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From Thought to Action: Exploring Beliefs and Outcomes in the Foreign Language Program

H. Jay Siskin
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Chapter 7

False Beginners' Transition to College-Level Foreign Language Classes: Beliefs, Expectations, and Cultures of Learning

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Introduction

Foreign language (FL) learning is a complex interplay of cognitive processes as well as social and affective factors, in which learner contributions play a central role (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993). Students' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes have the potential to affect learning behavior and can ultimately determine not only the quality of the learning experience but also its outcomes (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). This article explores how false beginners transition from their high school program to a college-level FL class. In this multiple case study, interviews with seven students, their teacher, and his assistant, as well as classroom observations, were used to explore learners' expectations, beliefs, and experiences in a college review course as part of their cultures of learning.

Background

Past research has emphasized the important role beliefs play in the FL classroom. It is apparent how the beliefs held by teachers profoundly impact what happens in the classroom. But the belief systems of learners can be just as powerful: "Student beliefs about language learning . . . seem to have obvious relevance to the understanding of student expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 283).

Studies investigating student beliefs have focused on a variety of issues, such as (1) epistemological beliefs and beliefs about language learning in general (Bernat, 2006; Cotterall, 1995; Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mori, 1999); (2) student beliefs regarding the teaching of culture, the role of grammar, and other specific aspects of FL learning (Chavez, 2005; Schulz, 2001); and (3) the belief systems of certain groups of learners (e.g., study abroad or beginning college students) (Horwitz, 1988; O'Donnell, 2003; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; White, 1999). Researchers also have approached learner beliefs from several theoretical perspectives, resulting in sometimes very different definitions (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). One of these theoretical frameworks is the concept of cultures of learning, which Cortazzi and Jin (2002) have defined as follows:

We use the term *culture of learning* to refer to the collection of behaviours, norms, values, beliefs and expectations about teaching and learning which have a cultural origin and which classroom participants

often take for granted. Cultures of learning are interpretive frameworks through which classroom events, other participants and their educational identities are evaluated. . . . These collections of beliefs reinforce notions of desired classroom behaviour . . . [and] spread or change through family and educational socialization practices, cultural transmission and transformation. (p. 55)

Viewing beliefs as heavily embedded in the students' environment, the theory of cultures of learning follows a contextual approach (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005) and emphasizes the subjective and at times value-laden nature of student beliefs (unlike the term *metacognitive knowledge*, which is sometimes used interchangeably with *beliefs* [Wenden, 1999]).

In their research, Cortazzi and Jin and others (Cortazzi, 1990; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Mitchell & Lee, 2003) have applied this concept collectively to investigate national cultures of learning, especially differences between Western and Asian cultures of learning. Unlike normative studies, which have relied on the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and other Likert-scale questionnaires to investigate cultural differences (Bernat, 2004, 2006; Cotterall, 1995; Horwitz, 1988; Mori, 1999; Sakui & Gaies, 1999), research on cultures of learning and other contextual approaches have favored qualitative methods (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005).

The previous definition of cultures of learning, however, can also be interpreted on a smaller scale. While a country's national culture shapes beliefs, attitudes, values, and expectations, it seems that learners are at the same time influenced by institutional, socioeconomic, racial, and other (sub)cultures as well as their unique individual experiences. As previous research has shown, past experiences are often related to learners' attitudes, beliefs, and learning preferences (Benson & Lor, 1998; Little & Singleton, 1990). Therefore, one can argue, cultures of learning are not only based on national cultures but also on the cultures of smaller groups (e.g., classes or schools) or even individuals.

In fact, this aspect of cultures of learning is reflected in Cortazzi and Jin's (2002) definition, which states that "these collections of beliefs . . . spread or change through family and educational socialization practices" (p. 55). How a student approaches a new learning situation is likely influenced by his past successes and failures, the social and academic roles he played in previous classes, former teachers' pedagogical approaches, and other factors.

The present study was designed to investigate how false beginners of German make the transition from high school to college FL classes—an important question related to the perennial issue of articulation. Despite several years of FL study in high school, students often return to beginning language study in college (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005). While some of them take first-semester classes together with true beginners, many universities have created specific review courses for these false beginners. Such a false beginner review course is the focus of the present study. As a theoretical framework, it is based on the re-conceptualization of cultures of learning proposed earlier and aims to find out if and how learners' previous educational experiences socialized them into certain learning patterns and roles and resulted in the formation of individual cultures of learning or a more general high school culture of learning.

Methodology

Context of the Study

The present study was conducted in the German program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), the flagship campus of the UT system. Its student body of over 28,000 is predominantly Caucasian and from within the state of Tennessee.¹ Before enrolling in any German courses at UTK, students who have had two or more years of high school German must take the German placement exam and are then placed in first-semester, German 150 (review German), third-semester, or upper-division classes. Between 2002 and 2005, about 25% of all students taking the placement exam were placed in German 150. Combining the first two semesters into one 3-credit-hour course, 150 is designed exclusively for students with prior yet limited German proficiency who would benefit from a review before taking second-year courses (false beginners). For this case study, 150 students were considered ideal informants—they were taking their first college-level German class and, therefore, were in the most critical phase of their transition from high school to college.

UTK's lower-division German program is based on a communicative curriculum and uses *Kontakte* (Terrell, Tschirner, & Nikolai, 2005) as a textbook for the first three semesters, including the review course. With fewer than three weekly contact hours, class time is intended to focus on interactive and meaningful language use (e.g., collaborative group work). In contrast, homework assignments tend to be more form-focused, especially at the beginning of an instructional unit. At home, students are supposed to work through English explanations and examples of a new structure followed by a series of exercises. Since many of these exercises have a controlled format, students are required to use the book's answer key for self-correction before turning in their homework.

Research Questions and Research Design

To investigate the overarching research question for this study—how false beginners transition to the German review course at UTK—the following subquestions were formulated:

1. How does the college review course differ from the classes students had taken in high school, and how does that affect students' transition? In other words, is there a distinct high school culture of learning that is different from college?
2. Do learners have established cultures of learning? If so, how do those cultures of learning affect the transition process and do they change in the college course?

To capture learners' experiences, beliefs, and expectations, a naturalistic approach was deemed most appropriate. By focusing on "the lived experiences of real people in real settings" (Hatch, 2002, p. 6), qualitative research aims to understand the world through the eyes of those living it. A qualitative methodology seemed especially useful to study a complex social phenomenon like cultures of learning because it allows for a holistic approach without "breaking [it] down into isolated, incomplete, and disconnected variables" (Hatch, 2002, p. 9).

The present study was designed as a case study, defined as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (Yin, 1984, p. 23). Conducting this project as a case study was deemed an appropriate research strategy for the following reasons: (1) it focuses on explanatory research questions (e.g., "how" and "why"), (2) its goal is to examine contemporary as opposed to past events, and (3) the investigator has no control over relevant behaviors. According to Yin (1984), these are all indicators that a case study approach is advantageous. Instead of investigating only a single case, several informants participated in this multiple-case study to allow insight into a phenomenon or population (i.e., cultures of learning, false beginners) (Stake, 2000).

The researcher's position as German language program director allowed her access to the site and participants for this study. After a class roll was obtained from early registration, potential participants who had registered for the German review course for the spring semester 2006 were contacted via e-mail in November 2005. The e-mail was an invitation to participate in this study and included information about the nature of participation.

Informants

This procedure illustrates that this study relied on convenience sampling (Patton, 1990). After having gathered some background information about the students volunteering to participate in the study (e.g., number of years of high school study, college class), the researcher decided to include all of them as informants. While some people would not consider a college junior or a student with knowledge of other foreign languages a false beginner, this study followed a broader definition of a false beginner as a learner who needs or chooses to start over with his language studies (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Klee & Rogers, 1989). In this particular context, the broader definition seemed especially appropriate since it reflects UTK's institutional conceptualization of a false beginner. Originally, eleven students agreed to participate in this study but only data from the seven participants who completed the course are reported here.² The seven participants were five female and two male students, ranging in age from 18 to 26. Biographical information of the participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Informant profiles

	Kathy	Martha	Ruth	Gary	Brad	Angela	Amy
Initials for audit trail	KZ	MB	RP	GN	BH	AW	AS
Age	19	18	26	19	19	18	20
Race	White	White	White	Black	White	White	White
Major	Accounting-	Pre- Pharmacy	Education/ Studio Art	Sociology	Business or Finance	Journalism e-media	Creative Writing
High school (HS) education	public suburban HS in AL (enrollment: 1,600)*	public suburban HS in TN (enrollment: 400)	public suburban HS in OH (enrollment: 3,000)	public HS in small TN town (enrollment: 1,300)	public suburban HS in TN (enrollment: 1,200)	public suburban HS in TN (enrollment: 2,300)	public HS in small TN town (enroll- ment: 1,100)
HS German program	German I- IV	German I- III	German I-V	German I- III,AP	German I+ II	German I- III	German I- IV
Year graduated	2004	2005	1997	2004	2005	2005	2003
Previous FL experience	- 2 years of high school German, - 1 semester of college Italian	- 2 years of high school German	- 3 years of middle school German, 3 years of high school German	- 2 years of high school German	- 2 years of high school German	- 2 years of high school German, - 1 year of high school Spanish	- 3 years of high school German, - 1 semes- ter of college Italian
Grades in previous German classes	B	A	B	A	A	A	A
Time since last German class	4 years	2 years	10 years	1 year	1 semester	1 semester	2 years

* She also attended a public urban HS in TN (enrollment 1,400) but did not take any German classes there.

All participants were enrolled in the same section of the review course offered during the spring semester 2006. The class was taught by Andor,³ a 25-year-old teaching associate from Hungary enrolled in the German MA program. Having taught for the first time only the previous semester, his teaching experience was rather limited. He is a conscientious and passionate teacher who likes to integrate technology⁴ and current events into his teaching. For this class, Andor had an

assistant, Chuck, a 28-year-old TA from Tennessee. As a first-year MA student, Chuck was still in training without any teaching responsibilities of his own. He attended all class meetings, was involved in grading and lesson planning, and taught increasingly longer sections of the class as the semester progressed.

Data Collection and Analysis

As is typical of case study research, the present study achieved triangulation by relying on several different types of data (Yin, 1984) whose richness enhances the study's reliability and internal validity (Merriam, 1998). The main source of information was interviews with the participating students. The first interview took place before the start of the course (late November/early December); the second interview took place shortly after the beginning of the semester (late January/early February), and the last interview was conducted at the conclusion of the semester (late April/early May). Since students were able to look back at the whole semester, the third interview was the most comprehensive one of the series. The researcher also interviewed the teacher Andor and his assistant Chuck about their impressions of students' transition and performance. All student and teacher interviews were conducted one-on-one and audio-recorded for analysis.

In general, the student interviews followed the interview guide approach: Before the actual interviewing, the researcher identified a set of issues to be discussed with the informants (Patton, 1990). While the first student interview followed the same interview guide with all participants, the next interviews also included questions addressing the uniqueness of each case. At times, an informal conversational interviewing technique also was used as the researcher spontaneously reacted to information provided by the interviewees and based some questions on this new information (Patton, 1990).

In addition to the interviews, the researcher conducted five class observations in March and April to gain a better understanding of the classroom atmosphere and dynamics as well as students' behaviors. During the observations, the researcher took field notes and kept a passive and unobtrusive presence. The last source of data was a five-page questionnaire, which students filled out during the last interview. It included open-ended as well as multiple-choice items about their German high school and college classes as well as their beliefs about FL learning.

As mentioned earlier, the data collection lasted about five months, spanning slightly more than one semester. This was arguably the most critical and perhaps difficult phase of students' transition, thus representing an important adjustment period. Data analysis began while the study was still in progress to inform future data collection. Findings from the classroom observations, for example, allowed the researcher to identify interesting issues for future interviews (Patton, 1990).

Due to the study's fairly narrowly formulated research questions and well-structured data, most topics addressed in the data were predictable. Therefore, a typological analysis was deemed most appropriate (Hatch, 2002). As a first step, the researcher generated a set of predetermined typologies based on theory, common sense, and the research objectives (e.g., homework, target language use, and group work). Next, the initial data processing focused on these predetermined typologies to look for patterns,

themes, and relationships in the data (unlike an inductive approach, where categories are allowed to emerge from the data). More refined and focused data analysis phases followed (Hatch, 2002). Although typological analysis begins with this deductive step, the analysis is not designed to test *a priori* hypotheses. Therefore, it is critical to be aware of other important dimensions in the data (Hatch, 2002).

For the purpose of reporting data, the names of all participating students, the teacher, and the assistant have been replaced with pseudonyms. The findings section includes many quotes in order to “take readers inside the contexts and allow them to hear the voices of the participants” (Hatch, 2002, p. 159).⁵ To establish the researcher’s trustworthiness and enhance validity, an audit trail is included for each data excerpt; it documents the research process and is used here to identify the data source, date, and interviewee (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).⁶

Findings

To discuss the findings of the present study, this section features individual case narratives as well as a cross-case analysis. First, several unique cases are discussed in case narratives. These narratives are the result of the first level of analysis, where each student is treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself (Merriam, 1998). Due to space limitations, however, the case narratives focus only on the experiences of three students, which illustrate the powerful influence of their cultures of learning on the transition process.

One of the sections includes the cross-case analysis, which is based on the second analysis level and highlights important patterns and themes in learners’ expectations, beliefs, and experiences across many cases. Using such a case comparison approach, the researcher can go beyond the uniqueness of individual cases by connecting them through thematic similarities and differences in order to build abstractions and general explanations (Merriam, 1998).

Individual Case Narratives

This section features the individual case narratives of Brad, Amy, and Gary, who had developed very pronounced and unique cultures of learning based on their role in the classroom, their identity as a learner, their relationship with the teacher and other students, and the instructional approach of the class. Being faced with a different learning environment, Brad, Amy, and Gary had to adjust their cultures of learning, which was more drastic and difficult for some than for others.

Brad:

Brad is a well-spoken and quite mature 19-year-old Caucasian from a suburb of Nashville, where he attended high school until 2005. He did well in his two years of high school German and is now considering business or finance as a major. Of all participants, Brad probably had the highest intrinsic motivation for learning German because “Germany is an economic powerhouse” (BH-I120205) and he viewed German as potentially useful for his career. Unfortunately, Brad’s high school German classes were a disappointment for him because “the class didn’t

come together and we didn't get anything done" (BH-I120205). As the oldest of the students, Brad saw his classmates as immature students who complained a great deal and got class off track. Lessons were very grammar-focused and lecture-based and included packets of worksheets for the students aimed at what Brad called "dissecting sentences" (BH-I120205). Brad remembers the first year as especially grammar-intensive and described the workload as "minimal at best" (BH-I120205).

From the interviews, it became apparent that through his experience learning German in high school, Brad had developed a culture of learning based on his personal role in the class as well as the class's emphasis on grammar. At the first interview, he gave the impression that he very much disliked his culture of learning and was ready for a change. In his high school German classes, he had defined himself as the mature, motivated student whose intellectual hunger was not being satisfied. As the following excerpt shows, Brad was happy to find out that the college-level German class was intellectually stimulating for him.

My thing in high school was that I always felt that I was wasting my time, we were never getting anything done. Why should I be here if we're not doing anything? And the stuff we did do, I could've done in 10 minutes on my own. . . . But in 150, we . . . never left early and we kept a strict schedule, absolutely. But it didn't bother me that we were in there because we were actually doing stuff the entire time. We were never wasting time. And I think that's great. (BH-I042706)

However, this intellectual adjustment was not too difficult for Brad because of his learning experience in his other high school classes, which were mostly advanced placement classes that were challenging for him. This culture of learning was in contrast to his high school German but proved to be very compatible with the German course at UTK.

Brad's culture of learning was also based on his playing the role of an outsider, unable to connect with either his classmates or his teachers. It is important to note that this role was at least somewhat self-selected. In the college class, however, Brad was happy to be able to change this aspect of his culture of learning, which had been dominated by social isolation.

BH: I think there was a big difference there! In high school, when I passed either one of my teachers we wouldn't really talk. And I have passed Andor and Chuck several times and we stopped and talked. . . .

R: Is that a good difference?

BH: Yes, I think I felt more comfortable asking questions than I did in high school. . . .

R: Did you feel a little out of place in your high school class?

BH: I did. I was the only person in the class from my grade level. For one, I didn't know any of the other students at all, they were all younger than me. I didn't really feel I could relate to them because they

were all talking about classes and stuff. It's difficult to hear people complain about workload when you have WAY MORE than they do. . . . That always just irritates me. . . . I think 150 was more people who were on the same playing field, people that I wanted to talk to, people that were more or less applying themselves and not just screwing off.

R: Did that take some adjustment to all of a sudden play a different role?

BH: It was DIFFERENT but it really didn't take adjusting to speak of because that's the way all my other classes have been before. It was more or less putting that one along the lines of where it was supposed to be. (BH-I042706)

The fact that Brad felt unable to relate to his high school teachers and classmates set him apart from several other informants who knew their teacher and classmates rather well.

Brad's high school culture of learning posed more problems for his transition in terms of classroom activities. While his high school classes were very teacher-centered and grammar-focused, the curriculum at UTK, with its focus on interactive and student-centered activities, reflects a fundamentally different methodology. In his first interview, Brad portrayed himself as somebody who was confident in his grammar abilities, almost like a grammar whiz. But he already expected the college German class to be more focused on speaking than his high school classes had been, which he knew would pose a challenge for him. Two weeks into the semester Brad confirmed his earlier expectations and reported that there were many verbal exercises: "I'm enjoying that but it's a challenge. . . . [S]peaking is my roughest point" (BH-I012706). In their interviews, the teacher Andor and his assistant Chuck also described a student who was still trying to get used to working with other students and speaking the FL.

Sometimes he tends to rather work by himself from what I can tell. My impression might not be accurate but I think he is more comfortable sometimes working by himself. Because very often I say you CAN work with a partner. (AG-I022206)

In the last interview, Brad talked in more detail about his difficulties with oral interactive classroom activities.

BH: Before, I had never really worked in groups to speak of. We OCCASIONALLY would work in a group and very rarely did we actually do any German-related work while we were in that group. So being in a course where every class we had we were working in groups was a big switch. And I didn't like it at first but as the semester went on . . . I definitely enjoy it now. . . . I definitely talked a lot more in the second half than in the first half. . . . And it wasn't that I wasn't paying attention—I was really afraid of making a mistake. So I didn't want to say it out loud if I wasn't actually sure I was right.

R: So you definitely feel you needed to adjust.

BH: OH YEAH! There was DEFINITELY an adjustment. The way the class functioned, inside of class with the groups, the interaction. We never really interacted in high school: It was very lecture-based. We never really spoke to speak of. We had a lot of grammar.

R: What did your teachers in high school expect in terms of speaking?

BH: Um, NOT very much [laughs]. They really didn't.

R: Do you think your hesitancy to say things in class comes from high school?

BH: I think definitely. Up until 150, I don't think I had ever really spoken AT ALL. (BH-I042706)

While this aspect of Brad's transition was most difficult for him, he did see value in using class time for oral exercises. Believing that this approach ultimately benefits his learning might have helped him make the transition, an attitude that he expressed in the exit interview.

I'm very happy to not see worksheets and we don't do near the focus on grammar. . . . You know, there is some degree of grammar but it's more focused on speaking. And I think that's probably a lot more valuable, to be able to speak or at least get a point across as opposed to being able to write down an essay. (BH-I042706)

In that respect, Brad is very different from other informants who were very skeptical or even critical of the instructional approach in the review course, as will be illustrated in the next section.

The fact that Brad experienced "few difficulties" (BH-Q042706) in his transition from high school German to this college course is probably due to his dissatisfaction with many aspects of his culture of learning. In addition, he believed in many aspects of the methodological approach used in the review course, which also seemed to help him to adjust successfully his culture of learning.

Amy:

Also a Caucasian, Amy is a bubbly and outgoing 20-year-old creative writing major from a small town about 50 miles from Knoxville. After graduating from high school in 2003, where she took almost three years of German, she attended a private college before transferring to UTK for financial reasons. Amy had a very positive but at the same time somewhat unusual German experience in high school. She described her German class as "the best part of my day" (AS-I120505) because it made learning fun. Instead of using a textbook, Amy's teacher focused on topics pertinent to the students and "made the German about us" (AS-I120505). In class, her teacher spoke about 50% German and included activities such as English-German translations, educational games (e.g., German Jeopardy), German versions of movies, and some group work (especially in levels 3 and 4).

Amy's high school culture of learning was based very much on her social role in the class and the close personal connections she was able to establish with her teacher and classmates. Over time, she and her classmates developed a bond with the teacher, whom Amy also knew from film club. In fact, she still has contact with him and considers him a friend. She was also very close to five other students in her high school German class. Before the beginning of the semester, she was apprehensive about having a different German teacher, which seems to indicate that she was nervous about having to change that aspect of her culture of learning. But she was able to build relationships in the review course. Amy's friendlike relationship with both Andor and Chuck was noted repeatedly during the researcher's classroom observations. For example, she said "Bye, boys!" one day as she was leaving the classroom (O041206). As the following excerpt illustrates, this part of her culture of learning is very important to Amy.

R: You had a very personal relationship with your high school teacher.

AS: I hung out with him the other night, actually.

R: Were you able to have a similar relationship with your 150 teachers?

AS: Yeah, I did, definitely. I didn't think I would at first. A student and I were talking about something and I was like: "Yeah, Andor is moving to Chicago" and he was like: "How do you know that?" And I said: "Well, I guess we're friends now."

R: Are you looking for a relationship with your teachers?

AS: I LOVE having a personal relationship with a teacher because one day I hope to also be a teacher. Maybe I'm hoping for some karma: if I treat my teachers like REAL people instead of these demi-gods, my students one day will think they can approach me and that I am there to help them, not just in class. I want to help them succeed as persons. Plus it's always cool to make new friends. (AS-I0S42806)

During the semester, Amy also was able to connect with some of the other students in her German class because "I love goofing off and being friendly with my classmates. We're in this together" (AS-Q042806). It is interesting to note that Amy gravitated toward students who, like her, actively influenced the dynamics of the class. This was similar to her high school experience and highlights another important aspect of her culture of learning: She enjoys being an influential, maybe even dominant, player in the classroom. Only three weeks into the semester, Amy identified herself as the "spokesperson" of the class—a role she thought she should take on since most students were very timid (AS-I020306). In class, Amy was definitely one of the most active students: She volunteered frequently (Q032706, Q041206, Q042806) and took on a leadership role during group work (Q032906, Q041206). Her teacher and his assistant had the same impression of her.

Most vibrant student. I wouldn't say she's dominant but definitely speaks up a lot more. She is the happy spirit at the beginning of the class, always greets me with a very happy "Guten Morgen," which is always nice to hear for the teacher. (AG-I022206) I think she provides a little bit of energy, that's good. (CC-I032706)

Being able to maintain her social role and therefore an important aspect of her culture of learning probably helped Amy make the adjustment to a more rigid class with daily homework and a textbook, aspects she was not used to from her high school class. Another facilitating factor was that, unlike the freshmen in the class, she had already developed a college culture of learning, which she was able to transfer successfully to the FL context.

AS: I just finally realized this is a college class. Just treat it like anything else. Do your homework. After I do my reading, I have to do my sentences. It was a quick transition. So often, I just wanted to slack off on it and wait till the morning it was due and do it right before class. I realized I can't do that—I'm not gonna learn anything that way.

R: Sounds like you're pretty conscientious.

AS: Yeah, you have to be. I have been in school for SO LONG, I think it's just about the only thing I know how to do. (AS-I042806)

While being able to maintain the social aspects of her culture of learning seemed to facilitate Amy's transition, her experience in the college German class added a new dimension that might have had a similarly positive effect. Based on her high school experience, Amy described herself as not being good at FL learning because it relies more on memorization than comprehension. But in the review course, Amy added a new role to her culture of learning: the role of the good student. On the one hand, conscientiously completing all assignments allowed her to feel like a good student (AS-I020306). On the other hand, Amy also felt academically superior to many of her classmates. After only eleven class meetings, she had the impression that she knew a great deal more than most students in the class (AS-I020306). She expressed a similar opinion in the exit interview, comparing herself to classmates using a slightly arrogant tone.

R: What is your relationship to the other students in 150?

AS: They're all pretty cool kids, except for maybe the people who aren't doing anything. Like the girls on the left. . . . I just feel I can't be friends with people . . . who aren't smart.

R: So you gravitate towards people who have similar attitudes and are motivated?

AS: Right. When people four months into the course . . . still don't know how to pronounce something, I'm like: "Excuse me, where have you been?" Today, for example, they're asking where we are going to have the study session, when Andor had already said it several times. Lord have mercy, people need to pay attention! I mean, God bless them, I'm sure they have other things going on, but come on now! (AS-I042806)

Feeling more capable than many other students could have been an additional factor easing Amy's transition to a course with a heavier workload than her high school class and "a doomful instrument like a textbook" (AS-I120506).

Overall, Amy was able to maintain the most dominant aspects of her culture of learning, which defined her role in the classroom in terms of her social relationships. Although Amy did have to make some adjustments during the semester, her transition was marked by "few difficulties" (AS-Q042806) because, similar to Brad, she was able to transfer other learning experiences to the context of learning German.

Gary:

As the only African American in the class, 19-year-old Gary was an atypical case because of the low minority enrollment at UTK in general and in the German program in particular. He attended high school in a midsize town 45 miles northwest of Nashville, where he took German in his sophomore and senior years. After graduating in 2004, he came to UTK because he had been admitted to the band and majored in sociology. While German was not his favorite class in high school, he made straight A's because German came easy to him. With a heavy focus on grammar, a typical lesson was conducted in a mix of English and German and would include a lecture followed by written exercises to be completed by the students. The conversational use of German was extremely limited, especially by the students.

Gary probably had the most difficult transition of all participants. From his high school German classes, Gary was used to being a good student who got A's without putting forth much effort or without paying much attention in class. But his role drastically changed in the college German class, which he expected to be difficult for him: "I think it'll be really hard—I don't think I am going to do well at all" (GN-I121305). His first impression of the course confirmed his earlier expectations, but he realized that the review course was even harder than he had expected and admitted "I get lost a lot" (GN-I020306). After having been one of the good students in high school, Gary had to accept the role of being a weaker student in his college German class.

Similar to Brad, Gary's difficulties were rooted in the oral component of the class. In the initial interview, Gary said this about his high school teacher: "She never let us talk. I can't speak German AT ALL" (GN-I121305). As a result, he was overwhelmed by the amount of German used by the teachers, about which Andor and Chuck also commented.

He is probably a little bit below class average and I think he has sometimes trouble understanding me in class—he appears confused very often. . . . I would say he is a little bit struggling but he's hanging in there. (AG-I022206)

Gary is a tricky one. He REALLY wants to do well! . . . I just think it's hard for him. . . . In class he doesn't participate a whole lot. . . . When Andor calls on him, he struggles. . . . A lot of days, it seems like he doesn't want to be there in a way. But . . . I don't think it's because he doesn't want to learn anything. (CC-I032706)

In the exit interview, Gary talked about his problems understanding oral German, identifying them as a major hurdle that semester.

R: You told me that there was hardly any listening and speaking German in high school.

GN: Yeah, that was one of the biggest problems I had. He [Andor] would be talking in German and I just couldn't keep up. . . . That was really hard because he never spoke English. . . . I think that was probably the thing that really messed me up. (GN-I050306)

While Gary knew early on that he was struggling, he was upset to find out that this fact was also obvious to his teacher, who approached him after class one day, mentioning that Gary seemed to have difficulties. Gary then started worrying about his classmates' perception of him, and his race became an issue. Coming from a high school with a 60% minority enrollment, it was difficult for Gary to be the only minority student in many of his classes at UTK, including the German review course. He said that from the beginning of the semester, he worried about being seen as the "dumb Black kid," but added that this was "kind of a complex . . . it's something in my head" (GN-I020306) and that neither his teachers nor his classmates made him feel that way.

R: You said that you got A's in high school without really paying attention.

GN: Yeah. All that's changed in college!

R: Was that difficult to adjust to?

GN: Not being the smartest one? Yes! . . . I always feel dumb when I'm in that class. . . . I don't like raising my hand and volunteering because if I'm wrong, I don't want to look dumb in front of everybody.

R: You told me in our last interview that you worried about being the "dumb Black kid."

GN: Throughout the semester, I felt uncomfortable. . . . In high school, it definitely was not like that at all. . . . We had the most diversity in our county—it was really hard to come to a school like this. . . . It's just weird to be in a certain environment for the majority of your life—cause I was in school with the same people basically from 5th grade through 12th. That's seven years and you're just so used to everything. . . . I'm REALLY not used to being the only minority in class. . . . I just didn't want to be that dumb Black kid [in the German class].

R: And in high school, that wasn't an issue because you were an A-student.

GN: Yeah, and even if I was bad, there were so many other [minority] people that it wasn't that big of a deal. (GN-I050306)

While Gary's culture of learning from high school was not based on his racial status, his difficulties in college brought that to the foreground and put more pressure on him to perform better.

In addition, Gary was struggling with UTK's system of autonomous learning. From high school, he was used to the strong presence of the teacher as a guide in his learning process. He usually tried to finish all of the assigned work in class so he could get help from the teacher. He also regularly sought the assistance of his teacher before school or after class. Over the course of the semester, Gary seemed to get frustrated because he thought he did everything he was supposed to do but it did not really pay off: "At times, it felt like I worked really hard and I didn't really get what I wanted. . . . I did all the homework assignments. Even when I had tons of other stuff to do, I turned in everything on time" (GN-I050306).

For Gary, the role of the student is to "keep up with all the work and know what you are supposed to do" (GN-I121306), which he did do. But he did not seem to take the initiative to go beyond the required work. For example, Gary thought that copying vocabulary lists, which his high school teacher had assigned on a regular basis, was tedious and repetitive but that it helped him learn the vocabulary. Despite this conscious knowledge of an effective vocabulary learning strategy, he did not use it because it was not assigned. He gave the impression that he wanted the teacher to lead him in doing this type of work: "I would've preferred something like: 'Let's do vocabulary': go over it, pronounce it, do definitions" (GN-I050306). Obviously, Gary had difficulty learning independently, which is also reflected in his view of the role of the FL teacher. On the questionnaire, he indicated that it is "not important at all" for the teacher to enable students to learn independently (GN-Q050306). The assistant also mentioned Gary's dependency on somebody to *teach* him and *make* him learn.

It seems like he really needs somebody to say: "Look, it's gonna be okay. This is what you have to do." Maybe it just makes him feel more comfortable to have someone there, kind of holding his hand. It MAY be good for him to have some tutoring one-on-one. . . . But I really think if I were to sit Gary down one-on-one, he could get excited about it. (CC-I032706)

Needing individual attention during the learning process, Gary did get a tutor for this class, which Chuck probably was not aware of when he made that statement. On the questionnaire, Gary noted: "My tutor helped the most [with my transition]" (GN-Q050306).

Looking back at the semester, Gary concluded that the transition had been "very difficult" for him (GN-Q050306). Like other students, he was struggling with the increased workload in the college class, the almost exclusive use of the target language, and the emphasis on autonomous learning. Being one of the weakest

students in the class was new territory for Gary, a difficult adjustment that was exacerbated by a new awareness of his minority status. In the university German course, Gary had to completely abandon his culture of learning, which made his transition very difficult and frustrating.

The case narratives of Brad, Amy, and Gary illustrate that each learner brought a set of unique self-concepts, beliefs, needs, and preferences to this new learning situation (e.g., Brad's dissatisfaction with his culture of learning, and the racial component in Gary's case), making them anything but "a monolithic, homogeneous group" (Kern, 1995, p. 71). This finding supports the reconceptualization of cultures of learning proposed earlier: While cultures of learning can be defined along group lines (e.g., national cultures), they also display considerable individual variation.

Cross-Case Analysis

As the narratives illustrate, the participants of this study represent unique experiences. There were, however, several themes that ran through the data, hence representing interesting similarities in students' experiences. The themes illustrate how the college review course differed from the German classes students had taken in high school and how that affected students' transition. The following themes emerged from the data as patterned similarities between several or even most cases, which will be discussed in more detail: (1) homework, (2) grammar, (3) group work, (4) target language use, (5) participation, and (6) social connections.

Although many informants had expected a heavier workload for a college-level class, this seemed to be a difficult factor in their transition. During the first interview, four students reported only a minimal amount of homework in high school, which was often due to the fact that they were allowed to complete most if not all of their "homework" in class. Considering this aspect of their high school experience, it comes as no surprise that five of the seven participants believed that the amount of homework in this college course was very or somewhat different. For four students, this was a (somewhat) difficult adjustment. In fact, the amount of homework was the biggest challenge for two students that semester and three said that it made their transition difficult. In the interviews, some students even sounded overwhelmed by the amount of homework and wondered if that large amount of work was necessary, as the following comment illustrates:

There's SO MUCH to do. At times, it was extremely overwhelming . . . homework every single time and there would be pages and pages and pages. . . . It was a huge adjustment and I hated it so much. I would just feel like: "Why do we have so much work?" (GN-I050306)

The only student who did not seem to mind was Brad, who said that the amount of work "was by no means undoable or anything like that" (BH-I042706). Ruth and Angela, in contrast, lost motivation over the course of the semester and did not think it was appropriate to put that much work into a first-year class they

needed only to satisfy a curriculum requirement. Amy had made a similar remark before the beginning of the course: She expected it to be difficult to justify spending time on the homework for this class when she could be doing work for upper-division classes in her major. But as described in more detail in her case narrative, she ended up taking pride in completing all of the work in a conscientious manner.

An important issue related to homework is the approach toward grammar at UTK. According to all seven participants, their high school teachers had provided explicit grammar explanations in a lecture format. In addition, many classroom activities focused on grammar as well. Here is how Angela described her high school class in that respect.

We came in and she [the teacher] was like: “Okay, guys, we are going to learn about the dative case today” and she would do a bunch of examples. And then she would have us come up to the overhead and we would do a zillion examples. (AW-I042806)

In the college class, however, class time usually was not used for such explicit grammar talk or grammar exercises. Instead, students were expected to do the initial form-focused learning phase beforehand on their own. Having this kind of responsibility for their own learning was (very) different for six of the students. Two students agreed that this system can indeed work, especially to review material previously covered in high school. But it takes motivation and discipline on the part of the student, as Angela pointed out.

It worked to a certain extent. If I went through them [grammar explanations] and really read them and I really tried to understand them, then I came in and I kinda knew what was going on. And we’d do some stuff and I’d be like: “Okay, I kinda get it.” . . . I think it’s a really good system IF you are going to go through the trouble of REALLY trying to learn it before you come to class . . . Maybe the other students were way more self-motivated than me. If there was a day when I didn’t take the time, the next class was just awful ’cause I was sitting there lost and confused. (AW-I042806)

Other students agreed that the system can work but they would like to get grammar talk from the teacher in addition to the explanations in the book. “I think I would [prefer to have grammar lectures from the teacher]—even though that’s more boring. I think it would’ve helped ME” (RP-I042806).

Several participants expressed a preference for a teacher-centered approach not only in terms of learning grammar but also with regard to other classroom activities. In the review course, Andor included group and partner work on a daily basis to engage students in meaningful oral language production. Except for Brad, who was the only one who grew to like and value student-centered activities over the course of the semester, many other students were (very) critical of group work. Again, they would have preferred form-focused or teacher-centered activities.

Yeah, I enjoy it [group work] . . . but I think it would’ve been more helpful to spend more time . . . not drilling, but kinda. (RP-I042806)

When we . . . do the interviews, that doesn't help me AT ALL. . . . I wish Andor was more like: "Who lives in a dorm?" and then we raise our hands and say it in German. If he could [take] more of an active role . . . I feel Andor was in front of the class but he wasn't necessarily . . . IN CHARGE of the class. . . . I think those activities . . . just take up class time that we never have enough of anyway. . . . [Doing a lecture] would be great. (AS-I042806)

I felt group work was a waste of time. (GN-I050306)

Another problematic issue in the review course was students' oral participation. During her observations, the researcher noted that the class was rather quiet and not very engaged (O041206, O041706). Andor would often direct personal questions at the class as a whole, waiting for volunteers to answer. While Amy was usually the first one to volunteer, the other students were often hesitant to contribute. As Angela's comment illustrates, most students were aware that participation was problematic.

A lot of times, it was like pulling teeth. . . . He WANTED us to participate: he would ask us questions and we would give him one word answers . . . or be like: "I don't know how to say that" and just look at him. He tried to get us to participate but a lot of us didn't really want to. (AW-I042806)

Interestingly, three students said that participation in general and group work in particular seemed to work better in high school: "It didn't seem like it was so much of a struggle [in high school]" (AS-I042806). On the one hand, this could be due to Andor's reliance on volunteers instead of calling on specific students. Martha and Angela actually preferred their high school teachers' reliance on what they called "forced participation."

In high school, my teacher . . . made us get in front of the class and do it. . . . I was forced to learn more because I knew I would be called on to answer stuff and write sentences. In 150, if I didn't understand, I just didn't volunteer. . . . I definitely prefer being forced into it. (AW-Q042806)

On the other hand, some students attributed their lack of participation to the social aspect of the class. In high school, many students knew their German teachers fairly well because the students had had them for several years, because the students knew them from extra-curricular activities, or because the teachers taught other subject areas as well. The same was true for students' classmates, some of whom the students already knew from other classes. Lasting a whole year, high school classes also meet more frequently and students often know each other from the previous class.

I knew everybody in my high school class so I think that made a lot of difference. . . . They were in my other classes and I saw them around school. There wasn't as much: "I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to embarrass myself in front of you." When we're in group work [in the college class], I'm like: "I don't really know you. I'm not comfortable with you." (AW-I042806)

As this discussion shows, informants' high school German classes were quite different and in some respects even substantially different. With the exception of Martha, who probably had the smoothest transition that semester, students needed to make several adjustments in the college German course. Although the differences manifested themselves in concrete terms (e.g., the amount of homework), they were rooted in underlying instructional approaches and beliefs (e.g., the role of the student) and represented similar institutional cultures of learning at the high schools. However, those cultures of learning were at odds with the pedagogical approach at UTK and caused problems for students' transition. This finding might indicate that there is a distinct high school culture of learning based on different pedagogical beliefs than that of college FL programs. Future research should investigate the high school and college cultures of learning on a larger scale since this study does not allow for generalizations beyond the context of UTK and the specific high school programs.

Conclusion

This study described the experiences of seven students enrolled in a false beginner course at UTK. While only one student had an "easy" transition from her high school German class to college and three others experienced "few difficulties," three students found the transition to be "somewhat difficult" or even "very difficult."

As illustrated in the case narratives, Brad's, Gary's, and Amy's transition process was influenced by unique aspects of their high school experiences. Defining themselves as either good or bad FL learners, they had very clear expectations for their academic performance in the college German class. In high school, Amy considered herself not very good at FL learning, attributing it to the nature of FL learning, which did not match her intellectual strengths. Interestingly, Amy's limited success did not seem to bother her, maybe because she did not see it as indicative of her general intellectual capabilities. To her own surprise, Amy became one of the best students in the college class. Gary's experience was in stark contrast to Amy's. Struggling in the review class, he was forced to accept the role of a weak student, which seemed to undermine his overall self-image.

These students' high school experiences also influenced their social behaviors in the college classroom. Brad was happy to abandon his outsider role from high school and become a more integrated member of the class. Amy, on the other hand, was able to maintain her preferred role as a dominant and upbeat student who interacted with her teachers on a social level. It is also interesting to note that even for a junior like Amy, her high school culture of learning initially dominated her attitudes toward the college German class, not her experience in other college courses. However, it appears that those experiences ultimately eased her transition.

The cases of these three students illustrate powerfully how the students approached a new learning situation with a set of established beliefs, values, and expectations that functioned as an "interpretive frameworks through which classroom events, other participants and their educational identities are evaluated" (Cortazzi & Jin, 2002, p. 55). Therefore, these findings support the earlier proposal that learners can develop their unique individual cultures of learning.

In addition to the uniqueness of students' attitudes, expectations, and behaviors, this study also showed that more general issues had an impact on the transition of many students. At this university, students had to adjust to an instructional approach that was very different from what they were used to. According to most participants, their German classes in high school had been more grammar-focused and teacher-centered, had relied less on the target language, and had not required students to complete much work outside of class. This shows that the cultures of learning of the seven high school German programs represented were very different from the lower-division program at UTK. Due to the case specificity of this qualitative study, no generalizations can be made about high school versus college programs and cultures of learning in general. Future research should address this issue further, which might have important implications for articulation efforts between high school and college FL programs.

The interviews with the students showed that their beliefs were at times heavily influenced by the teaching practices they had experienced in high school (Horwitz, 1988); consequently, the students were not receptive to or were even critical of the instructional practices in the university course, a phenomenon also observed by Cotterall (1995).

Language learners hold beliefs about teachers and their role . . . about themselves as learners and their role, about language learning and about learning in general. These beliefs will affect (and sometimes inhibit) learners' receptiveness to the ideas and activities presented in the language class, particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learners' experience. (p. 203)

Obviously, students' high school cultures of learning and the pedagogical philosophy of the UTK German program did not mesh in several cases. As Schulz (2001) has pointed out, such a disconnect can be problematic: "Any sizable discrepancy in teacher and student perceptions regarding the efficacy of instructional practices can be detrimental to learning" (p. 256) as it can diminish motivation and undermine the teacher's or program's credibility.

Despite the context-specific nature of this qualitative study, its findings have important practical implications. To provide an enjoyable and successful learning experience, it is important to avoid such conflicts between students' beliefs and the views of educators and administrators. It might be necessary to talk to students to raise their awareness of their beliefs as well as address any misconceptions because "learner attitudes and beliefs . . . may not automatically alter when learners merely become exposed to new teaching methodologies" (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p. 12). An open discussion about their beliefs can be beneficial not only for students with previous FL learning experience, such as the students in this study, but also for true beginners, who often hold preconceived notions about FL learning that are pervasive in society at large (Horwitz, 1988).

In addition, this finding has important implications for the vertical articulation between high school and college FL programs. So far, many articulation efforts have focused on curricular content (Lange, 1997), which was not a

pressing concern for the informants of this study. When asked about their transition from high school to college, they never brought up any issues relating to the material covered in high school or this college course. Instead, they talked about differences in instructional methods and the way those differences affected their transition, which underscores the need to broaden our articulation efforts to coordinate not only what we teach but also how we teach it and how we expect students to learn. Such articulation at the methodological level would significantly ease the transition between these levels. As Lange (1997), Hall (1997), and (more recently) Byrnes (2001) have pointed out, this aspect has mostly been neglected so far but needs to be addressed to achieve successful articulation.

Notes

1. Of the total enrollment for fall 2005, the most current data available, 82% of UTK students officially classified themselves as Caucasian; 8%, African-American; 3%, Asian; and 1% Hispanic. Eighty-one percent were in-state students.
2. Four participating students dropped the class due to illness and other reasons not related to their transition experience.
3. The names of the teacher, his assistant, and all informants have been replaced with pseudonyms.
4. Before class started, he would often show authentic videos such as German news-casts and music videos.
5. The following transcription conventions were used: Quotation marks signal shorter quotes in the body of the text while longer excerpts from the interviews are italicized and indented. Ellipses indicate the deletion of words; comments added by the author were put in square brackets. Capitalized words were emphasized by the speaker. The initial *R* is used to mark contributions by the researcher.
6. The coding system used for the audit trail includes the participant's initials (see Table 1) (the initials AG and CC were used to refer to the instructor and his assistant, respectively), followed by a letter indicating the data source and its collection date. An *I* indicates an interview as the data source, the letter *Q* refers to the questionnaire, and *O* stands for observation.

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