Second language learners' self-perceived roles and participation in face-to-face english writing consultations

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ABSTRACT

Learner talk, a neglected area of study in the literature of language advising for second language (L2) learners, deserves more attention. With reference to multiple qualitative sources of data obtained from interviews and tutor-learner recorded conversations, this paper delineates learners' behaviors, strategies and contribution to language learning in tutor-dominant writing consultations. More importantly, it reveals the relationships between self-perception and learning behaviors via learning strategies. Nine native and non-native English-speaking writing tutors and 23 L2 learners from different disciplines participated in the study. Three types of L2 learners and 11 learning strategies were identified and analyzed based on the self-reported data and transcribed conversations. Analysis showed that the identified strategies signify the learners' behaviors and varied degrees of readiness to engage actively in learning by obtaining language input from tutors through some self-initiated acts, demonstrating selfawareness of their problems and establishing rapport with tutors to accomplish the learning task. Implications for teaching and future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Second language (L2) learners' beliefs can influence their behaviors and approaches towards learning (Wesely, 2012), such as choosing the appropriate language learning strategy (Chamot, 2001; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Kaypak & Ortactepe, 2014; Mori, 1999; Oxford, 1990; Yang, 1999), deciding on the extent of participation (Norton, 2001), and regulating learning motivation (Dörnyei, MacIntyre & Henry, 2015; Ushioda, 2012) both inside and outside the classroom. Some researchers have called for in-depth examination of the relationship between beliefs and actual behaviors (Navarro & Thornton, 2011) because beliefs have significant influence on learning behaviors (Cotterall, 1995; Riley, 1996). Learning behaviors, in particular, are usually revealed through language learners' strategies (Griffiths, 2003) which are usually found by means of questionnaires, learners' narratives, diaries and think-aloud protocols (see Griffiths & Oxford, 2014). Regardless of how behaviors or strategies are classified, knowing how L2 learners perceive themselves and how their perceptions shape learning, behaviors and participation in a learning environment from a teacher's perspective are revealing and a useful reference for teaching (Ellis, 2001).

Face-to-face writing consultations are a specific learning environment on campus in which L2 learners continue their own learning beyond the classroom. Their conversations with writing tutors and how they think about learning can deepen our

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understanding on how they behave and manage their learning in this context. However, learners' behaviors and their self-perceptions, particularly their relationships, are not adequately discussed in writing consultations as the primary focus is on structure, pedagogy and management (e.g., Babcock, Manning, Rogers, Goff, & McCain, 2012; Thonus, 1999; 2004). In view of the importance of understanding the relationship between L2 learner self-perception and its influence on actual learning behavior by teachers, this paper examines the neglected issue in face-to-face, one-to-one English writing consultations. It first reviews the definitions of beliefs and learning strategies, and relevant research studies. Then it presents the method of study, and analyzes both L2 learners' self-perceptions of their roles in writing consultation obtained through interviews and identified strategies based on recorded conversations. The subtle relationships among L2 learners' beliefs in tutee roles, strategies used for learning and participation are discussed. Finally, pedagogical implications and future research directions are recommended.

2. L2 learners' beliefs and language learning strategies

Since Horwitz's studies (1987, 1988, 1999) on foreign language learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and learner expectations from different countries, there are numerous studies investigating foreign language learners' beliefs and their influence on learning such as on online consultation mode (Lee, 2012a), collaborative writing (Dobao & Blum, 2013; Shehadeh, 2011) and autonomous learning (Cotterall, 1995), just to name a few. Beliefs, which are considered as "value-related and tend to be held more tenaciously" (Wenden, 1999: 436), are defined by Benson and Lor (1999: 464) as "what learner holds to be true about these objects and processes" and "can be inferred more or less directly from data". Drawing on the mentally constructed beliefs based on prior experience, learners can "cope with specific content and contexts of learning (Benson & Lor, 1999, p.462). Beliefs are argued as important as they can impact a learner's motivation, attitude and learning processes (Riley, 1996). More importantly, good language learners can make use of their beliefs in other contexts to re-construct new experience (White, 2008).

Learners' beliefs towards a task and corresponding learning behaviors can be shown by means of language learning strategies. Language learning strategies are defined by Griffiths as 'activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning" (2013, p.15). The definition has captured six key elements debated in the past three decades (e.g., Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975; Wenden, 1987). Language learning strategies have also been categorized in different ways. Rubin (1981) identifies direct and indirect learning strategies. Oxford (1990) proposes three direct (memory, cognitive and compensation) and three indirect (metacognitive, affective and social) learning strategies consisting of 19 strategy sets (p.17). For instance, cognitive strategies deal with practicing, receiving, analyzing and reasoning the language. Affective strategies concerns the ways learners manage their anxiety, motivation and emotions. Social strategies refer to questions asked by learners for clarifications and correction, cooperation with other people, awareness of others' thoughts and feelings, and development of cultural understanding. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) suggest four similar categories, namely cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies. In Oxford's book in 2011, she revisits and regroups the direct and indirect language learning strategies, and introduces the strategic self-regulation model of language learning to explain how language learners monitor their own learning. Under the new model, memory strategies are omitted. Social strategies are re-conceptualized and a new category known as sociocultural-interactive (SI) strategies is formed. The SI strategies allow learners to continue to interact, learn and communicate and to manage identity and power. Although the categorization of strategies have been criticized as contentious (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014), they have provided a good reference for researchers. To avoid such controversy and prescriptive classification, a pragmatic approach is suggested by "grouping strategies according to post hoc thematic analysis" (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014, p.3).

Researchers have used multiple methods to study language learning strategies, including but not limited to narrative enquiries, interviews, case studies and questionnaires. Some strategies are found to be more frequently used than the others (Oxford et al. 2014; Griffiths, 2013; Griffiths et al. 2014). For instance, Griffiths (2013) found that higher level language learners were more inclined to use available resources and wider range of strategies than less successful ones as shown from empirical and case studies. Moreover, Oxford et al. (2014) and Griffiths et al. (2014) found that metacognitive strategies were more frequently mentioned than socio-affective strategies by North American, European, African and East Asian experts on language learning strategy in their personal narratives. Similarly, the social strategies of asking questions, seeking help and corrections were less frequently used outside classrooms and outside universities by the Malayalee undergraduate students who came from Malayalam-medium and English-medium schools (Harish, 2014).

Apart from revealing learners' preference, language learners' strategies can vary with other personal factors (Griffiths, 2008); one of which is their beliefs (White, 2008; Yang, 1999). The relationship between learner beliefs and strategy use had been confirmed by Yang (1999) who found that there was a strong correlation between Taiwanese college EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and the use of six groups of language learning strategies in a survey. It led to the argument that learners' beliefs about language learning would possibly lead to the use of certain language learning strategies and language learning strategies might be shaped by their beliefs. Yang further proposed a theoretical construct for language learning beliefs which comprised both metacognitive and motivational dimensions. The former focusses on "what learners know about themselves", "think about the task of second language learning" and "what they believe about how best to learn a second or foreign language" (p.532). The latter is concerned with the reasons for learning the language, how to learn the language and feeling about learning the language. In fact, the extent to which strategies are used for learning can indicate