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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.

Research Methods

- **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