

'Innovatability' Analysis:
Teachers in Task-Based Language Education

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I. Introduction

Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has gained increasing popularity over the past decade. Initially studies focused primarily on defining TBLT in terms of developing its theoretical foundations and philosophical justifications (Long & Crookes, 1992).

While these studies were valuable in giving clarity to TBLT principles, there was considerable criticism from teachers, administrators, and researchers regarding the need for investigations of practical applications of those principles in programmatic contexts.

In response to this need, recent studies have begun to shift their focus to real-world models of TBLT principles in practice in authentic educational contexts (Edwards & Willis, 2005; Leaver & Willis, 2004; Van den Branden, 2006; Carless, 1997, 2003, 2004, 2005; Markee, 1997).

When researchers began to investigate the actual implementation of TBLT principles within various contexts, significant challenges became apparent. An abundance of literature exists on the difficulties and challenges of educational innovation from various perspectives, including the field of general education (Geijsel, et al., 2001) and applied linguistics (de Lano, Riley, & Crookes, 1994; Karavas-Doukas, 1999; Kennedy, 1988). There are numerous challenges to implementation that educational change agents must face including sufficient resources (including time, funding, and staff), support from policy-governing bodies (depending on the educational context), support from parents (Carless, 2004), and conflicting assessment measures that may promote negative wash back effect (Long & Norris, 2000). However, among the various

factors involved, teachers' perspectives are widely recognized as the most critical in the realization of any curricular innovation (Van den Branden, 2006; Carless, 2004; Markee, 1997; Mangubhai, et al., 2005; Savignon & Wang, 2003).

The teacher has agency. They can accept, reject, or adapt the newly-proposed curricular innovation. This has been made apparent in various retrospective accounts of TBLT innovation (Carless 1997,2003, 2004, 2005; Markee, 1997; Suk, n.d.). Even if a teacher is forced to change their curriculum because of new policy decisions, that teacher could reject the implementation in subtle, discrete ways, such as making the required amendments to the course syllabus and changing classroom practices during administrative oversight/evaluations, but then doing something else during the actual classroom instruction.

Teachers' perspectives are crucial during curricular innovation (Markee, 1997). What further complicates the matter is the fact that teachers are individuals, and their views of what TBLT should look like in practice vary not only across institutional contexts but also intra-institutionally. Given teachers' central role in how curricular elements are put into practice, there is a need for systematic investigation of the relationship between teacher conceptions of TBLT, what actually happens in the classroom, and what kinds of innovation are possible.

The retrospective studies mentioned above investigated teachers' attitudes and dispositions towards TBLT innovation in diverse contexts. This approach can provide insights into the teachers' reactions to this kind of innovation in their particular context; however, we think it is important to consider teachers' perceptions of TBLT *before* the innovation has occurred.

It is also seemed that theses studies relied entirely upon preconceptions of and fixed notions regarding TBLT might. Deriving interview questions solely from a theoretically-based understanding may very well have constrained or influenced the data collection and analysis processes. However, because teachers are complex agentic beings, we adopted an approach that integrated empirical methods with the theoretical foundations informing the development of our data collection and analysis protocol.

In this light, we selected two different programmatic contexts: one an English for Academic Purposes program at a major US university; the other a private, intensive ESL school located in the same city. We observed the teachers during their everyday teaching, and derived our interview questions from emerging themes from these observations in addition to our theoretical understanding of TBLT. We also considered our membership as teachers in these two contexts as possible sources of insider knowledge. One author was a teacher in the EAP program, and the other author was a teacher in the ESL school. After interviewing a teacher from our own school program, we then switched and interviewed a teacher from the other program as an outsider (see the methods section for further discussion).

In our interviews, we were primarily interested in the role that teachers play in determining what kinds of innovation might be possible in a given context and how teacher-specific characteristics might influence this ‘innovability.’ The primary purpose was to explore these issues in the two distinct (and quite different) contexts in order to try to answer the following groups of research questions:

- *Educational philosophy*: What are the basic components of these teachers’ philosophy of education, learning, and teaching?

- *TBLT knowledge/dispositions*: What are these teachers' conceptions of and attitudes towards TBLT?
- *Interrelationship*: In what ways are these two categories of 'teacher characteristics' interrelated?
- *Influence on praxis*: How is this interrelationship reflected in these teachers' pedagogical choices?
- *Innovation dispositions*: What are these teachers' attitudes towards innovation in general? In what ways might their educational philosophy, knowledge/dispositions of TBLT, and pedagogical practice influence their attitudes towards TBLT innovation?
- *Influences on innovatability*: How might all these factors contribute to the context-specific potential for task-based innovation?

II. Methodological Overview

Methodological Challenges

As discussed above, much of the work done to date investigating 'teacher factors' influences on innovation processes in general and TBLT implementation in particular has been conducted after the fact and has used a predetermined notion of what the innovation is to guide development of the data collection instruments and protocol (Carless 1997, 2003, 2004, 2005; Markee, 1997; Suk, n.d.; see also Lamie, 2004 for a similar approach investigating non-TBLT innovation). More to the point, this use of a specific, fixed conception of TBLT is often the primary—if not the only—framework for constructing the categories comprising observational and interview protocols. The result is a methodology that investigates teachers' dispositions towards and knowledge of a pre-established innovation with no recourse to the flexibility necessary for successful innovation and agency that teachers exercise in their capacity as enactors of that innovation.

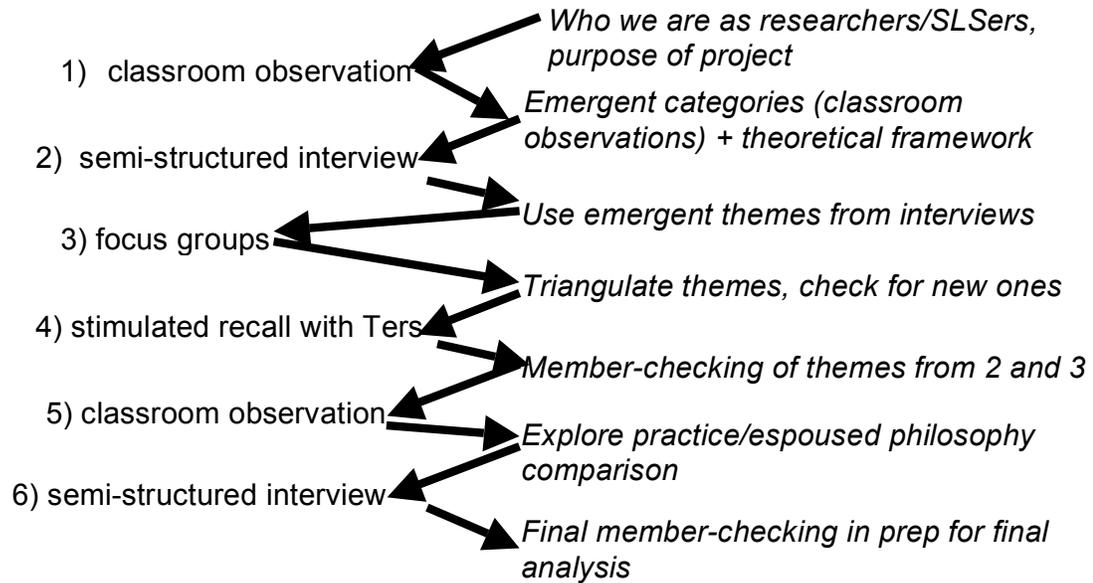
This kind of approach may shed some light on why a particular instance of one iteration or version of TBLT implementation did or did not work. If done well, it may even provide a general outline of some of the influences that teacher factors had on the extent, form, and success of that particular innovation. However, one of the overriding messages that seems to come out of these investigations is that teachers' understandings of and attitudes towards the innovation process in general and the characteristics of TBLT in particular not only play a crucial role in the implementation process, but more importantly, that this interaction effect is highly variable from one individual to another, not just from one context to another. The interplay between teachers' individual experiences and the context in which the innovation is being attempted must be taken into account and should be explored by using a methodology that is empirically grounded in the particulars of that program and those individuals as well as being cumulative and recursive in design. This may seem intuitively obvious, but its significance should not be underestimated.

The overall goal for the current research project is to develop an 'innovability analysis' protocol that would allow language programs to begin exploring some of the factors that might be influential in determining the potential for and most appropriate strategies and formulations of TBLT innovation. The challenges described above must be taken into consideration in order to develop an approach which is both adaptable (transportable) to diverse contexts while still being locally-situated, programmatically responsive, and contextually appropriate.

Grounded Theory and the Innovability Analysis Protocol

In consideration of the above-mentioned limitations, the present study takes a constructivist, grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000, 2002) in the construction of a data collection/analysis protocol. This innovability analysis protocol employs the following strategies: (a) recursive and concurrent data collection and analysis, (b) a combination of emic and etic perspectives, (c) derivation and utilization of emergent themes and investigative categories (d) member-checking and stimulated-recall sessions to triangulate and reconfirm data and interpretations (e) integration of theoretical framework with empirical data collection.

For this investigation in particular, the general aim is to ground the categories of investigation in observation of and interviews with individual teachers. The more specific purpose is, as Charmaz 2002 explains, to use these categories and questions in conjunction with TBLT principles to account for how “theoretical relationships emerge, change, or are maintained” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 675). Because we were ultimately interested in how teachers’ attitudes and conceptions influence innovability, we wanted to ground our data collection in these teacher factors as much as possible without interpreting teachers responses solely in terms of pre-existing notions of what innovation and TBLT are. We tried to develop a cyclical and recursive protocol utilizing multiple data-sources (e.g., classroom observation, interviews, focus groups, stimulated-recall sessions) which would allow us to triangulate our interpretations. The tentative plan for data collection (with intermediate data analysis) includes the following steps with the corresponding input and intermediate analysis of data from previous steps described to the right:



The process begins with the overall purpose of the project and who we are as researchers and teachers. These input factors in combination with the anticipated information needs of the next step frame the classroom observation. These observations were used in conjunction with elements of the theoretical framework to construct an interview protocol (see appendix). The data gathered from these semi-structured interviews will be analyzed for emergent themes which will be turned into questions for focus group sessions with other teachers from the same context for purposes of triangulation and possible elicitation of new categories. Stimulated-recall sessions with the original teachers will then be used for member-checking of the emergent themes from steps 2 and 3. A second stage of classroom observation will be conducted to explore divergences between espoused philosophy and beliefs/practices and actual classroom behaviors and practices. Finally, a second round of semi-structured interviews will be carried out for final member-checking and as a last chance for new reflections.

As of now, we have completed steps 1 and 2 and these will be described in more detail below along with some preliminary reflections and emergent themes that came out of the semi-structured interview and classroom observations.

Contrasting Contexts

Another potential difficulty that arises from a retrospective investigation is that by investigating issues of innovation only after implementation has been completed, it becomes difficult to explore the highly dynamic nature of the implementation process itself, which almost inevitably involves not a wholesale adoption, but rather an on-going progression of adjustment, adaptation, and integration of certain elements in conjunction with possible rejection of others. For this reason, the present study was carried out in two different contexts: one a for-profit, private language school serving students with a diverse range of language wants and needs; the other an intensive, English for Academic Purpose program operating as an “ESL service unit” in a large North American university. The former is not currently innovating in any systematic way on the programmatic level; whereas, the latter is in a process of on-going TBLT innovation (partly as a function of intentional programmatic innovation and partly due to the fact that it is staffed primarily by graduate students, has a high turnover rate, and consequently is in a constant state of teacher-training and development). These contrasting contexts ideally allow for a richer interpretation of the difference kinds of relationships and interactions that occur between teachers and the (potential for) TBLT innovation.

Conducting data collection in contrasting contexts also will hopefully help us to explore some of the interrelationships that arise between teacher factors, contextual characteristics, and how these interactions might influence innovatability.

Another motivation for choosing these contexts was because they were the programs in which we were working and with which we were most familiar and were most accessible. This allowed each of us to capitalize on the advantages of an emic perspective and the deep contextual understanding that comes with it. However, we were also concerned with balancing this with the benefits that come from approaching a context with the fresh eyes of an outsider which might enable us to see things not apparent to someone enmeshed in often deeply-politicized, high stakes exigencies of being a part of the context which one is attempting to investigate. In order to try to incorporate both emic and etic perspectives we each observed and interviewed one teacher in both programs. In this way, we recognize and attempt to take advantage of the fact that who we are as researchers and teachers affects the quality, components, directions, and results of the research process in many respects. Whether we are insiders or outsiders will impact on issues of access to participants and context, the type of interaction and disclosure negotiated with these participants, and even the very nature of the meanings co-constructed in the data collection and analysis processes. This was further justification in our minds for adopting a constructivist approach.

III. Initial data collection stages: Exploratory Classroom Observations and Grounded Interviews

Design and Procedure

As mentioned above, the data collection protocol was designed to be empirically grounded in the sense that each step uses data from the previous step to inform and guide the formulation of the approach in the current step with concurrent consideration of what will be needed in the next step. So for the first round of classroom observation, the primary goal was simply to look for evidence and indications of what kind of role the teachers play in the learning process, their overall philosophy of language education, important elements of classroom praxis, and general interactional styles and classroom behaviors.

After all classroom observations were completed, these initial sets of data were analyzed for emergent categories and themes common to and/or missing from some or all of the classes. We then used these emergent themes in conjunction with the theoretical framework adopted for the study (Long & Norris, 2000; Van den Branden, 2006; Carless, 2004; Markee, 1997; Karavas-Doukas, 1998) to construct an interview protocol. This protocol was designed to elicit elements of the teachers' philosophy of teaching, their conceptions of TBLT, and their attitudes towards innovation and TBLT (see appendix for full interview protocol).

Reflections and preliminary emergent themes

Differences between teachers

An initial general description of the participating teachers is vital to understanding any further observations, interviews responses, and interpretations made thereon. In total, four ESL writing teachers were observed in their respective classrooms and subsequently interviewed, two female and two male. Both female participants are experienced teachers

and Japanese L1 speakers. They are both in their late-twenties, early thirties and have lived in English-speaking countries for extended periods of time, though they both grew up and were educated through secondary school in Japan. Both have completed or are. The female teacher in the EAP program (pseudonym Eriko) has taught English in Japan and Japanese in Australia and is currently enrolled an M. A. program in applied linguistics/language teaching at a large North American university. The private language school teacher (pseudonym Ikako) graduated from the same M. A. program as Eriko and has taught English only here in Hawaii, both during her MA studies and since graduating in 2003.

One interesting difference between these two teachers was in their attitudes and beliefs about whether or not it is necessary to have a fixed and detailed conception of what and how they want their students to learn. This theme first emerged during classroom observations in which the subject of plagiarism was brought up. For Eriko, she explicitly addressed this issue. Actually, the observed class was primarily focused on strategies of how to avoid plagiarism through the use of quotation marks and citation conventions. However, this was as far as the discussion went. The issue was left not complexified further and was presented as a problem to be prevented or corrected. It was in no way viewed as a potential site of resistance or even as a step in interlanguage development. This practice was in accord with her responses during the interview. One of the questionnaire items was, "I know beforehand what I want my students to learn." When asked about her response of circling 3, she responded by saying that for certain topics she does have a clear, fixed idea of what she wants the students to learn, whereas for others, she likes to leave it more open-ended and let students pick out what they need

to learn given their particular interests/needs. When asked about the observed lesson and what she wanted students to learn about plagiarism, she responded by saying that she felt that the most important thing was for the students to know the correct conventions and how to cite to avoid committing plagiarism.

Though Ikako's class session was not about plagiarism, the students did have to do some in class writing in response to reading a news article, which required them to use—or at the very least created a situation in which they were likely to use—quotations from the article. There was no explicit mention made of plagiarism and no specific instructions given on how to correctly cite sources, though at one point Ikako did suggest that a student should put a sentence in quotation marks. When asked during the interview about what she wanted her students to learn, she responded by saying that the most important factor for her was that her students develop confidence in their writing abilities and that she wanted to become more comfortable expressing themselves through writing in English about topics that they find interesting.

Another interesting difference arose in their attitudes towards structure-based, 'grammar-translation' style drills and activities. Eriko had a very pragmatic view in which she felt these sorts of activities could be useful for review purposes and to prepare for certain kinds of tests and had no problem with using them when she deemed them useful. Ikako, on the other hand, strongly stated that she tries to avoid using structure-based materials and activities whenever she possibly can and feels that, even though there may be times when teachers are forced to use them, they ultimately do not have any benefit in terms of learning and can actually be detrimental insofar as they make students

overly concerned about “getting the one correct answer” and are often de-motivating or boring.

In the end, I think that these differences are not only due to differences in these two teachers’ beliefs and conceptions in isolation, but rather are a reflection of the interaction between who they are (and want to be) as teachers, their past experiences as learners and teachers, and the contextual/programmatic constraints in which they are currently working.

Similarities between teachers

One salient similarity between Eriko and Ikako was their focus on the writing process as opposed to only a finished product. They both included some form of drafting in their lesson plans and approaches to L2 writing instruction. However, what makes this similarity particularly interesting germane, is that there is also a significant difference wrapped up in it too. Though both teachers include drafting steps when having their students complete writing assignments, only Eriko explicitly discussed it using that term and only she recommended it as an integral and necessary part of the writing process. Ikako did encourage students not to feel like they have to produce a “perfect essay” and she does regularly give feedback to students on writing they have turned and asks them to resubmit. However, she does not explicitly address drafting as a coherent topic and a distinct step in the writing process. Again here, this may also be influenced by the different contexts and student needs for each of the teachers. It would be interesting to do follow-up interviews to do some member-checking and get some elaboration on these issues.

A second similarity that emerged was the common stress put on the importance of learner choice and promoting a learner-centered classroom. And it was precisely in view of the other differences described above that made this overlap in beliefs of particular interest. Even in very different contexts, teaching learners with different wants and needs, two teachers with quite divergent teaching backgrounds and experiences felt that learners should have as much freedom and agency in their education as possible. Of course, the degree to which this was possible varied between the two teachers across time, assignments, and aspects of the curriculum, but the belief seemed to be a shared pedagogical value.

A similarity that was somewhat unexpected was the teachers' responses to the term "task" and the concepts they associated with them. Both Eriko and Ikako thought of a task as a highly-structured classroom activity that is intended to lead to more or less specified language output and is often used as language practice for particular forms. In this sense, it seemed to be similar to what is referred to as "activities" in discussions of TBLT. What was even more interesting was that through further discussions, I discovered that both teachers do actually have concepts that for the most part are analogous to a more TBLT conception of task (i.e., an integrated, real-world language use scenario that is based on learner needs and can often be broken down into sub-tasks or otherwise modified into pedagogic tasks). It was just that the concept they associated with the term task was different than what most TBLT researchers and pedagogues would argue for. This divergence in word usage was a nice confirmation of the usefulness of not going into data collection with an overly predetermined definition of terms without any further inquiry into whether or not our participants share those definitions.

Classroom observations evinced frequent pair/group work forming a central component of pedagogical lessons and activities, suggesting that interaction and communication are highly valued in L2 literacy and writing acquisition for these teachers. However, during the interviews the picture proved to be much more complex than the initial observations would suggest. Ikako unreservedly stated that interaction was a necessary and beneficial factor in learning how to writing in an L2 as well as being conducive to general L2 acquisition. When asked to elucidate on her response to the word association item of “communicative”, she replied by stating that she consciously and intentionally tries to plan in opportunities for discussion and interaction and oftentimes will forgo in-class writing exercises and lets students talk if they seem to be getting more out of discussion. Eriko, however, had quite different things to say about the role of interaction. In a discussion during the interview (also spawned by “communicative” in the word association) she made several comments about how communication and interaction is not really that important in her class because she is teaching writing. What strikes me most about this is that what it really reflects is a discrepancy between a teacher’s espoused attitudes and what seems to be represented in her classroom practice. Again, it may very well be a function of word choice and terminological miscommunication. For me personally and for the larger research project from which these reflections arise, this concept/term confusion has significant implications for innovation dissemination and teacher development.

IV. Conclusion: Targeted Products and Future Plans

As mentioned above, to date only steps 1 and 2 of the data collection/analysis protocol have been completed. The intentions of the researchers are to first complete analysis of the interview data and work at teasing out more emergent themes. These themes could then be interpreted in light of TBLT principles and issues surrounding language educational innovation. The purpose of this phase would be to make a decision on how to proceed in one of two directions. In a very real sense, these initial steps of data collection and analysis serve as pilot study to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the approach and protocol. Consequently, the primary decision will be to either complete the entire data collection and analysis protocol with the current teachers and contexts or to go back, revise steps 1 and two, and then to start again with four more teachers from the same contexts. Initial analyses on steps 1 and 2 are still inconclusive, but there are a few reflections that might be suggestive of possible improvements. First, it became quite obvious that more questions on innovation should be included in the interview protocol. This protocol was intentional created to include more items than necessarily need to be asked, but it would be useful to develop in more detail what it is we want to know about innovation and teachers attitudes towards innovation (e.g., “If you were working in a school that has decided to innovate, how might you react?). As with the existing prompts, these new items would need to be extremely open-ended and their contribution would not be in extracting specific answers to precise inquiries, but rather in their capacity to elicit general attitudes about the topic.

Though the questionnaire seemed to work well and produced much interesting and potentially useful data, the clarity of a few of the items might prove to be somewhat problematic. As well, it would be advisable to rewrite certain items to avoid the use terms

like “best”, “extremely”, “most”, “completely”, etc. Because the questionnaire items were not intended as primary data elicitation, but instead were meant to serve as talking points and to provide sites for further elaboration, both of these challenges can be overcome through more detailed follow-up and confirmation/clarification questions. But as the questionnaire is now, it leaves open some possibility of misrepresentative answers and puts more onus than necessary on the interviewer’s ability to spot these misunderstandings. It would be better to amend this section so that it would instead tend to highlight potential places for complex responses, thereby helping the interviewer to capitalize on such opportunities.

In any case, whether or not it is decided to revise and start over or to continue on and finish a complete cycle, in any future protocol development, the importance of follow-up and confirmation/clarification questions should be stressed and the possibility of diametrically different interpretations of a single term should be acknowledged. Also, it should not be assumed that such a difference in terminological definitions necessarily implies that the interviewee does not possess the researchers’ intended concept.

Aside from the decisions about how to proceed with the protocol in the current two contexts, there are plans to possibly try to negotiate access to other contexts (e.g., in Japan/EFL context) for future replication. Another extension would be to develop an analogous protocol for administrators—at least the interview steps—to provide further contextual understanding in which to situate the other sources of data.

Any or all of these future plans will ideally lead to a presentation at the upcoming 2nd International Conference on Task-Based Language Teaching in 2007. If nothing else though, the ultimate end product is the innovability analysis protocol itself. This

procedure for exploring the characteristics of a program which might influence the potential for TBLT innovation would serve in a capacity analogous to an initial needs analysis in language program development.⁷ The primary purposes are as follows: (1) systematically assay possible factors influencing the form and extent of future innovation; (2) to scope out potentially useful directions and/or strategies for change agents to explore that are responsive to these factors; and (3) use the above-identified factors and strategies to ideally avoid prospective obstacles in order to innovate in a way that is contextually appropriate, theoretically and empirically grounded; and, most importantly, takes into consideration the critical role of the teacher.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. *Rapport Building*

How long have you been teaching?

What different kinds of contexts?

What courses, skills, levels of students?

What teacher training have you had? BA, MA, CELT

(The following comment should be made to frame the interview: I am exploring teachers' understandings and views of innovation and education. I am primarily interested in your individual perspective.)

2. *Open Q's*

What is your role as a teacher in language learning?

What do you think are the most important qualities of a good teacher?

What is the ultimate goal of language education?

What do you think is the best way to teach language?

3. *Word Association*

Good teacher _____

Bad teacher _____

Grammar _____

Focus on Form _____

Recasts _____

Successful class _____

Learner-centered _____

Pair/group work _____

Textbook _____

Assessment _____

Communicative _____

Task _____

4. *Show the two activities*

Would you use either one of these activities? If so, how would you use, change, and/or adapt it? Why?

In what ways do you think this kind of activity helps students learn language?

5. *Questionnaire*

To be followed by requests to elaborate reasoning behind certain answers.

6. *Specific questions*

How do you know when a class is going well (and learning is taking place)?

Think of an activity you used that you feel was both successful and a good reflection of you as the kind of teacher you want to be. What was it about the activity, and the way you implemented it, that made it so?

What kinds of things do you like to include in your lessons? (e.g., language forms, textbook chapters, language functions, tasks; maybe we wouldn't mention these explicitly unless interviewee is unable to come up with anything)

Do you use pair or group work? Why or why not? In what ways does it help your students learn?

What are your students' language learning needs? To what extent do you base your teaching on your students' needs? How do you identify your students' needs?

How much freedom do you have in choosing and adapting materials? What criteria do you use to evaluate teaching materials (including textbooks)? (then follow up with like or dislike and preferences)

How do you think people learn second languages (successfully)? How does instruction help? How can materials help?

What role does assessment play in language education? How do you go about assessing your students? How do you feel about grading? How do you go about deciding what grades to give students?

What is the relationship between what you do in your class and what happens in the rest of the school/program you work in?

How do you feel about innovation? How much do you try to incorporate new ideas into your teaching? Where do you get these ideas from? (For example, suggestions from colleagues or superiors, ideas from teacher training and/or materials, your own ideas on how to improve your teaching?)

Have you ever heard of "task-based language teaching"? If so, what do you think about it? What is your definition of a task? Is it the same or different than an activity? (then follow up with more detailed questions based on their answers to these in order to elicit their opinions/understandings of TBLT)

7. *Wrap up*

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____

Please circle the number that most accurately expresses your agreement or disagreement.

1. English learning through sentence drilling is effective for my students.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

2. I prefer to give a classroom activity or project that has a lot of structure.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

3. A quiet and controlled classroom is necessary for learning to take place.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

4. Language needs to be used to be learned.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

5. Using authentic material is the best way to learn a language.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

6. Learners should be exposed to multiple sources of language input.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

7. I know beforehand what I want my students to learn.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

8. Learners need to have their errors corrected.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

9. Language instruction should be individualized.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree