

## LANGUAGE LEARNERS' BELIEFS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE PROCESS OF TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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**Key words and phrases:** communicative skills; language learners' beliefs; learning environment; teaching strategies.

**Abstract:** Language learners' beliefs which stipulate those strategies that are applied by teachers are examined in the article. The research is done on beliefs of one hundred students learning a foreign language at Tambov State Technical University. The aim of the research is to analyze first-year students' beliefs and the connection of teaching strategies with them. It is supposed that young people who enter technical universities have low beliefs concerning learning foreign languages as their major does not cover this area and they consider foreign languages quite useless for their future job. However the analysis of students' answers to questions given as a part of the research shows quite a different tendency. Most of the students have high beliefs or beliefs above average about foreign languages. Therefore teachers of foreign languages change their approach to the process of teaching concentrating more on developing communicative skills, organising lessons as "skills lessons" and "systems lessons" accordingly and paying attention to individual abilities of every student. Consequently such a combination of students' high motivation and appropriate teaching strategies leads to excellent results.

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Teaching a foreign language at the present moment must meet a number of important requirements. For the first thing, it is a teacher's duty to give students proper knowledge of a foreign language with all its peculiarities. For the second thing, students must know not only language structures but also be aware of those cultural components which are an integral part of any language. Thirdly, students must be able to communicate with the help of this language. To encourage them to do this it is compulsory to arouse their interest in learning a foreign language, to make them understand the importance of this language in the modern world. In connection with this the problem of so called language beliefs arises today.

Language learning beliefs that determine students' success in language learning refer to internal factors and are defined as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning" [1]. If students have high beliefs concerning their studying a foreign language a success can be guaranteed in most cases. Knowing students' beliefs may provide teachers with their students' expectations, readiness and satisfaction with English classes. With such kind of information teachers can select the material and organize lessons according to students' needs and opportunities. Hence, before starting the process of teaching a foreign language it could be useful to find out those language beliefs which students have in order to adapt teaching strategies to them and to satisfy needs of both parties (students and teachers).

The aim of this paper is to study learners' beliefs at the beginning of the first year at university and to give efficient teaching strategies for motivating students. It is believed that students have low language beliefs if a foreign language is not their major and therefore they do not have a wish to master this language. We will analyze the results of the study done at Tambov State Technical University (TSTU) and see if it is true.

The English course at TSTU lasts four years and is divided into two stages. The first stage includes first and second-year students and the second stage – third and fourth-year students. According to the curriculum English is studied at the university as a second language for two academic hours a week. During the first two years students are taught General English, while third and fourth-year students learn English for specific purposes (ESP).

The objective of the work is to find out students' beliefs at the preliminary stage before beginning to learn English. Due to the received results teaching strategies used at this stage will be examined.

To do the research 100 first-year TSTU students have been interviewed with the Language learning beliefs questionnaire (Table 1).

Table 1

**Language learners' beliefs questionnaire**

Questions	Strongly agree (st-s)	Agree (st-s)	Neutral (st-s)	Disagree (st-s)	Strongly disagree (st-s)
1	2	3	4	5	6
1. People over 40 will probably find it hard to learn a foreign language	10	50	0	30	10
2. If you don't have a special aptitude it will be really hard to learn one well	0		40	10	0
3. It's really important to have your errors corrected from the start when you are learning a language or you will never speak correctly	80	10	0		10
4. Grammar drills are very important in mastering a foreign language	60	40	0		
5. You can learn a foreign language more easily if you like the people who speak that language	30	60	10	0	
6. The best way to learn another language is to forget about lesson plans or grammar, but just spend time with people who speak the language	0	30			10
7. You shouldn't say anything in a new language until you can say it correctly	0		20	40	
8. Some languages are by their nature harder than others	10	50	20		0
9. Attitude contributes as much as intelligence to language learning success	20	40		0	
10. If you can analyze how a language works, you'll be able to speak it well	40	50	10		

Table 1 continued

1	2	3	4	5	6
11. You are learning a language if you can understand it, even if you can't speak it	20		30	20	10
12. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another	30	60	10	0	
13. It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language	10	20	30	20	
14. It is important to listen a lot before starting to speak	50	30	10		0
15. Learning a foreign language is different from other academic subjects	20	60	20	0	
16. It is important to repeat and practice a lot	90	10	0		
17. It is important to understand what parts of a sentence mean when you are learning to say it	70	30	0		
18. At some point you need to spend a year or so in a country where the language is spoken in order to become really fluent	0	90	10	0	
19. Memorizing dialogues is a good way to learn a language	30	50	20		
20. Being anxious is usually harmful when learning a foreign language	10	20	70		
The total number of answers	580	790	370	180	100

Students were asked to react to statements concerning language learning beliefs. The answers could vary from “strongly agree”, “agree” and “neutral” to “disagree” and “strongly disagree”. The results are as follows.

Most students (60 %) agree that it is hard for people over 40 to learn a foreign language. 40 % of students disagree with this statement. It means that many 17- and 18-year-old people take into consideration those limits that a person's age can set thus taking an advantage of their youth for learning a foreign language. Other respondents do not pay attention to age limits and think that everything depends on an individual and that it is never too late to learn. So relying on the first part of students (60 %) a teacher of a foreign language can stimulate them by repeating whenever it is possible that if they do not master a foreign language this time they will have a lot of problems in the future. At the same time it should be noted that many young people cannot address age problems properly and for them 40 year-old people seem to be like 70 and 80 year-olds. So they make a conclusion that it is practically impossible to learn anything especially a foreign language at this age. Thus a teacher should try to teach them to perceive the real world as it is and give a foreign language as an example of good practice for a person's mind at any time as it stimulates the brain work and helps a man not to grow old at least mentally.

The second statement concerned a special aptitude without which it can be hard to learn a foreign language quite well. It seems to be a rather dubious statement as 40 respondents are neutral while 50 of them agree with it. The results imply the idea that a teacher of a foreign language should encourage students and develop different skills in all types of the communicative activity so that students will not feel themselves deprived of the aptitude to learn a foreign language even if they have some difficulties in doing that. Thus at our lessons of English we use an individual approach to students giving more difficult tasks to those for whom it is quite easy to learn a foreign language and simpler tasks to those who have problems. For example, the English language course for the first-year students includes the following topics:

- 1) Personality;
- 2) Travel;
- 3) Work;
- 4) Language;
- 5) Advertising;
- 6) Business (the coursebook Language Leader Intermediate, David Cotton, David Falvey, Simon Kent [2]).

Each unit includes five lessons in which exercises for developing and practicing communicative skills are given. All lessons have their aims depending on those skills which should be concentrated on as main ones in this lesson and others. As there are systems lessons and skills lesson which teach grammar, vocabulary, phonology, on the one hand, and speaking, reading, writing, listening, on the other hand, teachers formulate the objectives of lessons due to this principle. The coursebook has the same structure. The first lesson is focused on vocabulary. New words are introduced and words from previous units are remembered in it. It also gives some general information about the topic studied. The second lesson introduces grammar material connected with the topic. The third lesson is focused on reading. The fourth one is based on speaking and listening. The last lesson is concentrated on writing.

As for our students they are divided into groups of approximately 10 people and in case most students in the group have problems while learning English teachers either simplify all tasks or exclude those ones which are very difficult for students. For instance, while doing Lesson 4 “Scenario” of Unit 1 “Personality” a teacher asks students to simply describe themselves (interests, hobbies) instead of analyzing those candidates whose profiles are given in the coursebook. If students in the group have different abilities then more advanced students are asked to discuss these candidates and to choose the best one according to the requirements given in the coursebook and to explain their choice. Other students are given the task to ask each other questions about the best qualities, interests, traits of character and so on. This helps all students to understand that they have abilities for learning a foreign language and it creates good learning environment.

The third statement expresses an idea about a great importance which the correction of errors from the start has because otherwise you will never speak correctly. It is surprising that 80 % of students strongly agree with this as people do not usually like when they are corrected all the time and there is such a point of view that the correction of all mistakes can discourage a student and prevent him from learning a foreign language at all. So the results of the questionnaire show that students want to be corrected in order to speak a foreign language properly. Therefore at our University we usually apply the following method again based on an individual approach: if a more advanced student makes mistakes we try to correct most of them, less confident student’s errors are corrected partially, only the most important ones.

Almost all of (100 %) the students also agree with the statement that grammar drills are important in mastering a foreign language. This indicates that our students

have a very serious attitude to learning a foreign language and understand that is impossible to master one without Grammar. So at our lessons after learning a new grammar rule we address it repeatedly in different types of the communication activity thus developing necessary skills in applying this rule. For example, while studying Unit 3 “Work” a teacher draws students’ attention to the use of Present Perfect Continuous doing grammar exercises from the coursebook at first. Then students are asked to give examples of their own from their experience and ask each other questions with the use of Present Perfect Continuous. After that some more additional grammar exercises are given. At the next lesson a teacher shows the difference between Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous. After doing some grammar exercises students are asked to take part in a job interview and ask and answer questions using these tenses.

Students (90 %) also agree that it is possible to learn a foreign language more easily if you like the people who speak that language. As a result a teacher can stimulate students giving them information about native language speakers, their culture, customs and traditions. At Tambov State Technical University teachers of English often invite English-speaking students to their lessons to give learners an opportunity to communicate in English and to learn this language through the communication with native speakers who they can sympathize with.

We can distinguish three groups according to the reaction to the next statement about learning a foreign language without any lesson plans or grammar but simply by spending time with those who speak that language. There are 30% of those who agree, 30% of those who disagree and 30% are neutral. The results are a bit contradictory as in the fourth statement most students agree with the necessity of grammar drills. This means that first-year students are not sure which way is the best and therefore it is a teacher’s duty to show them that the best method of learning a foreign language is to combine several ways. So it is important to learn grammar as well as to communicate to native speakers.

Most respondents (80 %) disagree that you should not say anything in a new language until you can say it correctly. We admit that this is the right approach to learning a foreign language because it is necessary to practice first and even mispronounce something but this is just the right way to learn something new. It is impossible to say something new correctly at once. So at our lessons while studying a new vocabulary we make students repeat the words several times all together and sometimes individually and then use them in speech.

Fifty students agree that some languages are by their nature harder than others and only 20 % of respondents disagree with this. This result shows that it is necessary to give students examples of other foreign languages and explain them their main sentence structure and word formation so that they can understand that they are really difficult languages in the world such as Chinese, Japanese and so on and in comparison with them English is rather easy and flexible, therefore it is possible to master it in a full way to feel yourself a world citizen.

The statement about the equal contribution of attitude and intelligence to language learning success divided respondents into several groups: those who agree (40 %), those who are neutral (40 %) and those who strongly agree (20 %). This also indicates that it is rather difficult for the first-year students to identify those factors which are important for being a success in language learning. So a teacher’s task is to develop the right attitude as well as students’ intellectual abilities by giving those exercises which are aimed at this. For example, while studying the topic “Travel” a teacher can ask students to remember famous explorers and scientists and their contribution into the world history or science. It can be a quiz, a crossword, “a round table”. While studying the topic “Business” facts about famous businessmen and their achievements can be given, and students are asked to remember these businessmen.

Practically all the respondents (90 %) agree that if you can analyze how a language works you will be able to speak it well. It proves the idea that it is quite important to explain students language structures and their use, word formation, grammar rules and to teach them to form these structures and use them appropriately. One of the exercises based on this principle is the one where a student must form a necessary part of speech of the given noun according to the context.

The next statement that you are learning a language if you can understand it even if you cannot speak it divided respondents into several groups: some of them agree with it (40 %), some of them disagree (20 %), others are neutral (30 %). The results show that first-year students want to both understand a foreign language and speak it. It is true that if you know a language you have necessary skills in all four types of communication: speaking, writing, listening, reading. But in many cases understanding is the first step for successful language learning. It is the basis for the development of all other skills. So a teacher should pay attention to this.

Most students (90 %) express their agreement with the idea that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another. Though students reacted to this statement in such a way it shows only their opinion but not experience as in Russia not many people know two or three foreign languages. The opinion is supported by the fact that if a person has an aptitude for learning foreign languages he can be a success in all of them but it is true that everything depends on an individual so some people are really able to learn many foreign languages but others cannot cope even with one what is stipulated by a lot of factors. In practice in universities where students have an opportunity to learn two foreign languages many of them have difficulties with the second language because two languages interfere with each other, for example, it often happens with English and German. So it is not so easy to learn the second foreign language if you already know one.

The statement that it is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language as well as the previous statement but one again divided respondents into some groups: those who agree (30 %), those who disagree (40 %) and those who are neutral (30 %). It justifies the idea about the necessity to be able to speak as well as to understand a foreign language no matter what can be easier.

As for the next statement concerning the importance to listen a lot before starting to speak 80 % of students agree with this. But at our lessons we usually combine listening and speaking and do not separate them. For instance, while studying the topic "Language", lesson 4 "Scenario: Language training" students are asked to express their opinion about language training courses after reading some information about them, then they listen to three representatives of the HR department of the independent charity organization about different forms of language training courses which they can organize in their company, their advantages and disadvantages. Students make notes while listening to them and then they are asked to summarize the opinions of three representatives and on the base of this express their points of view on these forms of language training courses.

Almost all respondents (80 %) agree that learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects. The results are quite logical as foreign languages is such a different sphere of the human knowledge that it cannot be compared with anything else having its own peculiarities and dealing with the communication of people first of all. Therefore at our lessons we constantly draw students' attention to the fact that this foreign language is necessary for the communication with people from other countries.

All respondents (100 %) admit that it is important to repeat and practice a lot. It is good that first-year students understand this and it is easy to encourage them to do different exercises aimed at mastering a foreign language. So studying any topic

teachers ask students to read a lot, to speak a lot, to listen a lot and to write whenever necessary. Besides doing compulsory exercises in the coursebook students get additional tasks dealing with their real life and real situations. For example, when we study the topic “Work” we ask students to find job advertisements in newspapers, to write their CVs according to the requirements set in these advertisements, to analyze these CVs, to point out good features and bad features, to recommend to add something if necessary, then to role-play job interviews.

All students (100 %) also think that it is important to understand what the parts of a sentence mean when you are learning to say it. It contradicts the idea about teaching somebody a foreign language and making a person repeat sentences explaining the meaning of the whole sentence but not of the sentence parts. So it can be good for children. The questionnaire shows that 17- and 18-year-old people would like to understand what they learn in details. That is why we usually explain our students the general sentence structure in the English language and only then learning the vocabulary encourages them to make sentences using the known words and applying the rules about the sentence structure. We also give them exercises where it is necessary to correct the word order or to change the parts of sentences according to the context and so on.

Most respondents (90 %) think that at some point you need to spend a year or so in a country where the language is spoken in order to become really fluent. It is quite true that the environment of the country where a foreign language is spoken encourages people who come here to speak this language and makes them do this because otherwise you will not be able to live in this country and satisfy your everyday needs. Though at our lessons we try to make students speak only English they do not see any necessity to do it outside the classroom and they do not need this language in their everyday life living in Russia. So it is really good to visit another country and practice a foreign language with native speakers.

Practically all respondents (80 %) agree that memorizing dialogues is a good way to learn a language. It can be surprising on the part of first-year students because such tasks are usually given to children.

On the whole, it is not a bad practice to memorize dialogues as one learns framing expressions and important words in such a way and at the same time it is a good exercise for a person’s memory. But at our university we encourage students to make up dialogues themselves as they need to practise such situations which are close to real ones when they have to express their own ideas and points of view. As for framing expressions it is possible to learn them by heart separately.

Some respondents (70 %) are neutral about the last statement which expresses the idea that being anxious is usually harmful when learning a foreign language. These are first-year students and they are certainly not sure about their anxiety and its influence on their learning abilities. This statement deals with psychology and those problems which it solves. We can suggest that the state of anxiety is not good for a person though it again depends on an individual. In some cases anxiety helps a person get hold of himself and control the situation better but in most cases it is rather harmful as a person begins to feel nervous, it influences his speech, he can even stammer and have other problems. But it concerns any language, not only a foreign one but a native language as well. On the whole, at our lessons we try to encourage students and to create such an atmosphere that can let them feel comfortable and not to be afraid of expressing their points of view in English or making mistakes.

So our respondents reacted to 20 statements concerning their language learning beliefs. All results of this questionnaire are given in the following table.

We have also analyzed students’ answers concerning their language learning beliefs. The instructions how to calculate scores are given in the questionnaire.

Every “strongly agree” reply is worth 8 points, “agree” – 6 points, “neutral” – 4 points, “disagree” – 2 points and “strongly disagree” – 0 points.

Table 2

## Students' language learning beliefs

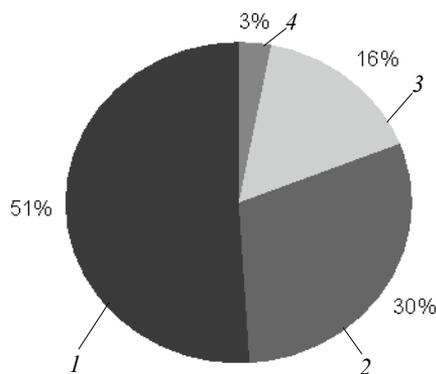
Students	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	40 – above average	48 – high	16 – average	2 – low	0 – low
2	80 – high	24 – average		4 – low	
3	48 – high	72 – high	4 – low	0 – low	
4	40 – above average	54 – high	20 – average	6 – low	
5	16 – average				
6	56 – high	36 – above average	8 – low		
7	40 – above average	60 – high	16 – average	2 – low	
8		36 – above average	20 – average	4 – low	
9	48 – high		8 – low	10 – low	
10	56 – high	42 – above average	16 – average	2 – low	

The results of our study are shown in Table 2 (10 students' answers are analyzed in it as an example).

According to these results we can say that most first-year students strongly agree or agree with the statements and so they have high beliefs and beliefs above average about learning a foreign language. This can also be seen in Figure.

According to figure 1. first-year students have a large percentage of high beliefs (51 %), those who have beliefs above average comprise 30 %. As for students who have average beliefs as well as low beliefs, their percentage is rather small (16 and 3 % correspondingly). Therefore we can say that interviewed students have a good intention and are quite ready for perceiving the information about foreign languages. This contradicts the idea about first-year students' low language beliefs and proves the fact that modern students, no matter what their major is, consider a foreign language as an important subject necessary for making a career and everyday life.

The study shows that language learners' beliefs influence strongly those teaching



**Language learners' beliefs at the preliminary stage:**

1 – high; 2 – above average;  
3 – average; 4 – low

strategies which should be used at lessons. If students have high beliefs or beliefs above average concerning studying a foreign language it is the best situation for a teacher as the motivation is high and it is possible to use various exercises and activities to help students master a foreign language. If students have average beliefs then a teacher should think about such activities which will increase their interest in a foreign language besides ordinary and habitual exercises. In case students' beliefs are low a teacher should first of all focus on their attitude to a foreign language, do his best to change it as the success in mastering a language will be guaranteed only if a student is positive about it.

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## Языковые убеждения учащихся и их роль в преподавании иностранного языка

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**Ключевые слова и фразы:** коммуникативные навыки; стратегии обучения; языковая среда; языковые убеждения.

**Аннотация:** Рассмотрены языковые убеждения учащихся, обуславливающие те стратегии обучения, которые используются преподавателями при обучении иностранному языку. Проведено анкетирование 100 студентов Тамбовского государственного технического университета, изучающих иностранный язык. Цель исследования – проанализировать языковые убеждения студентов 1 курса и связь стратегий обучения с ними. Существует предположение о том, что у поступающих в технические вузы молодых людей очень низкие языковые убеждения, так как выбранное ими направление подготовки не связано с иностранными языками. Однако, анализ ответов студентов на вопросы анкеты, проведенной в рамках исследования, показывает противоположную тенденцию. Большинство студентов имеют высокие языковые убеждения или убеждения выше среднего. Исходя из этого, преподаватели иностранных языков меняют свой подход к процессу обучения, концентрируясь прежде всего на развитии коммуникативных навыков и индивидуальных особенностях каждого студента. В свою очередь, сочетание высокой мотивации студентов и соответствующих стратегий обучения приводит к хорошим результатам.

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## Sprachliche Überzeugungen der Schüler und ihre Rolle im Unterrichten der Fremdsprache

**Zusammenfassung:** Im Artikel werden die sprachlichen Überzeugungen der Schüler betrachtet, die jene Strategien der Ausbildung bedingen, die von den Lehrern bei der Ausbildung der Fremdsprache verwendet werden. Es ist die Befragung von 100 Studenten der staatlichen technischen Universität Tambow, die die Fremdsprache

studieren, durchgeführt. Das Ziel der Forschung ist die Analyse der sprachlichen Überzeugungen der Studenten des 1. Kurses und die Verbindung der Strategien der Ausbildung mit ihnen. Es existiert die Annahme darüber, dass bei den in die technischen Hochschulen handelnden jungen Männern die sehr niedrigen sprachlichen Überzeugungen sind, da die mit ihnen gewählte Richtung der Vorbereitung mit den Fremdsprachen nicht verbunden ist. Jedoch führt die Analyse der Antworten der Studenten auf die Fragen der Umfrage, die im Rahmen der Forschung durchgeführt ist, die entgegengesetzte Tendenz vor. Die Mehrheit der Studenten haben die hohen sprachlichen Überzeugungen oder die Überzeugungen über dem Durchschnitt. Ausgehend davon tauschen die Lehrer der Fremdsprachen das Herangehen an den Prozess der Ausbildung, vor allem auf der Entwicklung der kommunikativen Fertigkeiten und den individuellen Besonderheiten jedes Studenten konzentriert worden. Seinerseits bringt die Kombination der hohen Motivation der Studenten und der entsprechenden Strategien der Ausbildung zu den guten Ergebnissen.

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### **Persuasions de la langue des élèves et leur rôle dans l'enseignement de la langue étrangère**

**Résumé:** Sont examinées les persuasions des élèves qui influencent le choix des stratégies de l'enseignement. Est effectué le sondage de 100 étudiants de l'Université technique d'état de Tambov étudiant la langue étrangère dont le but est d'analyser les persuasions des élèves de la première année et le lien avec la stratégie de l'enseignement. Bien que la filière choisie ne soit pas liée à la langue étrangère l'analyse atteste l'intérêt envers la langue étrangère. La plupart des étudiants ont de hautes persuasions de la langue ou bien celles plus hautes que moyennes. De ce fait les professeurs changent leur stratégie envers le processus de l'enseignement en se concentrant sur les acquis communicatifs et les qualités individuelles des étudiants. La combinaison de la haute motivation avec des stratégies correspondantes donnent de bons résultats.

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