

Conflicting Voices from the Classroom: Exploring Mismatches Between Language Learners' Beliefs and Curricula Goals

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Abstract

This article reports on a collective case study of two LOTE (languages other than English) students' beliefs about roles and responsibilities in a language programme which has as one of its stated goals the development of self-directed, autonomous learners. The methodology employed in the reported investigation can be characterised as a triangulated, contextual approach and represents an attempt to capture the 'voice' of the learners and thus gain greater insights into their own interpretations and experiences. The results of the study suggest that the two learners attribute a great deal of responsibility for managing the learning process to their teacher, often deferring to the teacher's judgement and expertise. Such conceptualisations of roles and responsibilities are in conflict with curricula goals in that they may hinder the transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the learner.

Introduction

In the past, learners' contributions to language learning have been considered less valuable than those made by teachers, researchers and linguistic theorists (Riley, 1997, as cited in Barcelos, 2003, p. 8). Learners have almost never been asked about their experiences and expectations. The tide, however, appears to have turned, as evidenced by attempts to access the voices of learners, representing an acknowledgement of the valuable contributions of learners to planning, developing, implementing and evaluating language teaching and learning. This recognition has led to increased attention of the beliefs which learners bring with them to the language classroom (see, for example, Horwitz, 1987; Cotterall, 1995; Kern, 1995; Benson & Lor, 1998; White, 1999; Chan, 2001; Barcelos, 2003).

This paper reports on a collective case study which investigated two Languages Other Than English (LOTE) learners' beliefs about roles and responsibilities in a language programme which has as one of its stated goals the development of self-directed, autonomous language learners. Also examined is how learner beliefs are manifested in the subjects' classroom learning behaviour. In a latter part of the paper, the beliefs expressed by the learners are discussed in relation to guidelines for fostering self-directed, autonomous language learning suggested by Esch (1996) and Cotterall (2000).

Approaches to Accessing Learner Beliefs

Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) has been used extensively as a means of capturing learners' perspectives on language learning (see, for example, Horwitz, 1987; Kern, 1995; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006). The BALLI questionnaire is designed to elicit agreement or disagreement with statements of beliefs in five general areas: difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies and motivations and expectations (Horwitz, 1987).

Learner beliefs have also been examined through the use of other specifically designed questionnaires for the purpose of determining learner readiness for learner autonomy (Cotterall, 1995; Chan, 2001). Learners who are “ready” for learner autonomy are seen as those who possess a meta-cognitive capacity which allows them to identify their needs and preferred ways of working, as well as make decisions about what is to be learned, how and with what resources (Cotterall, 1995). Wenden (1986), also using meta-cognitive approaches, analysed interview tape scripts of adult ESL students and identified five dimensions on which learners reflected on their language learning: the language, their proficiency in the language, the outcome of their learning endeavours, their role in the language learning process and how best to approach the task of learning.

Benson and Lor (1998) explored how learner beliefs were operationalised in the discourse of students. From observations of classroom discussions, informal classroom chat and formal interviews with students, Benson and Lor derived a number of statements which provided insight into students’ perceptions of their and their teacher’s roles and responsibilities in language learning. White (1999) conducted a longitudinal examination of ‘novice’ self-instructed language learners expectations and emergent beliefs. The study employed interviews, an open-ended questionnaire, ranking exercises and scenarios to understand “how learners conceptualised the initial stages of the process of self-instructed language learning” (White, 1999, p. 443). Barcelos (2003) examined the relationship between learners’ and teachers’ beliefs in her examination of three Brazilian ESL students and American ESL teachers at a language institute in the United States. Data collected from class observations, stimulated recall, semi-structured interviews, field notes and the researcher’s reflective journal revealed that mismatches existed between the students’ and teachers’ beliefs resulting in misunderstandings, miscommunication, frustration, unhappiness and passive resistance.

The Research Project

The investigation which forms the basis of this report, like that of Benson and Lor (1998), White (1999) and Barcelos (2003), attempted to capture learners’ beliefs as they are embedded in learners’ contexts and to seek out learners’ emic perspectives (Barcelos, 2003). In taking such an approach, the investigation attempted to permit the learners a ‘voice’ and privilege the research with insights in their own interpretive meanings and perspectives.

Research Questions

This investigation sought to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are learners’ beliefs about their teacher’s roles and responsibilities?
2. What are learners’ beliefs about their own roles and responsibilities?
3. To what extent are these beliefs manifested in classroom learning behaviour?

The Context

The investigation took place in an Indonesian as a second language class at a regional public high school in Queensland, Australia. Second language classes at the school are elective after Year 8 and typically have low enrolments. This particular class consisted of 8 students and was a combined class of Years 10 (3), 11 (3) and 12 (2) students. The class followed the state-wide curriculum which has as one of its stated goals the development of self-directed, life-long learners (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2000). Though the language teacher was aware of the curriculum goals through ongoing professional development activities, personal communication with the teacher suggests that these goals are typically not communicated to learners.

Subjects

The subjects of the collective case study were two Year-12 LOTE (Indonesian) students, Jen and Brad (both 17 years old). Given that the LOTE class was an elective subject, it was interesting to discover Jen and Brad's motivation for studying Indonesian. According to Jen:

It is exciting to think about meeting a whole new group of people and their culture ... it pushes your understanding of the world as you know it ... the world doesn't revolve around yourself

Brad was somewhat more instrumentally motivated. He studied Indonesian in Years 6, 7 and 8 before dropping the subject in Year 9 and then later returning halfway through Year 10. According to Brad, his motivation for returning to his LOTE studies was that he needed good marks for his Year 10 Certificate, and he realised that he has always achieved well in the subject. Now that he is back studying the LOTE, he is enjoying the opportunity to learn about a different culture and he feels that:

The knowledge I've gained from ... this unit drives me to do more Indonesian because of it, because it is really interesting

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was a three-part process, consisting of initial interviews, observations of three language classes and follow-up interviews. The initial interview, which took 30 minutes, consisted of a number of parts, including biographical information and learners' beliefs about roles and responsibilities. The interview questions, presented below in Tables 1 (below), were adapted from Chan (2001).

Recognising that the beliefs expressed by learners in the interview might not reflect what actually occurs in the language classroom, it was considered essential to observe how beliefs were manifested in actual learning behaviour. In total, three class observations took place, once a week over a three week period. The duration of each class observation was one hour and twenty minutes. For the sake of accuracy, the observed lessons were also tape-recorded, transcribed and used to verify the observation notes.

The subjects were interviewed again, a week after the observations, in order to get their interpretations or explanations of the data collected through the observations. This is what Lincoln & Guba (1985) term member checking and is a technique for both generating data and gaining deeper insight into the phenomenon being investigated.

Data were analysed according to emerging themes (DeSantis & Ugarrizza, 2000). These themes were related to learners' beliefs in regards to responsibility for the following:

- deciding topics and activities
- choosing resources
- explaining what and how language is being learned
- correcting and evaluating
- sustaining motivation and interest in learning the language.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of Jen and Brad's responses to interview questions in relation to their beliefs about responsibilities in language learning. Excerpts from their extended responses, along with key observations, are also presented and discussed according to the themes which emerged from the data (as listed above).

Table 1: Summary of Student Beliefs In Relation to Responsibilities in Learning

Who is responsible for ...	Jen's responses		Brad's responses	
	Teacher	Student	Teacher	Student
deciding what topics to study in class?	Mainly	Some	Mainly	Some
choosing which activities to do?	Mainly	Some	Mainly	Some
deciding how long to spend on each activity or task?	Mainly	A Little	Completely	None
making the lesson interesting?	Completely	Mainly	Completely	Completely
explaining what you are learning?	Completely	A Little	Completely	None
explaining how you are learning?	Completely	None	Mainly	Some
providing study materials?	Mainly	Some	Completely	A Little
correcting your mistakes?	Mainly	Some	Completely	None
evaluating how well you have learned the LOTE?	Completely	None	Mainly	A little
identifying your weak and strong points in the LOTE?	Completely	Some	Mainly	Some
giving you work to do outside of class?	Completely	None	Completely	None
motivating you to learn the LOTE?	Mainly	A Little	Mainly	Mainly

Deciding Topics and Activities

As indicated through their responses to the interview questions (Tables 1), Jen and Brad seem to ascribe responsibility to the teacher for deciding what topics and activities to study. According to Jen:

The teacher should have the main say [in deciding topics] because they are the one teaching the language and they know best ... I think there should be student input in what activities to do, because they are able to learn better with different activities, but I think the teacher would be able to see what the class needs to work on.

While Brad's response matches that of Jen, given the size of the class, Brad acknowledged the students' ability to contribute to the lessons when he stated that:

[The teacher] always has the say in what we do in the lesson. She actually tells us the layout of the lesson when she comes in. But we are more like friends because we are such a small class. We get our say.

Choosing Resources

In regards to selecting resources, Jen stated that this was mainly the responsibility of the teacher, while Brad thought that this was completely the teacher's responsibility. These views are reflected in the following statements by Jen and Brad, respectively:

The teacher will provide the students with some materials, but also the students. It is really helpful if you can bring in something that you are familiar with. And learn how to relate language to that.

Textbook wise, magazines and internet sites - that's completely [the teacher]. Sometimes she asks us to bring a game along or makes sure we bring an Indonesian dictionary and magazines.

Keeping in mind the limited number of observations which took place, in the observed lessons there were few occasions where Jen and Brad carried responsibility for deciding what topics and activities to study, and with what resources. The theme of the observed lessons, 'leisure, recreation and human creativity', was chosen earlier in the term in consultation with Jen, Brad and other students in the class. All activities, and their associated resources, observed in the lessons were determined and managed by the teacher, allowing Jen and Brad little or no opportunity to contribute.

Explaining What Is Being Learned and How It Is Being Learned

Jen and Brad generally ascribe responsibility for explaining what is being learned and how it is being learned to the teacher; though they do feel they and their classmates also share, to a lesser extent, this responsibility.

I think mostly the teacher because once again, they have done a course in learning about how to teach a language and often people, even once you get to Year 10 you still have people that have done a little language in grade 7 in grade 9 and then thought that they might come back to it and so they don't always have an understanding. (Jen)

I guess [the teacher] and [Jen] share the role of explaining to myself the better strategies in doing Indonesian, like the structure of sentences, the right words and when to place them and stuff. So they both share the role. Mainly for [the teacher] and sometimes for [Jen]. (Brad)

Despite this, during the observed lessons Jen and Brad appeared quite willing and able to reflect on what they had learned.

Correction and Evaluation

Jen and Brad indicated that correction and evaluation were the responsibility of the teacher, with some responsibility resting with them and, interestingly, with their classmates. For example, Brad indicated that the teacher would be better equipped to do so:

Mostly the teacher, but I think the student probably has some understanding of how they are going, but, yeah, mostly the teacher. (Jen)

We were doing sentence structure the other day and [Jen] said "you've got to do it this way" and [the teacher] said "Yeah, that's right". (Brad)

Oh, I guess me and [the teacher] both share the same sort of thing – identifying my weak points. But [the teacher], having all the gathered information from the lessons and exams and the tests, she'd have a more stronger ... So she would be mainly and I would be sometimes, I guess. (Brad)

It was observed in the lessons that Jen, Brad and the teacher initiated reflection. Jen and Brad appeared to be quite aware of the level of their language ability and were able to identify gaps in their language knowledge. Further, they did not hesitate to seek assistance from the teacher or other learners in attempts to bridge these gaps.

Maintaining Interest and Motivation

In the interview Brad attributed responsibility for maintaining interest and motivation to both teachers and learners. From their responses to the interview

questions and observations of their lessons, they appeared to enjoy the language learning experience and to have an interest in learning about other cultures and lifestyles. Jen and Brad felt that lessons were interesting when they could interact in a fun, friendly and relaxed atmosphere with their classmates and teacher.

I think the teacher has a huge part to play if students want to continue with the subject. It can make a really big difference. Also it is up to the students to be willing to want to learn. (Jen)

Well, I think it is all of our responsibilities to motivate. Like, um, doing the LOTE, as I said before, I am driven by interesting facts about different cultures and stuff. There are so many things I didn't know before I entered doing Indonesian. So, the motivation comes from [the teacher] and [Jen] as well. They motivate me to do Indonesian and I motivate myself because I want to learn about different cultures.

During the observed lessons Jen and Brad appeared to be taking on responsibility for maintaining interest and motivation, which was perhaps best evidenced by the positive attitudes they brought to the classes.

Discussion

From the learners' responses and the (limited) observations, it seems that there is a preference for having the teacher make choices in regards to topics, activities and resources. An essential characteristic of a language programme aimed at developing autonomous, self-directed learners is choice (Esch, 1996). To facilitate genuine choice, a programme aimed at fostering learner autonomy time needs to be devoted to increasing learners' awareness of ways in which they can identify their goals, specify their objectives and identify resources and strategies needed to achieve their goals and measure progress (Cotterall, 2000). Provided with a model of the language learning process, learners can be empowered with an understanding of the choices available to them, for example, choice related to input texts and tasks, and an understanding of the consequences of the choices they make.

The learners in this study ascribed responsibility for explaining what is being learned and how it is being learned to the teacher. A programme aimed at promoting autonomy, however, needs to provide opportunities for learners to reflect on what they have learned and the strategies by which they have learned. By making explicit their methodologies and their representations of the learning process, learners reflect on the choices they have made and repair and change strategies (Esch, 1996).

A programme aimed at developing self-directed, autonomous learners is characterised by reflectivity and shareability, where learners are able to look back on their learning in a negotiated way, that is, between learners and teachers and learners and other learners (Esch, 1996). Reflectivity can lead to greater self-awareness in relation to understanding goals, interests, motivations, strengths and weaknesses, which in turn increases the potential for learner autonomy (Cotterall, 2000). Certainly Jen and Brad have clear understandings of their motivations and interests in learning Indonesian as a second language. Further, the characteristics of reflectivity and shareability were evidenced by classroom learning behaviours which were participative and cooperative (Cotterall, 2000).

Conclusions

The findings of the investigation suggest that the two learners often defer to the expertise and experience of their teacher for making decisions about what to learn, how to learn and with what resources. Though the learners stated that the students share some of the responsibility for making such decisions, this was not reflected in the

observed lessons. The beliefs expressed by the learners to some extent conceptualise the teacher as an authority figure whose job it is to direct and control the learning. It is suggested that such a conceptualisation may hinder the promotion of learner autonomy and the transference of responsibility for managing the learning from the teacher to the learner that the development of learner autonomy implies. The absence of genuine choice, a key characteristic of a programme aimed at promoting learner autonomy was notable.

It is recognised that the findings presented here cannot be generalised to a wider population. Rather, the investigation reported in this paper, in taking a situated, contextual approach to investigating learner beliefs, was able to capture the individual learners' 'voices' in order to gain greater insights into their own interpretations and experiences in language learning.

The Author

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