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Abstract

What beliefs do Chinese learners hold about language learning? What is the effect of these beliefs on their autonomous learning? These are the two questions that this study aims to address. I employed naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to investigate five Chinese ESL learners' beliefs about language learning and their learning behaviour. A number of instruments (interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall, learning logs) were used to collect triangulated data over a 12-week period. Following standard procedures of qualitative data analysis, I identified five categories of learners' beliefs. The results revealed that the beliefs that the learners held were context-specific, reflecting their learning experiences. Some of them were conducive to learning autonomy while others were not. The beliefs influenced the level of the learners' autonomy. The study suggests that educators should take into account learners' beliefs when promoting autonomous learning.

Key words: Chinese learners; autonomy; autonomous learning; learners' beliefs; self-efficacy; learning behavior

Introduction

Littlewood (1996) defines an autonomous person as "one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions" (p. 428). The definition highlights two important aspects of autonomy: 1) learners' ability to take charge of their own learning; 2) their independence in decision making, that is, they are able to regulate their learning without relying on others, e.g. teachers. But when operationalizing the construct, a question needs to be answered: to what extent is a learner expected to take control of their learning in order to be regarded as an autonomous learner? Nunan (1996) posits that "it [autonomy] is not absolute, but rather a relative concept" (p.26). Littlewood (1999) concurs, arguing that autonomy is a matter of degree. He distinguishes two levels of autonomy: proactive and reactive autonomy. The former "affirms [learners'] individuality and sets up directions in a world which they themselves have partially created." (p.75). In this level of autonomy, learners take partial or total ownership of many learning processes which have been traditionally regarded as teacher responsibilities, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods and materials, and evaluating progress. Reactive autonomy, on the other hand, 'does not create its own directions, but, once a direction has

been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal.' (p.75). For example, learners go through past examination papers using their own initiative and learn vocabulary without being pushed. Littlewood (1999) points out proactive autonomy is regarded as 'the only kind that counts' when the concept is discussed in the West. He argues that it is also useful to consider reactive autonomy either as 'a preliminary step towards the first or a goal in its own right' (p.75), particularly for learners in East Asian contexts. In this paper, I examine the notion of the learners' autonomy and their level of autonomy in light of Littlewood's framework.

There is a general agreement in SLA that learning autonomy is an end that all teachers and learners ought to work towards (Nunan, 1996). However, I argue before promoting autonomous learning, it is essential to detect learners' beliefs. This is simply because human beings are designers of their own actions (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Behind all actions there are beliefs that underpin them. Hence, learners' autonomous learning is also governed by their beliefs. For example, if a learner believes learning a language is about using it in communication. The learner is likely to seek opportunities on his or her own to communicate in the L2. In this respect, it is necessary to examine learner beliefs in order to detect if beliefs that learners hold are conducive or hindering to their autonomy (Cotterall, 1995). However, to date there have not been many empirical studies of this nature. This study aims to investigate the beliefs that Chinese ESL learners hold and the impact on their autonomous learning. Specifically, it addresses two questions:

1. What beliefs do Chinese learners hold about language learning?
2. What is the effect of the beliefs on their autonomous learning? In other words, do the beliefs promote or hinder their learning autonomy?

The Study

This study employed naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to collect data on 5 Chinese learners over 12 weeks in 2008[1]. Because the purpose of the study was to provide an in-depth understanding of their beliefs about language learning, purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1990) was used to select the participants - they had to be recent students from China who had been in the New Zealand education system for no longer than 6 months. The 5 learners who were voluntarily involved in this study were all full-time students: 2 were from the elementary level; 3 were from the pre-intermediate level. Table 1 gives a summary of the participants' profiles. To ensure the

reliability and dependability of the study, I gathered triangulated data by using the following instruments:

(1) Interviews: I conducted two open-ended interviews, one at the beginning and another at the end of the study. Each interview lasted around one hour. Participants were provided opportunities to articulate their thoughts on a set of questions tapping into their beliefs about language learning and their learning behavior. For example, one of the questions that I asked was this: "In your view, what is the best way to learn English?" The purpose was to uncover their beliefs about their approaches to language learning.

(2) Learning logs: I asked the participants to write one or two entries of learning logs each week, relating anything about their learning, e.g. their class activities, the role of teachers, their learning activities etc.

(3) Classroom observations and stimulated recall: I observed and video-taped the learners twice in their intact classrooms to collect data on their class behavior. Each observation lasted 90 minutes which was then followed by stimulated recall where learners watched pre-selected video clips and commented on what was happening in the classroom, what he or she was doing at that time and why (Gass & Mackey 2000).

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Name	Fey	Shan	Ding	Peng	Bing
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Age	28	41	21	25	35
Educational background	University graduate	University graduate	High school graduate	University graduate	Art academy graduate
Length of time learning in N.Z.	2 weeks	2 weeks	2 weeks	2 weeks	6 months
Length of time living in N.Z.	6 months	18 months	12 months	10 months	6 years
First time learning	Junior high school	High school	Primary school	Primary school	A few months before coming to N.Z. from a

English					private tutor.
English proficiency	Pre-intermediate	Pre-intermediate	Pre-intermediate	Elementary II	Elementary II

Data analysis

Standard procedures of qualitative data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were followed. I started with open coding the set of data for the first learner. This involved affixing codes to the units of analysis in the data which could be single words, short phrases, complete sentences, utterances or extended discourse. The open coding was then followed by category construction where I grouped the codes denoting similar themes or concepts into tentative categories. They were then tested against the second set of data for case two to see if the tentative categories existed and held up. When new tentative categories were identified, I would re-examine the previous case and added the new provisional categories to the subsequent data analysis. The recursive process continued until all the data had been analyzed and saturation point had been reached, i.e. there was no more new information or insights forthcoming. During this process, some categories remained while others were added, collated or renamed. In the end, five categories of beliefs emerged from the data.

Results and Discussion

1. Beliefs about exams.

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:

...tests can give me some pressure. Humans are lazy by nature. But if I have tests, I will treat them seriously. The revisions before the tests had a big impact on me. They made a great difference....if I revise before exams, I can perform better. Tests help you learn and give you some pressure to learn more. For me it works very well. (Shan, Int II)

Another reason for more tests was related to the evaluative feedback they received from exams:

Tests can detect what I am clear about and what I'm not so sure of. If I made mistakes in the exams, they would leave a stronger impression. Next time I won't make the same mistakes again.

(Ding, Int II)

The significance that the participants placed on the role of exams may arise from their previous learning experiences in China where exams were usually high-stake. In other words, the test results played a vital role in their lives. For instance, they were used as the criterion for admission into university, applying for jobs and career promotions. Although they were in New Zealand, the influence from their previous learning still came into play. They reported responding to the test demands on the course and relying on tests as an external incentive to motivate them to learn and to provide feedback on their learning progress. Because exams decided the direction of their learning activities, I regarded their learning autonomy as reactive.

By contrast, Fei was different. According to her,

I don't think exams have a lot of impact on my learning in New Zealand. They don't affect my entrance to university or jobs… I learn at a pace that suits me…I don't change my learning behaviour due to the demands of exams. (Fei, Int II).

In her opinion,

Exams provide very important evidence for my progress, there are many other ways. For example, if I don't look up new words as often after reading for a while, I think this is a progress. (Fei, Int I).

Apparently, Fei changed her belief about the role of exams in her learning in the new learning context. Exams were not the drive in her learning anymore. On the contrary, she was in control of her own learning. She knew how to plan and evaluate her learning. Her learning behaviour was not reactive anymore but proactive.

2. Beliefs about accuracy.

Another noticeable theme among the five participants was their concern for accuracy. All the learners were of the opinion that error correction was "crucial" and "important" in their learning. They always wanted to be corrected:

I welcome error correction all the time. Only after errors are corrected will I know what went wrong. In this way I won't make the similar mistakes next time. I don't want to repeat the same mistake twice. (Peng Int II)

In addition, Bing, Peng and Fei associated accuracy with their dignity and level of education:

If you use correct grammar and appropriate words, you will not be considered as illiterate. I hope people will consider me to be well-educated. I really care how people think of me. (Fei, Int II)

Shan and Ding expressed similar views:

"*I won't engage in communication with Kiwis until I'm sure what I said is correct.*" (Shan, Diary: 18 Aug)

Rubin (1975) lists one of the features of good language learners is their willingness to live with a certain amount of vagueness and their willingness to make mistakes. Cotteral (1995) also points out central to good language learning was learners' willingness to take risks, a behaviour which may not be as important in other school subjects, e.g. Maths or physics. The corollary of these learners' concerns for accuracy was the attention they paid to grammatical features of English. This may lead to their neglect of the communicative function of the language and their high expectations of teachers to impart the correct knowledge to them.

3. *Beliefs about their own effort.*

All the learners held a firm belief at both times that their own effort was pivotal to the success of their language learning:

You have to work hard. If you don't work hard, external factors can't change your situation.
(Fei, Int I)

Your own effort is the most important. You have to work hard. No one can help you unless you help yourself. (Shan, Int I)

Their beliefs in the value of their own effort meant that 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:

(1) determining their own learning goals:

Most people say I should listen more and speak more. But my listening is okay. If I know the word, I will understand it regardless how it was said and in what environment. So for me it is vocabulary size that prevents me. Only after I have had enough words can I improve my listening and speaking. So I have to consolidate vocabulary and memorize more vocabulary. (Bing, Int I)

 (2) selecting their learning methods:

My main obstacle still lies in vocabulary, i.e. I can't remember spellings. It is very frustrating…I think it would be great if we could form learning groups. Apart from learning in class, we could learn in groups outside class where we could discuss grammar, memorize wordlists, practise speaking and grammar, use words and help each other learn. (Bing, Diary 23-09)

and (3) self-assessing their progress:

…during my conversation with Mohamud [her classmate], I had to ask him to write down what he said in order to understand what he said…this means that my English is still far behind. Otherwise, why are the teachers and the other fellow students able to understand [him] not me? (Shan, Diary 13-08)

During this process of self-regulated learning, most of the learners demonstrated proactive autonomy, that is, they made independent decisions about their learning objectives, learning methods and self-assessment. Gan's study (2009) compared students from the mainland and Hong Kong also found that the mainland students use more self-directed strategies, which he attributed to their institutional context and social environment, e.g. under-resourced teaching staff and teaching facilities.

4. The Role of the teacher

While they believed their own efforts led to successful learning, all the learners except Fei 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 some pressure to push them to learn by giving more exams and homework and monitoring their learning:

Teachers should give pressure to students and monitor them, for example, their homework and class performance. The pressure should be moderate so that students are able to achieve it. Lessons should be interesting and you won't feel bored so you can focus on them. The way they teach should be heuristic. They can clarify concepts. They can use class activities and a variety of teaching techniques to get students involved. Although the teaching content is from textbooks, they can present it differently. (Peng, Int II)

It appears that the learners expected their teacher to take charge of their learning. Their beliefs about the importance of their own effort and the role of teachers were clearly in conflict. How could they emphasize their own effort on the one hand and yet expect their teachers to take responsibility for their learning on the other hand? The paradox can be explained if I trace the source of the conflicting beliefs. Most Chinese learners grow up with the value that diligence is a virtue, which is inculcated at home, at school and in the society. Working hard is a desired social behaviour. There are many sayings in China about the value of hard work, for instance, "constant grinding can turn an iron bar to a needle." The role of students is to work hard using the resources they have been given and to persist in pursuing the goals that have been set for them, mostly by their parents, relatives or teachers.

On the other hand, teachers have been held in high esteem in the Chinese society. Teachers of today may not hold the same status as is reflected in such an ancient saying as "He who has taught a person for a day deserves the same respect as his or her father for a lifetime." However, the traditional views of teachers are still deeply seated in the Chinese society. Along with the reverence for teachers come the high expectations of teachers. They are expected to set a good example and to teach and build the moral characters of students. Their responsibilities for their students go beyond the curriculum requirements. For example, they also include the pastoral care of their students. In such social context, learners were barely given opportunities to make independent choices regarding their learning objectives and resources, which was taken for granted to be their teachers' responsibility. Learners were not expected to manifest proactive autonomy but they had to demonstrate a high level of reactive autonomy.

When the learners came to the new learning context, New Zealand, they expected teachers to play the same roles as their counterparts in China. Whereas teachers in New Zealand embrace the notion of learning centredness or learner-centredness (see Nuan, 1996 for details). They see themselves more as a facilitator, a class manager and organizer rather than as an authority figure in the classroom. A mismatch between teachers and learners arose:

In China, teaching is regarded as more than a job. It comes with solemn responsibilities. Teachers think for their students as to what to do outside the classroom and how to help them pass exams. In New Zealand, teachers don't think about this for their students. Teaching is just a job for them.
(Bing, Int II)

An exception to this general pattern was Fei. She demonstrated that she had the ability to take full charge of her own learning. At both times she was of the view that *"one shouldn't over rely on teachers. Teachers were a guide. How far you can go as a learner is entirely at your disposal"* (Fei, Int I). She planned her learning goals on her own, selected her own materials and self-assessed her learning progress (e.g. communicating in real life). The following quote illustrates how Fei set her learning goal and chose her own learning materials:

{*I think with my current English level I should act from the basics. For example, [I should] enlarge my vocabulary, practise grammar and do more speaking and listening. More haste less speed. I have to do things one at a time. In the future, I'd like to learn more and read more. Eventually I can combine the two cultures together…I believe the best thing to start off is to read some books which are higher than my current English level. Reading valuable books is the best way.*}

(Fei, Int I)

In this regard, Fei was entirely self-directed. She demonstrated a high level of proactive autonomy.

5. *Self-efficacy beliefs.*

A noticeable change among the learners was their self-efficacy belief. Self-efficacy is a construct that originates in the work of Bandura (1977a, 1997). He defines perceived self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of actions required to produce given levels of attainments" (Bandura, 1998, p.624). In this definition, it is clear that self-efficacy deals with personal judgements about one's control over behaviour itself. Therefore, self-efficacious language learners will be equally autonomous as they are confident about their ability to control their learning and take actions.

Table 2 compares the learners' perceived self-efficacy at time 1 and time 2. It shows that the five learners' perceived self-efficacy about learning English varied at time 1. While Peng and Fei were very confident about their abilities to learn English, Bing, Ding and Shan held a low self-efficacy belief about their capabilities. Their levels of self-efficacy ranged between 3 and 4. The interview data provided some insights. Bing's low self-efficacy seems to be related to the belief that *"I don't have good memory"* (Int I). Shan also believed that poor memory constituted a major barrier in her language learning. In addition, she considered herself to be lacking in perseverance. She was not sure '*if I can persist with my learning to the end*' (Int I). Finally, Ding considered herself to be '*very low*' in aptitude. She did not believe in herself and relied on teachers to give feedback on her progress and asked her friends to help with her homework.

Table 2

Comparison of the learners' self-rated self-efficacy at times 1 & 2

	Bing	Peng	Ding	Shan	Fei
Time 1	4	8	3	4	10
Time 2	6	8	6	8	10

* The self-rating scale ranges from 1 to 10. 10 is the maximum.

However, at time 2, to a varying degree, the five learners had all become more confident. According to Ding,

Now I'm completely different. I know better about myself. I know which skills I am good at and which I am not. Although I am still not very clear [about grammar], I have my own opinions now.
(Ding, Int II)

Shan's self-rated confidence about learning English shifted from 4 to 8. She did not '*feel English difficult to learn anymore*" (Shan, Int II). Her "*motivation to learn has been boosted*" (Shan, Int II). She believed "*If I work hard, I can handle it [English]*" (Shan, Int II).

What has given rise to the changes? Shan attributed the changes to the school, the teachers and her language progress:

I felt that this[her confidence] had to do with teachers and school management so I want to continue to learn. If I came across teachers who didn't take teaching seriously and who didn't care about attendance, I would've given up half way through…I have studied for only 3 months but I feel that I have made huge progress. Now I have become more confident. I know as long as I don't stop learning, I'm confident that I can learn the language well. (Shan, Int II)

Ding also linked the growth of her self-efficacy to her language progress:

In the past I never believed what I said was correct as I really didn't know. Now I have learned a lot of grammar and I know the reason why it is correct. I don't ask him [her friend] for help anymore. I feel he is not as good as I am and why I should believe in him. (Ding, Int II)

It seems when learners see some tangible changes after comparing where they were before and where they are now, they become more motivated to learn and their confidence about their

ability increases. This suggests that language proficiency enhances the learners' self-efficacy and autonomy.

In comparison, Peng and Fei's self-efficacy was very high. At both times, Peng rated his capability at 8. His confidence seems to come from the realistic goal he set for himself:

My goal is to be able to communicate in daily life. I think it is achievable. (Peng, Int I)

Fei, on the other hand, was an extremely confident person. Her high self-efficacy seems to be related to her past successful mastery experiences in learning. Successes have helped her develop into an extremely confident person. At both times, she rated her ability to learn English at the maximum of 10. In her view,

I believe you have to believe in yourself so that you can make progress. I believe the only person you can rely on was yourself and your own effort. (Fei, Int I)

The finding suggests when students perceive themselves as competent and capable, they are most likely to learn autonomously. That is, they tend to plan, monitor, and participate in their learning. They may be more likely to persevere in face of obstacles in learning and achieve in their future learning.

Conclusion

This paper reported on a qualitative case study investigating the effect of the learners' beliefs on their learning autonomy. It identified five beliefs that the learners held about the role of exams and teachers, about the importance of their own effort and accuracy and about their self-efficacy. These beliefs were constructed in the social and learning contexts the learners had been in. Some of them were more conducive to autonomous learning (e.g. effort and self-efficacy) while others were not (e.g. the role of teacher and importance of accuracy). These beliefs were very complex and sometimes were contradictory. For instance, their beliefs about the role of teachers were at odds with those about the importance of their own effort. Furthermore, the beliefs that the learners held played a significant role in their learning and influenced their learning autonomy. The study also revealed that the learners varied in their level of autonomy. While Fei's autonomy at both times

was predominantly proactive, the other learners were initially more reactive. However, at time 2, they also showed an increase in proactive autonomy. This variation and development appear to be related to the different beliefs they held about language learning.

The findings suggest that it is essential to understand the beliefs that learners hold about the different aspects of their language learning and the extent to which learners' behaviour is influenced by these beliefs. This understanding can help teachers promote learner autonomy and avoid misunderstandings between their intention and learners' interpretation. In order to be aware of their learner's beliefs, teachers should encourage their learners to express them overtly. This can be done by asking them formally (e.g. with interview questions) and /or informally (e.g. at the end of a class activity) (see Barkhuizen, 1998, for details). Once they have become aware of their learners' perceptions, teachers can plan and implement more effective strategies aimed at fostering learner autonomy.

Notes on the contributor

Qunyan Zhong is a lecturer at Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand, teaching English as an additional language to adult immigrant learners. She holds an MA in Applied Linguistics and also an MA in Linguistics. Currently she is at the last stage of her doctoral study. She has been teaching ESL for over 10 years and her research interests are learner beliefs, learning strategies, and classroom research and SLA.

NOTES

1. The participants were part of a case study which involved 8 learners. The research project had a number of aims:
   1) To examine the evolution of learner beliefs over the observed period
   2) To investigate the changes of the learners' learning strategy use

3) To examine the relationships between beliefs and learning strategy use and their effects on the changes in language proficiency

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