

On the Mismatch in Students and Teachers Beliefs Toward Grammar Instruction



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In trying to understand how people learn, we need to understand how they think and feel, what people believe in, and how this affects the way they feel and what they decide to do. Language learners - especially adults - bring a variety of beliefs to the classroom. These beliefs can be related to either their preferred way of learning, feelings that facilitate or inhibit learning (e.g. their self-concept) or whether they believe they have an aptitude for foreign language learning (Ellis, 1994). Just as learner motivation and learner success can reinforce one another, learners' attitudes and beliefs affect their success as language learners.

The word "belief" here does not refer to students' conceptual understanding of language, but rather to their ideas about what language as a field is and how one learns it. By means of their belief system, learners perceive and re-interpret experiences. But these perceptions and interpretations are not neutral: they usually evoke feelings and reactions, likes or dislikes; acceptance or rejection. These feelings often go together with some kind of judgment or evaluation. Failure to recognize learners' beliefs can become the cause of anxiety.

Not only do learners bring their beliefs about teaching and language learning to the classroom, teachers, too, build up over time attitudes, values, theories and assumptions about teaching and learning, which they bring to the classroom. These beliefs and attitudes affect their decisions and actions in the classroom. In order to successfully complete the task of teaching-learning exchange, both teachers and students need to share, among other things, these beliefs and attitudes; otherwise it will result in the mismatch between teacher and student beliefs, which will eventually raise the students' affective filter.

At the American University of Armenia, I carried out a study of attitudes towards grammar instruction in the Intensive English Program (IEP). The purpose of the research was to investigate two major questions: how to account for the students' strong feelings about the current need for more grammar instruction in the IEP and what the students' and teachers' attitudes were toward grammar instruction in the IEP classroom.

The research questions were prompted by the IEP students' perception that they needed more grammar instruction, which they persistently expressed in evaluating the IEP program. The approach adopted in the IEP is based on the theoretical belief that grammar can be learned in context indirectly through reading, writing, listening and

speaking. Evidently, the students had certain expectations from their language learning and their anxiety that they did not get enough grammar instruction was not groundless.

The student population of the IEP is a special group of adult learners with their undergraduate work completed and some of them with job experience in their respective specialties. They come to AUA with their preconceptions about what the language learning experience should be. They have had “traditional” language teaching classroom experience, where learners receive systematic instruction in the grammar of the target language. They are used to an educational setting in which their learning was overtly controlled by teachers, who emphasized the memorization of grammatical rules, which was done through mechanical procedures such as repetition and rote learning. In the “traditional” teacher-centered classroom that they are used to, students maintain a passive and subordinate role. In AUA they find themselves in a much more informal setting in which the teacher assumes a less authoritarian role and expects the students to take responsibility for their own learning. Larsen-Freeman (1986) describes students in the learning-centered classroom as more responsible managers of their own learning.

Thus, the IEP students come to AUA with certain beliefs formed at schools and higher educational institutions of Armenia. Lightbown & Spada (2001, p. 59) point out that “little work has been done in the area of language learners’ beliefs about how languages are learned and how the learners’ progress is affected by an instructional approach which is not consistent with their belief about the best ways for them to learn.”

The affective domain and the emotional factors that influence language learning have been of interest in the field of language teaching for a number of years. Variables that may influence foreign language learning in an indirect way are: beliefs about foreign language learning and certain personality traits such as extroversion, introversion, tolerance of ambiguity, inhibition and risk-taking.

It can be assumed that the learners’ philosophy dictates the approach they adopt towards learning. Students’ beliefs about both the nature of language and the nature of language learning determine how those dimensions relate to one another and to student reflection and performance.

Three hypotheses designed on the basis of the collected materials were tested during the research. The first hypothesis, which claims that learners’ beliefs about language learning are based on previous learning experience and influence learners’ expectations of how they must be taught, received full support.

The IEP students’ perceived need for more grammar is due to two major reasons. First, the students come to AUA with a belief developed from their previous learning experience, which is based on a traditional teacher-centered classroom. It is common knowledge that the grammar-translation method still predominates in the schools of Armenia. As a result of the teaching the students were exposed to, 71.6% think that languages must be taught by focusing on grammar. To the question what grammar meant for them, the students defined it “as the cornerstone, a foundation, and basis of the language, an inseparable part of the language”, the knowledge of which will help them to write and speak correctly, which in its turn will give them confidence. As the students were mostly exposed to the grammar translation method of teaching, they believe that

English must be taught through grammar rules followed by exercises or grammar rules and communicative practice. Learners' preferences for learning, which are determined by their beliefs about how languages are learned, are important factors for students' progress in effective language learning. Teachers should take into consideration learners' beliefs about language learning which have been shaped by their previous educational experience. (Tarone & Yule, 1989).

The second hypothesis that "learners' educational background determines their language learning goals" also found its full support in the responses to the questions 3 and 3a. Do you want to know grammar well? If "yes" which of the following are the reasons? The IEP students have already been educated in their specialties in the higher educational institutions of Armenia, and they have been taught to use academically appropriate language in writing and speaking when they deal with issues concerning their specialty, so, they want to be as literate in English as they are in their mother tongue. As far as English is concerned, they have long-term goals; they need it for their professional growth and careers. That the IEP students are highly motivated, career-oriented people and have their own perceptions of their needs in English is substantiated by the responses of first and second year students who were found dissatisfied with their current level of grammar accuracy, which they think they need in order to feel confident that they speak correctly, that they can show their professional competence in English using academically appropriate language. This is consistent with the grid of six variables suggested by Celce-Murcia (1991), according to which, the older and more educated the learner is, the more explicit focus on form is needed. Furthermore, adults who learn a foreign language without any formal grammar instruction during the basic stage can never achieve high frequency in the target language.

The third hypothesis that teachers must be responsive in linguistically and pedagogically proper ways to students' beliefs about how languages are taught, is born out from the analysis of the student and teacher survey data. The findings of the study reveal that there are mismatches in the students' and teachers' beliefs about the place and significance of grammar teaching in the IEP. These mismatches can be explained in the following ways:

a) Due to previous learning experiences the overwhelming majority of students think that grammar is of paramount importance for language learning, which is not the perception of some of the instructors.

b) The students view grammar as the necessary prerequisite for accuracy in speech and writing, while accuracy does not seem to be an issue with the instructors. For some of the instructors it seems to be divorced from the purposes of academic English.

c) The students believe in the usefulness of grammar error explanation; however, they do not get it from all the instructors.

The findings of this study support Horowitz's (1988) point of view that learner beliefs about language learning, when they differ from those of the teacher, can lead to frustration, dissatisfaction with the course, unwillingness to perform activities, and lack of confidence in the teacher. It is obvious, therefore, that this can also affect achievement.

Powel and Taylor, (1985, as cited in Tarone & Yule, 1989, p. 9) describe teachers' reactions to learners' beliefs and expectations different from theirs as "fight them" or "join them". Teachers can either ignore students' beliefs (fight them) and hope that in the course of time students will see the benefits of their methods or give up planned methods and give the students what the latter think they need (join them). However, neither of the two seems totally appropriate for the teaching profession. They recommend the third type of reaction that is a compromise solution when both teacher and student recognize their expectations of what they think are an effective learning experience.

The results of this study show that teachers' perceptions of learners' needs should not be in conflict with learners' expectations. Researchers have recognized the importance of teachers awareness of learners' language learning beliefs. Sauvignon (1976, p. 296) points out that teachers also have attitudes and beliefs about language learning and "not until we have taken a hard critical look at the attitudes and motivation of teachers, both individually and as a profession, will we be ready to determine what obstacles lie in the way of creating the kinds of learning environments which would be helpful to our students." Skehan (1998) speaks of the need for teachers to pay attention to students' cognitive and affective natures and needs in order to improve language teaching and education in the process. Mantle-Bromley (1995, p. 383) also emphasizes the fact that "teachers must acknowledge and respect students' attitudes, beliefs, and expectations and help them overcome any harmful perceptions and blocks." If teachers ignore the students' expectations about language learning, the mismatch in teacher/student beliefs results in the students' anxiety that they are not getting the right instruction.

Effectiveness of the successful teaching-learning exchange to a great extent depends on how teachers operationalize their personal beliefs about teaching, taking into account the students' needs and expectations about how they must be taught.

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**Քերականության ուսուցման հարցեր.
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Հոդվածում Հայաստանի ամերիկյան համալսարանում կատարված ուսումնասիրության արդյունքների հիման վրա քննության է առնվում ուսուցման ընթացքի արդյունավետության խնդիրը: Հոդվածագիրը կարևորում է ուսուցման սկզբունքների շուրջ ուսուցչի և ուսանողի համոզմունքների միջև հնարավոր հակասությունների հաղթահարման անհրաժեշտությունը, քանի որ հակառակ դեպքում այդ հակասությունների առկայությունն, անշուշտ, բացասական ազդեցություն կունենա ուսուցման ընթացքի վրա: