



EFL STUDENTS' EPISTEMIC BELIEFS, LEARNING STRATEGIES, AND ONLINE LEARNING ENGAGEMENT: EXPLORING POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: EFL epistemic beliefs and learning strategies, as complex students' characteristics, greatly impact the English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process, like online learning engagement and its outcomes. The exploration among them represents an emergent paradigm that spread English learning in diverse settings, where learning is situated in authentic contexts to face immerses experiences to accomplish meaningful learning. With the aim at disseminating such revolutionary arena, this preliminary analyses discloses reviews on their natures and applications in relation to English learning environment. The conclusions reveal some pedagogical implications that appears to EFL lecturers and educators to bear in mind the advantages of investigating their learners' characteristics prior to developing teaching materials or media and opting teaching techniques when dealing with enhancing online learning engagement when learning English.

Keywords: EFL, epistemic beliefs, learning strategies, online learning engagement

INTRODUCTION

Among different factors contributing to foreign language learning, the influence of individual difference variables such as aptitude, motivation, learning strategies, and beliefs to on English as a foreign language (EFL) learning are of paramount importance. One of numerous benefits ascribed to consider those individual differences is that it serves an essential process and ultimate goal of EFL learning in university level. Among these various factors, learners' beliefs about learning, learning strategies, and learning involvement are key factors in influencing the learners to learn English. Substantial attention has been emphasized that enhancing students' writing performance, as it is one of ultimate goals of learning English. As one of productive skills, teaching writing should be also seen from students' individual difference factors which influence learning, so that a promising teaching technique, methods, media, and materials accommodate the learning atmosphere.

In other words, the expectation of the existence of causal relationship chain occurs among the EFL epistemic beliefs, learning strategies, and online learning engagement can be elicited in the context of EFL learning, albeit mostly prior studies do not directly examine in the precise direction of influences among them starting from epistemic beliefs. There is a growing body of published research demonstrating possible linkages between them, in particular, epistemological beliefs influence learning engagement indirectly through their effects on learning strategies (Mellat & Lavasan, 2011). It is generally considered that epistemic beliefs are the most influential factor to learning strategies and so online learning engagement, which becomes the gap to be filled in this present study.

EFL Epistemic Beliefs

Epistemic beliefs belong to educational psychology that originally comes from epistemology. In educational psychology, two cornerstones of research on epistemic beliefs can be traced to Piaget's consideration of genetic epistemology and Perry's work on epistemological development among college students (Richardson, 2013). According to Muis (2004) Piaget's work on cognition was guided by problem of knowledge, the so-called epistemological problem, cannot be considered separately from the development of intelligence. Perry found that there are multiple possibilities for knowledge that the students perceived after several years they were exposed by diverse intellectual and social environments of universities (Richardson, 2013). These two ideas are concerned with the nature of knowledge and justifications of beliefs, which refer to epistemology, as a branch of philosophy (Muis, 2004). Because of the growing concern on philosophy and educational psychology, various studies employ divergent definitions, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies to explore students' epistemic beliefs.

Studies of epistemic beliefs have not been the sole interest in educational psychology (Bräten & Strømsø, 2004); other disciplines, including higher education (Fujiwara, et al, 2012), science education (Tsai et al., 2011),

reading and literacy (Bräten et al., 2008), teacher education (Olafson & Schraw, 2006), CALL (Mason et al., 2011), and ELT (Akbari & Karimi, 2013), have become the interests in the study of epistemic beliefs. Each discipline has used various research methods and paradigms, and as a result research in this area appears in numerous locations and has been used under different constructs (Muis, 2004).

Of specific interest, in the case of epistemic beliefs and English language learning, there has been no specific theoretical framework from which research is conducted. Regardless the studies on epistemic beliefs related to language learning in the first language (for example in Fujiwara, et al, 2012; Chen, 2012; Franco et al., 2012), one of empirical findings has demonstrated that epistemic beliefs that students hold about a target foreign language, especially in EFL setting has demonstrated the higher the students' epistemic beliefs, the better their EFL proficiency (Akbari & Karimi, 2013). However, epistemic beliefs which are specific to English language learning have not become the concern in the previous studies.

Accordingly, to accommodate the EFL epistemic beliefs, general epistemic beliefs should be adapted with beliefs in EFL. As mentioned in the theory of epistemic beliefs which elaborate two variables, namely what is knowledge and how to acquire knowledge, there are several dimensions comprise to become the constructs of EFL epistemic beliefs. In the first variable, *what is knowledge*, there are three dimensions, namely certain knowledge; simple knowledge; and nature of language learning. The second variable, *how to acquire knowledge* consists of seven dimensions, namely fix ability; quick learning, omniscient authority; the difficulty of language learning; foreign language aptitude; learning and communication strategies; and motivation and expectation. These EFL epistemic beliefs constructs has been developed by Emaliana (2017).

Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are developmental processes that each student can successfully experience at different levels when it is approached systematically (Caswell & Mahler, 2004). The role of learning strategies in the process of English learning has become increasingly important and differences between more and less proficient learners have been found in the number and range of strategies used, in how the strategies are applied to the task, and in appropriateness of the strategies for the tasks (Chien, 2010; Ridhuan & Abdullah, 2009). This implies the interplay of a number of factors for successful application of learning strategies.

In the early studies, research on language learning strategies puts more emphasis on describing strategic behaviors and characteristics of "the good language learner", while more recent research has tried to illustrate taxonomies of language learning strategies and categorize strategies which are utilized by language learners in the process of language learning. Besides, by conducting a lot of research, researchers have revealed that there is a connection between the use and option of learning strategies and different variables like learning contexts, learner characteristics and learning experiences and engagements, language proficiency, or cultural and educational backgrounds (Mellat & Lavasan, 2011). The findings have concluded that the employment of language learning strategies facilitate and revive language learning and help language learners in various ways. It is also shown that a direct correlation exists between language proficiency and language learning performance (Griffiths, 2003). Learning strategies are oriented to the main goal of communicative competence, permit learners to get more self-directed, and support learning (Oxford, 2003). In this regard, language instructors need to incorporate language learning strategies into their teaching methods and approaches, train the students to implement the appropriate strategy for a specific purpose or a specific skill area, and stimulate them to use the strategies as often as possible (Yang, 2007). Students can learn to use language learning strategies to make better their English language skills, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing strategies.

Online Learning Engagement

The most evident characteristic of online learning in detachment of learners and lecturers in space and time. Thus, it has become the focus of researchers to enhance and sustain learners' learning engagement (Chen, 2017; Zhang, et al., 2019). Learning engagement refers to the degree to which learners' actively join in instructional activities, which is identified as a critical factor for determining learners' learning performance in online learning environments (Li & Baker, 2018) and is related to many factors such as learners' self-efficacy, teachers' teaching existence, and perceived task value (Jung & Lee, 2018). Previous study showed that students' self-efficacy, perceived usefulness and teaching presence were positively related with their learning engagement. With the development of information technology and the in-depth application of learning analytics in the education field, more and more studies collect learners' behaviors on online learning platform as indicators of learning engagement (e.g., Ding, et al., 2018).



Possible Relationships

Considerable research has been devoted to uncovering how those individual differences impact among others. In their study, Sanders-Reio, et al., (2014) mention that beliefs about learning predicted variance in writing scores beyond that accounted for by self-efficacy and apprehension. In relation to self-efficacy beliefs which shows moderate correlation with English scores, some results are reveals, i.e. (1) audience orientation, is the strongest positive predictor of the students' grade; (2) transmission (a belief in relying on material published by authorities) shows negative correlation. Another variable in relation to learning strategies are not disseminated. Therefore, these results support the possibility that beliefs about learning can be leverage point for teaching English language to students.

Besides, some studies attempt to improve learners' learning engagement through an instructional medium which is close to them as well as stimulate their learning motivation. One of interesting and motivating medium is online learning environment and activity design (Beach, 2017; Lee & Brett, 2015; Rolando, et al., 2014). There is evidence shows a positive correlation between learners' engagement and their learning motivation (Tananuraksakul, 2015; Amirian et al., 2016). However, few studies have investigated the relationship between learners' learning beliefs, learning strategies, and online learning engagement. As for learners' learning beliefs and strategies shed lights on their actual learning engagement (Yeh, 2010 ; Amirian et al., 2016).

More recent studies have extended students' individual differences which affect English performance. Different from learning self-efficacy beliefs (i.e. students' beliefs about their own writing skill, they address what good writing is and what good writers do), the EFL epistemic beliefs review the whole beliefs of students' view on students' identification on learning English, and some of their ways to learn English. The EFL epistemic beliefs portray bigger constructs and concepts inside the students' reasons in learning English as foreign language. It emphasizes the prominent role of teaching and learning approach as the foundation of philosophical beliefs which is applied in the teaching and learning methods and techniques which has been received and internalized by the students (Emaliana, 2017). This leaves the gap for the present study to do compare to self-efficacy beliefs and beliefs in EFL setting.

Besides, learning strategies appear to be other factors affect learning. Language learning strategies are believed to be impacted by individual differences as well as environmental and contextual factors. Thus, effective use of learning strategies is determined by some aspects, like learning and learners' variables. Nguyen & Terry (2017) mention that contradictory findings observed in early studies led researchers to question the adequacy of the transfer approach and shift to a situation-specific approach that conceptualizes EFL learning strategies as unique types aroused in the process of learning or using English. Besides, Gerami & Baighlou (2011) indicated that successful EFL students used a wider range of learning strategies and different from those often preferred by their unsuccessful peers. The former often used metacognitive strategies while the latter tended to use surface level cognitive strategies. Besides that, students depend on a wide assortment of learning strategies in learning foreign language, as employment of language learning strategies facilitate and improve language learning and assist language learner in different ways. It is also found that a direct correlation exists between language proficiency and language learning achievement (Griffiths, 2003; Yang, 2007; Ya-Ling, 2008). Learning strategies are oriented towards the main goal of communicative competence, allow learners to get more self-directed, and support learning (Oxford, 2003). Consequently, learning strategies influence learners' ability to learn in a particular instructional framework, also in learning English, notably in listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

Inspired by the former conceptualization on factors affecting EFL learning, the present study provides an evaluative perspective with regard to the directions of causal influences among them. Similar to Zang & Liu (2019)'s study that beliefs about learning English relate to motivational beliefs, motivational regulation, and online learning engagement, the present study focuses on the EFL epistemic beliefs which relate to learning strategies for listening, reading, writing, and speaking activities and online learning engagement to see their causal relationship.

As previous studies have proposed several different methods for the creation of factors affecting English learning, among them is a remark to beliefs about knowledge and knowing, that is epistemic beliefs, have been linked to learning strategies and learning engagement. Students' learning strategies and engagement is closely related to conditions when teachers assist students in improving and growing up their beliefs by changing their simple primary beliefs to sophisticated one (Sosu & Gray, 2012). Students with more sophisticated epistemic beliefs have internal self-efficacy, interest, self-regulated learning, and goal orientation to reach high degree of academic achievement (Ulucinar, et al., 2012; Akbari & Karimi, 2013). Thus, possibility on relationships among them can be drawn from investigating unravel different perspectives on that previous studies relate to epistemic beliefs, learning strategies, and online learning engagement.



CONCLUSIONS

As students' characteristics, EFL epistemic beliefs and learning strategies can predict EFL online learning engagement. Since they are related one to another, impacts related to EFL teaching and learning are inevitable. Further research is suggested to examine possible relationships quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Investigations for students' epistemic beliefs, learning strategies, and online learning engagements are worth studying to give more suggestions for EFL teaching and learning activities.

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