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SECOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS

Daniela Vrabcová (a)*, Pavla Čapková (b), Kateřina Juklová (c), Oxana Pollulich (d)
*Corresponding author

(a) Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, daniela.vrabcova@uhk.cz
(b) Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, pavla.capkova@uhk.cz
(c) Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, katerina.juklova@uhk.cz
(d) Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, oxana.pollulich@uhk.cz

Abstract

The paper is a presentation of key empirical findings related to students´ learning strategies of Russian language as a second foreign language (FL). The paper focuses on the research question on the frequency of direct learning strategies (memory-related, cognitive, or compensation) employed by the sampled Czech secondary school students. The focus is on three types of direct learning strategies: memory-related, cognitive and compensation types, including the influence of selected variables. The main research design was quantitative in nature with the use of a questionnaire based closely on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning adopted to the Czech environment and several others. Key presented empirical findings are presented with a view to gender, awareness of learning strategies, attitude to the language, and to the the teacher.

Keywords: FL learning strategies, memory-related, cognitive and compensation strategies, secondary education

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1. Introduction

Foreign language learning (FLL) strategies are often viewed as *´operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information´* in foreign language learning (Wenden & Rubin, 1987, as cited in Vlčková et al., 2013). As to FLL strategies, more joint features may be identified, for example according to Cohen & Macaro (2007, as cited in Vlčková et al., 2013, p. 94) "*intentional, and conscious procedures by which a learner reaches his or her learning goal; they do not occur in isolation but in sequences or clusters and the quality of their orchestration is important for learning"*. There is no doubt that FLL strategies determine FL acquisition. However, the numerous approaches lead to numerous classifications of the strategies. The focus on FLL strategies has deeper roots in the character of the Czech as well as European educational system. The European-oriented school curriculum respected in Czech school curriculum (and school curricular documents) articulate the learning competency as one of the key competencies within the general system of crucial sets of strategies, skills, attitudes and knowledge for life, including critical thinking skills, culture-oriented learning, intercultural sensitivity and motivation as a basic principle as well as in the field of foreign languages. Such objectives and curricular priorities represent the concepts in the Czech Republic that needs to be highlighted with a view to the wider context of the Czech school curricular reform which has been in operation since the beginning of the century.[1]

This paper provides an insight into how a sample of upper secondary school students view and reflect their own FLL in terms of learning strategies by investigating the empirical results from a study (Čapková & Vrabcová, 2023) that was undertaken in selected Czech upper secondary schools.

2. Problem Statement

Effective FLL strategies represent one of the key goals as well as didactic procedural instruments of learning and teaching. FL teachers should be ready to teach the FLL strategies to guide the students and facilitate their learning. FLL strategies, similar to learning strategies, should be among the focused topics and areas within teacher training as prospective teachers specializing in foreign languages as these FLL strategies constitute a key agent in their students´ foreign language learning process. The phenomenon of *´awareness´* and *´metacognition´* becomes crucial, similarly to intercultural competence (Vrabcová & Menšík, 2016). This paper does not aim to overview all theories of FLL strategies and relevant classifications but focuses on the classification by Oxford (1989, 2003), and selected FLL starategies employed by students at secondary schools in the Czech education system.

The paper focuses on FLL strategies as the main research concept. The strategies applied in the paper were identified by Oxford (1989) and overviewed in 2003 as six main categories of learning strategies in the field of English as a second or foreign language (ESL or EFL). Admittedly, *"information about*

[1] The key change aspects include: framework educational programmes (FEPs), school educational programmes (SEPs), pupils´ key competences, electronic evidence of pupils, state level of maturita examination, school optimization (merging and closing down of schools), school self-evaluation, teaching standards, innovative teaching technology. The Czech school curricular reform might be divided into three stages (Janík, 2013): 1. systemic reconstruction (1999 – 2004), 2. general implementation (2005 – 2011), 3. reform modification (2012 - …); for more details on the stages see for example Vrabcová (2015), Vrabcová & Menšík (2016).

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language learning styles and strategies is valid regardless of what the learner´s first language is" (Oxford, 2003, p. 2). The main strategies are divided into three major groups of direct strategies (memory-related, cognitive, and compensation strategies), and three major groups of non-direct strategies (metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies). However, based on the 2022 preliminary survey (undertaken to verify the modified questionnaire among the Czech upper secondary school students), the survey focuses solely on some selected direct strategies from the direct strategies i.e. memory-related, compensation and cognitive strategies employed for Russian language learning (the overview of the strategies is embedded in Tables 1 – 3 below).

3. Research Questions and Purpose of the Study

The paper focuses on the following questions:

- What foreign language learning strategies are used by the upper secondary school students in learning the Russian language?
- Do girls employ different FLLstrategies when compared to boys?
- Do the types of the strategies differ according to how much the students know about FLL strategies? Do the better-informed students employ different FLL strategies when compared to the students that are less informed about FLL strategies?
- Do the students with negative attitudes to the subject (Russian language) employ different FLL strategies when compared to the students with positive attitudes to the subject (Russian language)?
- Do the students with negative attitudes to the teacher employ different FLL strategies when compared to those with positive attitudes to the teacher?

FLL strategies are identified from the perspective of Czech upper secondary school students learning the Russian language as a second foreign language. Monitoring FLL strategies in the case of learning diverse languages is important with respect to inherent challenges related to diverse language types, including factors linked to sociocultural environment (Vlčková 2010). According to Chamot et al. (1987, in Oxford, 1989, p. 236) the Russian language learners apply the strategies to a greater extent than Spanish language learners. On the basis of the information presented, it can be assumed that the choice of strategies is to some extent dependent on the orthographic system of the target language, especially when it is different from the orthography of the native language.

4. Research Methods and Sample

This research is methodologically grounded in questionnaire and correlation analysis. The students´ awareness of FLL strategies, gender and attitudes to the subject and to the teacher were correlated with respect to FLL strategies, and the correlationship tested by means of relevant statistic techniques specified in relevant sections below. The empirical findings are based on the SILL, *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (Oxford, 1989) adapted to the Czech environment by Vlčková (2007). The QLFL, *Questionnaire*

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on Learning a Foreign Language (Vlčková, 2007) identified specific strategies used for learning a foreign language. Additionally, Croskey questionnaire Affective Learning and Teacher Evaluation (1994) was adopted to measure respondents´ attitudes. The empirical search constitutes a source for better understanding the usage of direct FLL strategies by the upper secondary school students in the field of Russian language in relation to gender, level of awareness about FL learning strategies as well as in relation to the pupil´s attitude to the subject and to the teacher.

As to the structure of the questionnaire, the research instrument is divided into introductory instructions and five main parts (A – E). The introductory part of the questionnaire collected information for basic variables, i.e. respondent´s gender, age, affiliation to secondary education type according to the schools, school year (1 – 4), length of learning Russian (in years), and prioritized area of skills in Russian language. As to the item (involved in part A) asking whether the in-class teaching contains information about the methods and procedures how to acquire, develop and learn the Russian language, the respondents expressed their views on a 4-point scale: definitely no - rather no - rather yes - definitely yes.

The three main parts of the questionnaire (A – C) follow the original structure of Oxford's (1989) SILL and Vlčková's (2007) QLFL mentioned above; the items are divided into several parts according to the represented learning strategies. Part A targeted memory-related strategies (10 items), part B targeted cognitive strategies (19 items), and part C targeted compensation strategies (8 items).

Parts D and E were inspired by the Croskey (1994) questionnaire. In part D the respondents identified their attitudes to the Russian language as their learning subject (2 questions – 8 items) and in part E the respondents identified their attitudes to the teacher (2 questions – 8 items). Unlike the original questionnaire, the originally 7–point Likert scale was adapted into a 5-point Likert version - 1 – *never, almost never*, 2 – *rarely, usually ´no, I don´t use´*, 3 – *sometimes, ´50 – 50´*, 4 – *often, usually ´yes, I do use*, 5 – *always, almost always*.

4.1. Research sample

The respondents represented upper secondary school students. Out of 35 secondary schools in two regions of the Czech Republic (Královéhradecký and Pardubický regions), and were offered participation in the survey, seven schools particpated in the survey: four secondary vocational schools reflecting the typology of the Czech vocational schools (in the field of business and economy, administration as well as language training, health care and industry) while three schools represented the general education type of secondary schools – grammar schools. The data were collected by means of questionnaires implemented directly in Russian language classes in February 2023.

As to the gender, the research sample (n = 103 students) comprised 67% girls and 33% boys all aged between 15 – 20 years all studying Russian language as their second foreign language for an average length of: 5 years (1.94 % learning Russian language less that a year, 39.8 % between 1-3 years, 45.63 % between 4-6 years and 12.63 % between 7-9 years).

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5. Findings

The findings are presented in the parts 5.1 – 5.3.2 and provide an insight into selected aspects of how Czech secondary school students use FLL strategies in learning Russian as the second foreign language.

5.1. Secondary school students´ view of their usage of direct learning strategies

According to the survey secondary school students employ the direct FLL strategies generally on the average level (with the average value 2.82 on the 1-5 Likert scale). In relation to the inventory of learning strategies, it is possible to conclude that the students, to a certain extent, employ all subtypes of direct types of strategies. The compensation strategies appear to be used most often (frequency average value: 3.49). Memory-related strategies, on the contrary, are employed the least often according to the students´ view (frequency average value: 2.34). The frequency average value in the subtype of cognitive strategies is at the average level at 2.79.

5.1.1. Usage of memory-related strategies

A more detailed view of the memory-related strategies is enabled thanks to monitoring four specific subtypes of the memory-related strategies. For more see Table 1 below.

Table 1. Frequency of usage of the memory-related strategies and subgroups

Strategies and techniques	Frequency average value	Always or usually (percentage, %)	Rarely or never (percentage, %)
Subgroup - Creating mental linkages	**2.79**		
Grouping	2.79	40	47
Associating	3.34	44	18
Placing new words into context	2.25	19	61
Subgroup - Applying images and sounds	**2.34**		
Using imagery	2.55	32	53
Semantic mapping	1.23	1	96
Using key words	3.04	40	31
Subgroup - Reviewing well Structured reviewing	**2.54**	20	48
Subgroup - Employing action	**1.58**		
Using physical response or sensation	1.39	5	90
Using mechanical techniques	1.77	11	79

The more detailed insight into the memory-related strategies (Table 1) shows that the average frequency values of monitored subgroups range between the values 1.58 – 2.79: *creating mental linkages* (2.79), *applying images and sounds* (2.34), *reviewing well* (2.54), and *employing action* (1.58).

The strategy subtype/subgroup *employing action* represents the least employed subtype of the memory-related strategies (1.58). The low frequency of the usage is indicated also by the values in the

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specific strategies and techniques in the subtype. Using *mechanical techniques* (1.77), for example memory cards for better learning are used only rarely or never dominantly by 79% of the sample. As to the strategy of *using physical response or sensation*, the frequency average value 1.39 indicates even rarer use (90% of the respondents use the strategy rarely or never).

5.1.2. Usage of cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies appear to be the second most frequently used group of direct strategies within the sample, but the results are not as satisfactory on the frequency scale due to the mean values ranging between 2.50 and 3.43. The mean values of the subgroups and strategies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of usage of the cognitive strategies

Strategies and techniques	Frequency average value	Always or usually (percentage, %)	Rarely or never (percentage, %)
Subgroup - Practising	**2.50**		
Repeating (practice)	3.12	48	36
Formally practising with sounds and writing systems	2.65	22	50
Recognizing and using formulas and patterns	2.88	33	39
Recombining	2.47	20	53
Practising naturalistically	1.65	9	84
Subgroup Receiving and sending messages	**3.43**		
Getting the idea quickly	3.34	52	25
Using resources for receiving and sending messages	3.51	55	20
Subgroup - Analysing and reasoning	**2.93**		
Reasoning deductively	2.72	28	43
Analysing expression	2.61	26	50
Analysing contrastively	3.04	43	35
Translating	3.52	63	20
Transferring	2.74	27	40
Subgroup – Creating structures	**2.65**		
Taking notes	2.99	34	35
Summarising	1.75	9	77
Highlighting	3.22	47	35

Comparing the use of strategies and subgroups in Table 2, the most used strategy subgroup is represented by *receiving and sending messages* (average value 3.43) and the least used is *practising* (2.50). When comparing the studied strategies separately, the strategies with the highest and lowest average values need to be highlighted. Within the strategies, only two emerge with the average values above 3.5: *translating* (3.52), and *using resources for receiving and sending* (3.51). The strategies with the lowest average values, below 2.00 are *summarising* (1.75) and *practising naturalistically* (1.65). The low use of

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practicing naturalistically is confirmed by the very low percentage of respondents declaring frequent or usual usage of the strategy - only 9% of respondents, while 84% of respondents declared that they rarely or never used the strategy. Similarly, the strategy *summarising* was often or usually used by only 9% of respondents while 77 % rarely or nver used this strategy at all.

5.1.3. Usage of compensation strategies

From the secondary school students´ perspective, the compensation strategies appear to be the most widely used group of direct strategies in Russian language acquisition at the frequency average of 3.46 compared to the frequency average of the memory-related group of 2.34 and cognitive group of strategies of 2.79. The mean values of each subgroup and strategy monitored within the compensation strategies are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Frequency of usage of the selected compensation subgroups

Strategies and techniques	Frequency average value	Always or usually (percentage, %)	Rarely or never (percentage, %)
Subgroup - Guessing intelligently	**3.76**	61	11
Using linguistic and other clues			
Subgroup - Overcoming limitations	**3.46**		
Getting help	3.85	71	12
Using mime or gesture	2.83	32	41
Avoiding communication partially or totally	3.27	45	29
Selecting topic	3.70	68	16
Adjusting or approximating the message	3.83	68	8
Coining words, neologisms	3.17	46	33
Using a circumlocution or synonym	3.52	51	13

Although the subgroup of *intelligent guessing* (3.76) is represented by only one item in the inventory (using linguistic and other clues), the result shows that it plays a huge role in Russian language acquisition among the secondary school students in the Czech Republic. 61% of the students in the sample reported that they always or usually tried to guess the meaning of unknown words using linguistic and non-linguistic clues (3.76), and there was no single case among the respondents who declared not using the strategy at all (the total proportion of those who rarely or never used the strategy: 11%).

Looking more closely at the compensation strategies, it is observable that within the subgroup of *overcoming limitations* in speaking and writing (3.46), 71% of respondents do not hesitate to use the help of, for example, their communication partner (3.85) in case of vocabulary deficiencies, while only 12% stated that they rarely or never used this strategy. 68% of respondents always or usually try to *approximate the message* (3.83), while a low percentage of respondents (8%) rarely or never used this strategy.

68% of respondents try to steer the conversation towards topics in which they have a sufficiently rich vocabulary (3.70) while only 16% rarely or never used this strategy. 68% of the respondents actively resort to *adjusting (i.g. simplifying) the message* (3.83) while only 8% rarely or never used this strategy. The strategy of *creating neologisms* (3.17) is often or usually used by 46% of the students, while 33% of

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the sample never or rarely usde this strategy. 51% of the students try to *approximate unknown words* by describing them or using words of similar meaning (3.52), while 13% of the sample rarely or never used this strategyat all. Finally, one more interesting fact can be highlighted concerning *avoiding communication*. Almost half of the sample (45%) use the strategy *avoiding the communication* (3.27), while almost one third (29%) rarely or never used this strategy.

5.2. Direct learning strategies and the role of gender and student awareness

As mentioned above, the use of learning strategies is determined by a variety of factors. Based on the theoretical underpinnings, selected variables - gender, awareness of strategies, and attitudes towards both the subject and the teacher - were targeted in this study.

5.2.1. Direct learning strategies and the influence of gender

Existing findings show that, in general, females tend to use learning strategies more frequently than males (Vlčková, 2010). This section focuses on the relationship between gender and usage of direct strategies more specifically and with a view to the research question and related aspects: Do girls employ different FLL strategies when compared to boys? In other words, is the use of direct strategies dependent on the gender of the learner? The statistical dependence between the two variables (gender and monitored direct strategies) was detected using Spearman's correlation coefficient (for more see Table 4).

Table 4. Influence of gender on the use of direct strategies

	Average			
Strategies	Boys	Girls	R - values	p - values
Memory-related	2.24	2.39	-0.14	0.16
Cognitive	2.73	2.82	-0.08	0.44
Compensation	3.28	3.60	-0.25	0.01
Direct	2.71	2.87	-0.17	0.09

The frequency average values show that although girls generally use direct strategies more than boys (average values: boys: 2.71, girls: 2.87) in Russian language acquisition, it is statistically insignificant as the level of significance and the strength of the relationship between the variables are insignificant ($R = -0.17$; $p = 0.09$).

As to memory-related, cognitive and compensations types of direct strategies, while both boys and girls admit resorting to compensation strategies most often (boys: 3.28; girls: 3.60), again the girls outrank the boys in the usage of this strategy. The memory-related strategies are the least commonly used (boys: 2.24; girls: 2.39) and again this strategy is used more by the girls than the boys. However, statistically significant differences are found only for compensation strategies ($R = -0.25$; $p = 0.01$). The lowest correlation is achieved in the case of cognitive strategies ($R = -0.08$; $p = 0.44$).

The higher level of using the direct strategies is observed or statistically revealed in none of the direct strategy subtypes in case of the male gender. The uneven distribution of respondents, with boys representing only 1/3 of all respondents, may have had some influence. In contrast, female students in the sample appear to use the following strategies to a more significant level:

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- Memory-related strategies: using key words from the subtype applying images and sounds (R = -0,20; p = 0,05) and using mechanical techniques from employing action (R = -0.22; p = 0.02).
- Cognitive strategies – repeated reading from the subtype receiving and sending messages (R = -0.25; p = 0.01) and highlighting from creating structures for input and output (R = -0.27; p = 0.01).
- Compensation strategies – (adjusting or approximating the message from the subtype overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (R = -0.28; p = 0.00) and using a circumlocution or synonyms (R = -0.22; p = 0.02).

5.2.2. Direct strategies and the influence of student awareness

Another research question for this study looked at whether the use of direct strategies vary depending on students' awareness of learning strategies. Do the informed students use strategies more than the uninformed students? Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to determine the statistical dependence as in the previous case **(**the significance level (p), the strength of the relationship (R) between the variable). The pooled results for all groups of direct strategies show that being informed about learning strategies by the teacher has a positive effect on the usage of the strategies (R = 0.24; p = 0.01). Cognitive strategies (R = 0.29; p = 0.00) and memory-related strategies (R = 0.21; p = 0.03) show the strongest correlation compared to no statistical significance in case of compensation strategies (R = -0.13; p = 0.19). Based on the negative correlation it is possible to conclude: The less the teacher informs his/her students about the procedures and methods how to learn Russian language, the more students resort to compensation strategies (see table 5).

Table 5. Influence of in-class informing students on the use of direct strategies

	Average				R-value	p-value
Strategies	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No		
Memory-related	2.44	2.42	2.26	2.13	0.21	0.03
Cognitive	3.01	2.88	2.70	2.30	0.29	0.00
Compensation	3.54	3.37	3.53	3.78	-0.13	0.19
Direct	2.97	2.86	2.76	2.57	0.24	0.01

It is possible to confirm that the teacher's information has a significant effect on the use of the memory-related and cognitive sub-strategies listed below:

- Memory-related strategies Associating/elaborating (R = 0.20; p = 0.04), structured reviewing (R = 0.21; p = 0.03), use of physical response or sensation (R = 0.27; p = 0.01), and use of sensations and physical representations (R = 0.21; p = 0.04).
- Cognitive strategies –reasoning deductively (R = 0.20; p = 0.04), taking notes (R = 0.31; p = 0.00), summarizing (R = 0.23; p = 0.02) and highlighting important information (R = 0.22; p = 0.03).

Consequently, it is possible to state that the teacher's recommendations on ways of learning a foreign language have a positive effect on the use of memory and cognitive strategies. In other words, higher frequency of teaching the students about the procedures and methods of Russian language acquisition might

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lead to higher usage of the given FLL strategies and better recalling the learning content. Having lower awareness of the FLL strategies might lead to the more frequent use of the compensation strategies.

5.3. Direct learning strategies and students´ attitudes to the subject and to the teacher

Sections 5.3 presents insights into the relationship between the usage of direct FL learning strategies and the secondary school students´ attitudes to Russian language as the taught subject and to their teacher. The statistical relationship and dependence were verified by Pearson correlation coefficient.

5.3.1. Direct learning strategies and attitudes to the taught subject - Russian language

Do the students with negative attitudes to the subject (Russian language) employ different FLL strategies compared to the students with positive attitudes to the subject (Russian language)? For the relevant Pearson correlation coefficient values see Table 6.

Table 6. Direct learning strategies and attitudes to the subject – covariance

Strategies	r - values	p – values
Memory-related	0.38	0.00
Cognitive	0.06	0.55
Compensation	0.50	0.00
Direct	0.47	0.00

The analysis indicates a strong significant correlation between the attitudes to the subject (Russian language) and direct strategies (r = 0.47, p = 0.00). A statistically important variance is revealed in case of memory-related strategies (r = 0.38, 0.00) and compensation strategies (r = 0.50, p = 0.00). The cognitive strategies are not statistically significant with the students´ attitudes to the subject (r = 0.06, p = 0.55). With reference to these statistical data and analysis, it is possible to state two partial conclusions: 1. positive attitudes to the Russian language might increase the usage of direct Russain language learning strategies, 2. students might be expected to make more conscious effort in case of memory-related FLL and to overcome difficulties during foreign language conversations more easily.

5.3.2. Direct learning strategies and attitudes to the teacher

Is there any correlationship between the employment of FLL strategies among students with negative attitudes to the teacher compared to those with positive attitudes to the teacher? For relevant Pearson correlation coefficient values see Table 7.

Table 7. Direct learning strategies and attitudes to the teacher – covariance

Strategies	r - values	p – values
Memory-related	0.21	0.04
Cognitive	0.40	0.00
Compensation	-0.04	0.67
Direct	0.31	0.00

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Analysis of the data reveals a moderately strong correlationship between students' attitudes toward the teacher and direct strategies as a whole ($r = 0.31$; $p = 0.00$). Looking at the direct strategies in more detail, significant differences are revealed for cognitive ($r = 0.40$; $p = 0.00$) and memory-related strategies ($r = 0.21$; $p = 0.04$). No statistically significant relationship was found for compensation strategies ($r = -0.04$; $p = 0.67$). The negative correlation indicates that negative attitudes to the teacher increase the probability of students´ resorting to compensation strategies. However, it needs to be emphasized that the strength of the correlation and the significance level show negligible values.

In parallel with the demonstration of a significant relationship between students' attitudes towards teachers and direct strategies, the null hypothesis that there is no association between the two variables can be rejected. Despite the moderately strong correlation between the students´ attitudes towards the subject and direct strategies as a whole, it is impossible to accept the main null hypothesis fully. Nonetheless, for further studies as well as analytical and research focus, it is possible to articulate both a conclusion and a hypothesis that students' attitudes towards the teacher may underlie the higher use of memory-related and the cognitive strategies. Based on the data, it can be assumed that students with positive attitudes towards the Russian language teacher will consciously expend greater effort in an effort to please the teacher by resorting to mechanical language acquisition materials in order to learn and understand language as a structured system.

6. Conclusion

In an increasingly globalised world, FLL strategies represent one of the crucial areas worthy of attention in modern education. The knowledge of at least one world language has become an indispensable part of everyone's education nowadays. Therefore, it is necessary for FL teacher trainers to provide access to trainees of diverse educational concepts to motivate and keep promoting opportunities for natural learning of foreign languages in both the school and out-of-school environment. The empirical findings presented here show that sampled secondary school students in the Czech Republic are aware of and tend to use compensation strategies, in comparison to the memory-related strategies. It needs to be highlighted that variables such as gender and teacher's awareness of strategies may, to some extent, influence the choice of the FLL strategies. The most significant variable that emerged in this study appears to be the students' attitudes towards the subject and towards the teacher which has major implications for FL teacher trainers. This finding may be considered worthwhile to be incorporated by the relevant stakeholders of FL education in the Czech Republic during the preparation of the FL curriculum and teaching materials in order to ensure the efficacy of the FL teaching learning process.

Data Availability Statement

Data is available upon request.

Declaration of Conflicts Interests

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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