

A Survey of Student Language Learning Beliefs

著者(英)	ADAMS Keith
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A Survey of Student Language Learning Beliefs

Keith Adams

Tohoku Gakuin University

Introduction

Teachers of foreign languages often draw parallels between their 'craft' and the theatre. The classroom is the stage, and the students are the audience, though the 'play' demands active audience participation. Everyone has a role and lines to learn, but even perfect stage management and a well-delivered script will not guarantee that the performance will succeed. Above all, the play must appeal to the audience.

The ability to judge what will appeal or work with the audience is one of the most valuable assets teachers have at their disposal. It is a rather nebulous ability, a kind of sixth sense, born out of experience and the powers of intuition. It does not always prove to be entirely accurate the first time around—'certainties' mysteriously backfire; 'darkhorses' pleasantly surprise—and adjustments have to be made, but a teacher's sixth sense is frequently a trusted and reliable ally.

It is also highly controversial. One teacher's intuition may tell him that "A communicative teaching approach will be resisted by these students because they have been conditioned to grammar-translation", while another teacher will argue that "It's just what they want because they are sick and tired of all that grammar!" Both teachers are basing their appraisals on assumptions they have made about the

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students' experience and personalities, and the beliefs the students hold about learning a foreign language. Controversy naturally occurs since assessments are often highly subjective with little or no empirical support.

This paper will report on a survey which seeks to obtain empirical data to evaluate the validity of teacher assumptions relating to student beliefs about language learning. Though the importance of a teacher's intuition is recognized and valued, this study is based on the premise that since assumptions often become the foundations for some very important decisions, efforts must be made to verify interpretations whenever possible.

What is the rationale for investigating student beliefs about language learning? As illustrated in the example above, presumptions about student beliefs and attitudes about language learning often shape the fundamental principles of instruction chosen by a teacher. Yet, as Horwitz wrote :

Although we know that students come to ESL classes with many preconceived ideas about language learning, we know very little about the nature of these beliefs, the beliefs that specific types of students hold, or how these beliefs affect language learning strategies. (Horowitz 1987 : 119)

Given the tremendous influence that student beliefs, and teacher perceptions of these beliefs, exert on learning and instruction, the aim of this study is identify beliefs so that teachers can assess the type of learning and teaching approach that is most appropriate for their students.

The Survey Instrument

The model used for the questionnaire in this survey was the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed at the Inten-

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sive English Program of The University of Texas at Austin.

The BALLI asks for student opinions in five major areas of language learning: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations. The students are asked to respond to 34 Likert-scale items in the five areas. Opinions are expressed across a range of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

The BALLI questions are not intended to identify 'erroneous' student beliefs, since many of the issues raised in the survey are widely disputed among researchers. The purpose of the questions is simply to describe beliefs.

Thirty-one items from the BALLI were incorporated into this survey, either verbatim or with minor modifications. For example, item 32 on the BALLI states, "I would like to have American friends." This was modified to "... foreign friends." Three BALLI items were dropped because of their unsuitability to an EFL environment.¹ New items were developed to bring the total number of items on this survey to 37. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese, and both versions, English and Japanese, were used in the survey.²

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1. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refers to the situation where a student is studying English in a non-English speaking environment, such as the student's native country, where there are usually very limited opportunities for communication in English outside of the classroom. This contrasts with English as a Second Language (ESL) where non-native speakers of English are studying in an English-speaking environment which provides many opportunities for communication. Typical ESL learners are foreign students in English-speaking countries, or immigrants to such countries.
 2. In order to integrate the survey with language learning and to give the students a 'meaningful task', all students were given the English version and instructed to read it first, confirm their comprehension using the Japanese version, and then to mark their opinion on the Likert-scale sheet.

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The Students

The BALLI was first used with 32 intermediate level students in the Intensive English Program at The University of Texas at Austin. The students came from 12 different countries, including two from Japan, and were characterized as "...represent(ing) cultural backgrounds typical of students in intensive English programs." (Horowitz 1987: 121)

The survey described in this paper canvassed a much larger sample, though, quite naturally, all of the respondents were Japanese. The questionnaire was given to five different groups of students. Four of the groups were first through fourth-year, English Literature majors at Tohoku Gakuin University (TGU). All of the students in these groups were enrolled in an English Conversation class at the time of the survey. The fifth group was a class of second-year, Science majors at Tohoku University (TU), who were taking a required English reading course.

The total number of participants in the survey was 175. The breakdown according to groups is shown below.

TGU Groups :	First-year (L1) : 48
	Second-year (L2) : 23
	Third-year (L3) : 44
	Fourth-year (L4) : 24
TU Group :	36

Of the 139 TGU students, there were 95 females and 44 males. The TU students consisted of 30 males and 6 females.

Research Objectives

The specific research objectives were as follows :

1. To gain a general profile of the beliefs of the 175 students surveyed

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at TGU and TU, hereafter collectively referred to as the 'Tohoku Group' (TG).

2. To compare the responses of the Austin Group (AG) with the TG. This objective focuses on possible differences in beliefs of students in an ESL versus EFL environment.
3. To compare the responses of of the L1 through L4 TGU groups ; and the TU group with the four TGU groups to see if there is a difference in beliefs among the groups according to their year in university or their major.

Though the sizes of the groups were not uniform (the AG was approximately one-fifth the size of the TG, and the class sizes within the TG varied), it was hoped that the numbers of the smaller groups were still sufficient to reveal any trends if they existed.

Analysis and Discussion of Survey Results

Objectives One and Two : Tohoku Group Responses and Comparison With The Austin Group.

Category One : Foreign Language Aptitude

Focus of Questionnaire Items :

- 1) Belief in specialized abilities for language learning and identification of learners who possess such abilities

Overall Responses

The students overwhelmingly agreed (85.1%) that it is easier for children than adults to learn foreign languages, with almost half (49.1%) agreeing strongly. Almost identical numbers of respondents rejected the belief that "people who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages." Over half (52%) disagreed that women are better language learners than men.

Only 14% percent agreed that Japanese are good foreign language learners. 43.4% disagreed (22% strongly), though 41.7% had a neutral view. This is quite consistent with the responses to the statement : "I have a good ability for learning foreign languages. Only 10.2% agreed

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and 40% disagreed (5% strongly), though almost half responded neutrally.

The students were fairly evenly spread in their belief in the existence of a special ability for foreign language learning: 37.1% agree; 37.7% disagree; 25.1% neither. However, almost two-thirds (64.6%) accepted the proposition that "People who speak more than one language are very intelligent." Finally, the respondents overwhelmingly agreed (84.5%; 43.4% strongly) that anyone can learn a foreign language. Only 1 person disagreed with this statement.

Austin Comparison

There were three notable contrasts between the Austin and Tohoku groups. Austin agreed (81% vs. 37.1% TG) that "Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages". Furthermore, nearly one-third (31%) believed that they possessed this special ability, though the neutral response was almost identical (50% to 49.7%) in both groups. Lastly, the Austin group was also "more enthusiastic"³ about their countrymen's foreign language learning abilities: 40% agreed; 9% disagreed versus 14.8% and 43.4% respectively for the TG.

It is interesting to note that both the Austin and Tohoku groups disagreed with the general American acceptance⁴ that women are better language learners than men, and that science and math specialists' aren't good at learning languages.

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3. Horwitz (1987: 122). In her article, Horwitz reported that a further investigation of "how particular cultural groups felt about the language learning abilities of their compatriots, the measure of group language learning self-image" was being undertaken with a large sample of students.
 4. Horwitz (1987: 122) Horwitz also states that many Americans also believe that "children are better at language learning than adults, and that second language learning is mainly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words".

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Comments

The Tohoku Group's confidence in their foreign language learning abilities ("I have a good ability for learning foreign languages.") is not high. However, with almost half responding neutrally, and 10% positively, it can also be argued that the majority of the group does not have an excessively pessimistic view either. This guardedly optimistic profile is also supported by responses to items in Category Four: The Difficulty of Language Learning. Nevertheless, with a 40% negative assessment, it is clear that increasing the students' confidence in their language learning abilities should be a high priority on a teacher's agenda. Subtly drawing attention to Japanese who are good language learners—public figures, for example—may provide positive role models for the students and help to boost confidence.

Given that 84.5%(43.5% strongly) agree that anyone can learn a foreign language, it is clear that the students believe they are able to learn English, though many do not see themselves as being particularly gifted at it. This view may be especially important when the issue of motivation is addressed. How much will the students' enthusiasm, expectations of success, and consequent degree of success (if one accepts the influence of these affective variables⁵ on acquisition), be influenced by an assessment that "I can do it, but it's not going to be very easy for me"? (either due to a self-image based on perceived individual ability or shared 'traits' of most Japanese).

Category Two: The Nature of Language Learning

Focus of Questionnaire Items

- 1) Importance of target language cultural awareness and contact
- 2) Perception of the appropriate focus of language learning

5. As defined by Tony Wright, *Roles of Teachers & Learners*, Oxford University Press, 1987, page 157, affective variables "describe the emotional side of a social encounter — or affect — in contrast to the cognitive, or mental, side.

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Overall Responses

The students overwhelmingly endorsed the importance of cultural awareness (86.9% ; 44.8% strongly), and the desirability of total immersion studies in an English-speaking country (84% ; 50.3% strongly).

Half of the students agreed that learning vocabulary is the most important part of language learning. 22.9% gave grammar this distinction, but only 15.4% supported the importance of translation. In all cases, there was very little strong agreement (1.1%-9.1%), and a rather consistent, neutral response from 30% to 36%. Disagreement was high for grammar and translation (41.1% and 49.1%), but only 20% disagreed about the importance of vocabulary.

Austin Comparison

The TG generally agreed with the Austin Group in terms of the importance of total immersion studies (84%-94%). Quite interestingly, although 63% of the AG agreed that "It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures. . .", this was significantly less than the 89% of the TG who supported this statement.

Both groups' responses to the items dealing with "the most important part of language learning" were quite similar. Half of the Austin group also agreed that vocabulary is most important, though the AG was firmer in their rejection of the efficacy of translation (63% versus 49.1%). However, 50% of the Austin group, more than double the figure for the TG, endorsed the importance of grammar. This may be explained by the fact that students in American university ESL programs have to pass the 'TOEFL'⁶, which is heavily weighted towards grammar and other discreet point sections, in order to pursue their studies in their chosen majors.

6. TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language. The standardized examination used by most universities and colleges in the United States and Canada to assess the English proficiency of non-native English speaking foreign students applying for admission to these institutions.

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Comments

If language learning is viewed as a matter of learning grammatical rules and extensive vocabulary lists, communicative teaching practices, which emphasize other aspects of language learning, may cause frustration and result in resistance to class activities. Although the TG students generally de-emphasized the importance of grammar and translation, such 'traditional views' of language learning are still evident in the responses of the sizable numbers of students who either supported the validity of grammar and translation or took a neutral opinion. This point will be expanded upon in the next section when the students' opinions about specific learning activities and strategies are examined.

Since the TG students are obviously quite receptive to learning more about the cultures of English-speaking countries, materials and activities which focus on culture will probably be quite motivating. However, care must be taken not to place too much emphasis on culture at the expense of language learning. As the AG responses about cultural knowledge and total immersion studies suggest, cultural content materials are useful and interesting, but they must compliment, rather than dictate, the specific language learning goals of the class.

Category Three: Learning and Communication Strategies

Focus of Questionnaire Items

- 1) Perception of the most effective language learning practices

Overall Responses

Two items that referred to traditional learning strategies were supported by the respondents. The students overwhelmingly agreed (95.4% ; 57.7% strongly) that practice and repetition are important, and over two-thirds (68%) endorsed the use of cassettes.

The remaining questions in this category dealt with communication strategies, which, as Horwitz (1987 : 124) states, "are probably the most directly related to a student's actual language learning practices."

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The students comprehensively rejected (90.3% ; 61.7% strongly) the proposition stated in item number nine that: "You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly". However, responses to a closely related statement, "If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be very difficult for them to speak correctly later", received support from a sizeable minority of 25%. Further more, 39% of the students agreed that "it is important to understand every word"

Two items dealt with aspects of learning in a group environment. 74.3% of the students supported the statement that "Speaking English with my classmates is a good way to practice and learn English", with only 5.7% expressing disagreement. However, 40% of the students agreed that they felt shy when speaking English with other people, though an almost identical number disagreed with the statement.

Finally, 61% agreed that excellent pronunciation is important (21% neutral ; 18% disagree), and 64% felt that guessing was an acceptable strategy to deal with the unknown.

Austin Comparison

The Austin students gave nearly identical responses to the statements regarding practice and repetition, the use of cassettes, and the acceptability of guessing. Interestingly, a slightly higher percentage of the AG admitted to being shy about speaking English than the TG (44% to 39%).

A major contrast can be seen in the two groups responses to item number nine (above). Only 4% of the TG agreed with the statement, as opposed to 38% of the AG who supported it. However, both groups did give similar agreement responses (AG 27.5% vs. 25.1%) to the related statement about allowing beginning students to make errors. Lastly, the AG did place more importance on pronunciation—90% vs. 61.1%.

Comments

The responses to the questions in this section seem to indicate that the students are supportive of practices generally associated with a

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communicative approach. However, the responses also reveal that :

- 1) though the students may intellectually accept some ideas, other factors, such as shyness, may inhibit their success in using certain strategies and,
- 2) there is a consistent support rate for 'correctness'— "beginning students and errors" (25.1%); "understand every word" (38.9%); and "excellent pronunciation" (61.1%).

This is not to imply in any way that a concern for correctness is misguided: we are, of course, aiming for the goal of accuracy and fluency. However, a concern for correctness, if not managed properly, will probably present a barrier for a lot of students to overcome in terms of 'opening up' and adapting to a communicative approach. After all, in English Conversation classes the development of fluency is a high priority, so, by definition, the students must 'open up'—talk and interact—to develop fluency. Excessive concern for correctness, combined with shyness, can be a formidable negative combination for success in developing oral communication skills in a foreign language.

The inconsistencies seen in some of the responses, such as the virtual rejection of the premise that "you shouldn't say anything unless it is correct" (a basic Audio-Lingual tenet) by the students, yet their consistent endorsement of 'correctness first' positions, would also suggest that it would be appropriate for the teacher to orient the students about communicative language teaching methodology. For example, a lot of frustration may be avoided if the substantial number of students in this survey who feel that it is important to 'understand every word' are told that :

- 1) in many cases, communication can and does take place without every word being understood, and that
- 2) it's best to regard this as a goal, and to realize that it is a difficult goal that will take time.

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Category Four : The Difficulty of Language Learning

Focus of Questionnaire Items

- 1) Expectations of the difficulty of language learning
- 2) Students' belief in their ability to succeed in learning English

Overall Responses

Over half (57.1%) of the students agreed that some languages are easier than others, though 27.4% gave a neutral response. Almost equal numbers judged English to be "difficult" (40.6% ; 3.4% "very difficult") or "of medium difficulty" (42.9%). Only a small minority rated English as being "easy" (12%) or "very easy" (1.7%).

Slightly over forty percent felt that it would take 3-5 years of a "one-hour-per-day-study program" to learn a language well (item number 15), with 26.3% opting for 1-2 years and 18.3% for 5-10 years. 11.4% supported the view that regardless of the number of years spent studying, "You can't learn a language in one hour a day."

Fifty-three percent agreed (17.7% strongly) with the statement : "I believe I will learn to speak English very well." Only 13.1% disagreed, but one-third (33.7%) gave a neutral response.

The neutral position also totaled just over a third of all responses in the two questions regarding the relative difficulty of the four language skills. Only 20.5% agreed that "speaking is easier than understanding", while 44% disagreed. 45.1% agreed that "reading and writing are easier than speaking and understanding", with only 17% disagreeing with the statement. 'Strong' opinions at either end of the scale were quite low for these two questions (10% or below).

Austin Comparison

In terms of the difficulty level of English, the two groups were in close agreement. Approximately 80% of both groups judged English to be in the 'difficult' to 'medium difficulty' levels, and an identical 12% saw it as 'easy'. More Austin students agreed that some languages are easier than others (75% vs. 57.1%).

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Responses to question 15, "... how long would it take to speak a language well?", also show similar general patterns. The 'most optimistic' responses of choices 'a' and 'b' (less than a year; 1-2 years) received about 28% support in both groups, though 16% chose estimate 'a' in the AG as opposed to only 1.7% in the TG. Choice 'c' (3-5 years) received the highest totals in both groups—AG 31%, TG 41%. The 'pessimistic' responses— 'd' (5-10 years) and 'e' ("You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day.") received 19% each in the AG, and 18.3% and 11.4% in the TG.

Unfortunately, Horowitz gave no figures regarding the AG's responses to the questions pertaining to the relative difficulty of the different the language skills. Nevertheless, based on the information above, it seems that both groups see things very similarly.

Comments

The responses in this section of the survey correlate closely with the opinions expressed in Category One. The characterization of the 'average TG student' as being fairly optimistic is supported by the fact that over half of the students felt they would learn to speak English well. Since only 13% felt negatively about their probability of success, it appears that teachers will not have to deal with a widespread lack of confidence among the students. Similarly, since the 'extreme views' of the length of time required to learn a language received very low support, the students have a reasonably realistic view of the challenge ahead of them.

The average student also perceives speaking to be more difficult than understanding, and both of these skills to be more difficult than reading and writing.

The items in this section are designed to get a picture of the general mental outlook of the students; consequently, the questions are somewhat fanciful in nature. Has there ever been a study of the length of time it would take to learn a foreign language with one hour's study per day? Indeed, has anyone ever attempted such a program? Is

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speaking really more difficult than reading? Of course, the 'answers' to all of these questions would have to be highly qualified given the enormous number of variables inherent in the questions. Nevertheless, the responses in this section do give us valuable information about the students' expectations of the difficulty of the language learning task and their belief in their own ability to succeed. If, for example, the 'extreme views' of the length of time it takes to learn a foreign language were heavily supported, teachers would have to deal with two major problems: frustration, due to an underestimation of the required efforts; or low motivation, due to pessimism resulting from an overestimation of the enormity of the task. In this respect, it is safe to say that, in general, the TG group has a 'healthy' attitude towards the task at hand.

Category Five: Motivation

Focus of Questionnaire Items

- 1) Perceived relevance and importance of English in the students' lives
- 2) Sources of motivation

Overall Responses

The students almost universally agreed (98.3%) that they want to speak English well, and 80% expressed strong agreement, which was the highest 'strong response' to any item on the survey. They felt also that Japanese people attach importance to speaking English—70.9% agree (26.3% strongly), with only 4.0% disagreeing.

As for their reasons for wanting to learn English, the instrumental⁷ motivation of better career prospects, Question 29, received 70% agree-

7. Instrumental motivation is "motivation inspired by the promise of reward or betterment." Integrative motivation is "motivation believed to lead a language learner to want to become part of the community whose language is being learnt". (Wright, 1987: 157).

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ment (69.7%), with almost one-third (30.9%) responding strongly. Disagreement was just under 10%. Similar responses were given to the question regarding the students' expected use of spoken English in the future, either in personal life or work : 64.6% agreed (25.7% strongly), and only 9.7% disagreed.

Questions 24, "I would like to learn English so that I can have foreign friends", and 37, "I want to learn English because I like things from English-speaking cultures", belong to the integrative category of motivation. Almost two-thirds agreed (62.9%) with Question 24, with 22.9% agreeing strongly. This latter figure matched the neutral response of 22.3%, and only 14.9% disagreed. The results for Question 37 were quite similar : 72.6% agree, 29.1% strongly agree ; 15.4% neutral, and 12% disagree.

The last two questions in this section sought information about the influence that the general classroom ambiance has on motivation. "Studying a foreign language is often not very interesting" was soundly rejected with 71.4% disagreeing (32.6% strongly). Only a small minority of 13.7% agreed with the statement. "Learning English is easier if the classes are enjoyable, and the students feel relaxed" (item 32) received overwhelming support : 82.3% agreement (48.6% strongly), with only 1.7% disagreement.

Austin Comparison

Once again, the responses were very similar, though the TG were more adamant about their desire to learn English well than the AG—98.3% versus 91%. The AG responded marginally higher in terms of career 'instrumental' motivation—78% vs. 69.7%.

The only notable difference in the groups was that 90% of the AG stated that they would like to learn English better to know Americans ; whereas 'only' 62.9% of the TG agreed with the corresponding question regarding foreign friends. Of course, one would probably expect students who are studying in the target language culture to want to have as much contact with the host nationals as possible.

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Comments

Like the AG, the Tohoku Group displayed the same strong motivations to study English due to a mixture of integrative and instrumental drives. The results of this section clearly demonstrate that the students do want to learn to speak English well—even the TU science students—and English is seen as being important and relevant to their needs in one way or another. It is also clear that an enjoyable, relaxing classroom environment would be enthusiastically received by the students.

Of course, wanting something and doing what is necessary to get it do not necessarily go hand in hand. Therefore, a teacher is obliged to remind the students that fun and good intentions are important, but they must be accompanied by sincere commitment on the part of the students in order to progress and attain their ultimate goal.

Objective Three: Comparison of: TGU Classes, Years, 1-4; TGU English Majors and TU Science Majors

General Trends

All of the TGU classes expressed similar opinions (within approximately 10% of each other) to 16 of the 37 items on the questionnaire. There was a spread in the distribution of responses to 9 items. However, in the remaining 12 items of the questionnaire, an interesting pattern emerged. The opinions of the four levels divided into two contrasting 'camps', with the L3 level aligning with the L4, and the L1 with the L2.

The 'distinctiveness' of the TU Science students was surprisingly minimal. Their responses only differed significantly from the TGU group as a whole on three items. Though an analysis of the TU group for possible similarities with different levels from the TGU sample was not an objective of this survey, the TU group did show a tendency to agree with the L3/L4 opinion when the opinions of the TGU levels contrasted (7 responses clearly in agreement with L3/4, but only 1

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response in line with the L 1/2 opinion, with the remaining items neither in one camp nor the other).

Category One : Foreign Language Aptitude

TGU Contrasts

The L3-4 students endorsed two statements related to specialized abilities or potentiality for successful language learning in far greater numbers than the L1 students. Question number two, "Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages", was supported by 56.8% and 54.1% of the L3-4 students respectively ; however, only 8.4% and 4.3% of the L1-2 students agreed with the statement. The L3-4 students also agreed with the statement. "People who speak more than one language are very intelligent" more than the L1-2 students (77.1%/79.2% vs. 47.9%/43.5%).

TU Contrasts

As one might predict, the TU students had a more negative attitude about their language learning abilities than the TGU students. 61.1% disagreed that "I have a good ability for learning foreign languages", whereas the range of disagreement for the TGU group was between 26.0%-39.6%.

Category Two : The Nature of Language Learning

TGU Contrasts

The L3-4 students placed a higher (and stronger) importance on learning English in an English-speaking country than the L1-2 students (97.6%/95.8% vs. 77.1%/65.1% agree ; 68.1%/58.3% vs. 43.8%/26.0% strongly agree).

Two questions in this category dealt with a student's view of the primary focus of language learning. Question 17, "The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary", and Question 23, "The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar", are statements that are, according to Horowitz (1987 : 123), "indicative of a restricted view of language learning". Quite interestingly, the L3-4 students subscribed to these positions

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more than the L1-2 students. Responses to Question 17 revealed that 61.4% and 70.8% of the L3-4 students agreed, while only 33.4% and 47.8% of the L1-2 groups expressed a similar opinion. Whereas only 6.3% and 13.0% of the L1-2 students agreed about the importance of grammar, 31.8% and 33.4% of the L3-4 students agreed with Question 23. Disagreement figures for this question were very uniform (between 33-35%) for all levels with the exception of the L1 students. 60.3% disagreed that grammar is the most important part of learning a language.

TU Contrasts

There were no departures from the positions taken by the TGU students.

Category Three: Learning and Communication Strategies

TGU Contrasts

One interesting result was that approximately 60% (61.3% and 58.3%) of the L3-4 students admitted to feeling shy when speaking English (Question 21). This contrasts markedly with the L1-2 agreement figures of 14.6% and 4.3%.

Another significant difference in opinion was seen in the responses to the statement: "It is important to understand every word in listening exercises or conversations in class." While only a minority of the L1-2 students agreed (14.6% and 17.4%), over half (54.6%) of the L3 students and exactly three-quarters of the L4 students agreed.

TU Contrasts

There were no significant contrasts as they continued their general pattern of falling in line with opinions expressed in the TGU sample.

Category Four: The Difficulty of Language Learning

TGU Contrasts

The only contrast seen in this section concerns the relative difficulty of different language skills. Agreement with the statement that "it is easier to speak than understand English" was higher with the L1-2 students (35.3%/26.0% versus 18.2%/8.4%), though it cannot be

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said that this statement was strongly supported by any level in the sample. However, half of the L3-4 students disagreed with the statement, which was nearly double the figure for the L1-2 students (27.1 %/ 26.0%).

TU Contrasts

There were no contrasts in this section.

Category Five: Motivation

TGU Contrasts

The contrasts that were seen in this section were cases of expressing opinions more definitively rather than expressing conflicting opinions.

Questions 10 and 32 addressed the influence of affective factors in the classroom on motivation. All of the groups disagreed with the statement that "Studying a foreign language is often not very interesting"; however, this opinion was shared by more than 90% of the L1-2 students (89.6% and 95.6%) though the corresponding L3-4 totals were only 63.6% and 75%. Very similar percentages emerged from the responses to Question 32, which concerned the importance of an enjoyable and relaxing classroom environment, though the positions of the two camps' were reversed. L3-4 subscribed to this statement overwhelmingly (90.9% and 91.6%) as opposed to the 72.9% and 60.9% of the L1-2 students who agreed with the statement.

The two questions above are related to the influence of language teaching approaches and methodology to stimulate and/or sustain motivation. Questions 20 and 37 seek to identify possible reasons for enrolling in an English class, or, as in the case of the TU students, accepting the validity of a requirement. Once again, the L3-4 students gave greater support to both an integrative motivational position, "I want to learn English because I like things from English-speaking cultures" (87.8% and 83.3% versus 62.5% and 43.4% for L1-2), and to an instrumentally weighted motivation, "People in Japan feel that it is important to speak English" (81.8% and 87.5% versus 64.6% and 69.6%).

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TU Contrasts

This section provided two responses which truly distinguished the TU group. Given the students' choice of major, one expected contrast was that 37% the TU students agreed that foreign language study is often not interesting, compared to a range of 4.3% to 18.3% for the TGU groups.

The second contrast was quite notable. Although over one-third of the group often found foreign language learning to be uninteresting, significantly higher numbers of students in the TU group foresaw more chances of speaking English in the future (88.9% agreement ; 33.3% strongly) than the TGU students, whose agreement totals to question 35 were 54.2%, 73.9%, 59.1%, and 50.0%, L1-4 respectively). This result points to the potential power of the instrumental argument as an aid to instilling and maintaining motivation. Even if the students are not especially enthusiastic about the subject for its own sake, if efforts are taken to make the subject as relevant as possible to their specific needs, which they already recognize, and to remind them of the subject's relevance, a teacher should be able to overcome most cases of uninvolvement or apathy.

Comments

The L1-2 students seem to have a 'fresher, less-restrictive outlook' than the L3-4 students, though their views, quite understandably, may also reflect a certain amount of inexperience. For example, the L1-2 responses to the questionnaire items relating to language learning aptitude and special abilities indicate that the majority of the students don't view language learning as requiring any special abilities. Combined with their agreement that "everyone can learn a foreign language", the results suggest that the L1-2 students feel confident about their ability to learn English. Of course, this optimistic outlook is very encouraging for teachers ; however, the students' views may be based on a limited appreciation of the complexities and commitment involved in learning a foreign language. This may eventually lead to

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a loss of confidence when the students discover that learning to communicate in English may be more problematic than they had imagined. The vital role that a teacher can play in dealing with this possibility will be discussed shortly.

Another indication of their positive attitude toward English can be seen in the students' overwhelming rejection of the opinion that foreign language studies are often not interesting. Their lives in general are full of new experiences and freedoms, and perhaps English classes initially benefit from this exciting time in the students' lives. An English conversation class, with the presence of a native speaker teacher and the opportunity to speak English rather than merely 'studying English' for test purposes, is probably seen as something of a novelty by the students, and is therefore interesting in its own right. This possibility is also suggested by the contrast between the responses of the L1-L4 classes to the questionnaire item regarding the contributions of enjoyment and relaxation to language learning. Although the L1-2 students thought that enjoyment and relaxation are desirable, they didn't place as much importance on these factors as the L3-4 students did.

In addition to a positive disposition towards English, the students seem quite receptive to a communicative methodology. The L1-2 students placed far less importance on the study of grammar and vocabulary than the L3-4 classes, and they also felt less inhibited about speaking and understanding every word.

In sum, the L1-2 students may be characterized as being optimistic about their ability to learn English, and receptive to new teaching methodologies, but they may not have a realistic view of the demands and nature of the language learning task. If this is indeed the case, some instructional implications are quite clear.

A teacher should feel confident about introducing new modes of instruction and behavior patterns in the classroom. The concern that the students will resist a departure from the grammar-translation

methodology, which dominated their previous foreign language learning, is not supported by this survey. This is not to say that adjustment problems to a communicative methodology, for example, will not occur; however, the L1-2 responses do suggest that the students will support a teaching and learning environment which gives them the maximum opportunity to speak English in the classroom.

Secondly, and to expand upon a point raised previously, a teacher should consider including materials and activities in the syllabus which are designed to help the students to become more aware of the nature of language learning. Though a comprehensive treatment of this subject is not possible given the limited time available in most English Conversation classes, a teacher could devote some time to pointing out some important considerations to the students⁸. For example, for most people, learning a foreign language takes a great deal of time, and progress is more often made in gradual increments rather than great leaps forward. If a student enters an English course with high expectations of quick progress, initial optimism can rapidly turn to frustration, and perhaps alienation, if the student fails to achieve the expected progress. The teacher can address this potential pitfall by helping the students to set realistic, short-term goals. This can be done in various ways, such as defining the goals in terms of basic competence in selected functional or grammatical items, but, regardless of the way a teacher chooses to define the goals, a great deal of future frustration can be minimized if the students are reminded of the length of time involved

8. See Ellis and Sinclair, *Learning to Learn English, Teacher's Book*, Cambridge University Press, 1989. This course is designed to provide systematic instruction in 'Learner Training', which is based on the principles that "... individuals learn in different ways and may use a variety of learning strategies at different times depending on a range of variables, such as the nature of the learning task, mood, motivation levels; that the more informed learners are about language and language learning the more effective they will be at managing their own learning". (Ellis and Sinclair, 1987: 2)

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in language learning and the importance of setting attainable, short-term goals. As we will see in the analysis of the L3-4 students, the presumed lack of this kind of guidance may be one of the factors behind a significant change in the attitudes of the older students.

What has happened to our optimistic, 'communicative language teaching friendly' freshman by the time she has become a senior? This survey suggests that seniors may have :

- 1) become a bit 'jaded', as their freshman days' optimism seems to have waned, and
- 2) become more aware of their weaknesses, but, in a potentially constructive way, also
- 3) developed a more realistic appraisal of the difficult demands of learning a foreign language.

Concerning the first point above, it seems that a decline in enthusiasm in some students occurs during the junior year, and then bounces back slightly during the senior year. Though more than two-thirds of the students still felt that "studying English was interesting", disagreement with this statement gained moderately more support, and significantly less strong disagreement among the L3-4 students than among the L1-2 group. Another indicator of a possible dip in motivation was the students' increased support for the importance of an "enjoyable and relaxing" classroom environment.

Their enthusiasm may also have been influenced by an apparent tendency for the students to assess their abilities more critically than they had previously. Their positions upholding the importance of vocabulary, and, to a lesser extent, grammar, and their belief, especially the seniors, that one should understand every word in discourse, may indicate a greater awareness of their competence, or lack thereof. Of course, whether their assessments and 'remedies' are accurate or not is another issue, but it does seem that the students have adopted a more restrictive view of language learning.

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This changed outlook might also be a signal that they are dissatisfied with their progress. As was discussed earlier in this paper, the judgments and assumptions made as freshmen may not have withstood the trials of experience. By the third or fourth year, unrealistically high expectations which have not been realized could result in a sense of disappointment setting in with some members of the class.

Fortunately, the responses of the juniors and seniors also reveal many positive attitudes. Although the students' motivation may have been affected adversely by the factors discussed above, this may have been balanced by other motivational drives, such as their greater interest in "things from English-speaking cultures", or their recognition that speaking English well could result in better job prospects. Furthermore, their nearly unanimous endorsement of the importance of studying English in an English-speaking country may indicate a vital realization that in order to move to the advanced level that they desire, a more intensive effort is required.

What instructional implications can be drawn from the changes in motivation and preferred focus of learning which distinguish the L3-4 students from the L1-2? Looking at the motivational aspect first, the L3-4 students' interest in the culture of English-speaking countries offers a tremendous resource area for class content. Themes and tasks built around 'pop culture' as seen in movies, music or fashion may be a motivating compliment to more 'serious' topics, such as the environment' or other socio-political themes, which, perhaps regrettably, sometimes have limited appeal to the students.

Finally, an obvious issue for teachers who have adopted a communicative approach is how to deal with the students' desire for 'restrictive language' activities. Since a significant number of the L3-4 students still express a belief in the efficacy of controlled, discrete point exercises/input, a teacher might consider trying to include this type of work into the class to some extent. This certainly doesn't mean that

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a lesson or lessons should be based on grammar-translation, which is probably not what the 30% of the seniors who agreed about the importance of grammar had in mind anyway. However, even within the framework of a communicative methodology, selected grammar and vocabulary building activities could be incorporated into the syllabus in order to cater to the range of preferences found among the students.

Conclusion

The results of this survey indicate that large numbers of the respondents share many views about language learning. Of the three variables that were investigated, the students' major seemed to have the least influence on beliefs. There were more contrasts generated by the ESL/EFL variable, but the contrasts were largely outnumbered by the similarities between the two groups. However, the students' year in university did appear to produce noticeable differences in opinions, especially in the areas of the nature of language learning and motivation. This variable merits further investigation in order to specifically identify the factors responsible for the apparent change in beliefs as the students progress to their senior year.

In addition to the specific research objectives mentioned above, the overall goal of the survey is to obtain empirical data about possible assumptions teachers hold about their students' beliefs and attitudes about language learning. This goal is seen as highly relevant to the practicing teacher since assumptions often play an important role in instructional planning and implementation. Since the assumptions teachers make can carry such weight, it is maintained that efforts must be undertaken to obtain data about such assumptions in order to evaluate their accuracy.

A large majority of English teachers in Japan will probably find many of their assumptions confirmed by the results of this survey. Nevertheless, the responses demonstrate that although the majority of the students conform to the average profile, there is still a great deal of

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diversity. This survey suggests that some of the diversity may be predictable ; however, it is quite clear that teachers should always be sensitive to the different and evolving beliefs of students when teaching and learning decisions are being made.

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Appendix-Beliefs About Language Learning Survey (English Version)

In accordance with the format of this paper, the statements which appeared on the survey have been grouped according to their respective categories. The numbers indicate the order in which the items were presented on the survey sheet. An asterisk indicates statements developed by the author of this paper to address issues of local relevance, and which did not appear on the original Austin BALLI.

Finally, I am most grateful to Professor Takami Hatanaka of Tohoku Gakuin University for his translation of the survey questionnaire into Japanese.

Beliefs About Language Learning

The statements below are beliefs that some people have about learning foreign languages.

Please read each statement, and then decide if you :

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- 1) strongly agree
- 2) agree
- 3) neither agree nor disagree
- 4) disagree
- 5) strongly disagree

There are no right or wrong answers. I am only interested in your opinion.

Please mark each answer on the answer sheet. Statements 4 and 15 are different, so please mark them as shown on the answer sheet.

Thank you.

CATEGORY ONE: Foreign Language Aptitude

1. It is easier for children than adults to learn foreign languages.
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.
6. People from my country (Japan) are good at learning foreign languages.
11. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.
16. I have a good ability for learning foreign languages.
19. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.
30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.
33. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

CATEGORY TWO: The Nature of Language Learning

8. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.
12. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.
17. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary.

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23. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.
27. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other university subjects.
28. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from Japanese.

CATEGORY THREE: **Learning and Communication Strategies**

7. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.
9. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.
- 13.* In class, speaking English with my classmates is a good way to practice and learn English.
14. It is O.K. to guess if you don't know a word in English.
18. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.
21. I feel shy speaking English with other people.
22. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be very difficult for them to speak correctly later.
26. It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.
36. It is important to understand every word in listening exercises or conversations in class.

CATEGORY FOUR: **The Difficulty of Language Learning**

3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.
4. English is : a) a very difficult language
b) a difficult language
c) a language of medium difficulty
d) an easy language
e) a very easy language

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5. I believe I will learn to speak English very well.
15. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take the person to speak the language well?
 - a) less than a year
 - b) 1-2 years
 - c) 3-5 years
 - d) 5-10 years
 - e) You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day.
25. It is easier to speak than understand English.
34. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.

CATEGORY FIVE : **Motivation**

- 10.* Studying a foreign language is often not very interesting.
20. People in Japan feel that it is important to speak English.
24. I would like to learn English so that I can have foreign friends.
29. If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.
31. I want to learn to speak English well.
- 32.* Learning English is easier if the classes are enjoyable, and the students feel relaxed.
- 35.* I think I will have many chances to speak English in the future, either in my personal life or job.
- 37.* I want to learn English because I like things from English-speaking cultures, such as music, movies, sports, or fashions.