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