

Revisiting Beliefs about Foreign Language Learning¹

Benjamin Rifkin

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Russian School of Middlebury College

Abstract: Research on the beliefs of American university students about foreign language learning has been limited in three ways: First, students surveyed have generally been drawn only from beginning language classes. Second, research in this area has been conducted almost exclusively with students of French, German, and Spanish; the beliefs of learners of other languages — such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian — have been largely ignored. Third, published studies have focused on the beliefs of learners at only one institution, rather than at a number of institutions; the results of such studies are, therefore, also likely limited by the local conditions of the given institution. This paper presents an investigation of these three issues. The study is based on a survey of over 1,000 learners of 10 different languages at different levels of instruction in three different institutions. Data collected over a three-year period are analyzed in order to compare the beliefs about language learning reported by learners in the present study with those held by learners in Horwitz's 1988 study, "The Beliefs about Language Learning of Beginning University Students." Moreover, this paper presents comparisons of the beliefs of learners in their first year of instruction with the beliefs held by learners at other levels, of the beliefs of learners of commonly versus less commonly taught languages, and of the beliefs of learners at a public research institution with the beliefs of learners at small, private liberal arts colleges.

Introduction

Students' beliefs about foreign language learning — including beliefs about the time needed to attain fluency, beliefs about relative abilities of children and adults or males and females to learn a foreign language, beliefs about the roles of risk taking and communication in foreign language learning, and other beliefs about the learning process — are of critical importance to the success or failure of any student's efforts to master a foreign language. Horwitz wrote:

Americans appear to hold strong beliefs about how languages are learned. Definite viewpoints on the best techniques for learning a language, the "right" age to begin language study, and the nature of the language learning process are the subject of airline magazine articles, Sunday supplement advertisements, and cocktail party small-talk ... If beliefs about language learning are prevalent in the culture at-large, then foreign language teachers must consider that students bring these beliefs with them into the classroom.... (Horwitz 1988, 283)

Mantle-Bromley agreed, arguing in her 1995 study of the value of "attitude intervention" in the foreign language classroom that students' counterproductive beliefs about foreign language studies may hinder success: "without a positive learning atmosphere, students may well gain little or nothing from new curricular infusions" (383). Furthermore, when learners' beliefs about language learning are at odds with those of their instructors, the results can be disastrous, as described by Oxford et al. (1991). In order to develop plans to overcome learners' counterproductive beliefs about foreign language learning, we must first understand exactly what those

Benjamin Rifkin (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is Associate Professor of Slavic Languages at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and Director of the Russian School of Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont.