Methods of Investigating Students' Beliefs about Autonomy

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Research Title

Learner Autonomy in the UAE Secondary Schools:

An investigation of students' beliefs and conceptions of autonomy in learning English as a second language

Definition of Autonomy

- 'The ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec, 1981: 3)

- 'The situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions' (Dickinson, 1991: 11).

- 'A capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1999: 4).

- 'The ability to take more control over the purposes for which people learn language and the ways in which they learn them' (Benson, 2004: 1).

Identity of Autonomy

Who can decide that learners are autonomous or non-autonomous?

- Is autonomy invented and created by the teacher?

OR

- Is autonomy discovered and promoted by the teacher?

Schools of Autonomy

- **Mainstream Autonomy**

  What: Autonomy is created, developed, and promoted through technical and psychological instruments where learner training and teacher's support are its basic tools.

  Why: The rationale of this school is to increase students' independence and enable them to make learning choices.

  How: Autonomy is reduced to choices about which video to watch and which resource to use (Pennycook, 1997).

Schools of Autonomy

- **Contextual Autonomy**

  What: Every learner is autonomous in his own sense and this autonomy is impacted by social and educational contexts and the factors controlling them (Holliday, 2003).

  Why: Studying autonomy is for understanding features of the context as interpreted by students for improving it.

  How: Autonomy manifests itself in different ways and degrees, and technical development is one of its means.

Definition of Beliefs

Normative Approach

- 'Representations of students' myths and misconceptions of language learning which differ radically from the current opinions of second language scholars' (Horwitz, 1987: 119)

Metacognitive Approach

- 'Stable, statable although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners have acquired about language, learning, and language learning processes' (Wenden, 1987: 163).

Contextual Approach

The best way to define beliefs about autonomy is through their characteristics (Barcelos and Kalaja, 2006: 232-233).

- Dynamic and emergent (evolve according to situations and can change as a result of change in context / not static).

- Socially constructed and contextually situated (created in social groups and relationships, multi-voiced and reflect the diversity of social features and attitudes).

Characteristics of Beliefs

- **Experiential** (develop through experience/interaction with context and should not be classified as right or wrong)

- **Mediated** (can be influenced by situation, task, and people one interacts with)

- **Paradoxical and contradictory** (social but individual, unique but shared, diverse but uniform)

Why to study learners' beliefs?

- Investigating learners' beliefs about autonomy helps to gain insights on how the learning context can be improved in order to have improved linguistic competence (Woods, 2006).

  - ➤ ESL curricula
  - ➤ Teaching techniques
  - ➤ Syllabi
  - ➤ Assessment criteria
  - ➤ Learning opportunities
  - ➤ Enhancement of ESL resources

Research Approach & Methodology

- An emic-etic paradigm is adopted in order to understand the internal viewpoints of the insiders (students) about autonomy and to understand the patterns of students' beliefs as represented in responses to questionnaire.

- A mixed-methodology is applied where two different instruments are used for collecting different levels of data.

Research Instruments

- Four FG interviews are primarily used for understanding the beliefs about autonomy and for feeding a questionnaire with the ideas derived from students' contributions.

- A five-point Likert questionnaire is subsequently applied for investigating the beliefs of a large sample of respondents on certain beliefs and practices of autonomy.

- The original scale has **58** items which are reduced to **50** items after conceptual validation and to **47** items after statistical validation.

Composition of Focus Groups

Sch.	Type of FG	No. of PS	Age	Grade
1	Male High-Achiever FG (M-HA-FG)	6	17-18	12
2	Female High-Achiever FG (F-HA-FG)	6	17-18	12
3	Male Low-Achiever FG (M-LA-FG)	7	17-18	12
4	Female Low-Achiever FG (F-LA-FG)	5	17-18	12
	Total	24		

Features of Questionnaire Recruited Sample

Schools	Respondents			
	Male	Female	Nationals	Non-Nationals
6	226	297	221	302
Total	**523**		**523**	

Distribution of the sample by Gender

Male 43%

Female 57%
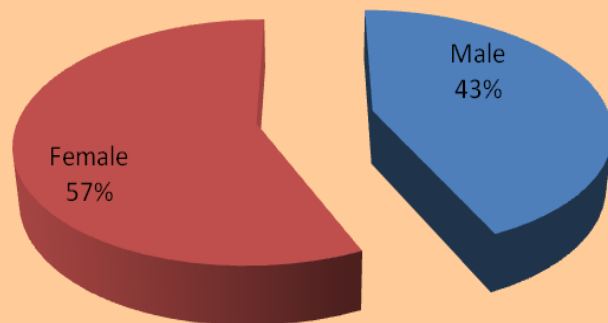
Distribution of the sample by Citizenship

nationals 42%

non-nationals 58%
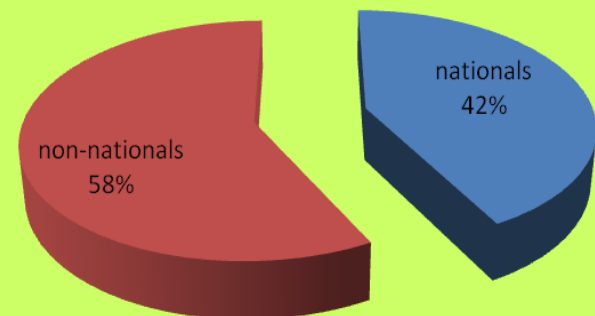
Scale Validity & Reliability

<u>Validation included</u>:

- Open discussion with teachers and supervisors

- Students' contributions in FG interviews

- Versions and perspectives of learner autonomy

- Previous studies and relevant literature

- Standardisation of the scale by experienced referees

- Extraction of Mean scores which are between 2.5 and 3.5

- Extraction of the SD scores which are between 1 and 1.5

Scale Validity & Reliability

Reliability

- The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is measured in the exploratory study (item analysis) and after factor analysis.

Stages	Exploratory Study	Factor Analysis
Alphas	0.961	0.941
No. of Cases	102	523

Analysis of FG Data

- Results of FG interviews are analysed thematically using template analysis which helps to see how themes are represented by different groups of participants (King, 2004).

- This analysis resulted in extracting eleven themes which represent key elements of students' beliefs and practices of autonomy.

Themes Extracted from FG Data

1. Students' beliefs of English language learning
2. Students' beliefs of learning abilities
3. Students' beliefs of classroom language learning
4. Students' beliefs of learning style
5. Students' beliefs of language development
6. Students' beliefs of modes of instruction
7. Students' beliefs of classroom organisation
8. Students' beliefs of learning agenda
9. Students' beliefs of learning resources
10. Students' beliefs of learning strategies
11. Students' beliefs of independent learning

Quantitative Data Analysis

- Questionnaire results are analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19.

- Factor analysis is performed where 'principal component analysis' is applied followed by orthogonal rotation technique 'Varimax'.

- Five factors are defined whose Eigenvalue are more than one.

- The five factors explained 71% of variance in students' responses.

- The items whose loading is at or greater than .40 are considered for analysis (Stevens, 1986: 139).

The Five Factors

1. Students' beliefs about optimal language learning strategies (18);

2. Students' beliefs about responsibility and style of learning English (11);

3. Students' beliefs about their learning context (8);

4. Students' beliefs about their self-efficacy and language learning abilities (5); and

5. Students' beliefs about their learning agendas (5).

Coherence among Items of the Five Factors

The internal consistency of the newly-derived factors is calculated using the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient which is **.941** which is an excellent percentage as per the proposition of Dörnyei (2003: 112).

Factors	F_1	F_2	F_3	F_4	F_5
Alphas	.931	.897	.845	.797	.871
Items	18	11	8	5	5

Descriptive Statistics

- Descriptive statistics are also calculated which are:

- Mean score of the scale is 159.70 higher than the scale Mean141 with an SD of 39.331.

- Mean scores of items range between 2.5 and 3.5

- SD of all items range between 1 and 1.5

- Impartial ratio is less than 25%

- Frequency of students' responses range between 52 and 223

- Scores of percentiles and cumulative percentages are also calculated

Research Results

Students hold different beliefs about autonomy depending on the cognitive and contextual factors that control it.

- Psychological influences

- Educational and contextual influences

- Personal and academic influences

- Socio-economic influences

Psychological Influences (metacognitive strategies)

(Responsibility of ESL development)

- Teacher's role is not redundant in independent learning and his support gives impression that a safety net exists.

- Teachers can hardly do everything and students have roles and duties in ESL learning.

- ESL development is a shared responsibility between Ts and Ss.

- Teachers should teach basics and provide necessary guidance.

- Students' agency, proactivity, and motivation are necessary for initiating independent work.

Psychological Influences(Cognitive Processes)

(Textbooks are highly structural, exams are widely used, communicating in English is necessary)

- Linguistic competence is enhanced through practice.

- Linguistic competence depends on grammar & vocabulary.

- Collaborative learning enhances language output and fluency.

- Explicit deductive teaching are better for teaching grammar.

- Acquisition of appropriate skills and strategies is necessary to improve reading comprehension and know meaning of items.

Educational & Contextual Influences

(Curricular elements, independent learning opportunities)

- Using textbooks is important as they help understand progression stages in learning English.

- Teaching techniques should enhance classroom interaction to practise and refine acquired input.

- Language testing should not be based on formal exams only; projects and oral presentations can be used.

- ESL textbooks are not enough and need to be enriched with other resources.

- Language pedagogy should not be always done in classrooms; ILCs should be established for learners to work independently.

Educational & Contextual Influences

- The learning context has few opportunities and need to be improve d for enhancing ESL learning independently.

- Teachers' autonomy is not great and the psychological pressure they experience can hardly make them innovative.

- Teaching techniques should not be only based on 'talk and chalk'.

- Besides being a pedagogue, an ESL teacher should advise students how language skills can be improved.

- Language resources can be helpful, but less efficient without teacher's guidance and feedback.

Personal & Academic Influences

(Job market, university credentials, instrumental motivation)

- Learning English is for achieving personal and academic goals.

- They should be good at English for getting a well-paid job.

- They should get a high score in English for joining universities.

- Teaching techniques should enable them to pass English exams with distinction.

- Classroom input is not enough for passing proficiency exams.

- Taking preparatory courses is necessary for passing IELTS.

Socio-economic Influences

(Diversity of nationalities, dominance of English, economic affluence, richness of ESL learning resources)

- Learning English is very important.

- Learning English is easy.

- The classroom is necessary for giving basics of English.

- Improving linguistic competence can be done independently.

- Chatting with native-speakers of English improves fluency, but classroom discourse improves accuracy.

- Digital and Internet resources are better than paper-based ones.

General Reflections

- Students' beliefs reflect diversity and complexity of the UAE society including social, cultural, and economical aspects.

- These beliefs reflect rigidities in the learning context and its affiliation to systematic language pedagogy where classroom input is the main source of learning.

- These beliefs show that quantity prevails over quality and the poor outcomes of gigantic projects is due to negligence of students' beliefs and concepts about what language learning should be like.

General Reflections

It can be inferred from research results that:

- Learning decisions in the UAE are hierarchical coming from the top and students' interests are rarely considered.

- Students are willing to take every possible challenge for improving their English.

- Students find that independent learning is synonymous to improved competence.

- There is technical and contextual limitations represented in poverty of independent l earning opportunities and resources.

- The teaching system needs to be renovated and an innovative philosophy of language pedagogy need to be adopted.

Research Contribution to Knowledge

- **The findings of this research help to:**

- Gain insights on how autonomy is interpreted in such highly progressing context;

- Gain insights on how learner autonomy can be promoted from the viewpoint of students in the UAE;

- Add further perspectives to our knowledge and understanding of learner autonomy;

- Verify the assumption that learner autonomy is contextual, and students' beliefs about it should not be viewed from a deficit perspective, but as reflection of their context; and

- Fostering autonomy entails improving learning context.

Research Publications

Three papers are considered for publication based on this research

1. **"Investigating the UAE learners' beliefs about autonomy in ESL learning"** in AILA Applied Linguistics Series.

2. **"Using Focus Group interviews for understanding the UAE students' conceptions of autonomy in English language learning"** in Salford Working Papers in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics.

3. **"Learner autonomy: Many perspectives and different beliefs"** in SPARC Proceedings.

Thank You