

Korean College Students' Perceptions about English Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Students' own learning belief is an important factor which influences students' language learning (Mills, Pajares and Herron, 2007). When post-secondary language learners believe that an activity or other instructional methods are not effective in their learning, students do not learn as much as they can learn when they believe that instructional methods are effective in language learning. To explore Korean students' beliefs about English language learning, 85 Korean college freshmen who took English reading and grammar as a mandatory course participated in this study. They filled out a questionnaire at the end of a semester and the results are expected to show students' beliefs about student-centered activities and language education in Korea.

Key words: Learners' beliefs; student-centered activities

I. Introduction

In second language learning research, interests in learners' psychological aspects have been increased. Related to L2 motivation, learners' beliefs are assumed to play a stronger role than their actual ability does in academic performance. Mills et al. (2007) studied influences of students' self-efficacy beliefs in language learning and found that there was a positive correlation between degree of self-efficacy beliefs and academic success. The more students are confident about their capacity to study in a language course the more they master academic tasks.

Even though constructivism and other language learning principles have emphasized the importance of various student-centered activities which are believed to help students to construct their knowledge effectively, a disagreement between teachers' beliefs and students' beliefs can hinder students' language learning. Yorio's (1986, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006) participants thought that teachers' instructional approach which was against students' beliefs hindered their learning. Horwitz (1988) used the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to explore students' beliefs and in-service or pre-service teachers' beliefs, trying to identify the nature of a mismatch between students' beliefs and teachers' beliefs, and the relationship between the mismatch and students' performance. In this research, students' beliefs about teachers' roles, student-centered activities and best practice to improve language skills are explored.

II. Literature Review

1. Learners' beliefs

Many researchers have blamed teachers' lack of skills, teacher-centered pedagogy (Setiono, 1999, cited in Exley, 2005), failing to adopt the communicative paradigm of the modern English teaching methodology (Alwasilah, 1997, cited in Exley, 2005; Setiono, 1999) and overcrowded curriculum that rewards rote memorization (Setiono, 1999; Buchori, 1997, cited in Exley, 2005) as a main cause of students' low performance. As seen, research has focused on pedagogical aspects related to students' performance so far. To explore a possibility of learners' beliefs as a reason of students' low performance, this study focused on a disagreement between pedagogy and students' beliefs.

Horwitz (1988) made the BALLI and surveyed beginning university students to see their beliefs about language learning and its consequences. The inventory (BALLI) included five categories to measure students' beliefs about language learning: "1) difficulty of language learning; 2) foreign language aptitude; 3) the nature of language learning; 4) learning and communication strategies; and 5) motivations and expectations" (Horowitz, 1988, p.285). In the survey, students who believed that they could be fluent in two years of language learning tended to drop out with disappointment when they realized the differences between their expectations and the reality. To prevent possible negative consequences due to students' misconceptions, Horwitz encouraged teachers to include explanations about relevant information about language learning for the students to get ride of the misconception.

Kuntz (2000) studied influences of conflicts between American students' beliefs and Arabic teachers' beliefs. In the study, the American participants who went to Arabic speaking countries to study Arabic had beliefs which were different from Arabic teachers' pedagogy. The results showed that 29.6% of teachers answered that translation from English was necessary in language learning while 46.7% of students did. Also, 30.5% of teachers answered learning grammar was important in language learning while 47.3% of students did. This disagreement was one of the obstacles to students' language improvement. The immersion environment in an Arabic speaking country was expected to improve students' language proficiency, but the study-abroad was not necessarily beneficial due to the conflict between the students' beliefs and teachers' instruction. Therefore, Horwitz (2000) claims that it is important for teachers to identify language learners' characteristics, differences among individual learners and learning styles, and to respond to them as they are directly related to learners' performance.

2. Asian Students' Characteristics

Exley (2005) claims that Asian students are typically passive, shy and quiet. Reid (1995) also claims that Asian students are passive and unreflective rote learners, and have more in common with each other than with Western students. Lewis (1996) surveyed 320 Indonesian students who were silent, occasionally completing pronunciation drills or answering comprehension questions on readings or grammar exercises. Class time was spent copying from the blackboard and translating texts or vocabulary from English to Indonesian. The percentages of Indonesian students' preferred pedagogy are followed:

- 1) Speaking English with foreigners (65%)
- 2) Teachers' correction (61.6%)
- 3) Learning in pairs and groups (57.6 %)
- 4) Watching English language TV programs (50 %)
- 5) Listening to tapes (49.2 %)
- 6) Putting words into sentences (48.4 %)
- 7) Paraphrasing (47.6 %)
- 8) Reading English newspaper (45.5 %)
- 9) Studying grammar (43.5 %)

On the other hand, Bang's (2006) participants were active in their learning and the results showed effectiveness of student-centered activities. She investigated a relationship between 72 Korean students' self-directed learning and their achievement. The results indicated that the experiment group which had self-directed learning through a website demonstrated a better score in a reading comprehension test than a control group which had teacher-centered instruction. Based on the results, Bang claims that teachers need to be a scaffolder, guidance or co-explorer to facilitate learner-centered studying environment instead of being a knowledge-transmitter.

III. Method

1. Participants

85 Korean college freshmen who took "English Reading and Grammar" as a mandatory course participated in this study. They all studied English, mainly focusing on reading and grammar, for 9 years at elementary, junior high, and high schools in Korea. Their average midterm score was 38 out of 50 and average TOEIC score was 650 out of 990.

2. Data Collection and Procedure

It is well known that pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities are expected to help students to decode texts (Kuntz, 2000). As a reading and post-reading activity, the participants worked as a group to answer reading comprehension questions and to translate texts from English to Korean. At the end of the semester, they filled out a questionnaire.

IV. Preliminary Results

21 students' questionnaires have been analyzed so far. The tentative results showed that a half of the participants preferred teacher-centered instruction because teachers could explain details faster and effectively but it was boring and sleepy. The participants believed that teachers needed to find students' difficulties and to explain them, and that the purpose of the course was listening to teachers' explanations and preparing tests. Another half of the participants preferred student-centered activities because students could improve their reading skills. However, they were worried because they could not translate some parts even after looking up a dictionary.

During the group work, majority of students stated that they tried to fully participate in the activity, but they could not concentrate on the group work because the textbooks were too difficult and the classroom was too noisy. Some of the participants stated that they did not want to participate in a group work at all because they thought that they needed teacher-centered instruction to study grammar in the reading. On the other hand, they believed that they could improve other skills through speaking with native speakers of English or studying abroad. They claimed that the course was helpful to improve vocabulary and reading and the teacher's explanation was the most crucial factor to decide their learning.

The participants who did not support student-centered activities stated that their biggest concern was that they did not know the exact translation, which could lead to a low score in midterm and final examinations. They did not particularly prefer teacher-centered lecture but they did not want to waste their time to translate with other peers taking risks of incorrectness. The examinations did not require a line by line translation but the participants had some fear of incorrectness related to translation and did not want to waste their time participating in a group work. Discussed results are tentative, but at the conference, more concrete results will be provided.

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