

'Innovatability' analysis for task based language education

著者名(英)	Brian Shoen
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Brian Shoen

Abstract

TBLT proponents advocate that language education should innovate based on TBLT principles. However, the actual implementation process is not very well understood. Among the various factors involved, teachers' perspectives are critical in the realization of any curricular innovation (Van den Branden, 2006; Carless, 2004; Markee, 1996). 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. This paper describes the development of a data-gathering protocol intended to explore how the above factors might influence the form and extent of task-based innovation as well as the results of the initial completed stage of what could be a much larger project. This overall 'innovatability' analysis protocol utilizes interviewing, focus-groups, and classroom observation to develop a grounded framework to ascertain the potential for TBLT innovation in any given context, resulting in a generalizable, but locally-situated understanding of the innovation process.

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 prin-

ciples, 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. She 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. In the end, the teacher-level decisions are ultimately the ones which determine the shape and character of any innovation.

Therefore, 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, I think it is important to consider teachers' perceptions of TBLT before the innovation has occurred.

It is also seemed that these 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 agentive beings, I adopted an approach that integrated empirical methods with the theoretical foundations informing the initial literature review and development of the project's approach.

In the interviews, I was 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 innovability: How might all these factors contribute to the context-specific potential for task-based innovation?

II. Methodological Overview

Methodological Challenges and Strategies

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 and content in general and the characteristics of TBLT in particular not only play a crucial role in the implementation process. Even more importantly, 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 to be a pedagogical platitude, 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 (i.e. transportable) to diverse contexts while still being locally-situated, programmatically responsive, and contextually appropriate.

Grounded Theory and the Innovability Analysis Protocol

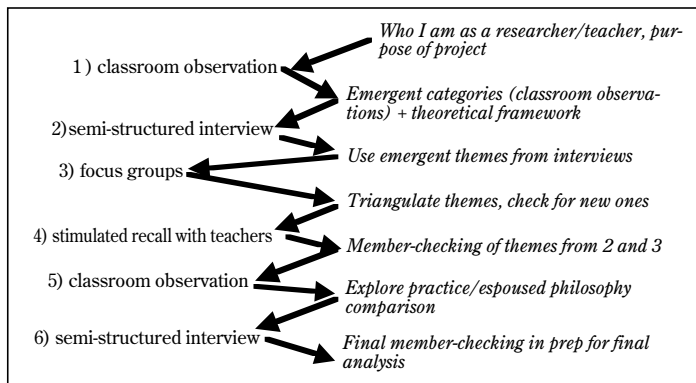
In consideration of the above-mentioned limitations, the present study takes a constructivist, grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000, 2002) in the construction of a data collection/analysis protocol. This innovability analysis protocol employs the following strategies: (a) recursive and concurrent data collection and analysis, (b) a combination of emic and etic perspectives (though this later had to be abandoned due to contextual and access constraints), (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 methods.

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 I was ultimately interested in how teachers’ attitudes and conceptions influence innovability, I wanted to ground my data collection in these teacher factors as much as possible without interpreting teachers responses solely in terms of pre-

existing notions of innovation and TBLT. I tried to develop a cyclical and recursive protocol utilizing multiple data-sources (e.g., classroom observation, interviews, focus groups, and stimulated-recall sessions) which would allow us to triangulate my interpretations.

The overall plan for data collection (with intermediate data analysis) is as follows. As can be seen in the diagram below, the process began with the overall purpose of the project and who I am as researcher and teacher here at KUIS. 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.

TABLE 1



As of now, I 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.

III. Initial data collection stages: 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 in conjunction with the theoretical framework adopted for the study (Long & Norris, 2000; Van den Branden, 2006; Carless, 2004; Markee, 1997; Karavas-Doukas, 1998). The analysis looked for emergent categories common to and/or noticeably missing from some or all of the classes. I then used these emergent themes 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).

TABLE 1

<u>Emergent categories (from observations)</u>	
• Activity type	• Concept of correctness
• Interactional styles	• Talk time
• Group/pair work	• Organization, structure, management strategies
• Materials/tech	• Learning goals and assessment
• Learner centeredness	• Rapport strategies
• Flexibility/adaptability	• Learner needs
• Teacher roles	

Reflections and preliminary emergent themes: Differences between teachers

In total, six ESL teachers were observed in their respective classrooms and subsequently interviewed, three female and three male. All six participants are English L1 speakers and are experienced teachers with Master's degrees in applied linguistics, TESL, second language studies or a related field. Four (two male and two female) are in their late-twenties, early thirties while the other two are in their early forties. Three have lived in Japan for an extended period of time, while the other three have only been living there for less than one year.

The qualitative data from the six open-ended interviews were analyzed in order to discover a number of emergent themes. These will be used to construct a focus group protocol designed to investigate the extent of contextual relevance and shared/divergent views of teacher factors with regards to TBLT innovation.

Given that this stage of data analysis is concurrent with development of the protocol for the next phase of data collection, the results will be presented here as two lists of general themes, one of factors shared among teachers and one of factors which represented differences among teacher perspectives.

Shared Factors

The following is a brief list of some emergent themes that were shared among all interviewees. Although I have provided some minor caveats as parenthetical amendments, these factors are mostly self-explanatory, and so I have left off the more detailed explanations given for the diverging factors below:

- Importance of learner-centered approach
- Multiple teacher roles with primacy given to “facilitator” and “guide”
- Espoused recognition of the importance of technology in learning process (though some teachers expressed reservation on own their comfort/competence)
- Concern for establishing and maintaining classroom rapport (but with different strategies between teachers)
- Frequent use of pair/group work (but used for different purposes/goals)
- Multiple activity types utilized
- Assessment viewed as an important “motivational” tool, though teachers are critical of its usefulness in actual language acquisition

Diverging Factors

The following is a brief list of some emergent themes that were shared among all interviewees with minor caveats as parenthetical amendments and short explanations in italics:

- Necessity of a explicit, fixed, and detailed concept of learning goals – *there was a large variety of views on how important goals are in the teaching process with some teachers placing them at the center of their approach in the classroom while others claiming only occasional reliance and mention of learning goals*
- Use and usefulness of structured drill activities – *although all teachers expressed some initial skepticism of the way in which these type of activities have been traditionally used in the language classroom, some claimed that if used creatively and strategically, they might be beneficial*
- Concept of truth/correctness – *attitudes varied from a very fixed notion of the “right answer” to a much more ‘constructivist’ concept of truth and a desire to get students to arrive at their own “correct” answer*
- Importance of classroom order/organization – *as might be expected, the level of tolerance and even embracing of chaos and the amount of authority vested in the teacher varied to a large degree not only across teachers, but also across activity types and situations for the same teacher; this dovetails with the importance of multiple teacher roles and activity types mentioned above*
- Amount of teacher talk time – *although the ultimate amount of teacher talk time might be lower than in many traditional, non-language classroom settings in Japan, there was still a fair degree of variation between teachers*
- Interactional style/register – *as with classroom order/organization above,*

divergence here showed up not only between teachers, but also with a single teachers behaviors and actions across situations and intentions

- Definition of task; compare/contrast with activity – *also not surprising was the tremendous variety of views and definitions of what constitutes a “task;” though some of this variety can be attributed to amount of exposure, experience, and training in TBLT, there was also some mention of “terminological fatigue” and wanting to “just teach” and not be overly concerned with what to call classroom “stuff”*
- Openness to innovation – *all were open to innovation, but much variation in attitudes about usefulness, “nothing really new out there”; most did, however, cite similar sources of innovative ideas, the most common being colleagues with literature/journals and conferences also being mentioned*
- Learner needs – *although all teachers expressed a belief in the centrality of learner needs, there were several evident dichotomies which evinced divergence of attitudes, i.e. explicit vs. implicit; formal vs. informal; prospective vs. on-going*

As mentioned above, these emergent themes are admittedly and intentionally ‘interim’ in nature and will be used primarily for the purpose of providing an empirically-grounded foundation for the construction of the next phase of the protocol. That being said, they still could be argued to provide some interesting and potentially useful interpretations.

IV. Conclusion: Targeted Products and Future Plans

The innovatability analysis protocol described above is primarily intended to

explore the characteristics of a program which might influence the potential for TBLT innovation and serve in a capacity analogous to an initial needs analysis in language program development. 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. With that general purpose in mind, the following are some comments and observations on the process and products so far.

As mentioned above, to date only steps 1 and 2 of the data collection/analysis protocol have been completed. The emergent themes from data analysis so far could be further interpreted in light of TBLT principles and other broader 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 have served as a pilot study to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the approach and protocol described herein. Additionally, the necessary but unfortunate abandonment of plans to coordinate with a colleague at another institution for the purposes of utilizing both emic and etic researcher perspectives would offer another area of expansion and revision of approach. Consequently, the primary decision will be to either complete the entire data collection and analysis protocol with the current teachers or to make another attempt to coordinate with another institution and repeat steps 1 and 2 (with the new researcher interviewing six more teachers from KUIS and each of

us interviewing six new teachers at the new context).

However, in addition to this procedural issue, the analyses of data from steps 1 and 2 offer a few reflections that are suggestive of possible improvements to the existing protocol steps already completed. First, it became quite obvious that more questions on innovation should be included in the interview protocol. This protocol was intentionally created to include more items than necessarily needed to be asked, but it would be useful to more specifically target what it is I 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, just in a more relevant way.

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.

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 dramatically different and unexpected 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 within her pedagogical lexicon; the concept just may be matched with a different term. This point is especially relevant

when discussing a context, such as KUIS, in which highly trained and educated professional teachers arrive from graduate programs in a variety of countries with their own set of discursual, pedagogical, terminological and conceptual conventions.

Aside from the decisions about how to proceed with the protocol in the current context, another extension would be to develop an analogous protocol for administrators—at least the interview steps—to provide further understanding of the context in which the teachers are operating and in which innovation might ultimately be attempted.

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Appendix I: Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Rapport Building

How long have you been teaching?

What different types of contexts?

What courses, skills, levels of students?

What teacher training have you had? BA MA CELTA

2. Open Q's

What is 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 _____

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/these type/s of activity helps students learn a language?

5. Questionnaire

To be followed by requests to elaborate reasoning behind responses.

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 do you like to include in your lessons? (e.g., language forms, text 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' 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 plays in language education? (How do you feel about grading? How do you go about deciding what grades to give students?)

How do you feel about innovation? How much do you try to incorporate new ideas into your teaching? Where do you get these ideas? (e.g. suggestions from colleagues or superiors, ideas from teacher training and/or materials, ideas from reflection on your own teaching experiences)

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

To what extent do you change your teaching when hearing others' suggestions? Have you ever heard about "task-based language teaching? If so, what do think about it? What is your definition of a task? How is it related to the concept of an 'activity'?

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 7 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 7 Strongly agree

3. A quiet and controlled classroom environment is necessary for learning to take place.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

4. Language needs to be used to be learned.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

5. Using authentic material is the best way to learn a language.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

6. Learners should be exposed to multiple sources of language input.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

7. I know beforehand what I want my students to learn.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree