

# A Comparative Study of Beliefs among Elementary- and Intermediate-Level Students at a Historically Black University

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## Abstract

This investigation compared the beliefs about foreign language (FL) learning held by African American students enrolled in elementary courses with those enrolled at the intermediate level. The following research question was addressed: Do African American students at the elementary level have significantly different beliefs from students at the intermediate level? The participants were students enrolled in first- and second-year Spanish courses at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU). The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was used for data collection. Elementary-level students' responses were compared to those of the intermediate-level students by independent samples t-tests conducted on the items of the scale. Results showed that level of instruction had significant effects on student views about FL learning. More specifically, second-year students had a higher level of integrative motivation as they placed more value

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on study abroad; having native instructors, acquaintances, and friends; and practicing with other FL learners. They also exhibited a higher level of instrumental motivation, being more aware than their elementary-level peers of the career benefits of FL study. Finally, second-year students expressed a higher concern for accuracy as well as a preference for early error correction and they were less willing to take risks with the FL. Research and teaching implications are discussed.

## Background

The beliefs that students hold about foreign language (FL) learning have been linked to their satisfaction with

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the acquisition process, their motivation to pursue the study of the FL beyond the common graduation requirement, and their success at achieving proficiency (Charle Poza, 2013; Horwitz, 1985, 1987, 1988; Lassiter, 2003; Rifkin, 2000; Tumposky, 1991). Students have counterproductive views about how languages are learned as well as unrealistic expectations about the amount of time that it takes to reach a desired level of proficiency. These views can negatively influence their satisfaction with their FL courses and overall progress. Therefore, it is imperative for instructors and curriculum planners to identify and address FL learning beliefs in order to increase student satisfaction and motivation to continue FL study beyond the graduation requirement (Horwitz, 1988; Lassiter, 2003). This is particularly important in the case of African American students given that, according to the Digest of Education Statistics, 2011 published by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only 4.1% of the total number of bachelor's degrees in FLs was awarded to African Americans in 2009-2010.

Although Charle Poza (2013) reported that African American students' views of how languages are learned were not different from those reported in studies about the general population, most studies have found FL beliefs to be conditioned by the learners' background (Kouritzin, Piquemal, & Renaud, 2009; Rifkin, 2000; Tumposky, 1991). Therefore, it remains important to conduct research on the beliefs of the African American student population in order to increase their participation in FL programs at institutions of higher learning in the United States.

In addition to cultural background, level of FL instruction has been found to influence beliefs (Oh, 1996; Rifkin, 2000), motivation (Shaaban & Gaith, 2000), and the types of classroom activities, form versus communication, that students favor (Mandell, 2002). Therefore, the present study investigates the relationship between level of instruction and beliefs among African American students with the purpose of increasing the participation of this student population in FL learning beyond the elementary level. It expands on the work of Charle Poza (2013), which focused on elementary-level students of Spanish at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), and adds data about the beliefs of intermediate-level students at the same institution in order to compare both groups.

### **Review of the Literature**

Extensive research has been devoted to identifying and addressing learners' preconceived ideas about FL teaching and learning. This line of inquiry was reinforced by the contributions of E. Horwitz in the 1980s. Horwitz (1985) describes the development of The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a scale that marked the beginning of a systematic approach to research about FL beliefs (Kuntz, 1996a; Horwitz, 1985). Initial studies focused on the commonly taught languages and on students enrolled in elementary-level courses at higher education institutions in the United States. Researchers later expanded their inquiry to learners of less commonly taught languages (Husseinali, 2006; Kuntz, 1996b) and to different areas of the world (Rodriguez Manzanarezis, & Murphy, 2010; Shaaban, & Ghaith, 2000; Tumposky, 1991; Wharton, 2005; Yang,

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1992). Perhaps the most comprehensive studies on FL beliefs using the BALLI in their instrumentation are those conducted by Kouritzin et al. (2009) and Rifkin (2000).

Kouritzin et al. (2009) surveyed over 6,000 students in three different countries, Japan, France, and Canada. Their study looked at how attitudes, motivation, and beliefs about FL learning differed in each country, as well as what factors of the social context influenced learners' views. The study concluded that FL learning beliefs were conditioned by the cultural and societal background of the learners. Rifkin (2000) noted that most studies focused on students from elementary FL courses, so he used the BALLI to survey over 1,000 learners of 10 FLs at several levels of instruction in three different institutions over a three-year period. He found that beliefs varied according to whether it was a commonly taught or a less commonly taught language, the kind of institution, and the level of instruction. Specifically, he found that the beliefs held by first-year students were significantly different from those of students enrolled in more advanced-level courses. Elementary-level students were more likely to think that speaking is easier than understanding, that translation is at the core of FL learning, and that learners should not be allowed to make errors to avoid difficulties with accuracy later on in the acquisition process. They were also less prone to take risks with the FL and less optimistic about both the level that they would ultimately achieve and the professional opportunities that knowing a FL would bring.

The findings of Rifkin (2000) are consistent with those of Oh (1996) who, also using the BALLI, found significant differences between first- and second-year students of Japanese in the United States. In this study, first-year learners expressed a preference for error correction, were less disposed to guessing words that they did not know, and were less optimistic about job prospects brought by FL proficiency than more advanced learners. Similarly, Shaaban & Gaith (2000) and Mandell (2002) found that level of study was related to motivation and to the students' preference for certain teaching approaches and classroom activities.

In terms of FL success, counterproductive beliefs can interfere with achievement and with acceptance of certain teaching approaches (Horwitz, 1988). In Horwitz's study, analysis of BALLI data showed that learners had restrictive views about how languages are learned, such as an excessive focus on translation, vocabulary memorization, and grammar. This can make learners less open and even resistant to communicative approaches (Horwitz, 1987, 1988) which in turn can hinder learning and reduce satisfaction (Rifkin, 2000). Horwitz (1988) also found that elementary-level students had high hopes about the level of proficiency that they would achieve, but underestimated the amount of time that it would take to reach that level. Horwitz concluded that this misconception leads to frustration when progress is not as fast as expected.

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Although most studies focus on counterproductive beliefs that hinder success and satisfaction, Rodriguez Manzanarez and Murphy (2010) took a different approach and used the BALLI to look at the beliefs of successful FL learners.

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These authors found that participants associated their success with their ability to make bonds with the target culture. They also preferred the social and affective component of learning the FL, especially outside of the classroom and in authentic settings.

While research that explores beliefs among students from different cultural backgrounds is ample, little attention has been given specifically to beliefs among the African American student population. An early study on affective variables found a general disinterest in FL study among African Americans, coupled with a belief that FL study should be removed from the graduation requirements (LeBlanc, 1972). Although in a later study Davis and Markham (1991) showed more positive findings, with students being aware of the practical and inherent value of FL study Research since then has yielded mixed results. For instance, Moore (1998) found that most African Americans in one middle school were either not interested or had a negative attitude toward learning a FL.

More recent research has focused on the specific teaching approaches favored by African American students. Several studies have revealed that African Americans prefer less focus on grammar (Glynn, 2007; Moore, 2005), and more emphasis on speaking skills and cultural awareness (Davis & Markham, 1991; Moore, 1998, 2005). Anya (2011) studied the motivation of successful African American FL learners. The findings of this study are similar to those of Rodriguez Manzanarez and Murphy (2010): successful FL learners felt a sense of engagement with others in the community of learners, coupled with a desire to connect with the culture of the native speakers.

Watterson (2011) also explored the topic of African American students' need to connect with the culture of the native speakers in order to increase their participation in FL study. The inclusion of cultural lessons about the African Diaspora was found to be a major motivating factor among African American non-language majors. In addition, FL majors and minors reported the financial benefits of FL study in their chosen careers as their major motivating factor. Previous study abroad experience coupled with family members' views of foreign languages were also linked to FL attitudes.

Two studies exclusively devoted to FL beliefs among African American students using the BALLI are Lassiter (2003) and Charle Poza (2013). Lassiter (2003) looked at beliefs as a possible cause for the low interest beyond the graduation requirement at an HBCU. She found that many participants were seniors and took the FL as a graduation requirement, yet expected to be successful language learners, and overall held somewhat positive views about the importance of FL learning. Additionally, the participants valued the inclusion of FL study in the curriculum, but saw it mostly as the study of grammar, vocabulary, and translation. Similarly, Charle Poza (2013) used the BALLI to look at the beliefs of African American students enrolled in several sections of Beginning Spanish at an HBCU and their influence on the students' intention to continue beyond the requirement. Her findings also resemble those of Rodriguez Manzanarez and Murphy (2010) in that students planning to continue were more interested in

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learning about the culture, communicating with native speakers, and using the FL outside of class.

The present investigation compares the beliefs of African American students enrolled in first-year Spanish courses with those of African American students enrolled in second-year Spanish. It is an expansion of Charle Poza's 2013 study, which focused solely on elementary-level students, with the objective of providing insights into the relationship between beliefs and level of instruction among African American students. By providing insights into the broader subject of what makes African American students stay in FL classes, the ultimate goal of the study is to increase their participation beyond the elementary level, which is the common university requirement. The following research question is addressed: Do African American students at the elementary level have significantly different beliefs from those at the intermediate level?

### **Methods**

#### *Participants*

The participants were students enrolled in elementary- and intermediate-level Spanish courses at an HBCU. For the elementary level, the survey was administered to all the sections of Spanish 101 and 102 offered at the university in the semester of data collection. The 4 non-African American students enrolled in these courses were removed from the analysis. A total of 62 African American students were enrolled in three sections of Spanish 101 and 90 were enrolled in five sections of Spanish 102. The response rate for Spanish 101 and 102 combined was 72.4% (Spanish 101,  $n = 41$ , Spanish 102,  $n = 69$ ). For the intermediate level, the survey was administered to the only section of that level, Spanish 202, offered at the university at the time of data collection. One non-African American student enrolled was removed from the analysis. Of the 26 African American students enrolled, 24 (88.9%) completed the questionnaire.

The resulting sample of elementary-level students consisted of 110 African American students. Thirty-three were males and 77 were females. Fifteen percent were classified as freshmen, 31% were sophomores, 32% were juniors, and 22% were seniors. Seventy percent of the participants reported to be taking Spanish as a graduation requirement, but 36% expressed a desire to continue their language study beyond the graduation requirement of two semesters for most students and four semesters for honors students and those pursuing a Bachelor's of Arts. The sample of intermediate-level students consisted of 24 African American students. Six were males and 18 were females. Regarding class status, 17% were freshmen, 4% were sophomores, 12% were juniors, and 67% were seniors. Forty-two percent of the participants reported to be taking Spanish as a graduation requirement and, in spite of the fact that 67% were already seniors, 50% reported a desire to continue learning Spanish beyond the university requirement.

#### *Instrument*

The BALLI was selected for data collection as it is the standard instrument used to generate data on FL beliefs and is widely considered a suitable tool to

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conduct research on this variable (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006). The BALLI was originally developed for students and instructors of English as a second language (ESL) and was later expanded to the commonly taught FLs (Horwitz, 1988). The first FL version contained 34 Likert-scale items covering a variety of issues concerning FL teaching and learning. The items were organized under five themes and the scale was pilot-tested with 150 FL students at the University of Texas, who attested to its clarity and comprehensiveness. The BALLI 2.0, a new version of the scale which incorporates 10 new items, was published in Horwitz (2013). This latest iteration removed the five organizing themes of the original scale, which had produced conflicting views among researchers. Some questioned their validity because they were not generated by statistical factor analysis (Kuntz, 1996a), while others supported their inclusion based on the consistent findings of the numerous studies that have used the scale (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006).

### Procedure

Participants were administered the BALLI 2.0 (Horwitz, 2013) together with a demographic questionnaire during their regular Spanish lessons. All participants were given the survey at the end of the semester. The researcher was not the instructor for any of the sections surveyed. For the analysis, the responses of students at the elementary level were compared to those of students at the intermediate level.

### Results

An independent samples t-test was conducted on each item of the BALLI to answer the research question of comparing African American students at the elementary level to African American students at the intermediate level. The statistical analysis yielded eight items of the BALLI that were significantly different between elementary- and intermediate-level participants, and all but one of these items were more prominently endorsed by intermediate-level learners than by those enrolled in elementary courses (Table 1).

**Table 1.** t-Test Results Comparing African American Elementary and Intermediate-Level Learners on BALLI Survey Items

Significantly Different BALLI Items between Both Levels	Level	N	M	SD	T	Df	P
11. It is best to learn Spanish in a Spanish-speaking country.	Elementary	108	3.44	1.10	-4.50	44	0.000**
	Intermediate	24	4.33	0.80			
19. It is better to have teachers who are native-speakers of Spanish.	Elementary	107	3.94	1.0	-3.64	48	0.000**
	Intermediate	24	4.54	0.66			
40. I would like to have Spanish-speaking friends.	Elementary	105	3.81	0.77	-3.32	41	0.002*
	Intermediate	22	4.27	0.55			

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14.	It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in Spanish.	Elementary	109	3.18	1.08	2.33	37	0.025*
		Intermediate	24	2.67	0.96			
20.	If I learn to speak Spanish very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	Elementary	107	4.28	0.72	-2.30	37	0.026*
		Intermediate	24	4.63	0.65			
18.	It is a good idea to practice speaking with other people who are learning Spanish.	Elementary	108	4.10	0.80	-2.15	37	0.031*
		Intermediate	24	4.46	0.72			
28.	I would like to learn Spanish so that I can get to know Spanish speakers.	Elementary	106	3.61	1.09	-2.09	42	0.043*
		Intermediate	24	4.04	0.86			
21.	If beginning students are permitted to make errors in Spanish, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	Elementary	107	3.01	1.18	-2.08	32	0.046*
		Intermediate	23	3.57	1.16			

\* $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$

Specifically, second-year students were more enthusiastic about learning Spanish in a country in which the language is spoken natively. Therefore, study abroad programs were more valued by those who move to the intermediate level, which indicates a desire to communicate with native speakers and to make connections with the culture of the countries where the FL is spoken natively. By the same token, the analysis revealed that intermediate-level students favored native instructors significantly more than their elementary-level peers. They also expressed a desire to get to know the native speakers of the language and even establish friendships with them, as shown by their significantly higher support of BALLI items 11, 19, 40, and 28. These findings are noteworthy because they show a higher degree of integrative motivation, or the kind that compels someone to make connections with the native speakers of the FL (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), among the intermediate-level participants of this investigation.

Instrumental motivation—that compels someone to study a FL for practical and career purposes—was also higher among intermediate-level students than among their elementary-level counterparts. Second-year students expressed a stronger endorsement of item 20 of the BALLI, which states that students will have better opportunities for a job if they are fluent in the FL. Therefore the intermediate-level participants of this study were more conscious of the professional opportunities that FL proficiency would bring than elementary-level participants.

In addition, t-test results showed that second-year learners placed higher importance on practicing with other learners. This is consistent with their higher endorsement of learning the language in the countries in which it is spoken natively

and making friends who are native speakers in that these beliefs show a desire to communicate in the FL beyond the classroom setting and in real-world situations.

The analysis also revealed that intermediate-level students favored a teaching approach that does not allow students to make errors, as shown by their higher agreement with item 21. Moreover, the only item of the BALLI that was significantly more endorsed by elementary-level students, number 14, referred to their willingness to guess when they did not know a word. These findings indicate a higher concern for accuracy among the intermediate-level participants of this investigation. Also, their reluctance to guess words indicates that this group was less prone to taking risks with the FL than their first-year peers.

## **Discussion**

The present investigation compares the FL learning beliefs held by African American students enrolled in first and second-year Spanish courses at an HBCU. The data analysis revealed that, similar to the findings of other studies conducted using the BALLI (Rifkin, 2000; Oh, 1996), level of instruction made a difference in the views that African American students held about FL learning. This shows that those students who pursue the study of the FL beyond the elementary-level courses have attitudes about FL learning that make them successful.

The analysis revealed a higher level of both integrative and instrumental motivation among students who move on from the elementary to the intermediate level. This is consistent with the findings of previous research, not only about African Americans, but also about successful learners of all backgrounds (Charle Poza, 2013; Watterson, 2011; Rodriguez Manzanarez & Murphy, 2010; Lassiter, 2003; Rifkin, 2000). Moreover, the findings of the present investigation enumerate the specific beliefs that make motivated students successful, such as a desire to live in the culture rather than just learning about it in class, and an eagerness to develop relationships with the native speakers that range from teacher-student to friendship.

A preference for early error correction was also expressed by the intermediate-level participants of this study. This may be due to a general trend among FL learners and instructors of all backgrounds to make a strong emphasis on grammatical accuracy, as found by most research on FL beliefs (Lassiter, 2003; Oh, 1996; Horwitz, 1988). This concern about making errors may be confirmed by the fact that, contrary to the findings of Rifkin (2000) and Oh (1996), the only significantly different item that was endorsed less by intermediate-level students refers to willingness to guess unknown words. A possible explanation for this reluctance to take risks with the FL is that doing so may lead to an increase in the number errors that would make it more difficult to use the language accurately later on in the acquisition process. This finding should be of interest to FL instructors since unwillingness to take risks may be a sign of FL anxiety (Horwitz, 2002; Phillips, 1992; Ely, 1986).

## **Teaching Implications**

The findings of this study are of value to FL instructors, textbook publishers, teacher trainers, and curriculum planners who serve students of all backgrounds, but they are of special interest to those serving African American students. These

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educators need to take action early in the FL acquisition process to address counterproductive beliefs and encourage those views that lead to success. Moreover, the beliefs that this investigation found to be more prevalent among intermediate-level students must be emphasized at the elementary level in order to increase the percentage of those who continue FL study beyond the graduation requirement.

Based on the findings of this investigation, FL programs must provide opportunities for students to practice outside of the classroom, in authentic situations, with native speakers and with other learners, both at home and abroad. Extracurricular activities like conversation partnerships, language tables, clubs, study groups, or pairing elementary-level students with those enrolled in more advanced courses constitute excellent opportunities for the creation of a community of learners and for instilling an appreciation of the intrinsic value of FL study. In the case of African American students, and when relevant to the specific FL, these activities should include

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content about Black speakers of the FL, their cultural and historical contributions, and their current social and political standing. In addition, extracurricular activities should include collaborative initiatives with Pan-Africana Studies programs. These opportunities will serve to diversify FL education to include the contributions of groups that are generally ignored in the curriculum and they will help African American students make connections between their own culture and that of the native speakers. In effect, this has been shown to increase motivation to pursue FL study among this student population (Watterson, 2011; Hines, 2007; Farfan-Cobb & Lassiter, 2003; Dahl, 2000).

Since the importance of learning the language in a country in which it is used natively was one of the most significant differences between the elementary- and intermediate-level participants of the present investigation, institutions of higher learning must provide accessible high quality study abroad programs and inform elementary-level students of their existence and benefits, both personal and professional. In the case of African American students, and for the reasons stated earlier, study abroad offerings should be expanded to include countries in Africa as well as countries with a strong presence of native speakers of African descent.

The present investigation also found a desire among intermediate-level students to communicate with the native speakers of the language, as shown by their preference of native FL instructors and friends. For that reason, FL programs and individual instructors must provide learners with as many opportunities to interact with native speakers as possible. Hiring native speakers of the FL as instructors is only one way to provide such opportunities, but there are excellent non-native FL instructors who are as effective at guiding students into high levels of proficiency as their native colleagues. This is especially true in the case of African American students for whom the need to have African American FL instructors to serve as role models supersedes having native instructors (Kubota, Austin & Saito-

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Abbott, 2003). Therefore, the profession must move beyond the exclusive hiring of native instructors and continue its efforts to provide FL learners with access to native speakers.

Having a good study abroad program provides multiple opportunities for communication with native speakers, but it is imperative for students to have access to native speakers at their home institutions as well. Thankfully, the use of technology-enhanced FL learning is much more generalized today than it was a decade ago. Instructors have greater access to affordable computer-mediated communication tools to bring native and non-native speakers together despite geographical distance.

Given this study's finding that instrumental motivation was more prevalent among students who enroll in intermediate-level courses, the potential professional opportunities derived from FL proficiency should also be emphasized at the elementary level. Presenting data on how FL proficiency can lead to better jobs and higher salaries or showing examples of job openings that require a FL are good ways of increasing students' instrumental motivation. Additionally, bringing guest speakers or former FL graduates to first-year courses to talk about the importance of FL proficiency in different professional and academic fields is a highly effective means of increasing this kind of motivation. Some of these guests should be Black speakers of the FL, both native and non-native, given the aforementioned need to incorporate the cultural contributions of Africa and the Diaspora in the FL learning experience, coupled with the low number of African American teachers who can serve as role models.

The last finding of this investigation was a higher concern for accuracy found among intermediate-level African American students. This fear of making errors may be connected to their higher unwillingness to take risks with the language, also revealed by the data. A possible explanation could be the excessive emphasis on grammatical and lexical accuracy that has prevailed among the FL profession for decades. Communicative approaches and holistic assessment based on proficiency have certainly changed the face of FL instruction, but grammatical accuracy remains a major emphasis in the everyday FL classroom. Therefore instructors need to take a second look at their teaching practices as well as their own beliefs and, if needed, receive training on teaching methodologies that emphasize communication and proficiency over grammatical accuracy.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the study accomplished its goal of providing insights into the beliefs of African American students enrolled in language courses as well as the relationship between these beliefs and level of instruction, there are several limitations to be noted. First, the participants were selected based on their enrollment in FL courses during data collection at one specific institution. Second, given the size of the institution, the sample size was small, especially at the intermediate level. Therefore, further research is warranted to confirm the findings and to improve our understanding of the beliefs that motivate African American students to continue FL study from the elementary to the intermediate level.

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The findings of this study could be replicated with a larger sample of African American students from different institutions, both minority-serving and traditional. Additionally, the scope could be broadened to include elementary- and intermediate-level students of multiple backgrounds to provide further insights into the role of level of instruction and of cultural and ethnic backgrounds on FL beliefs.

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