

***“Just Make the Thing Understood”-  
Transformation of Migrant Learners’ Beliefs  
about Learning***

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Currently, there is increasing recognition of the fact that the beliefs individuals hold are the best indicators of the decisions they make during the course of everyday life (Bandura, 1986). Substantial research regarding language learners’ explicit and implicit beliefs has been conducted in diverse language teaching environments. The present research was undertaken to understand the learning beliefs of PRC learners studying for a Nursing diploma course in Singapore. Our aim was to use a biographical approach to understand learner beliefs and examine the transformation of these beliefs as the learners undergo changes in their learning environment. In analyzing the biographies of these learners, we also tried to establish a connection between two kinds of change: change in the learning environment and change in the learning beliefs. In this study, students in their first and second years of a nursing diploma course in Singapore were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The paper presents our analysis of two interviews keeping the focus of this description on the changes in beliefs about language learning which correlate with changes in the learning environment. While we have reconstructed the narratives, our intention is to focus on the transformation of beliefs of these learners.

**Key words: learner belief, learner autonomy, learner strategy**

## **BACKGROUND**

Pioneering researchers in learner-centred learning such as Nunan have frequently pointed out the importance of understanding our learners in designing and delivering a curriculum. Nunan (2000) emphasizes the importance of learner-centered classrooms. He defines learner-centered classrooms as the place where “key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be accessed will be made with reference to the learner” (Nunan, 2000, p. 11) . Currently, there is increasing recognition that the beliefs individuals hold are the best indicators of the decisions they make during the course of everyday life (Bandura, 1986).

While the appropriateness of formal language education to the learners’ English communicative needs has always been recognized in ESP literature (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Mackay & Palmer, 1981; Pennycook, 1997), the issue of what happens to learners’ beliefs when they experience a gradual exposure to a more natural environment of English has not been investigated thoroughly. The issue becomes more complex in countries such as Singapore which have a complex multilingual environment and where the learners experience an immersion-type setting as well as mixed codes and varieties of English. (Sng, Pathak & Serwe, 2009) In such situations it becomes crucial to study the transformation in the beliefs and attitudes of learners. In this study, we trace the development in learners’ language awareness; and improvement in their use of language in communication as well as their adaptation to the English speaking environment.

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learning environment. In analyzing the biographies of these learners, we will also try to establish a connection between two kinds of change: change in the learning environment and change in the learning beliefs.

## **EARLIER RESEARCH**

Substantial research regarding language learners' explicit and implicit beliefs has been conducted in diverse language teaching environments. (Alanen, 2003; Barcelos, 2003; Castellotti, 2001; Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004; Levine, 2003; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004). Much of the research focuses on investigating the relationships between learners' beliefs, strategies, motivation, autonomy and approaches to language learning.

Some of these studies (See Peacock, 1998) investigate whether learner beliefs are in assonance with teacher beliefs concerning selection of learning activities. It has been reported that learners favour a 'traditional' (such as error correction and grammar work) approach, while teachers prefer a communicative approach which involves pair and group work activities. Peacock concludes that this wide gap might negatively impact learners' linguistic progress, satisfaction with the class, and confidence in their teachers, and that similar differences probably occur in many other contexts and classrooms. However, Peacock's findings need to be evaluated in the context of learners' background. It is observed (Zhenhui, 1999) that Mainland Chinese students are overexposed to the grammar-translation approach of language teaching and find group work situations uncomfortable. Such examples suggest how student expectations may revolve around teacher-fronted classroom, teacher-initiated communication rather than a learner-centric approach. Such situations also suggest that contrary to popular beliefs, much of the opposition to learner-centric approaches comes from the learners than the institutions. Therefore, it remains a challenge to provide for greater sensitivity towards learner beliefs and learners' culture resources while

developing approaches and designing activities.

In a study on learner autonomy on Asian students, Benson, Chik and Lim (2003) discovered that Asian learners can mobilize and use cultural resources for language learning. This learner autonomy involves a fusion of different cultural resources to create a learner’s individual identity. Benson (2003) explains that the concept of autonomy is founded in the learners’ natural inclination to take control of their learning. This autonomy can be developed by learners given the right conditions and opportunity to take control of their learning (Benson, 2003).

A similar study by Gao (2003) found that PRC students who moved to study in U.K. underwent transformation in their language learning strategies. They began to rely less on dictionaries and more on contexts to guess the meanings of words. These PRC students also began to depend less on rote learning and more on consolidating their vocabulary learning through using it in writing, reading and speaking. These learners reported that they changed their strategies in order to cope with their academic studies and interaction in the U.K. This study recognizes that PRC students studying in Singapore might undergo a similar transformation and may see the difference between learning English in a way that they can use it for real life communication, versus the kind of learning styles they have adopted in the past in their own countries. It would be therefore be interesting to find out what kinds of transformation in learning beliefs and attitudes PRC students experienced when they arrive in Singapore to study.

There has been much research on learners’ metacognitive strategies in learning autonomy but very little is known about the place of social and affective strategies (Benson, 2003). The present study focuses on the social experiences and affective strategies of the PRC nursing students when they have to use English for real life communication in Singapore. In an attempt to trace the transformation of PRC nursing students’ learning beliefs as they move from learning English in China to Singapore, our study tries to link the concept of autonomy with learners’ beliefs about learning.

## **METHOD OF STUDY**

A qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured interviews was adopted in this study. It was felt that this approach would be more effective in identifying the social and affective strategies of the learners. Studies on learner reflection in natural contexts (such as Lor, 1998) have noted that such reflection cannot be observed directly. Instead, it can only be uncovered either through writing or verbal reports. Such interviews can also facilitate reflection by allowing learners to externalize their thoughts and experiences (Lor, 1998).

In this study, students in their first and second years of a nursing diploma course in Singapore were involved as participants in semi-structured interviews. They were in the 20-22 age-group and had studied English as a foreign language in China. These students had undergone a short practicum in the Singaporean hospitals as part of their nursing program in Singapore. Therefore, they were exposed to the use of English for communication in the hospital wards. Consequently, the hypothesis adopted in this study was that they would have then experienced a transformation in beliefs and attitudes about their language study. The participants had volunteered to participate in this study as they hoped the findings of this study can benefit other PRC nursing students.

To explore their learning beliefs, the PRC nursing students were encouraged to narrate their language learning experiences in semi-structured interview situations. Questions were posed to prompt them to engage in this conversation about their language learning experiences. Most of the questions asked during the interviews were either to seek clarification or encourage the participants to provide more details. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. These transcripts were analyzed by observing occurrences of the following themes:

- Description of the teaching methodology the PRC nursing students were exposed to

- Description of their consequent learning styles, beliefs and attitudes.

The narratives were then reconstructed with the aim of tracing their learning journeys, beliefs about learning English and how these beliefs changed in relation to changes in learning environment.

### **Participants and the Context of the Study**

The subjects of this study, namely the PRC nursing students, started learning English in China at secondary level. They were taught English mainly through a grammar translation approach with very little opportunity to communicate in English. As part of the selection process to study nursing in Singapore, they had to participate in a selection interview conducted in English. Upon being selected, they then studied English at an ELT institution in Singapore for six months. In this intensive English program, which they underwent before the commencement of their nursing program, substantial emphasis was placed on listening and speaking skills. In their nursing education programme, all tutorials and lectures were in English and they learned specialized nursing terminology in English. In addition, they communicated with their lecturers and Singaporean classmates in English. At the same time, they were exposed to different varieties of English because of the mix of races in Singapore. During this process, they encountered ‘Singlish’, a variety of Singaporean English that is marked by code switching and code mixing with Chinese and Malay languages. In the second year of their nursing program, they had a short internship program in the hospitals. The multilingual environment of the hospitals posed an even greater challenge to them as there was a greater degree of code mixing and code switching of English with Malay and Chinese vocabulary. Here, the PRC nursing students found that they had to depend on their learning strategies to cope with this multilingual environment.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In this section we present our analysis of two interviews. Our focus in this description is on the changes in beliefs about language learning which correlate with changes in the learning environment. This section describes learning journeys of two learners: Xiaolin (XL) and Jul. (Participants have been nicknamed to protect their identity.) While we have reconstructed the narratives, our intention is to focus on the transformation of beliefs of these two learners.

### **XL-The Beginnings: The Formal Learning Environment in China**

Xiaolin started learning English at secondary level and continued learning English when he entered the University in China. He said that he learned English with the goal of passing the English paper in the final examination. Most of what he learned was written English. He practiced some spoken English in a special English conversation session called English Corner in his school. However, he felt that there was still a gap in his language learning as he lacked the opportunity to use English for real life communication. As a result, he found that he could only speak rudimentary English and his listening skills in English were very weak. He felt the main problem with learning English in China was the lack of environment to use English and the main attitude of the students was to study the language to pass the examination. The focus of teaching was on knowledge of English vocabulary (*yufa* in Chinese). They were tested on their listening skills but not on their speaking.

It seems the focus of learning English in China was mainly academic, that is, to pass the examination. There was almost no emphasis on using English for communication. Moreover the environment was not conducive to using English.

XL: I think, because I think all the Chinese people speak Chinese ...so don't have

the environmental...and always I think, Chinese, uhm, Chinese people think that uh English, we just use English as a language, not language, just use for examination, and not use uh oral, oral....so I think most, uhm most difficulty is that we, we don't have the environment

### **XL's Struggle with Inhibitions: The Formal and Informal Learning Environment in Singapore**

Xiaolin felt that the advantage in Singapore is that the environment is more conducive to speaking English. However, since most of the Singaporean population is Chinese, Singaporeans spoke to him in Mandarin. He found he had limited opportunities to use English and the main task in which he used English was when giving presentations in English in his course.

XL: Outside school... I think here is very similar in China, because all the, all the people can, most the people can speak Chinese, so I think outside is..is the same as in the school, always speak Chinese...except for some erm Malay people, Malay, Indian...so ...for example we go to MacDonald, the the waitress cannot speak Chinese, just speak very er very simple English to them...never speak it very much, but in our real life we always use Chinese

He used very simple English in communicating to Malay and Indian people in shops and food outlets. Apart from this, he found himself using Mandarin most of the time.

In the informal context, he found that he did not need a wide range of vocabulary to communicate in English in Singapore. He discovered that Singapore differed from China in that the emphasis was not in learning complex vocabulary. This finding reflects Gao's (2003) study where the PRC learners discovered that they did not need a very wide range of vocabulary to communicate in an English speaking environment.

In the formal learning environment, Xiaolin faced an initial problem in understanding the Singaporean accent of his teachers. He panicked at first but

later found his comprehension level rising as he listened more to his teachers.

In Singapore, Xiaolin learned a little more about using English for communication, especially that he did not need a very wide range or complex vocabulary for him to communicate. However, because of the large population of Chinese people in Singapore, he was still unable to find many opportunities to communicate in English. In terms of learning attitude, Xiaolin expressed that in Singapore, his main difficulty was that he was very shy about using English.

XL: I think most, most is the same, but the different is you have the environment. I think, for me, I think I am very shy, because most of my classmates - all Chinese, so we always use in Chinese, we speak Chinese... I think I think in course assessment, we need presentation, so we, we always just er speak a little bit English, always in the school, because always we, all can speak Chinese, so always we use Mandarin.

When he spoke in English, the Singaporean Chinese asked him to speak in Mandarin instead as they could not understand him. This led him to feel very embarrassed and heightened his inhibition to use English.

### **Dealing with Complexities: Communicative Environment of the Hospital**

In the hospital, Xiaolin faced a similar situation in which the Chinese patients spoke to him in Chinese.

XL: For example, my patient cannot speak Chinese, so I must speak er English to them. For the other people, always Chinese people, they can speak Mandarin with us, so we no need to speak in English. Sometimes the patient is very kind. They say, they always ask, 'Are you from China?' We say 'Yes' then the patient er speak Chinese with us. Ehmm we must speak English during the ...pass report...Lecturer ask, ask me some questions, and also the staff nurse

cannot speak Chinese, so we must speak Chinese. And the other, the other situation, we always in Chinese...

The only opportunity he had to use English was when he was practicing in the psychiatric ward when he gave instructions to the Indian patients. In terms of communicative tasks, he had to give instructions to family members and maids of the patients on how to care for the latter. With the staff nurses and the student nurses, he used Mandarin to communicate with them. Again, he had limited opportunity to use English. He said he used English only to pass his reports to the staff nurse.

His communication with the doctors was sometimes in Mandarin, and other times in English. In such cases, the doctors asked him for information about the patients and to get certain medical equipment. At this juncture, the difficulty Xiaolin faced was he was not familiar with the English names of the medical equipment. He discovered that when the staff nurse asked him to get a piece of medical equipment, he went to the storeroom and was unable to figure out what the staff nurse needed. The Singaporean nursing student, he found, did not have such problems. When asked what he felt was the cause of this problem, he attributed it to the acronyms or *jianxie* (in Mandarin) used by the Singaporean staff nurse.

When asked how relevant he found his language course in the nursing program to his communicative needs in the hospital, Xiaolin said that his training in presentation skills was the most useful. This was because oral English was very important in his hospital practice. He said that written English was important too as he had to write nursing notes. He found the names of diseases particularly hard to remember. He felt that the nursing course should encourage them to practice speaking skills as this was extremely important in the hospital. Along this line, he felt that conversational English was very important.

Talking about other communication problems he faced in the hospital, Xiaolin said that he could not communicate with the elderly patients as they spoke Chinese dialects like Hokkien and Cantonese and were unable to speak

Chinese or English. In such cases, there was no common language between them. With the Malay and Indian patients, he used very simple English. When asked if he had difficulty with the accent of the colloquial Singaporean English, Xiaolin said that now he understood the colloquial Singaporean English or *Singlish*, but he was unable to understand British English or American English. He was totally clueless when he listened to BBC.

Looking at the perspective of the patients, they sometimes had difficulties understanding Xiaolin's Chinese accent. Once a patient asked him if he was speaking "Chinglish" (a variety of English used by the educated Chinese):

XL: Sometimes...erm...I remember one time, I, I guide the patient to go to the toilet, then the patient ask me, "Are you from China?" I said "Yes". Then the patient said, "Are you speak Chinglish?" I'm shocked, I think "Chinglish? Ohhh...yes, yes, I speak Chinglish!" (laughs)

Xiaolin's coping strategies in this complex multilingual environment of the hospital lie in speaking slowly and clearly. Xiaolin confided regretfully that his listening and speaking skills were still very weak and felt that he and his PRC nursing peers needed four more months of an English course in their nursing program. At the same time, he stated that their perception of the English course was that it was boring as it focused on written and grammar components.

Xiaolin's awareness of the kinds of English communicative skills he needed to acquire was raised when he was faced with the complex, multilingual environment of the hospitals.

XL: Ya, not, not hospital, --- but they, they have a ward for uh mental problems, so patients always ask you erm up the bed, down the bed, erm always we go to the bed, then tell the patient, use English, because the patient is er Indian, then I think, I think er he got the mental problem, so we always use English, "Uncle, uncle, can you..erm blah blah blah", so I think erm ...ya!

He realized his listening and speaking skills were inadequate to help him function in this environment. He realized his English course should include more training in these two skills. In addition, his command of English medical terms was inadequate and he was unable to respond to the instructions of the staff nurses and doctors. He also faced great difficulties in communicating with the patients’ relatives.

XL: Ya, sometimes, because the family members sometimes ask “What’s wrong with my husband?” so you need to tell them some things... but for students nurse, we always just say very very simple problems then they er ask then, ask more....we tell them they can ask the staff nurse or the doctor

XL’s elaborate responses clearly indicate a need for training in specialist vocabulary for medical terms, listening and speaking skills. Xiaolin’s consciousness of communicative English was heightened when he was faced with the need to communicate in English. However, his language skills had not improved to the optimal functional level for the hospital environment. The multilingual environment of the hospital posed an added challenge to the PRC nursing students like him.

#### *Jul’s Learning Journey: The Beginnings*

Jul started learning English in China at the age of 12. She recalled that the focus of teaching was on grammar and vocabulary. She thought this had both positive as well as negative effects on her language learning (“*But when I want to speak I always think of grammar*”). She also implied that the vocabulary learning took place in a domain that was not much useful to her in Singapore (“*I think I also need to enlarge my vocabulary- know lot of words about Singaporean’s life*”).

Jul highlights her lack of opportunity to use English for communication, a dissonance between the teaching approach in formal education and use of English for everyday communication.

Jul: In China? Basically the teacher will –teach us how to pronounce the word-and also the articles also ask us to memorise it- basically – of course-Basically the teacher will speak in Mandarin during the English class except reading the textbook. So -of course in our life we speak Mandarin- No chance to practice the spoken English -how to speak like the foreigners.

### **The Formal Learning Environment in Singapore**

Jul acknowledges that in Singapore there is more emphasis on listening and speaking skills and the teaching approach is more communicative than that used in China. However, she mentioned how learners still encountered problems with retention of language learned. Although there were more opportunities ‘to practice spoken English’ and students were asked to give presentations, the opportunities for communication were still limited.

The main reason for this, according to Jul, is her learning beliefs and attitudes:

JUL: Because I am learning a lot of grammar- but I found -I found Singaporeans not follow the grammar. But when I want to speak I always think of grammar. So- before I talk I have to arrange the sentence in my head. At the beginning I am very scared somebody will ask me directions – how to go there- how to find something in the school- I think the problem is – (how to say)- you learn the language- you learn the language is different from speak the language. When you learn the language you have to follow many rules. But when you speak – something like-no rules- just make the thing understood. So now I realize when I speak English to my local friends- It’s not correct.

It is remarkable to note Jul’s emphasis on communication (“Just make the thing understood”) vis-a vis emphasis on the form of language. Jul seems to be striving to unlearn the predominance of grammar over language use. (“*you learn the language is different from speak the language.*”).

Jul realized that she had to be more pro-active in the selection of peers.

JUL: Also I- at school- I think- I like to talk to the Malay and Indian friends- who cannot speak Mandarin. Because the Singaporeans-they don’t have the patience- they talk in Mandarin to me- may be because I speak too slow- or don’t express my feelings too well- they speak in Mandarin to me. But the Malay and the Indian have the patience to listen to me. Classmates help me a lot. Also the lecturer, they know we are from China- so when we do the practice, normally we speak not so well- but they have patience to listen to us.

### **Communication in Hospitals**

Jul realized that besides learning English, they needed to learn some Malay and Chinese dialect words in order to comprehend and communicate in hospitals in Singapore. The English used is marked by frequent code switching and code mixing. This complex linguistic environment seems to be adding a different kind of stress for the nursing students.

JUL: Some patients especially the elderly patients speak only Hokkein and Cantonese. The patients always think- you are from China, you should know. But most of us are from the North of China So we don’t have the- we can’t speak Hokkein or Cantonese- only can speak Mandarin- English- Sometimes- the thing is like -I don’t have enough encouragement to talk to patients. For example, when a patient is new admission I have to fill up an admission form- lot of questions have to ask- so some questions I don’t know how to ask. Other is communicate with the staff nurse- I don’t know sometimes I feel –it’s just I feel, they do not mean that-so have very little time to talk to them.

Jul’s responses suggest how learners create personal space to explore own individual learning style.

JUL: I need to know more about the Singaporean’s lifestyle, the food, their habits, and the – I think I need to speak- practice English more. I think I also need to

enlarge my vocabulary- know lot of words about Singaporean's life.

This response indicates a realization of the need for reflectivity, flexibility and openness to cultural differences and varieties of English. There is also a realization that grammatical rules and perfect pronunciation are not really essential in effective communication.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Apart from the culture-shock that is much talked about, the interviews indicate that migrant learners face a major upheaval that is caused by their learning beliefs being challenged. Although this is a natural phase in cultural learning, ELT teachers have to be sensitive to the chaotic phase that migrant learners face in their learning journey. This phase has to do with changes in both the linguistic environment and teaching approaches.

JUL: more chance to speak- and also have to do the presentation. In China we don't have the presentation.

XL: we always use, because the examination... we we focus on the yufa (vocabulary in Chinese), but never, but never the, never use the oral, we just uh test the listening but not the speaking

These learners have experienced a drastic change when they move from their native languages to an English or multilingual environment. Earlier research (e.g., Hale-Benson, 1986) focused on students who have learned behavior and beliefs that are different from the majority culture in schools. More research is needed on learners who are persuaded to change the learning beliefs that are deeply ingrained in their native culture. In this study, it is discovered that learners feel safe to experiment with their language learning if ELT teachers are able to understand this critical phase caused by a challenge to learners' learning beliefs. In many cases, teachers may fail to

come to an understanding of this critical phase and this study shows the value of interviewing students to reflect on this.

Despite the fact that these nursing students have not been taught language learning strategies, they were able to draw upon their own resources and come up with their own strategies to cope with the intriguing multilingual environment of the learning institution and the hospital. Here are two examples:

JUL: Some patients especially the elderly patients speak only Hokkein and Cantonese. The patients always think- you are from China, you should know. But most of us are from the North of China. At school- I think- I like to talk to the Malay and Indian friends- who cannot speak Mandarin. Because the Singaporeans-they don’t have the patience- they talk in Mandarin to me.

XL: Outside school... I think here is very similar in China, because all the, all the people can, most the people can speak Chinese, so I think outside is..is the same as in the school, always speak Chinese...except for some erm Malay people, Malay, Indian...so ...

This reflects on inner resources that migrant learners possess and draw upon when faced with such a major change in their lives, such as a different language environment. “Just make the thing understood”, says Jul, although she realizes that this is easier said than done. “Before I talk, I have to arrange the sentence in my head” although she knows that “it’s not correct”. Research has shown that learners ‘tend to follow their own agendas during lessons’ (Benson, 2003, p. 185) and that they depend less on formal instructions, than on ‘processing of linguistic input (ibid). For this reason, there is much that can be learned from interviews on learners.

Findings on learners’ beliefs can inform teaching. This study shows the importance of ELT teachers to be informed about learners’ learning beliefs. Their beliefs influence their receptivity to the teaching approach and the effectiveness of their learning. This study affirms Nunan(2000)’s claim that individual learner’s beliefs about language learning can be transformed over

time. This is particularly true when learners experience a change in language environment and progress to increasingly use English for communication. Capturing such a transformation in learners' beliefs, learning strategies and autonomy is vital for any decisions made at the curriculum or the classroom level.

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