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4.9 A naturalistic inquiry of the relationship between learner beliefs and learner autonomy

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Introduction

Learner autonomy has received increasing attention in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Many educators believe that the ultimate goal of teaching is to help students become life-long, independent learners. Holec, who was one of the first to explore the concept of learner autonomy, defines autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (1981: 3). Over the last few decades, in the field of SLA, considerable effort has been expended in identifying environmental and individual factors affecting learner autonomy and conditions for fostering it (Benson 2007). However, a review of the literature on learner autonomy indicates that studies examining the effects of learner beliefs on learner autonomy are less frequent. It can be argued that it is essential to discover and identify learners' beliefs when promoting autonomous learning. This is simply because human beings are designers of their own actions (Argyris and Schön 1974). Behind all actions there are underpinning beliefs; hence, learners' autonomous learning is also governed by their beliefs.

Methodology

The present study addressed two main research questions;

1. What are the beliefs that Chinese learners hold about language learning?
2. In what ways do these beliefs affect their autonomy?

The study was carried out within an interpretative paradigm using a qualitative approach to collect data about five Chinese migrant learners over an 18 week period. The five learners were all full-time language learners, studying at a language school in a tertiary institution in New Zealand. Their age ranged between 21 and 41. Two were learning at the elementary level and three at the pre-intermediate level. To enable triangulation, data was collected using a number of instruments: one or two weekly learning journals, two in-depth interviews along with two classroom observations, as well as two follow-up stimulated recall interviews.

Major findings

The beliefs emerging from the data fell into five categories:

1. The most salient belief surfacing from the data was the significance that the learners attached to the role of exams in their learning. Four out of the five learners were of the view that exams could exert pressure and 'push' them

to revise and summarize. Shaped by these beliefs, these learners reported 'responding to test demands on the course'; 'relying on tests' as an external incentive to motivate them to learn; and 'counting on test results' to provide feedback on their learning progress.

2. Another noticeable theme was their concern for accuracy. They reported 'frequently consulting grammar reference books' and 'doing discrete grammar exercises in their own time'. Moreover, all the learners were of the opinion that error correction was 'crucial' and 'important' in their learning and they always wanted to be corrected. The consequence of these learners' concerns for accuracy was that they paid a lot of attention to formal, grammatical features of English. This led to their neglect of the communicative function of the language and their high expectations of teachers to impart correct knowledge to them.
3. All the learners held a firm belief that their own efforts were pivotal to the success of their language learning. With this emphasis, these learners were willing to take individual responsibility and strive to achieve their goals. This was evident in their consistent and substantial use of metacognitive strategies to regulate their learning by determining their own learning objectives, selecting their learning methods, and self-assessing their own progress. During this process, most of the learners demonstrated a high level of control over their own learning.
4. While they believed their own efforts led to successful learning, all the participants except one held a predominantly traditional view of the role of teachers: to teach and transmit knowledge. They expected teachers to deliver interesting lessons, clarify the confusion they had in their English learning and correct errors from their course work. They believed that teachers should exert pressure to push them to learn by giving them more exams and homework and monitoring their learning.
5. The five learners' self-efficacy beliefs varied. While three of them were doubtful of their abilities to learn English, two were very confident. The data revealed that those learners who perceived themselves as competent and capable were most likely to assume responsibility for their own learning. They tended to plan, monitor and participate actively in their learning. They also persevered in the face of obstacles during their learning and were more successful.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that learner beliefs about SLA are a complex system consisting of a set of sub-beliefs. They are not always in harmony but they are influential. The learners' levels of autonomy are related to the beliefs they hold about SLA. Some of the beliefs are more congruent with learner autonomy while others are at odds with it. It is essential for teachers to uncover these beliefs in order to promote learner autonomy and better understand how they affect the levels of learner autonomy.

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4.10 The accuracy of metacognitive monitoring in self-directed learning of L2 vocabulary depth of knowledge

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Introduction

It is not uncommon to hear L2 learners complain about the gap between knowing what a word means and knowing how to use it, with the former generally considered much easier than the latter. In vocabulary research, this distinction is characterized as size versus depth. Size boils down to connecting word forms and meanings, whereas depth goes beyond meaning to include lexical features such as collocation, register, and syntactic behavior. Because L2 learners are generally expected to self-direct much of their own vocabulary learning, this study undertook to ask how well-prepared they are for the depth-related aspects of the task.

Evidence already exists in the L2 lexicography literature that learners have trouble with vocabulary depth of knowledge insofar as they often ignore such features in dictionary entries and instead focus only on the more basic and easily accessible information. In particular, recent studies for example, by Chan (2012), suggest learners lack conceptual understanding of lexical features such as transitivity, complementation, and grammatical collocation. These features were the focus of the present investigation, subsumed under the umbrella term 'pattern' for ease of instruction and reporting. To evaluate preparedness for self-directed learning, the study centered on the process of metacognitive monitoring. This is where, for example, a learner looks at a lexical item she has just used in a composition and asks, "Am I using this word correctly?" The internally generated response to such questions are the basis on which students make strategic decisions about learning, so it is important for monitoring to be reasonably accurate.

There is a long tradition of psychological research into the accuracy of metacognitive monitoring, based on concepts such as calibration. Calibration studies usually involve giving participants some sort of objective test of knowledge