READINESS FOR AUTONOMY: INVESTIGATING LEARNER BELIEFS

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The promotion of autonomous approaches to language learning is justified on ideological, psychological and economic grounds (Crabbe, 1993: p. 443). This paper argues that before any intervention occurs, it is necessary to gauge learners' readiness for the changes in behaviour and beliefs which autonomy implies. Firstly the paper presents data on learner beliefs collected in a study which involved the development and administration of a questionnaire on learner beliefs about language learning. Factor analysis of subjects' responses to the questionnaire revealed the existence of six dimensions underlying the responses. The paper then discusses each factor in turn, examining the claims that have been made in the literature about the role that factor plays in language learning and exploring the hypothesized relationship of each factor to autonomous language learning behaviour. The paper concludes by reiterating the importance of investigating the beliefs which learners hold. These beliefs are likely to reflect learners' "readiness" for autonomy.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Boud (1988: p. 23):

> The main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction.

However autonomy manifests itself in different ways and to differing degrees. In this paper autonomy is defined as "the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics for taking control of their learning." The specification of this "set of tactics" constitutes part of the research agenda for autonomous language learning. The tactics would seem to include tactics for setting goals, choosing materials and tasks, planning practice opportunities and monitoring and evaluating progress. Learners will display these tactics to varying degrees. This paper argues that this variability is accounted for, in part, by differences in learner beliefs about language learning. It argues therefore, that before interventions aimed at fostering autonomy are implemented, it is necessary to gauge learners' readiness for the changes in beliefs and behaviour which autonomy implies.

Why should learner beliefs be so important in planning for autonomy? Simply because the beliefs and attitudes learners hold have a profound influence on their learning behaviour. Horwitz

(1987: p. 126) suggests that erroneous beliefs about language learning may lead to the deployment of less effective strategies. Let us imagine that a learner believes errors in her second language (L2) production will impede her language learning progress. This belief may discourage the learner from participating in fluency-focused activities and may create an expectation that all errors must be corrected by the teacher. If these beliefs are not challenged, the learner's progress may be hindered.

All behaviour is governed by beliefs and experience. It follows that autonomous language learning behaviour may be supported by a particular set of beliefs or behaviours. The beliefs learners hold may either contribute to or impede the development of their potential for autonomy. This study sets out therefore to identify "factors" in students' sets of beliefs. A "factor" in this context can be seen as an issue about which one might expect any student to hold a more or less coherent set of beliefs. How do such factors relate to autonomy? Although they are essentially artifacts of correlation analysis, they are expected to provide a useful focus in assessing learners' readiness for autonomy and in directing classroom dialogue about learning.

The paper briefly explains how the data for the study were gathered and analysed and then lists the six factors obtained from the analysis. Each factor is then discussed in turn, briefly reviewing the claims that have been made in the literature about it, and examining the hypothesized relationship of each factor to autonomous language learning. This discussion seeks to establish those beliefs which autonomous language learners could be said to hold. Investigation of learner beliefs, it is argued, should enable teachers to assess their learners' "readiness" for autonomy, and then to determine appropriate support for each learner.

THE STUDY

In order to gather data on learner beliefs about language learning, the writer constructed a questionnaire[1]. The items for the questionnaire were developed from a series of interviews with ESL students about their experience of language learning. It was administered to a group of 139 adult ESL learners who were enrolled in an intensive English for Academic Purposes course in the Summer of 1992–1993[2]. The aim of the study was to see if subjects' responses revealed any particular clusters of beliefs. Twenty-six items were incorporated into a five-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from strong agreement to strong disagreement with each statement. The remaining eight items employed a forced choice format.

Factor analysis[3] was used to identify the underlying constructs that could explain the covariation among responses to the items in the questionnaire. Factor analysis is a procedure that identifies clusters of items that vary together, and hence may be linked by a common underlying explanation or factor. The six factors obtained were named as follows:

(1)   Role of the teacher
(2)   Role of feedback
(3)   Learner independence
(4)   Learner confidence in study ability
(5)   Experience of language learning
(6)   Approach to studying

The factors are listed above in order of the amount of variance within the data that they account for. Thus Factor 1 accounts for 2.2% of the variance, whereas Factor 6 accounts for 1% of the variance. In the discussion which follows, factor loadings (expressed as coefficients) are provided after each item. These indicate the level of correlation between the factor and each item used in the analysis. Under each factor, items are listed in order of the strength of their factor loading. The sample size ($n = 139$) determined that only factor loadings of 0.43 and greater should be considered statistically significant (see Stevens, 1986: p. 344). Consequently variables which had factor loadings of less than 0.43 are not included here.

The procedure of factor analysis recognizes the strength of correlations between variables in a particular data set. Therefore, at times the clusterings obtained in the study may be counter-intuitive. Future work on refining the instrument used in this study will seek to test the reliability of individual items. It should also be noted that the statements in the questionnaire were formulated after conducting interviews with a number of language learners and recording their views. One limitation of the instrument, therefore, is that some of the statements are open to more than one interpretation. However it was felt that the benefits derived from empirically identifying dimensions underlying the construct of language learning autonomy outweighed the disadvantages of potential ambiguity in interpreting certain items.

THE FACTORS REVEALED BY THE STUDY

Factor 1 The role of the teacher
32   I like the teacher to offer help to me (0.69)
28   I like the teacher to tell me what my difficulties are (0.59)
31   I like the teacher to tell me how long I should spend on an activity (0.54)
33   The teacher should always explain why we are doing an activity in class (0.49)
29   I like the teacher to tell me what to do (0.43)

Learners who agree with the statements which cluster together as Factor 1 clearly see the teacher's role in language learning as dominant. Item 32 suggests that learners who agree with these statements are not ready to initiate enquiries or seek help. Taken together the affirmation of these statements presents a coherent (and fairly traditional) view of the teacher's role. Learners who subscribe to such a view do not correspond to the profile of the autonomous learner. In fact the functions which they assign to the teacher—diagnosing difficulties, allocating time, establishing the purpose of activities—are central to the behaviour of autonomous learners.

Wright (1987) makes the point that, in any learning situation, role is a complex factor. What adds to the complexity is the covert nature of beliefs about roles, and the inaccessibility (by outsiders) of the experiences which helped form those beliefs. A survey of the literature reveals two broad conceptualizations of teacher roles in language learning. The first of these is that of the teacher as authority figure—someone who acts as authority on the target language and on language learning, as well as directing and controlling all learning in the classroom. The second conceptualization sees the teacher as facilitator of learning.

Learner expectations of teacher authority can present an obstacle to teachers who wish to transfer responsibility to their learners. Haughton and Dickinson (1988), Kumaravadivelu (1991) and

Bergman (1984) present illustrations of mismatch in the classroom due to differing perceptions of the roles of teacher and learner. All three studies recognize that learners often expect the teacher to function as an authority figure in the classroom. This view of the teacher's role is at odds with that held by proponents of autonomous learning.

An alternative characterization of the teacher's role centres on the functions of counselling and facilitating learning. Wenden (1985) argues that language teachers also need to provide learner training. Galloway and Labarca (1990) recommend that teachers provide "scaffolding" for their learners, gradually withdrawing support as learners gain greater task autonomy. Tudor (1993) claims that teachers need to prepare learners for their new role by developing learners' self-awareness as language learners and their awareness of learning goals and options and of language itself.

In summary, the statements clustered as Factor 1 correspond to the traditional authoritarian view of the teacher's role, whereas the view of teacher as counsellor and facilitator of learning is consonant with beliefs about how autonomy could be fostered. Learners who believe the teacher should do all the things referred to in the Factor 1 statements are not yet "ready" for autonomy. For teachers who aim to prepare learners to work more independently, awareness-raising about language learning processes and a gradual transfer of responsibility appear to be central.

Some questions which future research might address include the following: How can learner beliefs about role be accessed? To what extent must learner and teacher perceptions of role match in order for learners to assume greater responsibility for their learning? Can teaching practice modify students' beliefs about roles? If so, how? How can changes in learners' perceptions of roles be monitored? Whatever the answers to this array of questions, the dimension identified in Factor 1 appears central to diagnosing "readiness" for autonomy.

Factor 2 Role of feedback
10   I find it helpful for the teacher to give me regular tests (0.71)
 8   I need the teacher to tell me how I am progressing (0.57)
 7   It is important for me to be able to see the progress I make (0.50)

This cluster of items reflects beliefs about the role of feedback in language learning. The items concern the learner's perception of ways in which feedback might be provided, the teacher's role in providing feedback and the importance of feedback. This clustering of items suggests that for some learners the notion of feedback is difficult to separate from ideas associated with the teacher.

How would an autonomous learner respond to these items? This time it is less clear. Agreement need not necessarily be associated with dependence on the teacher. Rather, it could reflect an understanding of the importance of monitoring progress and a recognition of the assistance a teacher can provide in that process. Items 10 and 8 relate to external sources of feedback. Item 7, on the other hand, appears to recognize the learner's role in using feedback. The literature on feedback in language learning also reveals this division into external and internal sources.

Research on L2 writing provides insight into learner views of feedback. Radecki and Swales' (1988) paper confirmed that learners vary considerably in the way they approach teacher feedback and suggested that the usefulness of feedback depends on the match between teacher intentions and

student expectations. The researchers reported that while a majority of subjects in their study responded well to content-focused feedback, they also wanted explicit correction of all their surface errors. Clearly, expectations are influenced by one's understanding of the learning process.

Autonomous learners, however, are unlikely to depend solely on the teacher for feedback. One of the characteristics of "good language learners" according to Stern (1975: p. 315) is that they "consciously monitor their performances." Self-monitoring provides learners with feedback on their language performance. The literature on learning strategies (see, e.g. O'Malley *et al.,* 1990 and Wang and Peverly, 1986) also indicates that self-monitoring behaviour characterizes autonomous and successful learners.

Autonomous learners not only monitor their language learning, but also assess their efforts. Haughton and Dickinson (1988) claim that it is essential that learners be able to evaluate the quality of their learning. An appreciation of their abilities, the progress they are making and of what they can do with the skills they have acquired is essential if learners are to learn efficiently, according to Blanche (1988: p. 75).

Inspection of the literature suggests that while all classroom learners are regularly exposed to teacher feedback, learners vary in the use they make of it. Some rely exclusively on the teacher for feedback on their progress. Autonomous learners, on the other hand, are likely to share with the teacher a general understanding of the language learning process and a specific understanding of the role of feedback. That understanding would allocate the learner responsibility for seeking and using feedback from a variety of sources.

This discussion raises certain questions about feedback. For example, do autonomous learners perceive and process certain types of feedback more easily than other learners? Do autonomous learners need less feedback in order to modify hypotheses than other learners? How can learners be encouraged to monitor their progress and to make use of sources of feedback outside the classroom? The answers to these questions may help us understand how learners' theories of language learning influence their language learning behaviour.

Factor 3 Learner independence
19   I have a clear idea of what I need English for (0.70)
15   I like trying new things out by myself (0.47)
23   Learning a language is very different from learning other subjects (0.43)

This cluster of beliefs appears to be central to the beliefs underlying autonomy. These items describe characteristics of an active learner reminiscent of the "good language learner" profile constructed by Stern (1975) and others. Learners who agree with these statements are likely to have clearly-defined goals and to be comfortable experimenting with new activities. The covariance of Item 23 with the other two suggests that learners responding affirmatively to Items 19 and 15 appreciate the difference between language learning and other types of learning. A willingness to set goals and take risks are central to good language learning, whereas these behaviours may be less important in other types of learning. While Factor 1 assigned a central role to the teacher, here the learner is central.

The characteristics of the learner referred to in Factor 3 are all reflected in the "good language learner" literature (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Naiman *et al.*, 1978; Reiss, 1985). Recent case studies of autonomous learners (Wenden, 1991; Cotterall and Crabbe, 1992) also support the attribution of characteristics such as those clustered under Factor 3 to autonomous learners.

However a number of obstacles to learner independence have been identified. Knowles (1976) claims that experience of a traditional education system may train learners to adopt dependent behaviour. Wenden (1991: p. 55) reports that research into adult learning has shown that socialization processes have, in some cases, led to the "acquisition of beliefs that encourage dependence rather than independence". Such beliefs are likely to be deep-seated, strongly held and difficult to modify. Cameron (1990) suggests that culture and educational background interact as they contribute to learners' beliefs about the role they should play. She believes that in many cases learner "scripts" are culturally-derived. Ignoring them, or seeking to alter them without explicit discussion is likely to lead to misunderstanding and possibly hostility.

One further obstacle to learner independence, according to Victori (1992) is lack of experience. In her investigation of learners' views of language learning, she found that (1992: p. 72):

> the more experience in language learning the respondents had, the less likely they were to rely on teachers during the task of language learning.

It may therefore be unreasonable to expect learners to operate independently in the early stages of language learning. The items clustered in Factor 3 support this view, in that they could not be responded to affirmatively by a person who had no language learning experience.

Learner independence has been identified in the literature as a correlate of successful language learning. Autonomous learners are likely to be individuals who have overcome the obstacles which educational background, cultural norms and prior experience may have put in their way. The degree of independence with which learners feel comfortable will be a key indicator of their readiness for autonomy.

Factor 4 Learner confidence in study ability

3   I know how to study languages well (0.68)
4   I know how to study other subjects well (0.65)

This factor links two statements which reflect confidence in academic or study ability. The items may reflect a failure to recognize the difference between the skills and knowledge required to succeed in language learning and those required for success in other subjects. However, they also imply a belief in the learner's ability to influence the outcome of his/her learning. Learners' prior study experiences will contribute significantly to their confidence as learners.

In the literature on language learning, learner confidence has generally been linked to the broader concept of "self-esteem". Brown (1980) refers to three levels of self-esteem: global, situational and task. The dimension identified as Factor 4 appears to relate most closely to the second level, that is, to an individual's assessment of his/her ability in relation to study in general. Learner confidence is considered by Curran (1976) so central to learning that his counselling-learning model of language learning assigns ultimate importance to its development in the early phases.

Wang and Palincsar (1989) point out, however, that learners' beliefs about their abilities may be based on invalid assessments. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) label certain learner beliefs about capability as "myths" and discuss the disabling effect they can have. They claim that the opinions which individuals form about their strengths and limitations are informed both by external assessments of the amount of learning that has taken place and by their own intuitions. Once formed, they suggest, opinions concerning ability are hard to modify. Therefore the way in which learners perceive their language learning experiences is crucial to the development of their confidence. Indeed Wenden (1991) has claimed that without confidence in their ability to learn successfully, learners cannot develop autonomous approaches to learning.

While the statements clustered as Factor 4 cannot be unequivocally associated either with autonomous or dependent approaches to language learning, inspection of the literature reveals general agreement that learner confidence correlates with academic success and supports the view that confidence is a defining characteristic of autonomous learners. Learner confidence goes hand in hand with a belief in one's ability to influence the outcome of learning and derives from perceptions of previous learning experiences. Those perceptions can enhance or inhibit confidence, depending on their validity and on the learner's understanding of the language learning process. This suggests the need to explore with learners their "myths" about themselves and to promote reflection on the language learning process. Clearly the dimension identified as Factor 4 is central to diagnosing "readiness" for autonomy.

Factor 5 Experience of language learning
17   I have been successful in language learning in the past (0.48)
11   I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned (0.43)

The statements which cluster as Factor 5 can be interpreted as reflecting an appreciation of what is involved in language learning and use as opposed to the formal study of a language (captured in Factor 4). Item 17 signals the contribution of experience in the form of a positive evaluation of the outcome of prior langauge learning. This prior experience has resulted in the development of methods of self-assessment (Item 11). Learners who agree with these statements are learners for whom previous experience of language learning has resulted in a degree of awareness about themselves, about language learning and about strategies.

The term most often used to refer to knowledge about learning is metacognitive knowledge. Flavell (1979) has derived a three-way classification of metacognitive knowledge, dividing it into *person, task* and *strategy* knowledge. In this classification, person knowledge embraces learner beliefs about the cognitive and affective factors that mediate learning. Task knowledge is considered to include views of how language works and what tasks involve. Strategic knowledge includes both knowledge about strategies and an understanding of general principles which might determine strategy choice (Wenden, 1991: p. 49).

Studies of *person* knowledge have obtained examples of learner beliefs about the role of aptitude and motivation in language learning (Horwitz, 1987), about learning progress, performance errors and changes in interlanguage (Lennon, 1989), about language proficiency (Wenden, 1986) and about the role of innate ability (Victori, 1992). Item 17 appears to belong with these examples in that it represents a personal evaluation of previous language learning experiences.

The literature on *task* knowlege reveals that learners have a range of beliefs about the nature of language learning (see, e.g. Horwitz, 1987). Victori (1992: p. 75) reports the following examples:

> language learning was perceived as different from learning other subjects, and to involve more time, more practice and different mental processes.

Wenden (1991) reports examples of learners' knowledge of the nature of language learning and of the demands of specific language tasks as well as learners' judgements of task difficulty. Enkvist (1992) cites examples of learners' conceptions of language learning which emphasize the way in which the learning influences the learner.

Investigations of learners' *strategic* knowledge have uncovered instances of learners' knowledge about the effectiveness of certain strategies (Carrell, 1989; Wenden, 1991; Cotterall, 1991) and knowledge about how best to approach language learning (Wenden, 1991). Horwitz's (1987) study also obtained evidence of learner beliefs about general learning strategies and about communication strategies. A study by Yule (1988) provided data on learners' beliefs about the accuracy of their self-monitoring strategies. Item 11 is a further example of strategic knowledge.

Learner beliefs about language learning will profoundly influence their approach to language learning. Learners need to be aware of the role of cognitive and affective variables in language learning, of how language works and of how strategies influence learning. Such awareness can enhance the quality of thinking and task engagement. Autonomous learners use their experience of attempting tasks, employing strategies and solving problems to develop their understanding of how language learning works.

Questions for which we still need answers include the following: How much experience of language learning is necessary in order to destabilize erroneous beliefs? How do beliefs about person, task and strategy interact? Is there an optimal sequence for awareness-raising about person, task and strategic knowlege?

Factor 6 Approach to studying

1   I study English in the same way as I study other subjects (0.52)
14 Talking to the teacher about my progress is embarrassing for me (0.51)

These two statements appear to reflect a personal orientation to study which is not specific to language learning and may or may not be linked to beliefs underlying autonomy. As with the Factor 4 (learner confidence in study ability) items, they reflect a fairly traditional approach to study. Neither item distinguishes language learning from other subject matter study. Furthermore, whereas Item 1 reflects a general approach to study, Item 14 is an example of a specific strategy.

How would we expect an autonomous language learner to respond to these items? Item 1 is unlikely to discriminate between autonomous and dependent learners because, while a learner may appreciate that language learning is different from other kinds of study, she or he may nevertheless adopt the same general approach to both. Statement 14 is also difficult to associate exclusively with either an autonomous or a dependent learner. It would be wrong to assume that all autonomous learners feel comfortable discussing their learning. What is a defining attribute of autonomous

learners, however, is a conviction that such activity is an integral component of successful learning behaviour. Without further "teasing out" of learners' understanding of these statements it is difficult to reach a conclusion about the relationship between this factor and autonomy.

The term "approach to studying" describes the behaviours which learners engage in as they study, that is, the way in which they usually go about their learning. Work conducted by Biggs (1993) and his associates has focused on the development of instruments such as the Study Process Questionnaire which seek to classify learners' general orientation to study. This raises the question of whether such findings can be generalized to language learning contexts.

In the language learning literature a number of cognitive variables (all of which contribute to an individual's approach to study) have been investigated in order to determine their relationship to proficiency (see, e.g. the discussion in Skehan, 1989). Attempts have also been made to describe and classify different learning styles in language learning (see Willing, 1993 and Reid, 1987). However while cognitive style and learning style will help determine an individual's approach to learning, neither is amenable to mediation or observation in the way that recent research suggests learning strategies may be.

Instruments have also been developed to identify learning strategy preferences. Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning allows learners to obtain a profile of their strategy use. This analysis also provides a starting point, she argues, for implementing work on other strategies. The work of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) develops this idea by outlining sequences of strategy instruction at the level of specific tasks.

Consideration of the literature suggests that approach to studying is likely to vary between individuals. It will be influenced by a range of cognitive and affective variables and is less likely to be amenable to change than study tactics employed with specific language tasks. The relationship between approach to studying and autonomy is not clear. While certain study behaviours seem to characterize autonomous learners, the two statements in Factor 6 do not provide examples of such. Furthermore, it may be unhelpful to suggest that a particular approach to studying characterizes autonomous learners.

CONCLUSION

Language learners hold beliefs about teachers and their role, about feedback, about themselves as learners and their role, about language learning and about learning in general. These beliefs will affect (and sometimes inhibit) learners' receptiveness to the ideas and activities presented in the language class, particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learners' experience. This paper has reported on a study which provides empirical support for the identification of six factors underlying learners' beliefs about language learning. It has also examined the claims made in the language learning literature about each of these factors. By exploring the beliefs identified in this paper, learners and teachers can hope to construct a shared understanding of the language learning process and of the part they play in it. This awareness is an essential foundation of learner autonomy.

NOTES

[1]A copy of the questionnaire may be obtained from the author.
[2]The subjects included approximately equivalent numbers of female and male students from 32 different countries including the People's Republic of China, Thailand, Taiwan and Indonesia. Most were intending to enrol at tertiary institutions in New Zealand on completion of the English language course.
[3]The procedure used a maximum likelihood extraction with an orthogonal rotation (SAS package).

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