Learning Beliefs of English Pronunciation—A Case Study

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Learning belief is an outlook on how to learn a second language well. This paper investigates the learning beliefs of English pronunciation of two first-year English majors, the result of which reveals that the learning beliefs of pronunciation held by these two students mainly focus on these two aspects: learning strategies of English pronunciation and learning motivations of English pronunciation. The paper also shows that English pronunciation course influences the two students’ learning beliefs of English pronunciation to some extent. It is hoped that the case study of the two students will have an illuminating effect on the adjustment of students’ learning beliefs of English pronunciation and their English pronunciation level in general.

Keywords: learning beliefs of English pronunciation, learning strategies of English pronunciation, learning motivations of English pronunciation

Introduction

Since the 70s of the last century, there has been a shift in the focus of foreign language study. Researchers have been more interested in learning than in teaching. As a result, the role that learners play in the process of foreign language learning has attracted more attention. It is true that there are lots of individual differences among learners. Wen (2001) classified the variables influencing individual differences into two categories: controllable and uncontrollable variables. The uncontrollable variables are the elements that cannot be changed, such as sex, age, intelligence, language learning aptitude, idiosyncrasy, etc., while controllable variables are the elements that can be changed, such as learning motivation, learning belief, learning strategy, etc. As more and more research has attested, controllable variables are the critical factors that influence the process of second language acquisition. Learning belief, as one of the important controllable variables, has been defined by different scholars. For example, Hosenfeld (1978) put forward mini-theory, which stated that learning belief was the theory about how to learn a second language well. Wenden (1987) thought learning belief was one part of metacognitive knowledge. Although these definitions are worded differently, in essence, they have quite the same nature. This paper will adopt Horwitz’s (1987) definition: learning belief is an outlook on how to learn a second language well which learners form through personal experience or others’ influence in the process of learning this second language. Learning belief is a relatively stable knowledge system, but it can be adjusted or updated, as learners may constantly reflect on their learning process with gradual maturity in cognitive learning. Up till now, many scholars at home have studied learning belief from different perspectives. They have tried to describe learners’ learning belief, reveal the relationship between learning belief and other variables like strategy or motivation, or explore the reasons behind some specific phenomenon. But these studies tend to be...
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quite general, without much focus on the specific study of the learning belief of a certain aspect of foreign language learning like listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation, etc. So far, just several studies have tried to focus on the learning belief of a specific aspect of English learning at home. The major ones are as follows: Du and Zou (2011) investigated the status quo of the learning beliefs of English vocabulary held by non-English majors and the influence on these students’ vocabulary capacity; Wu (2013) investigated the learning beliefs of translation held by English majors and analyzed the characteristics. And also these studies are mainly targeted towards large groups of students, and there are few in-depth case studies of the learning belief of a specific aspect of foreign language learning. Therefore, this paper intends to conduct a case study of two first-year English majors’ learning beliefs of English pronunciation and explore the influence of English pronunciation course on the learning belief systems of the two students.

Study Questions and Subjects

This paper intends to explore and study the two questions that follow: (1) What are the characteristics of the learning beliefs of English pronunciation of the two first-year English majors? (2) Are there any changes in the two students’ learning beliefs of English pronunciation over a time span of one semester after they took the English pronunciation course?

The study subjects are the two students from the English pronunciation class that the author has taught. The students of the class are the first-year English majors whose pronunciation scores were below 80 in the pronunciation test organized at the beginning of this semester, which suggests that they are intermediate-level and low-level students. They mainly come from Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Anhui, Zhejiang, etc. The two students chosen, one boy and one girl, come from Jiangxi and Jiangsu, representing the two regions with the highest proportion of students in the class.

Data Collection

Referring to The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) by Horwitz (1987, 1988) and based on the teaching experience and the problems arising in teaching, the author devised a questionnaire about learning beliefs of English pronunciation. The questionnaire has 24 questions, dealing with five aspects: the learning ability of English pronunciation, the nature of English pronunciation study, the difficulty of English pronunciation study, the strategies of English pronunciation study, and the motivations and goals of English pronunciation study. Then the questionnaire was revised by an experienced teacher and was used as a pilot survey of a class of 25 students to check the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The pilot survey was conducted at the beginning of the semester with 25 questionnaires handed out to the class. The students were required to finish the questionnaires within 20 minutes and then hand them in. All the 25 questionnaires were valid. The result of the pilot survey showed that the questionnaire had a good reliability, with Cronbach α being 0.827. Thus it was used to survey the two subjects at the beginning of the semester. The questionnaire adopts Likert Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. The data are processed by SPSS 19.0.

In order to further know the characteristics of and changes in the learning beliefs of English pronunciation of the two students, the author also interviewed the two students at the end of the semester. The interview questions were designed based on the questionnaire and the author’s further thinking. Before the interview,
permission was asked for and the students agreed to be interviewed. The interview was recorded and notes were taken by the author.

**Study Results**

**The Results of Questionnaires**

The analysis of the questionnaires shows the learning beliefs of English pronunciation that the two intermediate-level and low-level first-year English majors generally hold (the average score is more than 4) are as follows: No. 11 “It is necessary to listen to radio, discs and to see English movies in order to improve English pronunciation and intonation” (M = 4.3333, SD = 0.57735); No. 12 “It is necessary to practice reading English words and sentences a lot in and out of class in order to improve English pronunciation and intonation” (M = 4.0000, SD = 0.00000); No. 13 “Choosing effective learning methods is important for forming good English pronunciation and intonation” (M = 4.0000, SD = 1.00000); No. 15 “It is important to find out the weak points of your pronunciation and intonation and take some measures” (M = 4.6667, SD = 0.57735); No. 17 “It is necessary to regularly evaluate one’s progress in order to improve your pronunciation and intonation” (M = 4.3333, SD = 0.57735); No. 18 “Proper allotment of time is very important for forming good English pronunciation and intonation” (M = 4.0000, SD = 0.00000); No. 23 “If I have good English pronunciation and intonation, I will be able to communicate with native speakers more easily” (M = 4.6667, SD = 0.57735), and No. 24 “If I have good English pronunciation and intonation, I will have better opportunities for a good job” (M = 4.6667, SD = 0.57735). Obviously, the learning beliefs of English pronunciation of the two intermediate-level and low-level first-year English majors mainly focus on the learning strategies and learning motivations of English pronunciation.

**The Results of Interviews**

The first interviewee is a male student from Jiangxi Province, whose English pronunciation is of intermediate level. He started learning English by learning words and grammar from junior high school. He hasn’t learned phonetic transcriptions, and doesn’t have a good grasp of sound linking and stress. He was not interested in English pronunciation at first and later has been gradually interested in it. At the beginning of the English pronunciation course, he thought this course mainly helped students to correct pronunciation. But he later found that this course actually let students learn more things. He thinks that it is important to have access to standard English pronunciation and be immersed in English environment by watching original movies, listening to English songs, etc. But he thinks that there are not enough ways to be immersed in English in real life. And of course he admits that he lacks initiative. He agrees that improving English pronunciation takes time.

By taking the English pronunciation course, he realizes that he needs to continue to pay attention to English pronunciation in the following university years, because a good pronunciation will benefit him in job seeking in the future. He is confident in improving his English pronunciation and considers himself to be ambitious.

The second interviewee is a female student coming from Jiangsu, whose English pronunciation is of low level. She speaks English with a local accent, but she is much interested in English. She started learning English from Primary Grade one, but at that time she just learned about 10 English phonetic transcriptions. So she knows that she does not have a good grasp of English phonetic transcriptions. Since she took the English pronunciation course, she has found more problems with her English pronunciation, such as speaking with an accent, speaking with a flat tone and reading with no pause. She also has problems with sound linking, word
stress, and sentence stress. She thinks watching American TV series and especially listening to English songs are great ways to improve English pronunciation. She thinks it is not easy for a person to improve his/her English pronunciation, but it is very important to improve one’s English pronunciation, as a person’s pronunciation may influence other people’s judgement of his/her English proficiency. She really wants to improve her English pronunciation as she thinks a good English pronunciation can be very helpful in the future job seeking and workplace communication.

Discussions

From the results of the questionnaires and interviews, we can see that the two students, regardless of their sex, the regions they come from, or their English level, mainly agree upon some learning strategies of English pronunciation study and have similar learning motivations both at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. They think it is necessary to have access to standard English pronunciation in various ways like watching American TV series, listening to English programs, etc. in order to improve pronunciation. They think English pronunciation is very important as it can influence one’s future job, which is a practical learning motivation.

According to the questionnaire results and the interview results, there are some changes in the two students’ learning beliefs of English pronunciation over a time span of one semester. After taking the English pronunciation course, both of them find more problems with their English pronunciation and have a deeper understanding of the nature of the study of English pronunciation. For example, the first interviewee thought the English pronunciation course mainly helped students to correct English pronunciation at the beginning of the semester, but gradually he has found that this course is more than correcting English pronunciation. By taking the course, he realizes that he has problems with phonetic transcriptions, sound linking, and stress. The second interviewee realizes that she reads with a flat tone and she does not pause in the process of reading by taking the course. And also she realizes that she has problems with sound linking, word stress, and sentence stress. As for the understanding of the difficulty of English pronunciation study, the results of the relevant questions in the two questionnaires are as follows: No. 4 “It is difficult to pronounce English words correctly and form the correct connected speech” (M = 3.0000, SD = 1.00000); No. 5 “It is difficult to correct the existing bad habit of English pronunciation and intonation” (M = 3.0000, SD = 1.73205). This suggests that they did not really realize the difficulty of pronouncing English words correctly and forming the correct connected speech or correcting the existing bad habits of English pronunciation and intonation at the beginning of the semester. However, they had a clearer awareness of the difficulty of English pronunciation study at the end of the semester, as the two students mentioned in the interviews that it’s really not easy to pronounce English words correctly and form the correct connected speech or to correct the existing bad habits of English pronunciation and intonation. As for the ability of learning English pronunciation, the interviewee from Jiangxi is confident in improving his English pronunciation all the time. However, the interviewee from Jiangsu was not very confident at the beginning of the semester. The results of the questionnaires show that the interviewee from Jiangsu highly agreed on “Some people have the special ability to speak idiomatic English”, but she held a neutral attitude to “I believe that I have the ability to speak idiomatic English”, which shows that the English pronunciation level may influence a person’s confidence. At the end of the semester, when she was asked in the interview if she believed that she had the ability to speak idiomatic English, she said she was more confident than before as she realized some of her problems and also learned some theories about English pronunciation.
From the above discussions, we can see that the English pronunciation course can influence students’ learning beliefs of English pronunciation. Therefore, teachers should explain English pronunciation terms, English pronunciation phenomena, and sound systems in details instead of just correcting students’ pronunciations. Students do realize the importance of learning strategies, but they may not know the specific learning strategies, so teachers can introduce some useful learning strategies to them. Students may also lack learning initiatives, so teachers can form a certain monitoring system to help them learn autonomously. Students have certain learning motivations, but their learning motivations may be quite practical, so teachers can guide them on a higher level. Teachers need to be patient with those students who do not have a good English pronunciation and help them build their confidence. Teachers also need to guide students to form the habit of reflecting on themselves. In this way, they can adjust and update their learning beliefs all the time so as to improve English pronunciation.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the learning beliefs of pronunciation held by two intermediate-level and low-level first-year English majors, the result of which reveals that they both greatly realize the importance of learning strategies and learning motivations of English pronunciation. However, they don’t have similar learning beliefs concerning the learning ability of English pronunciation, the nature of English pronunciation study, and the difficulty of English pronunciation study. Also there are some changes in the two students’ learning beliefs of English pronunciation over a time span of one semester. Though it is not easy to improve students’ English pronunciation all at once, taking English pronunciation course can be of some help and teachers’ guidance can help students adjust and update their learning beliefs. It is hoped that the case study of the two students can be enlightening to English pronunciation learning and teaching to some extent. Of course, the paper has some limitations, for example, the investigation is not deep enough, the subjects may not be representative enough and the investigative methods are not various enough, so further study is needed.

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