

AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction

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

H. Jay Siskin
Editor

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**AAUSC 2007: From Thought to Action:
Exploring Beliefs and Outcomes in the Foreign Language Program**
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Introduction

I recall a colleague who concluded her perusal of a set of student evaluations by exclaiming *Ils veulent! Ils veulent! Ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils veulent!*¹ Her frustration grew out of a sense of conflicting, yet unarticulated expectations. My colleague clearly had certain beliefs as to the methods, contents and goals that for her comprised the task of language teaching. Her students had other ideas that challenged her belief system. The discomfort created by this discordance between teacher and student beliefs was recast as a defensive remark: if students don't want what I want, their input may be dismissed as conceived in ignorance.

My colleague's frustration is certainly not unique. We have perhaps all reflected on the diverse belief systems that construct our multiple professional identities as language program directors, colleagues and scholars. These reflections and their implications for our students, our curriculum and our professional development are elaborated in the thirteen articles contained in the 2008 volume of the AAUSC series *Issues in Language Program Direction* entitled *From thought to action: Exploring beliefs and outcomes in the foreign language program*.

The volume is divided into five sections. In the first, entitled *Historical Perspectives*, Horwitz explores the historical and institutional contexts that led to the development of her Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). In her thought-provoking conclusion, Horwitz urges us to consider students' experience with language learning, and its implication for continued productive learning.

The second article in this section, written by Arnett and Turnbull, offers a thorough review of the literature on teacher belief systems. The authors argue that in order to reduce the "tensions" that result from conflicting theoretical, institutional, and personal prescriptions, we must develop "a greater appreciation for and understanding of the nature, function, and consequences of teachers' beliefs" (pp. 000). In particular, they conceive of an expanded version Ajzen's theory of planned behavior as a productive framework for relating belief to practice.

Three articles compose the following section, entitled "Curriculum development". In the first, Allen explores a secondary French teacher's beliefs and classroom practices regarding the textbook, the curricular weave, and the emphasis given to teaching the language system, relating this teacher's beliefs to her classroom practices. Allen concludes by considering the implications of her study for implementing change in classroom FL instruction.

Eloa's study examines changes in a Spanish teacher's beliefs and expectations in response to a shift in focus from product- to process-oriented writing instruction, with particular emphasis on the revision process.

¹ *They want! They want! They don't know what they want!*

Language for Specific Purpose programs are designed to meet student's particular academic and/or pragmatic needs. Martinez and Sanz consider administrators' and teachers' beliefs within this framework, highlighting the at times divergent outcomes articulated by each group.

In the final article in this section, Taguchi and Iwasaki document how program goals and coordinator beliefs are manifested in pedagogical approaches and materials. Their findings show that the proven efficacy of chunk learning has modified the coordinators' beliefs and assumptions about the nature of language and the process of language learning.

The articles in the following section focus on student beliefs and learning. Arnold investigates false beginners' transition from their high school program to a college-level FL class. Understanding these students' "cultures of learning" is crucial in ensuring a successful adaptation to their new learning environment.

Fernandez shares a widespread concern faced with the high attrition rate after the introductory-level language course. Her contribution seeks to determine whether continuing students hold different beliefs than those held by non-continuing students. She highlights the importance of promoting beliefs that lead to persistence in FL learning.

LPDs often feel pressured to balance the priorities, goals and demands of numerous stakeholders in a FL program. Worth notes that the student — lacking political and economic power in the educational enterprise — is often the most disenfranchised of stakeholders in a FL program. She advocates for bringing student beliefs and goals into consideration when determining FL program curricula.

One of the most critical responsibilities of the LPD is the academic and professional development of teaching assistants. Section four of this volume focuses specifically on beliefs and TA training. Katz and Watzinger-Tharp explore the beliefs that TAs hold about grammar and grammar pedagogy, often consisting of misconceptions or outdated notions. They urge a discourse-based approach in which TAs study grammar within its pragmatic and sociolinguistic context as a first step in introducing innovative pedagogical techniques.

Mills and Allen privilege the construct of teacher self-efficacy in the professional development of the teaching assistant. In particular, they seek to identify the events and influences that contribute to native and non-native graduate TAs' sense of teacher efficacy. Their conclusion presents significant implications for programmatic, curricular and institutional planning.

Although removed from the more quotidian pedagogical enterprise, university administrators and counselors hold beliefs that have a direct bearing on the shape of academic planning. Because their decisions affect funding, staffing, enrollment and class size, it is crucial to examine their belief systems. Roebuck and Wagner introduce such an examination in the last section of the volume devoted to administration and assessment. These authors analyze the beliefs of academic and professional advisors within the context of an expanded language

requirement in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Louisville. They identify areas in which the beliefs of language program directors and language teaching faculty differ from those of college advisors and discuss ways to enhance communication and understanding of the content and goals of language teaching.

Student evaluations are often used by supervisors and administrators as tools to assess the efficacy of a language program as well as to monitor the progress of graduate student teaching assistants. Using Student Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness as their framework of enquiry, Sundquist and Sundquist-Neary discuss the overlapping nature of students' attitudes toward their TA and their language course as evidenced by responses on these evaluations. Their conclusions suggest improved designs for the SETE, as well as alternative tools and strategies to gain further insight into the workings of the language program and teacher development.

Success in implementing change in FL instruction requires a consensus among all participants. Such a consensus cannot be achieved without an explicit elaboration of belief systems. These original, thoughtful and authoritative articles offer multiple strategies for eliciting and articulating beliefs, leading us to a better understanding of "what they want".

H. Jay Siskin
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