



The relationship between Chinese university students' conceptions of language learning and their online self-regulation



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ABSTRACT

In the field of second language acquisition, an increasing amount of research has been conducted on learner beliefs and self-regulation. Less attention, however, has been focused on the relationship between the two constructs in online learning environments. This study reports on a quantitative inquiry about the relationship between Chinese learners' conceptions of language learning and their online self-regulation. Data were collected through two questionnaires, Conceptions of Learning English (COLE) and Online Self-regulated English Learning (OSEL), among 401 university students in China. The findings provide empirical evidence linking learners' COLE with their OSEL. In particular, the two factors in the COLE, such as language learning as "Understanding and seeing in a new way" and "Memorizing," play powerful and positive roles in predicting learners' online self-regulation. More interestingly, the study reveals that emphases on achieving success in examinations may relate to learners' unsophisticated conceptions of language learning, which negatively associate with their online self-regulation. These findings suggest that language instructors reinterpret learners' preference for memorization in the learning process and adopt pedagogical methods to foster sophisticated conceptions of learning among learners. Second, we recommend that policy-makers be aware of the negative influence of "Testing" and diversify assessment methods in language education.

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1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), language learner beliefs are considered an important learner variable affecting language learners' perceptions, behaviors and even learning outcomes (Barcelos, 2003; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Mercer, 2011a). Conceptions of language and language learning are regarded as "higher level category conditioning

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specific beliefs” and reflect learners’ thinking about their language learning (Benson & Lor, 1999, p. 459). Recent research has approached language learners’ beliefs or conceptions of learning in two ways. First of all, beliefs are increasingly recognized as a dynamic, complex, and socially-situated variable (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Gao, 2010; Li & Ruan, 2015; Zhong, 2014, 2015). Second, substantial research has focused on the mediating role of beliefs on other variables, such as language learning strategies, or learner autonomy (e.g., Abedini, Rahimi, & Zare-ee, 2011; Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Mercer, 2011b; Yang, 1999; Zhong, 2014, 2015). Mercer (2011a) pointed out that it is necessary to investigate learners’ conceptions of language as a construct and to further explore its association with learners’ foreign language learning experiences. Although much research has provided evidence for the inter-relational nature of conceptions of learning, approaches to learning and learning outcomes (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2011; Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis, & Wilss, 2004; Li, Liang, & Tsai, 2013), studies on the interplay between learners’ conceptions of language learning and their learning behaviors are not well established.

With integration of information and communications technology (ICT) into language education, researchers claim that online or blended learning has the potential to change the nature of education and to further enhance the effectiveness of language learning (e.g., Thang & Bidmeshki, 2010; Thang et al., 2012). In an online or blended environment, learners’ self-regulation plays a particularly important role for their effective learning (e.g., Lee & Tsai, 2011; Strømsø & Bråten, 2010). Many factors may influence learners’ self-regulation and earlier studies have shown that learner beliefs are closely associated with the employment of self-regulated learning strategies (e.g., Bown, 2006; Elbaum, Berg, & Dodd, 1993; Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996; Zhao & Zheng, 2014). Although researchers have probed into learners’ self-regulation in online learning settings (e.g., Barnard, Lan, To, Paton, & Lai, 2009; Barnard-Brak, Lan, & Paton, 2010; Usta, 2011), few studies have related learner beliefs to their online self-regulation in the field of SLA. Hence, this study, situated in mainland China, attempts to explore the relationship between learners’ conceptions of language learning and their online self-regulation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptions of language learning

Conceptions of learning refer to a coherent system of knowledge and beliefs about learning and related phenomena (Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004). Much attention has been paid to the research about learners’ conceptions of learning in the past several decades (e.g., Säljö, 1979; Tsai, 2004; Tsai, Jessie Ho, Liang, & Lin, 2011; Vermunt & van Rijswijk, 1988; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004) and research has shown that conceptions of learning exerted a profound influence on students’ learning process (e.g., Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). Drawing on the previous categorizations (e.g. Marshall, Summer, & Woolnough, 1999; Marton, Dall’Alba, & Beaty, 1993; Säljö, 1979), Tsai (2004) emphasized the domain-specific feature of conceptions of learning. He further proposed a framework for conceptions of learning science with seven categories: (1) memorizing, (2) preparing for tests, (3) calculating and practicing tutorial problems, (4) an increase of knowledge, (5) applying, (6) understanding, and (7) seeing in a new way. Subsequent studies supported Tsai’s taxonomy and empirically verified a hierarchy of seven conceptions where the first three, “memorizing,” “testing,” and “calculating and practicing,” were grouped as lower-level and unsophisticated conceptions of learning, while the others were higher-level and more sophisticated conceptions (Lin, Tsai, & Liang, 2012; Tsai et al., 2011).

In the field of SLA, conceptions of learning a foreign language refer to learners’ beliefs of what a foreign language is and what the learning process consists of (Benson & Lor, 1999). Using a phenomenographic research approach, White (1999) investigated learners’ conceptions in relation to their distance language learning. She stressed the importance of learner-centered principles in technology-enhanced learning environments and called for more in-depth and contextualized explorations concerning language learners’ beliefs and their online learning experiences (White, 2006, 2007). Although there were substantial investigations into the complex interplay between learners’ conceptions and their learning behaviors in the educational research (e.g., Boulton-Lewis et al., 2004; Ferla, Valcke, & Schuyten, 2008; Loyens, Rikers, & Schmidt, 2008), limited research findings have been reported in the field of SLA. As claimed by Zhao and Zheng (2014), there is still a need for inquiries linking learners’ conceptions of English language learning to their use of strategies.

2.2. Self-regulated learning and online self-regulation

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is a key research topic in educational psychology (Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2000; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). It emphasizes the learners’ own “strategic efforts to manage their own achievement through specific beliefs and processes” (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997, p. 105). Although a variety of theoretical approaches have been proposed to conceptualize SRL (for a summary, see Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001), there is a consensus among researchers that learners’ self-regulatory skills are crucial elements for enhancing learner motivation and improving their academic achievement (e.g., Dignath, Büttner, & Langfeldt, 2008; Hilden & Pressley, 2007; Zimmerman, 2001). In foreign language learning and teaching research, Dörnyei (2005) anticipated that SRL would have great potential for further research. More recently, a series of illuminating findings have been generated about language learners’ SRL with the support of technology (e.g., Lam, 2014; Liu, Lan, & Ho, 2014; Ziegler, 2014; Ziegler & Moeller, 2012).

Self-regulation refers to “processes that learners use to activate and maintain cognitions, emotions, and behaviors to attain personal goals” (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2014, p. 145), and is regarded as a multidimensional and process-oriented research

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