

EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) in Teaching Writing Skills

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) in teaching writing skills at public secondary schools in Nekemte Town. A descriptive survey research design was used. The study was conducted with 46 EFL teachers, and the data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. The questionnaire data were analyzed quantitatively, whereas the interviews and classroom observations data were analyzed qualitatively. The findings revealed that the EFL teachers had positive perceptions (with a mean of 5.9) of different aspects of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI). Although there were positive perceptions about the principles and importance of SBI in teaching writing skills, it was found that they did not practice (with a mean of 1.2) as they had perceived. Therefore, it is recommended that EFL teachers are expected to use preferred strategies that help students' language learning.

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language; English as a Second Language; Foreign Language; Strategy-Based Instruction*

Introduction

Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) is one of the teaching methods under the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching (CLT), and it puts potential emphasis on learners to be responsible for their attempts to learn and use the target language. It also aims to help students become more active learners by allowing them to individualize the language learning experience (Cohen, 2000). It helps second language learners become more conscious of how they can learn most effectively, ways in which they can increase their own comprehension and production of the target language, and ways in which they can learn after leaving the classroom

(Cohen, 1996; Geleta Dugassa, Eba Mijena, 2015; Geleta Dugasa, Tamiru Olan, & Sherif Ali, 2022).

Many EFL/ESL (English as a foreign language or second language) teachers want to know why some learners learn faster than other learners (Geleta Dugassa, Eba Mijena, & Ashenafi Bekele, 2015). They also want to know why classroom tasks are much easier for some students than for others. One of the reasons is related to the strategies EFL teachers and students employ to accomplish their needs or the tasks assigned. Theory has shown that strategy use favors effectiveness in language learning (Cohen, 2003; Oxford, 1990). The more aware learners are of the strategies they employ, the more effective and skillful they will be. More specifically, according to Graham (2008), learning to write is difficult, especially for those writing in a second or a foreign language in academic contexts, since they do not know enough about how to generate ideas in writing. As effective writing is considered to be a problem for EFL learners, a need is felt to find out some ways of teaching that can help learners improve their writing performance. Thus, the main purpose of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of SBI in teaching writing.

As a matter of fact, the way teachers think about, understand, and value instruction influences their practice. According to Johnson (1992), research on teachers' perceptions consists of three basic assumptions: (1) teachers' perceptions influence their decisions and judgment, (2) teachers' perceptions play a role in how information on teaching is translated into classroom practices, (3) understanding teachers' perceptions is essential to improving teaching practices and other education practices. Since teachers are a critical factor in the implementation of appropriate instructional methods, their values, attitudes, and perceptions about classroom practices are important. Classroom practices are based on a logical system of opinions; however, previous research on teachers' practices in regard to strategy use in improving language skills has given little attention to the thoughts and perceptions teachers hold about their practice (Garner, 1987). Thus, the study is aimed at investigating EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of SBI in teaching writing skills on their use of English as a foreign language in classroom settings.

Strategies for language learning and language use have been receiving ever-growing attention in the areas of foreign language teaching and learning (Oxford et al.1990; Wenden 1991; Rubin & Thompson 1994; Mendelsohn 1995). So, it is fair to say that language educators in many different contexts have been seeking ways to help students become more successful in their efforts to learn and use foreign languages. In this context, the application of foreign language learning and using strategies can be viewed as one vehicle for promoting greater success.

As detailed in Weaver and Cohen (1994), there are numerous means of providing strategy instruction for learners, such as awareness training, the existence of strategies in language textbooks, and the integration of strategies directly into the foreign language classroom. Although there have been cases when the effectiveness of strategy instruction has been questioned, there is a consensus that if the right conditions are fulfilled and the teachers have positive perceptions, it can be effective.

Perceptions guide teachers' behavior and inform teachers' practice by serving as a kind of interpretative framework through which they make sense of what they do in their classrooms. Richards et al (2001) state that teachers' perceptions are formed based on teachers' own schooling as young students while observing teachers who taught them. In addition, teachers' perceptions about how language teaching should be implemented need to be understood. In other words, the first perceptions about teaching emerge as learners; the way teachers perceive teaching rises from their experiences at school. This study, therefore, is concerned with investigating EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of SBI in teaching writing skills.

The present study aimed to investigate the sampled teachers' awareness of a number of implementation issues. First, the previous researchers did not give attention to the perceptions that EFL teachers hold in practicing SBI. As indicated in the aforementioned paragraph, considerable time and effort have gone into the theory and classroom teaching of the language learning strategies, yet many of these studies have ignored the perceptions of classroom teachers in practicing SBI. Second, the attempt to practice SBI in teaching writing skills was given little emphasis. Furthermore, this study focused on investigating the perceptions that EFL teachers hold with regard to Strategy-Based Instruction and the practices they carried out in the actual language classroom teaching. Although dealing with writing skills was not the

major concern of the study, the researchers examined how EFL teachers perceived, practiced, and role-played SBI to make foreign language learners develop their writing skills.

More specifically, the study attempted to answer the following basic research questions: 1) What perceptions do EFL teachers hold about the principles and importance of SBI? 2) How are EFL teachers' perceptions of SBI reflected in their classroom practices?

Materials and Methods

Since the objective of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) in teaching writing skills, a pragmatic research paradigm was adopted. This approach stresses the importance of understanding a particular research problem, combining the two philosophical positions: subjectivism and objectivism (Creswell, 2003). Thus, it employs a mixed-method approach. It combines quantitative analysis from the questionnaire with qualitative analysis from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The descriptive survey was designed to assess teachers' perceived practices of Strategy-Based Instruction in improving students' writing skills.

The Study Setting

The study was carried out in public Secondary and Preparatory schools found in Nekemte Town. Nekemte town is located in the East Wollega Zone, Oromia region. The study includes all public secondary and preparatory schools found in the town in the 2021/22 academic year. The reasons for selecting this study area are: 1) Experienced teachers are assumed to be available in the study area, and 2) researchers can closely and easily observe the teaching-learning process. Thus, the researchers selected the study area for its convenience. In addition to this, a convenient sampling technique was chosen because the researcher could easily select subjects based on their relative ease of access (Kumar, 1996).

The Study Population

The target population of the study was grade 9-12 EFL teachers from 6 secondary schools in Nekemte town. Out of 46 EFL teachers, 10 participants were from Biftu Nekemte Secondary school, 10 participants were from Darge Secondary school, 4 participants were from Kumsa Moroda Secondary school, 9 participants were from Dalo Secondary school, 9 participants

were from Nekemte Comprehensive, and 4 participants were from Leka Secondary school. The total number of EFL secondary school teachers in the six schools was 46. All the teachers participated in the study by using a comprehensive sampling technique to complete the questionnaire items.

Instruments of data collection

The research instruments used in this study include teachers' questionnaires, teachers' interviews, and classroom observation.

The questionnaire for teachers included the major principles and importance of Strategy-Based Instruction (i.e., autonomous learning, students' self-direction to develop independent learning, the importance of developing writing skills, and the role of the EFL teachers in practicing SBI). The questionnaire was adapted from Gizem Dogan (2015). The researcher has given the questionnaire items to two of Wollega University TEFL instructors so as to check if the items meet the objectives and context of the study. Then, the questionnaire was sent to the respective advisor for further improvement.

The purpose of the interview was to gather information about teachers' perceptions and practices of SBI in teaching writing skills. In order to come up with a reasonable explanation and to enrich the study, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 6 teachers. Berg (1999) notes that a semi-structured interview is conducted in a systematic and consistent order, but it allows the interviewers sufficient freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers are permitted to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardized questions. The teachers who participated in the interview were selected using a simple random sampling method. All randomly selected participants were willing to participate in the interview, and then, the researcher discussed the objective of the study and assured them of confidentiality. It took 15-20 minutes for each interviewee to complete. During the interview, the responses were noted down by the researcher.

According to Johnson (1992), the use of observation provides direct access to the phenomenon under consideration by providing accurate and complete information from the behavior of the participants. The classroom observation was conducted in order to check whether teachers practiced the principles of SBI (besides what they responded to the questionnaire) in the EFL classroom while the actual class lesson was going on. Similarly, the other reason for the

requirements of classroom observation was to find out the level of EFL teachers' practices of SBI. The observation was conducted for twelve periods altogether; the 6 teachers were observed twice each. Each session was scheduled for 40 minutes. Totally, the classes were observed for six hours.

Procedures for Data Collection

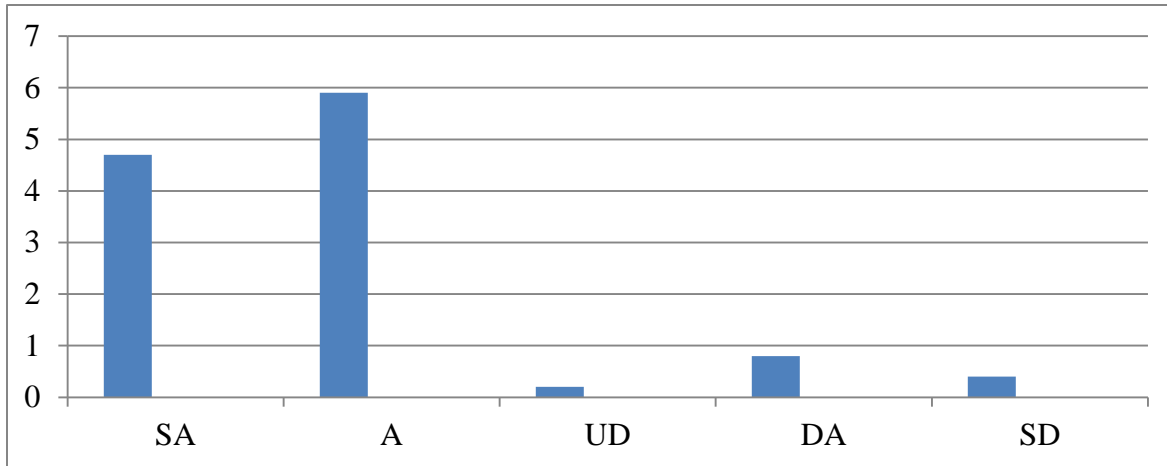
After the researcher has selected a specific design for the study, which is consistent with the objectives of the research, the next step is to collect the research data. In collecting the data, it is important to use procedures that elicit high-quality data, since the quality of any research study depends largely on the quality of the data collected and the data collection procedure. In collecting the data for this study, all necessary ethical procedures were followed. The teachers were given the questionnaire and returned it after a day. All the teachers' questionnaires were returned. After the questionnaire data were collected, classroom observation was conducted. It took two months period beginning with the administration of the questionnaire, followed by the interview and the classroom observation respectively. The data gathered by questionnaire and observation checklist were analyzed using frequency, percentage, and mean before being analyzed through textual description.

Results

As stated in chapter one, the specific objectives of the study were: to assess EFL teachers' perceptions about the principles and importance of SBI, and to examine how EFL teachers' perceptions of SBI are implemented in classroom settings. Accordingly, to collect information for the study, a questionnaire for teachers was developed. Hence, the items in the questionnaire were subcategorized by their theme into two groups based on specific research questions. These are: EFL teachers' perceptions about the principles and importance of SBI, and EFL teachers' practices of SBI in the writing classroom.

In addition to the perceptions questionnaire, a questionnaire related to EFL teachers' classroom practices of SBI for further improvement of students' writing was also used. The results of the teachers' questionnaire were analyzed as follows:

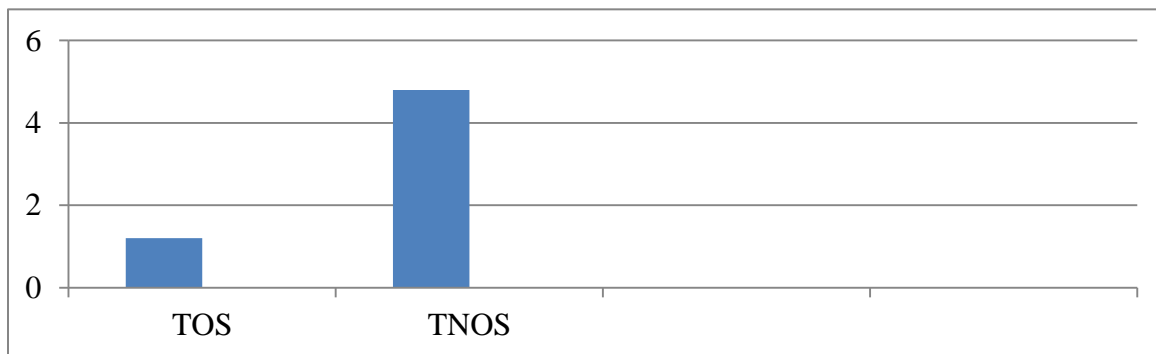
Figure 1: EFL teachers’ perceptions towards the principles and importance of SBI Frequency



Keys: SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, UD=Undecided, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree

The above bar graph portrays that the majority of the teachers strongly agree with SBI and its importance, and indicate their positive perceptions about SBI principles and its importance. However, the classroom observation conducted indicated the reverse of what was revealed through the questionnaires. That is to mean, the results gained through the questionnaires with regard to EFL teachers’ perception towards the principles and importance of SBI contradict the classroom observation conducted so far. As indicated in the bar chart, the majority of the teachers responded that they strongly agree that the implementation of the principles of SBI in the writing classes is vital. The data gained from the classroom observation showed that there was a mismatch between the teachers’ perception of the principles of SBI and the importance of SBI in their practical classroom presentation. Based on the results, the researchers concluded that although the sampled teachers perceived themselves as familiar with the principles and importance of SBI in teaching writing, they did not properly implement them.

Figure 2: EFL teachers’ classroom practices of Strategy-Based Instruction Frequency

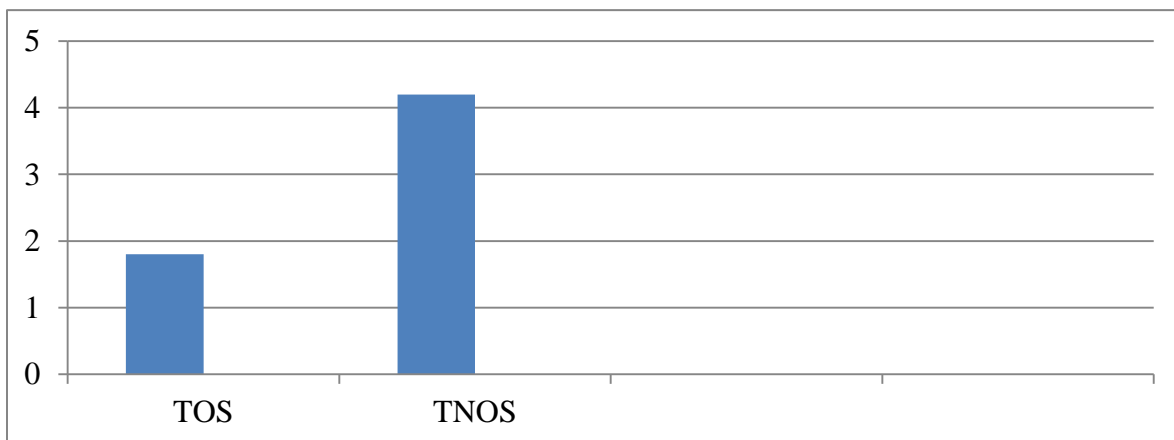


Keys: TOS= Total Observed Sessions, TNoS= Total Not observed Sessions

As can be seen, the above bar graph reveals that almost all of the teachers were not observed while practicing Strategy Based Instruction (SBI); whereas, only a few teachers were observed practicing SBI in the actual classroom. This shows that EFL teachers' positive perceptions have not resulted in their classroom practices. Teachers' perceptions about Strategy-Based Instruction and the instruction in writing were further ascertained through interviews with some of the teachers. With regard to this, in the interview session conducted with teachers, teachers expressed positive remarks about writing, such as, "I enjoy writing, and I think my enthusiasm for writing is known by my students." Another teacher participant stated, "They know that I consider it important. I am very passionate about writing, eager to read, and share ideas with students about different writing styles." A third teacher responded, "I love writing, and I love teaching writing." Likewise, most of the teachers who were interviewed said they were effective writing teachers who were hard-working, although they were not observed while practicing. However, in the real context of the classroom observation conducted, the majority of the observed teachers were not observed practicing SBI principles.

Figure 3: EFL teachers' classroom practices of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) in teaching writing skills.

Mean



Keys: TOS= Total Observed Sessions, TNoS= Total Not observed Sessions

As it can be seen, the above bar graph summarizes that the majority of the teachers (Mean=4.2) were not observed while practicing Strategy Based Instruction (SBI) in teaching writing skills; whereas, only a few teachers (Mean= 1.8) were observed practicing SBI in the actual classroom. This reveals that EFL teachers' positive perceptions have not resulted in their classroom practices.

Discussions

The main objective of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) in teaching writing skills with particular reference to public Secondary and Preparatory schools found in Nekemte town. Thus, the analysis of teachers' questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation has resulted in perceptions and implementation of the Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) for the enhancement of students' writing ability.

The overall findings indicated that Nekemte Secondary and Preparatory School English teachers have a positive perception of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI). So, it seems that the teachers strongly favor the principles and importance of SBI. However, only a few teachers apply the principles partially. Furthermore, based on the responses of the respondents and the interview and observation made by the researcher, it is possible to infer that the practice of SBI in Nekemte public Secondary and Preparatory schools is very low. This implies that there is a mismatch between teachers' perceptions (with Mean=5.9) about SBI principles and their classroom practices (with Mean=1.2).

According to the data obtained from teachers' questionnaires (as shown in Figure 1), the teachers believe SBI helps students develop language learning in general and improve writing skills in particular. However, they tend to shift to classroom teaching through teacher-centered methods where forms of the language are overemphasized. This shows that the teachers are uncertain in using strategy instruction in enhancing students' writing. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of Strategy-Based Instructions do not inform their classroom practice.

The result shows that teachers do not change their teaching techniques as they perceive the principles of the Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI). They appear to have the knowledge and understanding of the theories of Strategy-Based Instruction in language teaching. However, their classroom practices have been noted to have mismatched with the principles of the Strategy-Based Instruction. They seem to have accepted the mismatch as a normal condition. But a mismatch in teachers' perceptions and practices has a strong impact on students' learning, particularly in enhancing their writing skills.

The data gained from teachers indicated that Strategy-Based Instruction is relevant to enhance students' writing ability because, unlike the traditional way of teaching, which focuses on teacher-centered instruction, it gives students more responsibility in the writing classes.

In a language classroom, teachers are supposed to do their own activities. In doing so, they use teaching roles. The role teachers are expected to play in the language classroom is determined by the type and the nature of learning activities (Harmer, 1991), which are in turn dependent upon the method the language teacher employs. In contrast, the results of the class observations show that teachers used much of the class time teaching and giving instructions. As a result, most of the students did not believe that much happened if they put a lot of effort into the writing classes. This indicated that the teachers' role is to transfer knowledge, and the students' role is to accept, which would go against the principles of Strategy-Based Instruction.

Similarly, the results of the teachers' interview reveal that some students were shy and lacked confidence in their writing because of their inability to use an appropriate strategy that helps them most. Therefore, in order to help students develop autonomous learning, the teachers should instruct and encourage their students to become skilled and able writers.

All the teachers, on the other hand, believed that strategies should not be explicitly taught to the students, which seems to be conflicting with their wishes. Teachers' comments, however, made it quite clear that they could not make the distinction between explicit and implicit instruction of language learning strategies. Researchers have stated that students do not develop appropriate strategies if they are not trained explicitly. Regarding this, Cohen (2000) suggests the strategy-based activities in which teachers "provide an explicit focus on only part of the time, while the rest of the time the strategies are implicitly embedded into the language tasks" (p. 16).

Based on this study, teachers reported that few students like writing. Less than 40% of the respondents reported that students liked writing. On the other hand, the majority of teachers explained that students considered writing as it was boring, time-consuming, and lengthy. They also reported that students often did not have ideas for writing topics, especially when topics were teacher-assigned. Additionally, several respondents reported that writing created stress for students. Additionally, as to the respondents, the majority of students did not view themselves as writers.

Graham (2008) maintains that many individuals are not confident in their writing skills and believes writing apprehension is a barrier to the development of effective writing skills. He believes self-efficacy is positively influenced by active engagement in meaningful writing tasks within a supportive environment, by the use of appropriate models that reflect the writing task, by the application of constructive feedback, and by the reduction of stress.

Moreover, teachers reported that students shared a variety of dislikes they had about writing. However, the students maintained that they disliked writing on teacher-assigned topics. Teachers indicated that students did not like to follow instructions that would help them improve their writing. If they were, as teachers supposed, the students would see the difference revision makes in their writing. Other participants indicated that students disliked trying to organize their ideas in ways that make their writing fluent. Students enjoy writing when they were allowed to write on self-selected topics because they sometimes lack necessary knowledge to write effectively on teacher-selected topics.

As one can understand, for most EFL students the place to learn writing is in the classroom, and students' writing practice opportunity is largely restricted to the classroom. An immediate goal for most EFL students is to meet the requirements of writing activities. Thus, the main reason to practice writing is to pass examinations. In addition to the students' need, their interest in the writing tasks and their background experience influence their strategy to learning.

Furthermore, although the teachers reported that they perceive positively about the principles of SBI in the questionnaire and interview data, the classroom observation results reveal that the teachers do not practice SBI in the writing classes. The results of classroom observation also show that the teachers dominantly focused on teaching theoretical parts in the lesson, such as defining, identifying, listing, and so on. Students need to get involved in a wide range of activities.

In short, the teacher participants believed that Strategy-Based Instruction enhances students' writing ability, but teachers' classroom practices did not reflect this theory. Most of the class time was dominated by the teacher talking. Thus, teachers have still conducted teacher-centered teaching in the classroom.

Summary

The main objective of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) in teaching writing skills with particular reference to public Secondary and Preparatory schools found in Nekemte town. Teachers' responses concerning their perceptions about the principles of Strategy-Based Instruction show that both secondary and preparatory school teachers seem to be aware of the importance of SBI in enhancing students' writing. However, their positive perceptions were not reflected in the actual classroom.

Similarly, teachers' responses concerning their perceptions of SBI with regard to the principles and importance of SBI show that almost all EFL teachers hold high positive perceptions (Mean=5.9), and they seem to be aware of the importance of SBI in language learning in general and in developing students' writing in particular. In contrast, the result of the classroom observation revealed that only a few teachers were observed practicing Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI).

This study revealed that teachers faced issues pertaining to their own effectiveness, such as the existing unfamiliar writing topics in student textbooks, the lack of resources and training, and the absence of adequate time to practice SBI to promote learners' writing. Zimmerman (2000) concluded from his research that teachers must be cognizant of their attitudes, perceptions, experiences, and practices about writing since they can positively or negatively influence students' attitudes, motivation, and levels of learning of present and future students. MacArthur & Gaham (2006) found that teachers must provide students with an array of strategies and techniques designed to help them write well. Providing adequate time for instruction and practice in writing was considered by teachers as they defined effective writing. Students do not have enough time in the daily school schedule to adequately practice writing.

Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) in teaching writing skills with particular reference to public Secondary and Preparatory schools found in Nekemte town.

The overall analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the majority of the teachers generally hold positive beliefs on some aspects of the general characteristics, and

aims/outcomes of the strategies and Strategy-Based Instruction. In addition, almost all of the items regarding the implementation of the Strategy-Based Instruction showed that a larger group of teachers held very optimistic beliefs on the principles of Strategy-Based Instruction, although they were not observed while practicing the principles of SBI in the actual classroom. This paper has argued for the usefulness of SBI, and explored a model of SBI that has been widely used in the field of language education. The model is characterized by explicit strategy instruction and integration and aims to transfer the responsibility of strategy choice and use from the teacher to the learner, with the ultimate aim of learner empowerment. There are many instructional strategies that need to be explored in order to develop learners' writing ability. However, one of the important considerations in overcoming writing difficulties is helping EFL learners master strategies of language learning.

Although the present study suggests that the Strategy-Based Instruction is beneficial to Secondary and Preparatory students, there are areas that need to be studied further. One area for further research is integrating learning strategies into classroom instruction. The teacher may provide some models for applying various strategies in different skills. Another area for doing more research is to conduct such studies with a variety of language students, including school-aged students and students with different educational backgrounds.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions, the researcher stated the following recommendations:

- Perceptions are accepted to be difficult to measure, though they were measured in this study through teachers' questionnaires and classroom observation conducted in EFL classes. Thus, the researcher suggests that further studies should be conducted to infer teachers' perceptions from the ways in which they act rather than from what they say they believe.
- Teachers and individual learners should work together to solve learning problems strategically, and as a result, learners develop a strong sense of control over learning outcomes. Teachers who are concerned with helping individual underachieving learners are also encouraged to explore the indirect and individualized model of strategy instruction.

- In addition, the teaching experiences of the teachers were not within the scope of this study; further research is needed to examine how years of experience influence the perception and under what conditions perceptions are maintained and enhanced.
- As it was observed, teachers hardly practiced the principles of Strategy-Based Instruction in the actual classroom. Teachers should be allowed to play the roles of planning, monitoring, and evaluating their teaching. Therefore, the teacher education program should provide in-depth training on language teaching strategies
- Besides, a constituent approach to the writing process in subject areas and explicit instruction on the writing process by the subject teacher help students become better writers. Therefore, models of good writing in the subject areas and
- Feedback that is constructive and formative should be given to students so as to make them improve their writing skills.

Pedagogical implication

The results of this study provide a lot of implications; the first is the clear need for understanding teachers' perceptions and beliefs on any teaching and learning process, since teachers are heavily involved in various teaching and learning processes. Besides, the present study underscores the need for continuous professional development and support for teachers to effectively integrate Strategy-Based Instruction into their writing curriculum.

Findings from teachers' perceptions and beliefs indicate that these perceptions and beliefs have a considerable effect on both their instructional practices and classroom behavior (Bandura, 1997; Johnson, 1992b; Anderson, 1991). Similarly, this study was undertaken to determine whether EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of Strategies-Based Instruction should have a role in the foreign-language classroom, particularly in writing classes. If teachers systematically introduce and reinforce strategies that can help students write in the target language more effectively, their students may well improve their performance in writing on language tasks. The findings of the study would also suggest that explicitly describing, discussing, and reinforcing strategies in the classroom can have a direct impact on student outcomes.

Furthermore, the study implies that the students can become better learners if they become more aware of their learning processes and then decide to act on that awareness. Teachers may increase their students' confidence in writing by familiarizing them with the principles of

Strategy-Based Instruction. Likewise, the paper has some implications for syllabus design. Strategy-based instruction can help students to classify and to reinforce their creativity and self-awareness. Not only is this way of teaching useful for writing, but it also enhances students' sense of retention, understanding, problem-solving ability, and classroom performance. Hence, it will be very useful for teaching other skills too.

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