Investigating students' beliefs about autonomy in an Arab setting

Al Ghazali, F

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Investigating Learners’ Beliefs about Autonomy in ESL Learning

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Introduction

• Why this research?

- Learner autonomy has been perceived as an optimal learning aim assumed to lead to effective and efficient learning (Little, 2007).

- It enhances learners’ responsibility and independence in taking decisions and making choices on language learning (Benson, 2001).

- It promotes learners’ centredness and interaction through which real learning occurs (Lantolf, 2000).

- English language gains exceptional interest in the UAE and fostering learners’ autonomy underpins their confidence to explore new learning pathways through which their English can be improved.
Background

- What is the research problem/gap?

  - Previous research in applied linguistics and TESOL landscape used to universalise autonomy through provision of learner training and learning opportunities (Schmenk, 2005).

  - This approach mainstreams autonomy and assumes that learners are likely to behave independently in any context given that they are provided with appropriate resources and technical support.

  - This approach has deficit representation of autonomy where learners are described as autonomous based on their endorsement to certain criteria.

  - This approach ignores contextual elements and educational limitations that govern the way students act and interact.
Aims and Objectives

• What do you hope to achieve?

➢ Give more prominence to the contextual approach which views each learner as autonomous in his own sense.

➢ Fostering learner autonomy starts from the bottom; that is from learners and their beliefs about strengths and limitations of context.

• How you intend to achieve it?

➢ By investigating learners’ beliefs, it can be possible to see how they interpret their autonomy and why they behave in this way.
• Methodological steps

- This study adopts an emic epistemology which helps to study a phenomenon from the insiders (students) themselves.

- It supports a subjectivist ontology which views learners’ beliefs as dynamic, evolving, emergent, and experiential and carry different interpretations.

- Conducting focus group interviews for understanding perspectives of autonomy and for feeding in a questionnaire with enough ideas.

- Applying a Likert-type questionnaire for knowing how these beliefs are represented by large sample of respondents for generalisability.
Results

• Main findings

- Autonomy (ability to take charge of one’s own learning) is not independent from social and educational influences like:
  - Contextual and curricular influences (strengths & limitations)
  - Psychological influences (ESL is a shared responsibility)
  - Socio-economic influences (importance/prevalence of English)
  - Personal and academic influences (university/job market)
Limitations?

- This study is only applied in public schools in the UAE; hence:
- Other *correlational studies* need to be done in public and private schools to see how learning settings influence autonomy.
- Other studies need to be done to scrutinise teachers’ beliefs about autonomy and their interpretation of the social and educational context.
Contribution to Knowledge

- Results of this study help to gain insights on how autonomy is interpreted in TESOL landscape in a very progressing context.

- They help educational authorities in the UAE to gain insights on how the learning context can be improved for promoting learner independence.

- They help to see how the linguistic competence can be promoted from the viewpoint of students themselves.
Thank You