

Learner Beliefs and Learner Autonomy:
A Case Study of Two Chinese Migrant Learners in New Zealand

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Abstract

This study employed a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to investigate two Chinese migrant learners' beliefs about language learning and the impact of these on their levels of autonomy. A number of instruments were used to collect triangulated data over an 18-week period. Following qualitative data analysis, the study identified four categories of beliefs. The results reveal that the learners varied in the beliefs they held about language learning. Some of them were more conducive to learner autonomy while others were at odds. Their beliefs influenced their levels of autonomy. The study suggests that educators should take into account learners' beliefs when promoting autonomous learning.

Full Abstract

Learner autonomy has received increasing attention in SLA. However, a literature review indicates that empirical studies focusing on the impact of individual learner factors on learner autonomy are scarce. This study employed a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to investigate the relationship between two Chinese migrant learners' beliefs about language learning and their levels of learner autonomy. A number of instruments (interviews, classroom observations, stimulated recall interviews and learning logs) were used to collect triangulated data over an 18-week period. Following standard procedures of qualitative data analysis, the

study identified four categories of learners' beliefs. The results reveal that the learners varied in the beliefs they held about language learning. Some of them were more conducive to learner autonomy while others were at odds. Their beliefs influenced their levels of autonomy. The study suggests that educators should take into account learners' beliefs when promoting autonomous learning. The paper concludes with some practical instructional recommendations.

Keywords: Chinese learners, learner autonomy, learner beliefs, levels of autonomy

Background to this study

Learner autonomy has received increasing attention in recent years (see Benson, 2007; Esch, 2009, for a detailed review). It is widely acknowledged that the ultimate goal of teaching is to help students become life-long, independent learners and that learner autonomy is an end that all teachers and learners ought to work towards. Holec (1981), the first person who introduced the concept in his seminal report, defined autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (p. 3). This definition emphasizes two key elements. One is the association of autonomy with an attribute of learners. Another is the idea of taking control. In his view, 'autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes' (p. 3). In recent years, questions have been raised and some researchers have argued that this notion of autonomy is based on Western values and that other factors, particularly contexts and cultures, should be taken into account (Benson, 2007; Gao & Lamb, 2011; Stewart & Irie, 2012). Littlewood (1999), for example, contended autonomy is a matter of degree. His distinction of two levels of autonomy: reactive and proactive, has been widely cited. He defined reactive autonomy '[it] 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). Learners going through past examination papers using their own initiative and learning vocabulary without being pushed are

some examples of this kind. Proactive autonomy, on the other hand, ‘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. Littlewood (1999) pointed out proactive autonomy is regarded as ‘the only kind that counts’ when the concept of autonomy is discussed in the West. However, he believed it is also useful to consider reactive autonomy either as ‘a preliminary step towards the first [proactive autonomy] or a goal in its own right’ (p. 75). In this study, I examine the notion of autonomy and learners’ autonomy levels in light of Littlewood’s framework.

Given the importance of learner autonomy, substantial work has been carried out to find out ways to foster it. The development of numerous self-access/independent learning centres in many institutions worldwide is an outcome of this effort. However, as Benson (2007) pointed out in his review that most of the current studies remain at a theoretical level and empirical investigations are not common. Particularly studies aiming to examine individual learner factors that influence learner autonomy are very scarce in the literature. I argue that, in order to promote independent learning, it is essential to detect learners’ beliefs. As Argyris and Schön (1974) pointed out human beings are designers of their own actions. Behind all actions underlie beliefs. Hence, learners’ autonomous learning is also governed by their beliefs. By examining learner beliefs, educators can gauge if the beliefs that learners hold are conducive to or hindering to their autonomy (Cotterall, 1995; Zhong, 2010). This study aimed to fill in this gap. It addressed the following questions:

1. In what ways do learners vary in their beliefs about language learning?
2. How do the differences in learner beliefs affect their levels of autonomy?

The Study

Participants and context

This inquiry is part of a broader study into the beliefs and learner strategy use of Chinese learners and their impact on learning English in a New Zealand context (see Zhong, 2012 for a full report and detailed description of methodology). It was conducted at a language school of a tertiary institution in New Zealand. The research site was chosen because it represented a typical environment where migrants went to learn English in New Zealand. The study was carried out within an interpretative paradigm using a qualitative approach to collect data on Chinese learners over an 18-week period. A purposeful sampling was employed (Patton, 1990). The criterion used to identify potential participants was that they had to be recent Chinese migrants who studied in a New Zealand context for no more than six months. The participants were recruited at two different times over one academic year. The same ethics procedures were followed rigorously. First, all the eligible students were approached by the school administrators. After they had agreed to participate in the study, the researcher gave them detailed information about the study, reassuring them that they could withdraw from the study at any time and their confidentiality would be protected. A total of 15 participants voluntarily got involved in the study. Two participants quit the study at week 8 and 13 of them continued until the research was complete. The 13 participants were studying different courses in the programme. Four were from the Intermediate level, six from the Pre-intermediate and three from the Elementary two level. Due to the scope and space limitations in this report, I chose two representative learners, focusing on the relationship between their beliefs and their levels of autonomy, which was one of the major themes to emerge from the broader study. This narrow focus enabled me to conduct an in-depth and meaningful analysis of the phenomenon and shed further light on learner autonomy.

The two learners were Ling and Feng (pseudonyms used for confidentiality). Ling was a 26-year-old female learner. She graduated from a vocational school in China. She started learning English at secondary school in China. When the study was conducted, Ling had been in New Zealand for six months. She was living with her aunt and a cousin as her father had remarried in New Zealand and her mother was in China. Her cousin had been in New Zealand since she was 11 years old, so Ling could get some help in learning from her cousin. After Ling came to New Zealand, she did not enrol in a language school. Instead she found two part-time jobs: as a shop assistant in a Chinese clothing shop and as a cleaner in a Chinese restaurant. Every day she went home at about 9pm. She wanted to change her life situation, so she decided to learn English. When her English was good enough, she wanted to find a decent job or set up her own boutique shop in New Zealand. This was her first English learning experience in New Zealand.

Feng was a 43-year-old male learner. Although he had acquired permanent resident status in New Zealand, he had been working at a university in China teaching interior design. He was on sabbatical leave to visit his wife in New Zealand. His wife started as an international student and was granted permanent residency in New Zealand after graduation, working for a private education provider. When the study was conducted, Feng had been in New Zealand for one year and had studied in this language school for 6 months.

Feng had learned some very basic English as a general subject at a university in China in 1981. It was an era when China had just resumed its educational system shortly after the Cultural Revolution. Grammar translation was the predominant teaching method. Feng felt he hardly learned English at that time. Since graduation from university, he had barely used English in his work. Just before he came to New Zealand, he went to a three-month intensive English training programme to brush up on his English. After he arrived in New Zealand, he immediately enrolled

in the language school. Now he was in his second semester. Unlike Ling, Feng did not want to settle down in New Zealand. He learned English in order to read information in English.

Both Feng and Ling were full-time, pre-intermediate students. As full-time students they had to study two courses. One of the courses focused on core skills in English: speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation and grammar while another was on different aspects of New Zealand, e.g., its history, education, social customs, government, etc. Each course involved nine hours of classroom-based study per week over 16 study weeks. A full-time student had a total of 18 classroom contact hours a week. According to the Programme Handbook, one of the major aims of the course was 'to develop students' language skills to a point where they are able to pursue individual vocational, work, further study, and social/ community goals'.

Feng and Ling were from the same class. There were 25 students in the class and they were from diverse cultural backgrounds. One third of the students were from China; another third were from Africa and the rest from Iran, India and other countries.

Data Collection Procedures

A number of instruments were used to gather triangulated data to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

1. Learning logs: Learners were asked to write one or two journal entries per week about anything relating to their language learning.
2. Interviews: Two open-ended interviews, one at the beginning and another at the end of the study, tapping into the learners' beliefs concerning language learning and their subsequent actions in learning English.
3. Class observations: Two observations were carried out in their intact classrooms with each lasting 120 minutes. Both observations were video recorded with the permission of the teachers and learners involved.

4. Stimulated recall interviews: Subsequent to the class observations, two sessions of stimulated recall were conducted. During the process, the 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).

Data analysis

Data analysis was based on the principles of qualitative research methods and followed the inductive process of coding for themes→ looking for patterns→ making interpretations→ building theory (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I first transcribed and translated all the data I gathered in order to get the feel of them. Then I read them repeatedly while jotting down notes in the margins. After several readings, I started open coding the set of data for Ling. During the line-by-line scrutiny of the data, codes were affixed to the units of analysis which could be single words, short phrases, complete sentences, utterances or extended discourse. They expressed her beliefs about language learning and the strategies she used. Data reduction followed after that. Similar themes were grouped into tentative categories. Propositional statements were made for each of these categories. For example, I subsumed all her comments about learning grammar, speaking, reading, writing and the best way to learn English under one category, the proposition of which was ‘beliefs about learning a second language’. All the categories were then tested against the second set of data for case two, Feng, to see if the tentative categories existed and held up. If new tentative categories were identified, I would re-examine the previous case and add the new provisional categories to the subsequent data analysis. Finally, theory was built to interpret the findings. It was a process of recursive analysis where data were read repeatedly; new codes were added until saturation was reached, i.e.,

no new themes were found, and salient themes, categories or recurring patterns began to emerge. During this process, research questions were frequently referred to, literature was revisited, and negative evidence and contradictions were watched for and accommodated.

Results and Discussion

Beliefs about language learning

Four categories of beliefs emerged from the data. The results reveal a number of differences in the beliefs the two learners held about language learning.

1. Beliefs about learning a second language

The most salient and firm belief Ling held was that learning a language was about using it. The best way to achieve this was through exposing herself to English and learning from real life. Ling felt that living in an English-speaking country offered her the best environment to do so. She believed she could learn anywhere and textbooks were not the only source. She wrote:

there are far more opportunities to learn English in real life. It all depends on you. Learning doesn't mean burying yourself in the book for three hours in the classroom or at home. I'm now living in an English speaking country. I can learn anywhere. I can even learn some useful words and usage from the billboards on the street. (Diary: 12/10)

Of the four skills in English, she regarded speaking as the most important. She believed the best way to improve her speaking was to stay in touch with Kiwis and make more Kiwi friends.

In contrast, Feng placed a great emphasis on the role of tests in his study, believing it was critical to do well in exams. To his mind, low scores in tests meant 'a loss of face'. Although he felt he was over-assessed and stressed out by the different types of tests on the courses, he felt the benefits of taking tests outweighed the drawbacks. According to Feng,

... you have to be tested as a student. You could not do as well without pressure from study. Tests force you to study hard... people are generally lazy. Like me, if there were no assessments, I wouldn't work as hard. I must study hard for the tests...learning and testing are a process of transformation. Through this process you improve. Tests are a criterion and they can assess how well you have learned.

(Interview II: 25/11)

The significance that Feng placed on the role of exams may arise from his previous learning experiences in China where exams were usually high-stake. For instance, they were used as *the* criterion for admission into university, applying for jobs and career promotions. Although he was in New Zealand, the influence from his previous learning still came into play.

2. Beliefs about accuracy

Ling's beliefs about accuracy went through some changes. In the first interview, she believed it was essential to be corrected. She felt if mistakes were not corrected, they might become fossilized and people would regard her English as poor. She felt grateful if she was corrected. She recalled her learning experience with her cousin like this:

every time she(cousin) corrected me, I jotted down notes. Now when I write, I can use tenses well [...] if I wasn't corrected, I may speak like that [wrong English] forever. I may get my message across, [but] they [Kiwis] may feel that my English was not as good. (Interview I: 18/09)

However, in the second interview, while she still considered error correction to be important, she became more relaxed and tolerant about errors. She commented:

I like being corrected, but it is all right. When I talk with Kiwis, they won't point out that you have made mistakes or you shouldn't use this tense. I believed they

don't point them (mistakes) out but they understood what I meant. That is what matters. (Interview II: 25/11)

Feng, on the other hand, insisted at both interviews that accuracy was paramount. According to him,

it is critical to be corrected, particularly in writing. If errors are not corrected, it means I haven't learned anything. Every time I received corrections from the teacher, I'd go home to learn them to make sure I won't make the same mistake again next time. (Interview I: 18/09)

Rubin (1975) listed 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. Cotterall (1995) also pointed out that central to good language learning is learners' willingness to take risks. The corollary of Feng's concerns for accuracy was the attention he paid to formal, grammatical properties of English. This may lead to neglect of the communicative function of the language and his high expectations of teachers of imparting the correct knowledge to him.

3. Self-efficacy beliefs

A noticeable change in Ling was her self-efficacy belief. According to Wenden (1991), self-efficacy is concerned with learners' confidence in themselves as learners. There are two components. One is learners' confidence in their ability to learn a language and another is learners' confidence in their ability to self-direct and manage their learning. It is apparent that self-efficacious language learners will be autonomous as they are confident about their ability to control their learning and take actions. At the outset, Ling doubted her ability and did not have enough confidence in her ability to learn English well. She felt 'it was just impossible' for her to communicate in English fluently. Being fluent was like 'a fantasy land'. She did not feel her

speaking and listening skills were as good as her Iranian classmates. As her English progressed, her confidence had grown. In the second interview, she commented:

now my English has improved so much and my confidence has grown at the same time. Before I thought only teachers knew if I made progress or not and I ignore myself... I thought teachers were very important in my learning. Now I felt my own efforts were more important. I can learn without teachers. I can now leave my teachers and continue to learn with my own methods. (Interview II: 25/11)

It seems that 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 confirms Zhong's (2010, 2012) findings that language proficiency enhances learners' self-efficacy and autonomy.

However, Feng's self-efficacy remained unchanged. In his view, his memory was not as good as his fellow classmates due to his age and most of his classmates had been in New Zealand for a longer time than he had. He felt his listening and speaking were weak and his writing was at elementary level.

Both Feng and Ling tried to monitor their own progress. The major difference between them was that Ling evaluated her progress by comparing herself. When she knew she was more competent to do what she had been unable to do in the past, her confidence grew. Feng, on the other hand, compared himself with others. After each comparison, he felt inferior. Bandura (1997, 1998) suggested that one of the methods to enhance self-efficacy is to encourage learners to compare with themselves rather than with others.

4. Beliefs about collaborative learning

Ling and Feng recalled when they learned English in China, both teaching and learning were aimed for exams. There were barely any interactive activities among learners or between teachers

and learners. The teaching methods were very ‘traditional and backwards’. They were not motivated to learn. Now in New Zealand, teaching was very ‘engaging’ and ‘interactive’. Learning involved working in pairs or groups. Ling enjoyed learning collaboratively. Although she sometimes found it hard to follow those fellow students with strong L1 accents, she also realized the importance of understanding English spoken both by Kiwis and by people from other countries. She regarded pair/group work as an opportunity to share and exchange ideas and thoughts. She commented

when working in groups and pairs, I could talk to different people and get to know different opinions. They may express same opinions in a different way. I should not only understand Kiwi English but also English spoken by people from different countries. (Interview: 25/11)

While Ling was positive about working in groups and pairs, Feng held a different view. In his opinion,

working in pairs or groups may work for others but not me because I don't have enough vocabulary. I found it difficult to understand others due to my weak listening. I can't play an active role. It was a complete waste of time. I prefer to listen to the teacher. (Stimulate recall II: 22/10)

It seems that Feng's negative view about collaborative learning was related to his English proficiency and his reliance on teachers to impart knowledge to him. This suggests that when learners regarded teachers as an authority figure and the font of knowledge, they were unlikely to enjoy learning from peers.

Different as they are, Ling and Feng also share some beliefs in common. First of all, both Ling and Feng believed that learning new words was important. Both learners were identified to look up new words frequently during the class observations. Also, both learners were not

satisfied with their learning back in China but had very positive and pleasant learning experiences in New Zealand. Finally, both learners considered their own effort to be pivotal to successful learning.

Beliefs and level of autonomy

The results reveal that the two learners varied in terms of their levels of autonomy and the variations seem to be related to the different beliefs they held. Underpinned by her beliefs that ‘the best way to learn English is to keep in touch with Kiwis and use the language’ (Interview I: 18/09), Ling reported making every effort to create opportunities to use English and communicate with others in real life. Whilst at school she purposefully chose to sit next to a Korean fellow student so that she could ‘force’ herself to speak in English. Ling lived closely in a Chinese community and was surrounded with Chinese people and Chinese language in her daily life. Despite the fact that she seldom had opportunity to use English outside of class, she took actions and created opportunities for herself. She made Kiwi friends online and practised English with them; she saw her workplace as a second classroom and asked her customers to explain new words to her.

Ling’s high self-efficacy beliefs meant that she did not believe that teachers were there to take charge of her learning; hence she was actively involved with her learning. She constantly monitored and evaluated her progress in terms of what she was more able to communicate in real life rather than the scores she had received from tests. Therefore, she was able to judge her own progress as she knew that she was more competent at work and she was able to do more than she used to. She wrote,

I remember when I first came there [the shop], I could barely speak. Most customers there were Maori and Indians. I couldn't understand their accents at all. Over the past three months I have learned many words [...] I believe overall I am competent for the job now. (Diary: 16/09/07)

As her self-confidence grew, she became more capable of charting her own language journey. Reflecting on her learning in China, she felt she never knew if she progressed. That was because the criteria to assess her progress were test results and teachers' praises, both of which were in the hands of others, whereas 'now I feel it is only I and myself who know if I have progressed or not. I can now leave school and learn by myself and with my own methods' (Interview II: 25/11).

It is evident that Ling's learning went beyond her course requirements. She experimented with learning methods that worked for her and created her own learning environment. She assumed strong control of her own learning. In this regard, she demonstrated herself as a proactive autonomous learner.

In comparison, Feng's learning was shaped by the firm belief that doing well in tests was critical. He assessed his progress in terms of test results rather than what he could do in real life. All his learning activities revolved around tests. He spent a lot of time in the library preparing for his tests and revising his past test papers. After each test, he reflected on tests and evaluated his test strategies. During the school semester break, he made up an interim study plan:

a. revising all the test papers that teachers have given to us so far. b. doing listening practice for a few times in the library. c. preparing for the upcoming test[writing]. d. if time is enough, revising all the reading texts that the teachers have taught. (Diary: 21/09)

When the test weeks approached, he made plans for his test preparation. The speaking assessment for his course was a casual conversation in the form of role play where students were asked to find their own partner. He set the criteria for his prospective partner. He wrote in his diary,

My partner should be like this: 1. he/she is not from other countries. 2. often studies in the library. 3. speaks clearly and slowly. 4. is easy to get along. 5. is better in English. (Dairy: 23/10)

He found a fellow student that met his criteria. They both passed their test easily.

Feng constantly reflected on his learning and monitored his own progress. When he found his listening was the weakest link in his learning, he decided to spend more time listening to the tapes in the institution self-access centre. Every day he spent the entire afternoon doing self-directed study there. He listened to the tapes repeatedly and gradually he found he could understand more. Other learning actions that Feng reported taking outside of class included revising what he learned during the day and completing his homework. He reported responding to the test demands of the courses and relying on tests as an external incentive to push him to learn and to provide feedback on his learning progress.

Feng's learning was responsive to the course demands. His learning was confined to the institution, either in the classroom or in the library/self-access learning centre. The direction and control of his learning activities were governed by external forces (e.g., exams) rather than by himself. In this regard, his autonomy was more of a reactive nature.

Conclusion and Practical Implications

The aim of this study was twofold. One was to detect the beliefs that the two Chinese learners held about language learning and another was to examine the impact of these beliefs on their autonomy. The results reveal that Ling's predominant belief was that learning was about using the language. Underpinned by this belief, Ling focused on using the language and communicating

with others. She made every effort in real life to create opportunities to use the language. She also evaluated her progress in terms of what she was more able to communicate in real life rather than what she could do in the test papers. As she progressed, she knew that she was more competent at work and more capable of communicating in real life. Consequently her self-confidence grew. She became more tolerant with errors in her English and more willing to work with people from other backgrounds. She felt she was capable of charting her own language journey. Feng, however, held a strong, but narrower, belief that doing well in tests was critical and good scores saved him from ‘losing face’. Shaped by this belief, he spent a lot of time in the library preparing for his tests, revising his past test papers and reflecting on how he could improve his test performance in the future. He evaluated his progress in terms of test results rather than what he could do in real life. His learning was responsive to the course requirements.

Similar to Cotterall (1995) and Zhong’s (2010) studies, this research has provided another piece of empirical evidence that beliefs influence learner autonomy and that before promoting autonomy, we need to detect learners’ beliefs and gauge their readiness for autonomy (Cotterall, 1995, 2008; Wenden, 1991). There are a number of ways where teachers can investigate beliefs their learners hold about language learning (see Barkhuizen, 1998 for more suggestions). Some of my suggestions include:

1. Asking learners to write. Most language learners are keen to write in the target language and would like their teachers to read and correct their writing. The writing can take different forms, e.g. learning journals, letters to the teacher, compositions or paragraphs. Learners can be asked to write about their perceptions of language learning or of a certain class activity. Some of the writing topics could be:
 - My view of a good teacher/learner;
 - The best way to learn English;

- My favourite class activity;
- My strengths/weaknesses in language learning;
- Why I learn English.

Through reading their learners' writing, teachers can become aware of their learners' beliefs and help them to make informed decisions about teaching. For example, after identifying their learners' beliefs, teachers may decide to do more error correction or use more collaborative editing.

2. Asking learners to talk. Teachers could invite their learners to talk about their beliefs.

This could be conducted one-on-one with a student privately or with the whole class.

The purpose is to create an opportunity for learners to talk about their learning and for teachers to become aware of their learners' perceptions.

3. More formally, administering a simple questionnaire to survey learners' beliefs.

This understanding can assist teachers to address those beliefs which they believe are at odds with learner autonomy so that they can plan and implement more effective strategies aimed at fostering independent learning. At the same time, learners can also benefit from reflecting on the beliefs they hold and become more self-regulatory.

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Notes

1. The broader investigation was a doctoral research study. It had a number of aims:
 - 1) To examine the evolution of the Chinese 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 the effects on their language proficiency

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