his/her efforts, cannot use knowledge, does not understand what is being taught and does not understand the content of the lesson. In addition, researchers say that the symptoms of intellectual helplessness are the result of teaching methods that focus on memorising and replicating teachers' or textbooks' ideas rather than understanding the learning content. The researcher believes that in order to promote understanding of the material, the teacher should: (1) alert students as to where they are most likely to make mistakes; (2) clearly introduce new concepts; (3) encourage students to ask questions, share doubts and report problems; (4) prompt students to think independently and encourage them to use their own words while explaining and defining new concepts (Sędek, as cited in Kossowska, 2010).[5]

In order to understand the material, students must be given the opportunity to think about and be aware of what they are working on and to talk about it with other students and with teachers. To achieve this, the teacher can carry out certain tasks in class, such as: showing students how to provide examples that illustrate how a principle applies, encouraging students to explain a concept in their own words, encouraging them to compare and contrast and generate analogies (Vosniadou, 2001, p. 20).

In his critique of contemporary curricular trends, J. Brophy believes that curricula have been emphasising breadth at the expense of depth. Textbooks offer disconnected facts instead of "coherent networks of connected content structured around powerful ideas" (ibid., p. 34). As a result, teachers attempt to cover too much material, students, on the other hand, memorise what is taught rather than reflect or discuss (ibid.). G. Sędek (1995) also notices that the content of the core curriculum is too broad. Curriculum overload prevents students from assimilating information with understanding, depriving them of the pleasure of gradually solving new types of problems on their own. Instead, students are forced to memorise information, the usage of which leads to monotony, lack of understanding, failures and helplessness (ibid., p. 175). E. Czerniawska and M. Ledzińska, on the other hand, put the blame on school leaving exams for "discouraging" students from

---

[5] The article is based on the text prepared for the conference *Psychology at school*. The material was made available by Prof. G. Sędek and his research team.

meaningful learning. The tests students are obliged to take emphasise the reproduction of knowledge and thus promote rote learning at the expense of deeper understanding of the subject (2011, p. 169). Learning strategies seem to be the "antidote" to the problem described. Thanks to them, students, among others, will better understand their learning process, will know how to use learning resources, will be able to relate new information to prior knowledge and, last but not least, will become more self-directed (Oxford, 1990).

In the literature, self-direction tends to be used to refer to an attitude towards learning, which consists in "taking responsibility for one's own learning" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 12). This responsibility may occur in four areas: (1) being aware of learning objectives; (2) assessing the degree of congruity between the content and objectives of the course; (3) being able to evaluate one's progress; and (4) taking an active role in learning, which means looking for opportunities to practice and learn (ibid., p. 24). Learner self-direction is an ongoing process, and this phenomenon increases as learners gain "confidence, involvement and proficiency" (Oxford, 1990, p. 10).

The promotion of self-direction requires new capacities from the teacher, as well as assuming new roles and a student-oriented style. The sphere of action for the teacher wishing to support his/her student in self-directed learning cannot be limited to only being a manager who makes the decisions about the learning objectives. The new roles include being a facilitator, helper, adviser, ideas person, diagnostician, coordinator and co-communicator. His/her capacities are increased to support students to develop learning strategies, help them identify their learning strategies, organise the learning environment, as well as provide clear and consistent feedback to show that not only the final result counts, but also the process of reaching it (Filipiak & Kosz, 2011, p. 6; Klus-Stańska, 2018, p. 115, Oxford, 1990, p. 10). "In extreme highly individualised approaches, a teacher is mainly an observer of students' spontaneous activities (…). Whereas, in some moderate circumstances, in which he/she assumes the socio-cultural perspective, the teacher is a supporting companion" (Klus-Stańska, 2018, p. 115) who motivates students and supports them in the development of their metacognitive ability (Filipiak, 2012). Placing students at the centre of the learning environment will enable the teacher to stimulate the students' learning process and organise various situations in which the students work independently on authentic tasks. While communicating with the child, the teacher ought to be fully "present" in conversations by trying to learn about the way the child sees the world, "what the child thinks, what his/her beliefs on certain issues are, what way he/she approaches his and her beliefs, what his/her model of perceiving the world is, the model that he/she uses to interpret his/her own experiences, how he/she places himself/herself and others in this world" (Filipiak & Kosz, 2011, p. 52).

Conclusions and implications for practice

Learning strategies play an important part in the learning process, as they facilitate and encourage learning, as well as increase understanding of the subject, students' autonomy, self-directed learning and enthusiasm for learning. Last but not least, the more strategies learners use, the less helpless they become. There are some principles underlying successful strategy training. First of all, the students' needs and the amount of

time should be determined. It is desirable to learn as much as possible about the participants, e.g. their age, language level, the strategies they have been using so far, in order to select appropriate strategies, materials and activities. Second, teachers are advised to integrate strategy training with subject content so that language problems are related to meaningful tasks and, as a result, are understood better. Third, it is important to conduct "informed training", in which learners have the opportunity to learn where and how a given strategy can be employed so as to be able to use strategies consciously and to evaluate their effectiveness (Oxford, 1990, p. 203–208).

Are learning strategies common in Polish schools? Are Polish students instructed by teacher how to learn independently? Unfortunately, strategy training is not a common phenomenon in Polish schools. In her studies, M. Ledzińska (1988, as cited in Ledzińska & Czerniawska, 2011, p. 170) found that barely 18% of secondary school learners point to the school or teachers as the source of their knowledge about learning strategies. One may wonder why only a few students perceive teachers as those who help them how to learn. There are several likely explanations. The first one is that instruction in learner training is implicit, and the learning process affects students indirectly. The second one is that the effects of teachers on students were inefficient and, as a consequence, not used. Another explanation might be that most teachers do not conduct strategy training. The possible reasons for this are: no extra time allocated to *learning how to learn* in the school curriculum, a lack of knowledge about learning strategies on the part of teachers and no obligation from the education authorities to introduce these strategies into schools (Ledzińska & Czerniawska, 2011, p. 171).