

# **‘I worry about getting it wrong and looking like a silly billy’: does explicit classroom-based strategy intervention change pupils’ attitudes towards speaking in the modern foreign languages classroom?**

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## **Abstract**

A number of factors among schoolchildren in England are currently contributing to poor attitudes towards speaking in the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) classroom. Although multiple explicit strategy-based instruction (SBI) intervention studies have appeared in recent years, very few studies have focused on its effect on oral skills and, in particular, pupils’ attitudes towards speaking in the target language (TL). From the small pool of SBI investigations into schoolchildren whose first language (L1) is English, there is some evidence of success among boys in particular. The present two-cycle action research and development study of beginner (Y7) and intermediate (Y10) learners of French (L2) (N=148) investigated the impact of 12 hours of strategy intervention training on TL speaking skills in an all-boys selective secondary school in England. Adopting a quasi-experimental design, the intervention cohort which underwent explicit SBI training was compared with a class from the same year group which did not receive training, in respect of their attitudes towards speaking in the MFL classroom. To assess the impact of the intervention, a mixed methods approach was adopted; data were captured via questionnaires, lesson observations and interviews. In Cycle 2, pupils navigated the ‘Strategy Island Map’, an innovative tool to track their strategy use when speaking in the TL. Results suggest that explicit SBI improved attitudes towards speaking among both age groups. Implications for practice and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: attitudes; language learning strategies; MFL; speaking; target language.

## **Introduction**

Learning and teaching of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in secondary schools in

England could be seen to be in something of an alarming state among pupils of all ages. Preceding the introduction in 2014 of statutory provision in primary schools, demotivation in MFL was identified as early as Key Stage (KS) 3<sup>1</sup> (see Coleman, Galaczi and Astruc 2007). KS4 remains a ‘crunch point’ for disincentivised MFL learners: between 2014-2018, language entries for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination, taken at age 16, declined by 19% (Tinsley 2019). This may perhaps be explained by the fact that MFL study has been optional at KS4 since 2004. Although numbers of those studying Spanish for the ‘Advanced Level’ (A-Level) examination at age 18 have risen incrementally year on year since the mid-1990s, French and German A-Level entries have endured ‘substantial ongoing declines’ (Tinsley 2019:3).

Among the four equally weighted examination papers at GCSE MFL, the skill of speaking, considered ‘one of the most important components of learning a foreign language’ (Yaman and Özcan 2015:143), appears to be in a dire state. Notwithstanding the ambitious aims for speaking of the National Curriculum for languages at KS3 (Department for Education (DfE) 2013), and the claim that speaking, for pupils, is often ‘the prime goal’ (Grauberg 1997:201), evidence collected by the national school inspection service concluded that speaking was the weakest L2 skill in 80% of schools observed between 2007-2010 (Ofsted 2011). This weakness was subsequently exposed on a European scale: the UK ranked bottom out of 27 jurisdictions in a survey of 14-15-year-olds’ L2 oral proficiency (European Commission 2012).

In addition to pupils recognising that their lack of progress in TL speaking adversely affects their motivation towards studying European languages (Bower 2017, 2019), in a recent national survey of schools (Collen 2020), 53% of responding state-funded secondary schools (N=271) reported that Brexit has also had a negative impact. Although some demotivation may perhaps be explained by the status of English as an

international ‘lingua franca’ (Seidhofer 2005), more recently termed ‘global English’ (Collen 2020), secondary school MFL learners have also been identified as lacking confidence in their ability to speak in the target language (Graham 2002; Thirlwall 2015). The quote in the title of our article, taken from a pupil in the current study, encapsulates this feeling of language anxiety, which may perhaps hinder pupils’ willingness to communicate (WTC). Furthermore, behaviour has also been identified as a harmful barrier to pupils’ L2 speaking development (see Llewellyn-Williams 2014).

Considered the sole TL source for many learners in England (Collen 2020; Ellis 2008), MFL classrooms in England must provide ample opportunity to maximise pupil spoken TL use (Teaching Schools Council 2016). To this end, Meiring and Norman (2002) advocated deploying L2 learning strategies which, according to Macaro (2003), could boost pupils’ autonomy as language learners. Hassan et al.’s (2005) in-depth review and Plonsky’s (2011) meta-analysis both sought to measure the impact of explicit strategy-based instruction (SBI) on learners’ L2 performance and both drew positive conclusions. However, investigation into the impact of SBI on L2 speaking is scarce (Breen 2001; Plonsky 2011), and the body of existing SBI research is mainly conducted in settings contextually dissimilar to those of schoolchildren in England (Chamot 2005; Macaro and Erler 2008). Tinsley’s (2020) recent survey of ‘odds-beating’ state secondary schools in England (N=31), i.e. schools where boys have achieved good outcomes in terms of language learning and where an above-average proportion of boys continue with languages to GCSE level, found that extensive L2 classroom oral interaction and explicit language learning strategies training commonly featured in MFL teaching practice. Moreover, many of the schools reported that both elements were deemed especially fruitful among boys. This merits further investigation as both examination entries

(Tinsley 2020) and performance (Collen 2020) of male pupils in GCSE MFL are consistently lower than among the female cohort.

Responding to calls for empirical studies to address this gap in applied linguistics research (see ‘UK Project on Language Learner Strategies’ in Grenfell 2007), this paper reports on the impact of explicit SBI intervention on the attitudes of English (L1) beginner and intermediate schoolchildren learners towards speaking French (L2).

## **Research background**

### ***Pupil factors which may constrain TL speaking capacity in the MFL classroom***

In any subject, pupils’ progress is likely to be affected by a number of factors including prior learning experiences and levels of proficiency. More specifically in the MFL classroom, pupils’ TL speaking capacity specifically is likely to be constrained by three interlinked pupil factors: motivation, language anxiety and behaviour (Dörnyei 2014; Papi 2010).

#### ***Motivation***

Motivation, as many teachers might agree, is an important, if not ‘*the* most important factor’ (van Lier 1996:98, original emphasis) in language learning outcomes, perhaps even more so than aptitude (Gardner and Lambert 1972). The first of the current ‘Teachers’ Standards’ in England requires teachers to ‘inspire, motivate and challenge pupils’ (DfE 2011:1). Yet, as mentioned above, the MFL context in England is ‘in a language crisis’ (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages 2019:2).

One possible explanation for L2 demotivation stems from factors identified within Dörnyei’s (2009) ‘L2 Motivational Self System’. His model, which is gaining momentum (MacIntyre and Serroul 2015), posited that learners behave according to their ‘ideal self’.

This notion broadly refers to the person you aspire to be, and more specifically in the context of L2 learning, encompasses learners' success and competence as users of the TL (Dörnyei 2001). When it comes to TL speaking, whether for 'integrative' or 'instrumental' motivational reasons (Gardner 2010), learners will demonstrate more or less WTC (MacIntyre et al. 1998). Gardner (1979) had previously argued that L2 learning is distinctive, especially speaking, as it can have implications for learners' self-identity.

While some studies have shown recognition among English (L1) pupils of the utilitarian value and importance of L2 learning (Court 2002; Stables and Wikeley 1999), MFL commonly appears to have negative connotations, with minimal bearing on learners' current or future lives (Blenkinsop et al. 2006), particularly among anglophone boys (Mitchell 2014). TL speaking is, therefore, unlikely to feature in their 'ideal self', although there are those who claim that 'ideal self' theory has less significance for children of school age because their self-image is still developing (Kormos and Csizér 2008; Lamb 2011).

### *Language anxiety*

Considered the 'obverse of learning confidence' (Mitchell 2014:20), language anxiety is a 'negative emotion' (Gkonou 2018:79) which has received extensive attention in L2 literature (Oxford 2017). Krashen's (1982) 'Affective Filter' constituted a 'strong early claim' (Mitchell et al. 2019:56) regarding the significance of emotion in second language acquisition. Drawing on Alpert and Haber's (1960) distinction between 'debilitative' and 'facilitative' anxiety, claims that the latter can incentivise L2 performance (Marcos-Llinás and Garau 2009) are eclipsed by effects of the former; as Gkonou put it, 'the fallout of language anxiety can be both diverse and immense' (2018:80).

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope's (1986) concept of 'Foreign Language Anxiety' recognised its social, cognitive and academic consequences for L2 learning, within which

speaking has been identified as ‘the most anxiety-provoking element’ (Marzec-Stawiarska 2015:103). This anxiety may hinder learners’ WTC, as reported by a boy studying MFL in an English (L1) secondary school: ‘I don’t like speaking French in public ... it feels weird ... it feels like everything in your mouth is wrong’ (Jones and Jones 2001:13). This comment encapsulates the feelings of ‘communication apprehension’ and ‘fear of negative social evaluation’ (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986). In a study conducted in an English selective single-sex secondary school in England (Thompson, 2019), only 15% of KS3 boys (N=557) studying MFL reported feeling comfortable speaking TL publicly. Similarly, Thirlwall’s (2015) questionnaire study of KS5 learners (N=18) of French (L2) reported analogous results. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the self-identity nature of L2 speaking (Williams, Mercer and Ryan 2015). Besides threatening learners’ ‘language ego’ (Guiora 1994), MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) hypothesised, in line with Krashen, that language anxiety may occur at stages of input, central processing and output, thus impeding L2 development (MacIntyre 2017).

Oxford affirmed that language anxiety can engender physical symptoms, for example ‘tense muscles, sinking sensations, dry throat, trembling, palpitations, twitching, stammering, and blushing’ (2017:217). According to Dörnyei and Kormos (2000), these can be contagious. Oxford highlighted the importance of teachers’ involvement in combatting learners’ anxiety by creating a ‘comfortable, nonthreatening environment’ (2017:217).

### *Behaviour*

The importance of good behaviour, i.e. that which contributes to a classroom environment conducive to positive learning outcomes and progress, is clear, yet the overall picture nationwide appears less positive: a recent governmental announcement (DfE 2019)

claimed that Ofsted reported behaviour as ‘not good enough’ in over one third of schools in England. Nevertheless, in the latest Teaching and Learning International Survey of 48 countries (Schleicher 2020), standards of classroom behaviour in England seemed typical of the international average.

When behaviour is an issue, it is particularly likely to be problematic in MFL classrooms due to low motivation (Llewellyn-Williams 2014), and where activities are of a certain type, relying typically on pair/group/class discourse, and Ofsted’s (2015) report highlighted the detrimental effect of poor behaviour on achievement in MFL lessons. Bad behaviour, i.e. behaviour that is disruptive and potentially has a negative effect on learning outcomes and progress, is commonly cited as a reason for teachers not using TL (Aberdeen 2018; Dickson 1996; Franklin 1990), but there is lack of agreement as to whether teacher input spurs pupil output (Macaro 2001; Marinova-Todd 2003). However, if teachers, often learners’ sole TL model (Ellis 2005), do not routinely use it, pupils’ L2 speaking capacity is unlikely to flourish (Ofsted 1993, 2011).

Given the distinctive cumulative nature of TL understanding and progress in MFL, pupils must persevere or risk entering a ‘downward spiral’ (Jones 2005:35) of bad behaviour and insufficient progress. Strategies to support learners could be an important means of empowering them with increased responsibility and ownership of their MFL learning, which Ofsted (2014) identifies as key approaches for avoiding bad behaviour.

In brief, combinations of low levels of motivation, language anxiety and poor behaviour in MFL classrooms in England may all reduce pupils’ WTC in TL, thus hampering their speaking skill development. Issues surrounding motivation and behaviour commonly appear to affect boys.

### ***Language learning strategies***

Despite a lack of clarity vis-à-vis definition (see Oxford 2017), language learning

strategies (LLS) have been prominent for almost 50 years. They are considered teachable actions and processes deployed by the learner to assist them with learning and using the L2, and can potentially empower learners with increased autonomy (Macaro 2003). Early LLS research sought to identify, via observation and interview data capture, strategies used by the ‘good language learner’ (see Naiman et al. 1978; Rubin 1975; Stern 1975). Addressing calls for a rigorous theoretical framework, the 1990s saw researchers, notably O’Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990), undertake more detailed identification and cataloguing of LLS. Though published in the same year, these classifications differ in their structure. O’Malley and Chamot differentiated LLS using a tripartite system: metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective; contrastingly, Oxford’s dichotomous system classed LLS as ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’.

However, through her ‘Strategic Self-Regulation’ (S<sup>2</sup>R) model, Oxford (2017) more recently cautioned against traditionally strict strategy classification. Acknowledging the complexity, multifunctionality and overlap of LLS, her pioneering S<sup>2</sup>R model coined the less prescriptive notion of four ‘meta-strategies’. One of these is ‘meta-affective strategies’ which, following explicit SBI, learners could employ, along with various ‘metacognitive’ and ‘affective’ strategies, to control their emotional temperature. Notwithstanding individual and contextual variables in L2 learning, the pervasive impact of language anxiety may be mitigated by emotional self-regulation.

One line of research into improving the motivation of L2 learners suggests boosting ‘self-efficacy’ (Bandura 1986) by equipping them with ‘tools’ to achieve progress in learning outcomes (Macaro 2003). More recently, the Professional Development Consortium in Modern Foreign Languages’ ‘Principle 6: Self-Efficacy and Motivation’ added that learners must ‘see the link between the strategies they use and how successful they are on a task’ (cited in Macaro et al. 2015:6). Intervention studies in

England with Y7 (Macaro and Erler 2008), Y9/10 (Macaro 1998), and Y12 (Graham and Macaro 2008) have all reported success following explicit SBI, with Macaro (1998) finding particular benefit among boys.

None of the above studies, however, focused on oral skills. Nevertheless, there is some empirical evidence to suggest benefits for language learners' attitudes towards speaking TL. Experimental participants in Dörnyei's (1995) quasi-experimental study of Hungarian (L1) EFL pupils demonstrated a generally positive attitude towards strategy training, Lam's (2006) mixed-methods intervention study in two Hong Kong secondary schools reported that experimental participants displayed increased task effectiveness and confidence during L2 spoken activities following SBI training. Further support comes from Forbes and Fisher's (2018) more recent action research study conducted in an English (L1) secondary school. After six weeks of training, A-Level learners (N=5) of French similarly reported increased confidence in speaking tasks. They also found that students demonstrated higher levels of self-efficacy as speakers of French. Notwithstanding the three studies mentioned above, there is a dearth of studies pertaining to the impact of SBI on L2 speaking skills (Breen 2001; Plonsky 2011), and in particular among English (L1) schoolchildren (Chamot 2005; Macaro and Erler 2008).

## **Research questions**

In light of these understandings, we have identified the following questions:

- Does classroom-based strategy intervention training change pupils' attitudes towards speaking TL?
- Is classroom-based strategy intervention training effective in this respect among both beginner (Y7) and intermediate (Y10) learners?

## **Methodology**

### ***Population, sample and participants***

Our population for this small-scale practitioner research study was young-beginner and intermediate learners of French as a foreign language. The school, judged by Ofsted to be ‘outstanding’, is a large all-boys selective state-maintained school in a market town in South-East England. English is overwhelmingly the pupils’ first language, and the proportion of those with English as an additional language falls below the national average. At KS3, all pupils study French and either German or Spanish. Contrasting with the overall national decline in languages uptake (Collen 2020), GCSE MFL entries have remained stable: MFL study at KS4 is compulsory for all pupils at the school. The number of optional dual-linguist entries has also remained generally constant.

Three intact mixed-ability classes from both Y7 (aged 11-12) (n=90) and Y10 (aged 14-15) (n=58) formed the purposive sample for this study. Two classes from each year group, each taught by their regular teacher, acted as experimental groups. All classes within each year group were considered to be of ‘equal proficiency’ as none were set by ability, and analysis of baseline data from Cognitive Abilities Tests<sup>ii</sup> and Yellis<sup>iii</sup> scores revealed close parity between each class. The terms ‘beginner’ and intermediate’ refer to Y7 and Y10 respectively in terms of time spent learning French. 87% of the Y7 cohort started learning French at KS2. To facilitate evaluation of the impact of the intervention, one class from both year groups acted as a comparison group. Institutional constraints prohibited the randomisation of participants.

[Insert Table 1 here]

## ***Study design***

### *Data collection*

In order to answer our research questions, data were collected pre-intervention (henceforth T1) and post-intervention (henceforth T2). At both time points, a questionnaire, modified from Gkonou and Oxford's (2016) 'Managing Your Emotions for Language Learning', was administered to gauge pupils' attitudes towards learning and speaking French (see Appendix 1). Additionally, interviews were conducted individually with teachers. Group interviews were carried out with some experimental pupils from both year groups at T2 only. Questions asked in interviews were devised based on our understanding of relevant literature in relation to the aforementioned attitudinal issues towards both learning and speaking a foreign/second language, such as motivation, language anxiety and behaviour. Lesson observations were also employed as a means of 'methodological triangulation' (Denzin 1989) along with questionnaires and interviews: by comparing what pupils and teachers reported with what was observed in lessons, reliability of findings is increased. Adopting a mixed-methods approach enabled us to yield a comprehensive picture of our specific focus (Cresswell and Clark 2007).

### *Rationale for our training approach and selection of strategies to be taught*

Two intervention phases were integrated into routine lessons as advocated by existing research (Cohen 2011; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 2011; Wenden 1987). Through explicit training, the aim of the two cycles was to raise pupils' awareness of different strategies in different language learning and task contexts (see Appendix 2), and then give them opportunities to use a broad range of strategies (Mutton and Bartley 2006) in order to 'make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations' (Oxford 1990:8). Pupils navigated the

innovative ‘Strategy Island Map’ (see Figure 1) in Cycle 2 which enabled pupils to plot the trajectory of their strategy use during the main speaking activity of each lesson before recording it in a ‘strategy use’ log. We chose Oxford’s (1990) strategy classification as a model not only because it is the ‘most widely used strategy inventory’ (Cohen 2011:693), but also as it ‘uses less technical terminology’ (Oxford 1990:14), making it more child-friendly for participating pupils.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

## **Results**

### ***Pupil questionnaire***

In response to an open question in the questionnaire at T1 about WTC in the MFL classroom, a Y7 pupil stated: ‘I worry about getting it wrong and looking like a silly billy’. Similarly acknowledging a lack of confidence, a Y10 pupil also highlighting his fear of speaking TL in front of classmates, expressed a preference for pair and group oral work: ‘I don’t volunteer to speak in front of the whole class because I don’t want to make a mistake, but I don’t mind talking in French with the people around me’.

Repeating the T1 questionnaire, experimental and comparison classes self-reported their attitudes towards learning and speaking French at T2. Immediately apparent when comparing findings at class level is the **marked** increase in positive orientation among both Y7 (see Table 2) and Y10 (see Table 3) experimental groups following training.

Focusing specifically on speaking, comparison of pre- and post-intervention data shows positive shifts in Y7 and Y10 experimental pupils reporting speaking as their strongest linguistic skill: noteworthy are 7E2’s increase from 18% to 36%, and 10E2’s

even more marked rise from 5% to 32%. These positive shifts in self-efficacy were accompanied by **notable** increases in pupil enjoyment and confidence: examples include 7E2, where the percentage of pupils reporting that they ‘very much enjoy’ or ‘quite enjoy’ speaking French increased from 61% to 82%, and 10E1, where the percentage of pupils reporting that they are ‘very confident’ or ‘quite confident’ about speaking French increased **strikingly** from 59% to 88%. By contrast, figures relating to the comparison groups’ attitudes remained broadly stable in Y7 and appear to show a decrease in positive outlook for Y10. The latter finding could perhaps be explained by participant fatigue effect, which may threaten validity. Among experimental participants, responses to further questions indicated that the increase in confidence was, as expected, partnered with a decrease in the tendency to feel anxious about speaking French, when compared to T1. At T2, these pupils also reported lower instances of ‘not knowing a specific word or phrase’.

[Insert Table 2 here]

[Insert Table 3 here]

### ***Pupil group interviews***

Qualitative data were obtained, post-intervention, through group interviews conducted with three pupils from each experimental group. Interviewees from both year groups gave positive answers to questions relating to the impact of two cycles of explicit SBI on their TL speaking capacity. For example, one Y7 participant elaborated as follows:

*It has made me feel a lot more confident about speaking French because I know how to speak more accurately and am speaking much more.*

Whilst interviewees alluded to the usefulness of ‘metacognitive’ strategies in general, some also remarked upon the value of the innovative strategy resource. One Y10 respondent said:

*The ‘Strategy Island Map’ thing we used was effective because it was a fun and interactive way of seeing where we were going and structuring what we were saying.*

This resource also boosted pupils’ self-efficacy during TL oral activities. One Y10 pupil stated:

*I liked using it because I felt more confident and resourceful when speaking.*

Finally, it is interesting to note that, Y7 and Y10 interviewees shared the opinion that ‘communicative/compensatory’ strategies were among the most useful in terms of boosting their confidence. As one Y7 pupil commented:

*The most useful things for me were the fillers to give me time and what to do when I’m stuck and need help.*

### ***Lesson observations***

Due to national school closures in England on 20 March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was only possible to carry out pre-intervention lesson observations to which the following comments relate. Teachers involved in the study observed each other’s

classes and then participated in follow-up group discussions.

During one such discussion, an observer remarked on the impressive TL culture in one Y7 class:

*Outstanding! It is a classroom which has a culture of speaking in the target language full stop ... It wasn't just a few of them, the whole class seemed willing to give it a go ... the boys didn't seem frightened to get things wrong.*

This comment supports data collected from the pupil questionnaire regarding Y7 pupils' involvement in lessons. By contrast, a different picture seemed to emerge from two of the Y10 classrooms. Although observers commented that pupils were 'on-board', some were not forthcoming and, consequently, the teacher appeared to have to work quite hard to get them to relax and speak in French:

*For some boys, it wasn't that they didn't want to speak French, they just didn't want to make a fool of themselves by getting it wrong.*

This corroborates Y10 responses to the pupil questionnaire and suggests that the TL culture was not as far-reaching in this year group as in the Y7 class mentioned above. An observer of a second Y10 class remarked:

*It wasn't like they refused to answer questions, but I didn't get the impression that many of them volunteered much, except for one boy whose hand was up so often it was like he was pointing at the ceiling.*

### ***Teacher interviews***

Responding to questions about the overall effectiveness of the intervention, Y7 and Y10 teachers unanimously agreed that explicit SBI clearly had a positive impact on pupil confidence when speaking French. They concurred that this subsequently led to greater breadth and depth of pupil engagement and WTC in the classroom. As articulated by one teacher:

*They are keener to try things and ask in French for help.*

Another teacher similarly highlighted increased pupil confidence in asking questions in French to improve the range of expression in the oral work:

*They definitely became more confident with their manipulation of the spoken language, especially during Cycle 2 when they felt more comfortable to ask for some high-level phrases.*

Corroborating the aforementioned pupil voice, one teacher commented on the pure enjoyment experienced by Y7 pupils with regards to ‘communicative/compensatory’ strategies:

*They loved using the fillers!*

## Discussion

### *Does classroom-based strategy intervention training change pupils' attitudes towards speaking TL?*

In answering the first research question, there appears little doubt that in the current study classroom-based strategy intervention training changed pupils' attitudes towards speaking TL. Self-reported data from the intervention cohort, supported by teacher interview data, indicated increased enjoyment and confidence speaking TL following SBI. The latter finding resonates with those of previous SBI studies similarly conducted among secondary schoolchildren (Forbes and Fisher 2018; Lam, 2006). The present study's attitudinal data also provided an insight into experimental participants' boosted 'language ego' (Guiora 1994): following SBI, akin to Forbes and Fisher's (2018) findings, there was an increase in their self-efficacy (Bandura 1986) as speakers of French. This important concept (applicable also to wider L2 learning) was outlined by Macaro (2003). However, the magnitude of the increase in pupils' perception of speaking as their strongest skill during the current study was unexpected, especially given Ofsted's (2011) report identifying speaking as the weakest MFL skill in 80% of secondary schools visited in England.

These positive changes are particularly interesting in light of negative research findings surrounding the issue of demotivated English (L1) schoolchildren regarding MFL study (Blenkinsop et al. 2006), particularly among anglophone boys (Mitchell 2014). The fact that following SBI the intervention cohort's attitudes to speaking French improved over and above the comparison group's is an encouraging result from the current study. However, experimental participants could have been influenced by researcher effect. Besides, there is no data tracking the intervention's long-term impact,

the importance of which is acknowledged in the literature (Hassan et al. 2005; Plonsky 2011).

The positive attitudes exhibited by pupils towards speaking TL also extended to the strategy training, echoing the findings of Dörnyei's (1995) study similarly investigating schoolchildren, albeit in an EFL context.

***Is classroom-based strategy intervention training effective in this respect among both beginner (Y7) and intermediate (Y10) learners?***

Experimental classes from both year groups demonstrated a more positive attitude towards spoken TL use following intervention. Y7 appeared to have a more positive outlook than Y10 at T1, and this remained the case at T2. This appears to align with findings from previous 'transition' studies regarding overall levels of motivation towards the study of MFL (see Courtney 2017; Graham et al. 2016), which reportedly dip during Y7 but recover towards the end of the academic year. Data collected from pupils and teachers at the pre-intervention stage indicated that Y10 were overall less WTC (MacIntyre et al. 1998) in TL voluntarily in class in front of their peers than Y7. Y10 pupils also self-reported a higher level of anxiety towards speaking TL at pre-intervention than Y7. It is possible that Y10 felt more self-conscious than Y7, a concept outlined by Williams, Mercer and Ryan (2015). Yet, Y10 also self-reported a keener desire to have more opportunities to speak French. SBI was extremely effective in supporting Y10 in this aim: over the course of the intervention, there was a striking increase in Y10's confidence and self-efficacy in oral output. It is important to highlight some anomalies in the findings, notably the difference in attitudes at the pre-intervention stage, which may possibly have led to increased benefit for some groups compared to others. This attitudinal discrepancy warrants future research.

## **Limitations**

Prior to drawing conclusions and suggesting implications for practice and ways forward, there are three main limitations to acknowledge.

Due to its single school context (Aubusson, Schuck and Burden 2009), this study cannot be seen as being representative of all young-beginner and intermediate learners of MFL in England, thus limiting its wider generalisability. A further limitation arises from the lack of sample randomisation. Yet, institutional constraints prohibited such sampling, which may also have compromised ecological validity.

Second, while the cognitive test scores were a helpful way of establishing comparability between groups, the lack of L2 proficiency testing prior to intervention constitutes a second limitation. Ideally, a pre-intervention speaking assessment would have been carried out, but time constraints and the ethical obligation to ensure a manageable workload for participating teachers prohibited this.

The third limitation concerns the presence of descriptive statistics, which make it problematic to assess the reliability of findings. Additionally, given the lack of delayed post-test data, further research could track pupils' language learning over the course of KS3/4 to examine the longitudinal effectiveness of SBI.

Finally, it must be recognised that teacher and teacher-researcher effects typically constitute confounding variables in such intervention studies (Macaro and Erler 2008), thereby posing a potential threat to the validity of the present study's findings. Notwithstanding individual pupil differences, as well as efforts to monitor lessons of all experimental groups to ensure consistency regarding SBI, teacher effect could perhaps have played an influential role in pupils' enjoyment and their perceived usefulness of the training. Teacher-researcher effect may have engendered social desirability bias in pupil

questionnaire responses and interviews. Nevertheless, from an ethical perspective, informed pupil consent was a pre-requisite to participation in the current study.

## **Conclusions**

Notwithstanding the above limitations, the current study can tentatively conclude that explicit SBI, incorporating a wide range of strategies, is a productive approach to take with both beginner (Y7) and intermediate (Y10) L2 learners in the context of an all-boys selective secondary school.

Findings from the present study have indicated that the effectiveness of SBI on pupils' attitudes towards speaking in the MFL classroom is multi-dimensional, with implications for practice: increased confidence, self-efficacy and pro-activity. Further, borne out of analysis of answers to the research questions, a broad binary theme permeated the entire study: the importance of motivation and engagement among learners. These appear to be prime factors bringing impetus to learning and determining success. Nurturing motivation and engagement among pupils also serves to mitigate poor behaviour.

This study has demonstrated that SBI is effective as early as Y7. Allocating substantial time to SBI within a departmental Scheme of Work, as advocated by Ellis and Sinclair (1989) may, at this beginner stage, help to combat the 'motivational dip' (Deckner 2017) typically experienced at KS3, and perhaps stem feelings of anxiety towards TL speaking as pupils progress in their language learning career.

The present study is one of very few to have explored SBI in relation to speaking (Breen 2001; Plonsky 2011), particularly among a population of schoolchildren (Chamot 2005; Macaro and Erler 2008), and provides therefore new evidence of its potential effectiveness. Given the positive impact that SBI can have on pupils' attitudes towards speaking in the context of an all-boys selective secondary in England, future research may

focus in greater detail on the effectiveness of selected individual strategies within a strategy group, and, investigate the longitudinal impact of SBI among schoolchildren in different contexts.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1 – Pupil questionnaire A focusing on their current attitudes towards learning and speaking French, administered at both pre- and post-intervention.*

We would like to ask you some questions about learning and speaking French at school. This isn't a test and there are no right or wrong answers. We are just interested in **your** opinions which will be kept strictly private from your teachers.

**1. Which of the following describe the reasons you are learning French? (Tick the boxes of all reasons that apply to you)**

I am interested in the language	
I want to be able to speak to native French speakers	
I want to learn more about the culture	
I have friends or family who speak the language	
I may need it for my future career	
I will need it for travelling	
I may want to study abroad	
I prefer it to Spanish or German	
Other (please specify)	

**2. How important is learning French to you? (Tick one box)**

Very important	
Quite important	
Not very important	
Not at all important	

**3. Which of the following best describes your involvement in French lessons? (Tick one box)**

Very involved	
Quite involved	
Not very involved	
Not at all involved	

**4. Which of the following best describes how much you enjoy speaking French? (Tick one box)**

I enjoy speaking French very much	
I quite enjoy speaking French	
I don't particularly enjoy speaking French	
I don't like speaking French at all	

**5. Why do you say that?**

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**6. How confident do you feel about speaking French? (Tick one box)**

Extremely confident	
Fairly confident	
Not very confident	
Not at all confident	

**7. Would you like to speak more French in the classroom? (Tick one box)**

Yes	
No	

**8. What prevents you from speaking French in the classroom? (Tick the boxes of all reasons that apply to you)**

Not knowing a specific word or phrase in French	
Fear of making a mistake	
My classmates might laugh at me	
N/A – nothing prevents me	
Other (please specify)	

**9. Do you think you are making progress with French speaking skills? (Tick one box)**

Yes	
No	

**10. Would you like more opportunities to listen to French in class? (Tick one box)**

Yes	
No	

**11. Which is your strongest skill in French? (Tick one box)**

Listening	
Reading	
Speaking	
Writing	

*Appendix 2 – Overview of strategies taught in Cycle 1*

## Cycle 1: prescriptive ‘broad brush’ explicit training

STRATEGY GROUP	PRACTICAL IDEAS
Memory	Ask pupils to brainstorm past/current/possible memory strategy use; Kim’s game; snap; imagery; objects (physical response); semantic map
Cognitive	Example sentences/text or sentence builders: repetition; highlighting; translation (gapped, oral, tangled), odd one out
Communicative Compensatory	Introduce fillers (authentic transcript); add fillers to example sentences/text or sentence builders from previous work; Just a minute; role play scenarios; interpreter; cartoon
Metacognitive	Language learning notebook (set goals/objectives, new phrases, grammar rules, strategies you enjoy and find useful, notes about conversations); plan for speaking tasks/tests; organise work; self-monitor; self-evaluate
Affective	Progressive relaxation; meditation; chair yoga; music; laughter; tongue twisters; jokes; positive statements in TL; rewards; discuss feelings; cooperation vs. competition
Social	Teach common questions for clarification and verification; dictation; speed dating; survey; cooperation and empathy

Notes:

<sup>i</sup> The National Curriculum in England is divided into Key Stages. Key Stage 3 represents learners aged 11-14, and Key Stage 4 represents learners aged 14-16.

<sup>ii</sup> Cognitive Abilities Tests are administered to Y7 pupils at the beginning of the academic year to assess their learned reasoning and problem-solving abilities.

- iii Yellis is an adaptive baseline assessment administered to pupils in KS4 to gauge their strengths and weaknesses, and to predict their performance in GCSE examinations.

**Figure 1**



Figure 1. 'Strategy Island Map' for pupils to track strategy use when speaking TL during Cycle 2.

**Table 1**

Table 1. Learner group demographics drawn from school database.

Demographic factor	Class/condition					
	7E1	7E2	7C	10E1	10E2	10C
Number in class	30	30	30	17	20	21
English as L1 (%)	83%	93%	80%	94%	95%	91%
Prior hours of secondary French	26	26	26	260	260	260

Baseline ability test mean score	123.3	125.7	125.6	125.6	127.1	130.2
Teacher	A	B	C	A	D	C

Note: E = Experimental. C = Comparison.  
Baseline ability test for Y7 = Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT); Y10 = YELLIS.

**Table 2**

Table 2. Comparison of Y7 attitudes towards learning and speaking French at pre- and post-intervention stages.

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Class/condition</i>					
	7E1		7E2		7C	
	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
Learning French is very/quite important to me	23 (82%)	26 (93%)	17 (61%)	21 (75%)	22 (85%)	25 (96%)
I am very/quite involved in French lessons	25 (89%)	25 (89%)	21 (75%)	24 (86%)	20 (77%)	20 (77%)
I very much/quite enjoy speaking French	21 (75%)	26 (93%)	17 (61%)	23 (82%)	21 (81%)	21 (81%)
I am very/quite confident about speaking French	20 (71%)	23 (82%)	19 (68%)	22 (79%)	18 (69%)	19 (73%)
I am very/quite keen to speak more French	18 (64%)	20 (71%)	19 (68%)	21 (75%)	19 (73%)	20 (77%)
Speaking is my strongest skill in French	9 (32%)	11 (39%)	5 (18%)	10 (36%)	5 (19%)	5 (19%)

Note: E = Experimental. C = Comparison.  
7E1 (n=28) ; 7E2 (n=28) ; 7C (n=26).

**Table 3**

Table 3. Comparison of Y10 attitudes towards learning and speaking French at pre- and post-intervention stages.

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Class/condition</i>					
	10E1		10E2		10C	
	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
Learning French is very/quite important to me	15 (88%)	15 (88%)	14 (74%)	17 (89%)	15 (75%)	15 (75%)
I am very/quite involved in French lessons	15 (88%)	16 (94%)	18 (95%)	19 (100%)	15 (76%)	13 (66%)
I very much/quite enjoy speaking French	13 (76%)	15 (88%)	13 (68%)	14 (74%)	16 (80%)	15 (76%)
I am very/quite confident about speaking French	10 (59%)	15 (88%)	11 (58%)	13 (68%)	14 (70%)	12 (60%)
I am very/quite keen to speak more French	14 (82%)	15 (88%)	15 (79%)	16 (84%)	16 (80%)	16 (80%)
Speaking is my strongest skill in French	3 (18%)	5 (29%)	1 (5%)	6 (32%)	4 (20%)	1 (5%)

Note: E = Experimental. C = Comparison.  
10E1 (n=17); 10E2 (n= 19); 10C (n=20).