Summer 7-21-2015

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Applying Systems Theory as a Lens on Teacher and Student Perceptions of Assessment
and Feedback in an Intensive English Program

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for The Master of Arts in TESOL
degree at SIT Graduate Institute, Brattleboro, Vermont.

July 2015

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Abstract

The goal of this project was to apply systems theory, or more generally, systems thinking as a lens on the perceptions of teachers, students, and administrators who work together at an intensive English program (IEP). This goal necessitated a two-part project: a review of pertinent literature on systems theory and a limited qualitative study situated at the IEP. Sixteen participants, including seven teachers (more than half of the current faculty), two teacher/administrators, and seven students from different levels within the program, were invited to participate. The primary focus of the study was on participants' awareness of and attitudes about two particular practices that are integral to the functioning of the school: assessment and feedback. In-depth interviews that centered on these two practices were utilized to gather the necessary qualitative data. This data was then analyzed to reveal topics and issues that were perceived by the participants to be of significance. Throughout the planning, execution, and analysis stages, the discipline of *mental models* served as a guiding principle. More generally, systems theory provided both a unique perspective and specific concepts that helped facilitate new, broadened understandings of the complex system known as the language school.

Keywords: systems theory, ST, complex systems theory, CST, complex dynamic systems, DST, feedback, leverage, intensive English program, IEP, mental models

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Descriptors

Culture

Culture Conflict

Cultural Understanding

Feedback (Response)

Intensive Language Courses

Intercultural Communication

Organizational Change

Organizational Climate

Organizational Culture

Organizational Effectiveness

Qualitative Research

Second Language Programs

Student Attitudes

Student Teacher Relationship

Systems Analysis

Systems Theory

Teacher Attitudes

Teacher Responsibility

Teacher Role

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Introduction

When I first began this project, I had two general goals: first, to learn more about my teaching context, and second, to apply systems theory as a lens on that context to see if it could help me achieve the first goal and thus prove the value of systems theory for regular people… like us. I say "regular" to mean teachers, learners, administrators, and others involved in education who simply want to grow and improve at what we do, not make our work sound more important with some new and impressive theory or terminology. As I began to learn more about systems theory and became more familiar with some of the core terminology and ideas, despite the challenge of trying to understand this new perspective, I got the sense that the study of systems, at heart, is focused on seeing things more holistically. I hoped that this new way of seeing might provide insights into true causes rather than just symptoms, and that it might offer some new tools for better understanding the dynamics of the school where I work. Although my interest in systems really began long ago with a childhood concern for the health of the oceans and the environment, my recent introduction to systems theory I owe to my brother, who holds a master's degree in sustainable management practices, and who, about a year and a half ago, introduced me to the work of Donella H. Meadows.   Her book, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, laid out the basics of systems thinking, including concepts that offer helpful new ways of looking at issues.

Once "hooked" on this idea of applying systems thinking, I looked toward other authors' perspectives – for what they chose to be most significant about this way of thinking and how they chose to apply their understanding of it. I wanted to know more about where modern systems theory came from and, in particular, how it has been applied

to the fields of linguistics and education. This led me to not only "raid bibliographies"

but to follow up on suggestions that professors in the graduate program at SIT, and also

mentors and colleagues within my own teaching context had offered. Authors like Diane

Larsen-Freeman and Mark A. Clarke soon gained greater status in my mind as

enlightened but also practical systems thinkers. Other authors helped broaden my

introduction to systems thought, often focusing on specific applications to the world's

pressing problems, as in Dana Meadows, Dennis Meadows, and Jorgen Randers' *Limits*

to Growth, The 30-Year Update, and bridging several fields of particular interest to me as

a teacher, as in Peter Senge's *Schools That Learn* or his earlier book *The Fifth Discipline.*

The first chapter of this paper will look at this broader background of work, which has

helped me to see the value of systems thought.

Senge's work is especially significant for me now because I can see how my

project has come to focus on something he calls "mental models": attitudes and

perceptions, often tacit, unexplored, and hidden, but which comprise a very real part of

the structure of a system. For Senge, *mental models* also comprise one of five

"disciplines" of what he calls a "learning organization" – an organization committed to

growth in self-understanding and awareness, including the ways that it responds and

adapts to challenges. He characterizes this concept as a "discipline" because it is not only

basic for better understanding organizations like the school where I work, but it is also a

practice, which requires participation and commitment. At the heart of the mental

models discipline is the idea that our own beliefs about reality are a very real part of the

structure of the organization(s) in which we work. While it is obvious that

preconceptions have a major impact on the way people relate to one another and on the

choices they make, I am particularly attracted to the neutral sound of this term in contrast to other words like *preconception* or *bias.* I also appreciate how Senge characterizes our mental models as part of the structure – the reality – of a system. Mental models are therefore not something we can ignore if we want to better understand each other and how things work.

A number of authors warn about the sound of the terms that have come out of systems theory and how these words can either be superficially sophisticated sounding, or superficially technical and scientific sounding, and potentially off-putting: words like *feedback, reinforcing* or *balancing feedback loop, complexity, dynamics, adaptation,* etc. While this is good advice to keep in mind, I think that the example of the term, mental models, as a kind of neutral, helpful way of putting things, reminds us of how important it is to find the right language to begin any discussion. In other words, the language of systems theory may offer helpful alternatives to accepted ways of describing issues. The first chapter of this paper will explore more terms and definitions that will be helpful to us, along with other essential ideas in systems thinking in preparation for applying the ideas to the pilot study presented in chapter two.

The second chapter of this paper will look at that research – my initial investigation into the mental models present in the intensive English program where I work. Through in-depth interviews of a broad range of participants, including students, faculty members, and administrators, I will seek to uncover features of the system structure of our school that are related to two important activities there: communication and assessment – in particular, feedback between students, teachers, and administrators, and awareness of attitudes surrounding assessment practices. In facilitating that process

of uncovering some of the attitudes present in our school, I hope to draw attention to the value of systems thinking. Before I can go any further, however, I would first like to recognize the 16 people who participated, and who generously donated time out of their busy schedules to allow me to interview them. Without their cooperation, my effort and learning through the course of this project would neither be as meaningful nor as rich.

Chapter 1 – Introduction to Systems Theory and Literature Review

The first chapter of this study is comprised of two sections: the first section will summarize the basics of systems theory, which include definitions of the term *system*, an overview of system structure, including basic elements and terminology, and also principles about the behavior of systems; the second section will review relevant literature on the topic of systems theory to highlight the growing importance of systems thinking both generally and within the pertinent fields of applied linguistics (AL), second language acquisition (SLA), and education. Together, the overview of systems theory and the review of literature will help the reader see how this particular study will contribute to the further understanding of the topic, especially in regard to how ideas from systems theory might be put to practical use and applied to issues in second language education. The reader will then be well prepared for chapters two and three, in which systems theory is used to guide qualitative research and analysis of data in a pilot study situated within the author's teaching context.

Systems Theory and Systems Thinking

Systems theory is the study of simple and complex systems, their structure, and their behavior. It is concerned with identifying the elements and interconnections within systems. It focuses on the interrelationships and interaction of elements through their

interconnections, which not only helps in understanding how systems work, but also makes physically very different systems comparable, enabling insights across disciplines. It works to reveal the relationship between system structure and behavior, which is very closely related, as well as the relationship between systems and their surrounding context or environment. Perhaps most importantly, it recognizes the dynamics of systems, and in fact, of all reality, and challenges objectification and oversimplification.

What is a system?

The following definitions come from voices in the varied fields of environmental science, systems modeling, and education. "A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something" (Meadows 2008:11). A system is "a grouping of parts that operate together for a common purpose. A system may include people as well as physical parts" (Forrester 1968:1-1). "Systems are assemblages of parts that function as a whole… that is, they seem to function with an identifiable purpose" (Clarke 2003:15). Although somewhat abstract, these three definitions all point out the basic characteristics of systems: "a system must consist of three kinds of things: e*lements, interconnections,* and a *function* or *purpose"* (Meadows 2008:11).

With these three characteristics alone, it becomes easy to start seeing systems everywhere: a person, a family, a classroom, a school, a company, a community, a government, the natural world, and so on. Natural systems and human organizations like these are referred to as *complex systems* because they consist of many diverse elements whose interconnections and relationships change over time.

In defining the term *system* in a slightly different way, Donella H. Meadows draws attention to a core principal of all systems:

> "A system is a set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time. The system may be buffeted, constricted, triggered, or driven by outside forces. But the system's response to these forces is characteristic of itself, and that response is seldom simple in the real world". In other words, *structure*—the way a system is organized—has a lot to do with *behavior*—the way a system works. As she puts it, "The system, to a large extent, causes its own behavior!" (Meadows 2008:2).

Understanding and revealing the relationship between the structure and behavior of a system is the central role of systems theory.

Guiding Authors

This review of literature follows the lead of several authors: two from within the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition, Diane Larsen-Freeman and Lynne Cameron, one from the field of environmental science, Donella H. Meadows, and one from the fields of organizational management and education, Peter Senge. While the first two fields mentioned are closely related to the field of education, and being a teacher myself, it might make sense to begin the investigation there or with Peter Senge, I actually began my introduction to systems thinking by way of Meadows' book, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer.* I first wanted to know how people outside the field of education talked about systems and what they saw as most important. I also wanted to prepare myself with somewhat of an "outsider's" perspective before seeing what educators have

been doing with systems thinking. After reading Meadow's book, I used her

bibliography to discover several other authors. This is how I first encountered Senge.

Meadows references Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* as a "jumping off point"

for learning more about systems thinking in the field of business. In fact, since then,

Peter Senge has published another book, *Schools That Learn*, which not only applies

systems thinking to education, but also reintroduced me to the concept of "mental

models" –an idea that I had first encountered with Meadows and which later proved

important in helping me to understand the data collected through my qualitative research.

I later encountered Diane Larsen-Freeman and Lynne Cameron's *Complex*

Systems and Applied Linguistics. Next to Meadows' work, this was probably the most

important "discovery" for me in my research. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron provide a

thorough explanation of systems concepts and terminology. They clarify the somewhat

confusing naming conventions—systems theory (ST), complex systems theory (CST), or

just complexity theory (CT)—and they trace the history and development of systems

thinking across several fields. But more importantly for my study, they highlight its

importance in AL/SLA as a source for both a new conceptual metaphor and a new

theoretical framework—both of which are compatible with many existing theories and

ideas within these fields. This point about ST providing a new way of viewing existing

theory and practice is right in line with my own study. I have also benefitted by using

their bibliography as a resource. Other authors whose work I was able to investigate

include: Julia L. Evans, Nick C. Ellis, Rod Ellis, the co-authors, de Bot, K., W. Lowie,

and M. Verspoor, John Holland, and Mark A. Clarke.

Of these people, while most provided further insight into the application of systems theory to second language acquisition, Mark A. Clarke presented a very practical anecdotal account of systems thinking from the perspective of an experienced language teacher. Clarke's perspective, often described as an "ecological perspective" seemed closest to Meadows' in that he distilled for me the key ideas that someone new to systems thinking would need most—much like Meadows' "primer" in systems theory, but for teachers.

I had hoped to notice greater overlap between Larsen-Freeman & Cameron's research and that of Meadows, but it became clear that their books not only had different purposes but different audiences. Even so, I felt that collectively they had guided me toward others who had clearly done much work to advance systems thinking. More importantly, I felt that I had discovered the perspectives on systems thinking that I had set out to explore from the start: both from inside the field of education and from without. In addition, the work of Peter Senge and Mark A. Clarke, introduced me to voices that spoke more directly to my need as a teacher for practical application of systems thinking to my own work.

Other Names, Other Definitions

According to Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), systems theory goes by different names, including complex systems theory (CST), complexity theory (CT), dynamic systems theory (DST), and still others depending on both the discipline and the aspects of the systems being studied. For example, if the changes in a particular system over a period of time are the primary focus, then the term DST would likely be used. If the influence of the surrounding environment on a particular complex system were the

focus, then terms like "open system" or "complex adaptive system" (CAS) could be used. They are all basically the same: the study of systems, their structure, and their behavior.

Two other explanations from the fields of business management and education will add clarity to the definition of a system. "A system is any perceived structure whose elements 'hang together' because they continually affect each other over time. The word 'system' derives rom the Greek verb *sunistanai,* which originally meant 'to cause to stand together'" (Senge 2012:124). "Systems are all living organisms and stable groups of living organisms, from single cell organisms to plants and animals. The individual human being is the system we are most interested in, along with families, classrooms, schools, and communities, which are also systems" (Clarke 2003:15). These definitions point to other important characteristics of systems: they are *dynamic* in that their elements "continually affect each other over time", and they are also *persistent* in that their identity as a system or "perceived structure" is identifiable over time. In short, systems are "stable groups" with a purpose.

Helpfully, Clarke focuses right in on the type of systems most pertinent to this study: human systems. A human system is, in fact, a kind of *complex system.* Complex systems consist of "many different types of elements, agents, and/or processes" (Larsen-Freeman, Cameron 2008:28). The term *agent* designates an animate or living element within a system. So, in the complex system of the classroom, the *agents* would be the teacher and students, the *elements* would be the physical desks and other learning materials as well as intangible things like ideas and subject matter. Some of the *processes* would be, of course, the thinking that goes on as well as the daily routines and interactions between the people in class. Listing these various elements is an initial step

in understanding a system's structure and behavior. In systems theory, these two are closely linked.

Donella Meadows (2008) characterizes persistent major world issues like hunger, poverty, or unemployment as systems problems: "No one deliberately creates those problems, no one wants them to persist, but they persist nonetheless. That is because they are intrinsically systems problems—undesirable behaviors characteristic of the system structures that produce them." She also mentions smaller-scale problems, such as companies "losing market share" or individuals coming down with the flu virus—in each case, the company or the individual "sets up the conditions" for the problems to arise. What if persistent school-centered issues are similar in that the solutions (or preventions) lie somewhere in our ability to change our view? A systems perspective can enable us to consider the entire system and how the structure could be contributing to the problem.

Origins and History

According to Peter Senge, systems thinking has been around a very long time: "It's a new scientific term for a very old idea: that we live in a web of interdependence". In the interview in which he said this, he went on to describe the connection between himself and the interviewer: "We are the conversation. The conversation is a dance between us two. That's all that systems theory is pointing out. It's a set of tools and methods that to some degree have their roots in modern science. But the sensibility, the awareness, is very old" (Senge 2011). To paraphrase Senge, systems theory is like a toolkit for seeing things more holistically. Philosophers and scientists have been exploring this "web of independence" throughout history, but more recently, in the fields

of biology, physics, mathematics, among others, people have developed the specific

"tools and methods" – the ideas, approaches, and terminology – to which Senge refers.

Diane Larsen-Freeman and Lynne Cameron give a very thorough account of the

evolution and development of the "set of tools and methods" of which Senge speaks.

Interesting Characteristics

Here are some interesting characteristics of systems:

- System structure determines the behavior of the system

- System behavior determines the outcomes of the system

- System outcomes = the purpose of the system

- Stated purpose of the system may not be the same as the actual purpose; actual

  purpose = whatever the system actually produces

System Models

     Thinking in Systems was my formal introduction to the basics of systems theory.

Systems theory includes basic principles or characteristics that are common to all

systems. Despite their origins in biology, mathematics, chemistry, and physics, systems

concepts were made readily accessible by Donella Meadows' down-to-earth approach.

That was, in fact, her goal: to make systems thinking available to a wider audience. To

become ready to start applying systems thinking, it will first be necessary to become

acquainted with systems, their basic parts, and common behaviors, before we can begin

to apply a systems lens.

     Fortunately, for anyone who is new to systems theory, there are not only excellent

authors like Meadows, Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, Clarke, and others out there who

can shed light on the subject, but there are also many examples of *simple systems,* which

are invaluable in understanding basic system structure and behavior. To be able to start

applying systems theory or *systems thinking* as a lens, it is helpful to both be able to

describe examples of systems and create simple system models using some basic

terminology and common symbols.

System Elements and Interconnections

Systems consist of *elements* and *interconnections*. System elements may be either

inanimate or animate. Inanimate elements are objects like rocks, trees, buildings, etc., so

they may be living but not mobile or able to make decisions (Larsen-Freeman and

Cameron 2008:27). Animate elements include people and other living things and are

referred to as *agents;* they can make choices, and they do not always make the same

choices (We're all guilty, aren't we?). Entire systems, even complex systems, may

themselves be elements—subsystems within larger complex systems. For example,

depending on the level that you wish to view, a person is either a complex system (unto

him or herself) or an *agent* within a larger complex system, such as a family or some

larger system.

Processes

System elements may also be *processes*. Consider this example: if you want to

better understand the assessment practices at your school, you could describe the system

elements, or better yet, because it is a complex system, you could visualize it by creating

a *system model*. It would basically look like a flow chart, flowing roughly from left to

right, but feature some commonly accepted symbols. The model could include various

testing procedures as elements: processes such as placement testing, achievement testing,

exit testing, grading procedures, analysis of results, etc. These elements would be just a

few of the many elements that make up the assessment practices at your school. Of

course, there would be various agents involved—the students tested, the test

administrators, school administrators, etc.—and therefore other system elements that you

would also want to include. I use the word "want" here because, most likely, you would

not choose to include them all. An effective model would include only as many elements

as are necessary to help shed light on the particular system in question. Most likely, as

the system modeler, you would be looking at a particular problem that has been identified

within the system and which you are trying to better understand, and possibly, solve.

More on that later, but first, systems elements are typically represented by several simple,

logical symbols.

In the Kitchen

There are specific types of system elements that are used to describe the function

of a system. These include the terms and symbols for *stocks, flows, faucets, sources,* and

sinks. *Stocks* are the things in a system that are measurable and quantifiable. They are

depicted as containers or boxes. Stocks can represent something tangible like the amount

of fuel in an automobile's gas tank, or something intangible like the degree of self-

confidence a person feels at any given time. *Flows*, depicted as arrows, affect the level of

a stock by adding to or taking away from that stock. An *inflow* adds more of a particular

stock to a system, increasing the level of that stock, while an *outflow* depletes the level of

that stock.

In the Clouds

Sources and sinks are depicted as clouds—metaphorical boundaries of a system.

They are the origins and destinations of inflows and outflows. For example, if a person

experiences repeated successes at work, that person's achievements can be represented as a single, generic source—a cloud—at one end of a system model. For the systems modeler, the exact details of each successful experience had by the person may not be necessary to include in the model. The single source (of generic or aggregate success) adds simplicity and focus. The number of successes affects the rate of inflow of self-confidence to the person's stock of self-confidence, which that person not only senses but can apply to his or her work. The person's degree of success will most likely vary over time. That variable rate can be depicted as a *faucet*.

Alternatively, two of the possible sinks that could affect the person's stock of self-confidence might be the number of either personal mistakes made by that person or criticisms voiced by colleagues. The sources and sinks in system models such as these are represented as clouds and located somewhere at the perimeter of the system model—generally, sources on the left and sinks on the right. Again, this lack of detail is not because the exact details of where things come from and where they go are unimportant, but because this can add simplicity, focus, and therefore, utility to the model.   Having said that, Meadows cautions about forgetting the boundaries: "It's a great art to remember that *boundaries are of our own making, and that they can and should be reconsidered for each new discussion, problem, or purpose"* (Meadows 2008:99).

By now, the reader should have a clear idea of the subject as well as the author's interest in it. However, it is evident and helpful to know that systems theory has a broad appeal across many disciplines.

The Importance of Systems Thinking

Current literature gives a clear sense of the growing importance of systems theory in a complex world:

"Today, it is widely accepted that systems thinking is a critical tool in addressing the many environmental, political, social, and economic challenges we face around the world. Systems, big or small, can behave in similar ways, and understanding those ways is perhaps our best hope for making lasting change on many levels" (Wright; Meadows 2008).

Humanity lives in a world of complex systems that challenge human understanding, and so there is a need to confront the challenge: "Man lives and works within social systems. His scientific research is exposing the structure of nature's systems. His technology has produced complex physical systems. But even so, the principles governing the behavior of systems are not widely understood" (Forrester 1991: 1-1).

In the introduction to Donella P. Meadows' *Thinking in Systems,* Dana Wright also addresses this question: "Today, it is widely accepted that systems thinking is a critical tool in addressing the many environmental, political, social, and economic challenges we face around the world. Systems, big or small, can behave in similar ways, and understanding those ways is perhaps our best hope for making lasting change on many levels" (Wright; Meadows 2008). In other words, systems theory is already considered a means for better understanding the modern world and solving some of its most challenging problems. But, how is it being used to improve education?

Consider Peter Senge's helpful example of the everyday phenomenon of the "phantom traffic jam": "The dynamic of the phantom traffic jam—the emergent

relationship among the cars on the road—is a structure. And in any complex system—

whether it's a traffic jam or a classroom or a school district—it's the nature of the

structures at play that most determine the behavior of the people within it" (Senge 2012).

Through such thinking, systems theory can facilitate a different orientation and approach

toward problem solving. Instead of just focusing on why students are failing to achieve

intended outcomes or why teachers are failing in their primary task of facilitating their

students' learning, one might ask: what is the "emergent relationship" between the

teachers, learners, and other participants within the language school, and how is that

structure enabling particular outcomes?

An organization such as a school typically has a carefully defined and explicit

program structure. The existence of an "emergent relationship" among participants is

suggestive of an implicit alternative structure, which may not only go unseen by

participants, but may also be independent of and potentially in conflict with the explicitly

stated and intended structure of the school. In recognizing the reality of such an

emergent structure, a systems oriented approach to problem solving is already focused

more on underlying causes than on simply calling out symptoms or people who may be at

fault. It is clearly a more holistic approach, which may aid participants in becoming

more fully informed and aware. As such, perhaps systems theory does offer a chance at

lasting change.

Metaphor

A number of well-known authors recognize the great potential for applying

systems theory within the fields of AL and SLA to enhance research, understanding, and

teaching practice. According to Julia Evans (2008), a primary role for systems theory in

these fields is to change people's perspective through challenging the dominant metaphor of the mind-as-computer.

> "Since the late 1950s the dominant metaphor for language and cognition has been the digital computer and the belief that human intelligence is a process of computations on symbolic representations—rule-based manipulation of symbols. Language, from this perspective, is a symbolic system that is innate, residing in the human genetic code" (Evans 2008: 128).

According to Larsen-Freeman & Cameron (2008), not only does such a metaphor encourage other mechanical analogies for thinking and learning, but it misses entirely the socially constructed nature of language:

> "In the field of language teaching, for example, terms such as 'input' and 'output' became just the 'normal' way to talk about listening and speaking… When speaking becomes 'output', for example, we can lose sight of how humans construct meaning through social interaction" (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008: 12).

So, for decades, the mind-as-computer metaphor has influenced what researchers and teachers see and do. In many ways, that influence has benefitted both theory and practice, but Julia L. Evans; Diane Larsen-Freeman and Lynne Cameron; de Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor; and Nick C. Ellis all indicate the need for the new metaphors and new theoretical understandings that systems theory can provide.

Similarly, while terms like 'input' and "output' may help teachers to clarify aspects of the planning and teaching of a lesson, these and similar mechanical metaphors may also distract from the need for learners to experience language authentically through

social interaction. Teachers may inadvertently sacrifice opportunities for more authentic

language use in the classroom.

Mental Models

Donella Meadows compares the process of drawing a system model to sharing

beliefs and assumptions. Both actions involve exposing our mental models to scrutiny—

both our own scrutiny and that of others. She reminds us that everything we know about

the world is just a model (Meadows 2008: 172). These mental models represent different

and isolated views of the world. Until we learn to share them more effectively, our

unique mental models will remain both untested and incomplete. Peter Senge concurs,

"Because mental models are usually tacit, existing below the level of awareness, they are

often untested and unexamined. They are generally invisible to us—until we look for

them" (Senge 2012: 99).

Senge explains how we become so attached to our beliefs that it creates barriers to

achievement: "We live in a world of self-generating beliefs that remain largely

untested… Our ability to achieve the results we truly desire is eroded by our feelings that:

Our beliefs are the truth. The truth is obvious. Our beliefs are based on real data. The

data we select is the real data" (Senge 2012: 101). The fact that we can all relate to the

experience of having our beliefs challenged and how threatening that feels to us, shows

just how important learning how to explore mental models really is.

Peter Senge points out that the concept of mental models helps us come to terms

with the limits of our perception and the need to collaborate. "Differences between

mental models explain why two people can observe the same event and describe it

differently: They are paying attention to different details. The core task of the discipline

of mental models is to bring tacit assumptions and attitudes to the surface so people can

explore and talk about their differences and misunderstandings with minimal

defensiveness" (Senge 2012: 99-100).

Meadows cautions: "Instead of becoming a champion for one possible hypothesis

or model, collect as many as possible. Consider all of them to be plausible until you find

some evidence that causes you to rule one out. That way you will be emotionally able to

see the evidence that rules out an assumption that may become entangled with your own

identity" (Meadows 2008: 172). This observation about the emotional ties that we each

have to our knowledge is a key insight into the challenge they represent. As Meadows

explains, our knowledge, which becomes connected to who we are, is perhaps only closer

to what we think we know about the world than to being an accurate representation of it.

Once again, a person's knowledge is just one view and only part of the picture. She

therefore urges us to share our mental models so that they can be compared.

Similarly, Peter Senge clearly recognizes the challenge that uncovering our

mental models actually poses. He has designated mental models as one of five core

disciplines for organizations, and describes the discipline as "becoming more aware of

the sources of our thinking" (Senge 2012: 97).

I do not think that either author is advocating that we give up on accuracy just to

be polite and entertain other opinions for a while. I think that they are saying accuracy

lies outside of ourselves and that we need each other to get there. I believe this is

especially true in regard to complex systems involving many human beings such as a

school. What implications might these ideas about systems theory have for the classroom

or the school?

Relevance to Education

According to Peter Senge, "Systems thinking is particularly relevant to education because of the types of problems that are prevalent in school systems." Senge quotes author Ron Heifetz who describes them as "adaptive" and explains that they are problems that "cannot be solved with purely technical or specific responses." Instead, like a "complex disease" such as "cancer or diabetes", the response to any adaptive problem "requires much more than a technical solution or simple treatment. The diagnosis is uncertain, the outcome is more of a guess than a certainty, and the patient must be engaged to learn and change behaviors if the solution is to take hold" (Senge 2012: 125-126).

A World View

Systems theory is a way of seeing the world or any a part of it. In the introduction to *Limits to Growth,* Dennis Meadows and Jorgen Randers describe systems theory as a "world view":

> "Like any viewpoint—for example, the top of any hill—a systems perspective lets people see some things they would never have noticed from any other vantage point, and it may block the view of other things. Our training concentrated on dynamic systems—on sets of interconnected material and immaterial elements that change over time. Our training taught us to see the world as a set of unfolding behavior patterns, such as growth, decline, oscillation, overshoot. It has taught us to focus not so much on single pieces of a system as on connections… It lets us approach problems in new ways and discover unsuspected options" (Meadows, Randers, Meadows 2004: 4-5).

In other words, systems theory is a way of noticing how things are interrelated, how they interact and affect one another, and how their individual behaviors change over time because of that interaction. Moreover, recalling Donella Meadows' comments on structure and behavior, it is also about noticing how interrelated elements can develop a collective behavior, a perceivable function or purpose as a system, one that the individual elements would not have if they were apart from one another. This is what systems theory is about: seeing reality more holistically.

Six Categories

In reviewing the responses of the 16 people interviewed, six general themes or categories emerged: *time, pressure, motivation, variety, needs, and weaknesses.* These *emergent categories* represent the researcher's attempt to notice and highlight the ideas that seemed most important to each person in their responses to the interview questions. The six key words chosen are based on the emphasis that speakers placed upon certain ideas. These ideas fell roughly into six general categories.

In some cases, students, teachers, and administrators followed similar threads in relation to a general theme such as time and appeared to be in agreement. In other cases, responses branched off in unexpected directions. The point of this analysis it to get a sense of what these participants notice and care about. Although they all work and study within the same intensive English program, their perspectives vary. Where thoughts converged or diverged and which thoughts came into focus for different individuals or groups are key places of interest for this study. According to authors like Peter Senge and Donella Meadows, these varied perspectives or "mental models" represent a part of the systemic structure of our school, which is normally hidden from view. Senge explains: "Because mental models are usually tacit, existing below the level of awareness, they are often untested and unexamined. They are generally hidden to us— until we look for them" (Senge 2012: 99). This hidden aspect of system structure is not something that can be ignored because it has a significant effect on the behavior of the overall system. Specifically, they shape human behavior: "…human beings are creatures of interpretation. Our behavior and our attitudes are shaped by our mental models: the images, assumptions, and stories that we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people,

institutions, and every aspect of the world" (Senge 2012: 99). It is therefore important

that the mental models that are present are carefully revealed, acknowledged, and

explored. The following data analysis represents an initial step in that direction. While

the mental models do reveal greater complexity than is already explicit in a complex

dynamic system such as a language school, they also show us a more complete picture of

the system and a chance to better understand its complex behaviors.

Two versions of the questionnaire were used. Round one featured a single list of

questions asked to all variety of participants. As the first round progressed, it became

apparent that certain questions applied more to teachers than to students or vice versa.

Quite a few questions needed to be reworded on the spot to accommodate the different

participants, interrupting the progress of the interviews. As a result, at the end of that

first round the questionnaire was revised where necessary to include two versions of the

same question: one addressing teachers and one addressing students. The same revised

questionnaire was then used for both rounds two and three.

To preserve both the anonymity of respondents and their roles or groups within

our school, they will simply be numbered incrementally as T1 (Teacher 1), T2, etc., or S1

(Student 1), S2, etc. Additionally, teachers and administrators will be referred to together

as "teachers"[*]. Occasionally, where necessary, separate statements made by the same

person will be indicated. Otherwise, rather than invite the tracking of the opinions of the

individual respondents, the analysis will take note of the relative correspondence of

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[*] Teachers and administrators are grouped here and throughout as "teachers" in order to preserve
the anonymity of this study's participants.

opinions expressed in order to highlight areas of significance. This will allow teachers', students', and administrators' mental models to emerge more naturally as they would in an open discussion, while allowing the individual participants to speak anonymously as part of their collective voice. A more focused study of individual perspectives is still made possible by referring to the appendix. Now, for the first emergent theme and category of *time*.

1. Time

Among the teachers and administrators interviewed, the category of *time* was significant in that it was often tied to negative comments and a sense of a *systemic* lack of time. Six out of nine teachers/administrators interviewed seemed to attach negative connotations to *time*. In general, they mentioned time as a factor in preventing them from choosing preferable ways to teach or assess their students. So, a fairly strong connection between *time* and *variety* seemed to emerge.

Teachers' voices regarding time:

Time* and *variety

In the following six examples, there is a consistent underlying thread: a structural lack of time prevents teachers from making choices that could allow them to better facilitate or support their students' learning and progress. While the impacts mentioned vary, all agree on the same core issue. For example, three describe how a shortage of time affects their ability to assess learners in more varied ways:

> *T1: Lack of time prevents teachers from doing multi-skill assessments.*
>
> *T2: Yes, I would like to give a greater variety of assessments, e.g. in level… more*
>
> *practice with note taking. But time limits (my) options for assessments.*

> *T3: I would like to try more projects, but getting them set up and grading them*
>
> *properly is intimidating. But time is also a factor.*

The third voice helpfully points out what he/she sees as an obstacle to achieving greater

variety through projects. It seems that for this person, feeling intimidated about

managing class projects is a significant limiting factor. Experienced teachers all

recognize aspects of their teaching practice that lie within their "comfort zone" and others

which do not. What this person means by "intimidating" is perhaps worth exploring. Is

the meaning here simply "lacking confidence in facilitating project-type activities"

because they are unfamiliar? Is it that such activities might prove unwieldy or

unmanageable and lead to unsuccessful classroom experiences? Or, is *time* actually the

primary obstacle given the IEP context, where more standard forms of assessment often

prove to be most practical and time efficient? In other words, are *time limitations* a major

source of this person's sense of intimidation?

Time **and** *practices*

Two other voices focus on how lack of time limits their ability to provide learners

with a beneficial learning environment:

> *T4: ...one of my biggest issues is: at times I have felt that I was constantly*
>
> *assessing students without having given them enough adequate time to even*
>
> *practice. That seems so unfair.*
>
> *T5: I used to give back the test and we would go over it in class and really*
>
> *discuss all the possible different answers that they could have. I don't have time*
>
> *to do that anymore.*

The first speaks of the frustration in not being able to meet a very basic need of learners':

the need for adequate practice. Now, while an alternative or outside perspective might

suggest that this teacher is just making the wrong decisions, it is important to consider

how the description provided serves to outline system structure. "…at times I have felt

that I was constantly assessing…" and "That seems so unfair." These two comments

suggest a feeling of powerlessness in the face of a system that does not allow for better

choices. It is also important to note that any value judgments about this teacher's choices

in response to the issue of *time,* such as "Why not just make a better decision?" would

surely prevent him/her from sharing and exploring the structure of the issue with others.

The behavior that this teacher has chosen is perceived to be beyond the teacher's control,

and this perception is actually part of the system structure: a mental model. We may

recall that according to systems theory, system structure determines behavior—not just

that of the overall system, but the structure influences the behaviors of individual

participants (Meadows; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). The second voice also

seems troubled by time limitations and speaks regretfully of past preferable classroom

actions that can no longer be taken. Again, there is an implied recognition of system

structure as the culprit.

The next voice, T6, speaks of giving students feedback on their writing and the

time constraints that limit what students can do with that feedback.

T6: Also in writing, due to time constraints, there is not a lot of time for doing

revisions. The feedback can be very effective for some students, but for others, I

don't think they will put as much work into it as the teachers half the time!

A final voice, T7, addresses system structure directly as a limiting factor that prevents teachers from engaging in a particular practice that is central to their work: reflection on action.

> T7: (**Paraphrase:** *Due to short breaks between class periods, teacher's don't have the luxury of debriefing themselves) after a class—which is what I see as a weakness in the system. And so, that for me is a fault in the system that doesn't honor thinking on the part of teachers.*

Taking time to reflect upon action is one of the key stages of the ELC (experiential learning cycle), which applies to all learners, students and teachers alike (Kolb 1970s; Senge 2012). Increasingly, the ELC is being recognized as both a helpful description of reflective teaching practice and a preferable way for teachers to frame what they do. The speaker here admits that the system structure in place, here the class schedule, basically short-circuits this process.

Students' voices regarding time:

Among the students who were interviewed, as with teachers, time was also significant. For two students *time* was tied to *variety* in a similar way as expressed by the teachers/administrators. However, students' responses were also somewhat more varied, connecting to other of the six emergent categories or other important themes.

Time **and** *variety*

Time limitations inherent in the system and teachers' choices about how to spend class time are identified by the following two student voices as factors that may negatively impact the quality of their learning.

S1: Having an assignment as homework – interviewing somebody and doing research. Sometimes the teachers give us some resources to learn from. These (other ways) are used often. But sometimes we don't have enough time.

S2: Teachers may spend too much time on a subject that students don't like without knowing it. I have experienced that here.

According to these voices, time impacts both variety of experience and variety of subject matter. A resulting decrease in learner interest seems to be implied.

Time **and** *pressure*

Two other voices highlight the connection between timed assessment and students' experience of a "pressurized" learning environment. Both seem to agree that timed testing/assessment can lead to increased pressure on students, which negatively affects their performance and chances for improvement.

S3: Teachers reminding students of the remaining time during a test again and again is the worst thing: very distracting.

S4: In real life I don't have to write anything in 30 minutes, except in a standard test like TOEFL or IELTS. So, I don't have to waste a lot of time in learning English with this kind of test – many times in each term. I think it's not helpful. Maybe we have to practice that, but we could do it like classwork, so we will feel more relaxed and do our best when we have to take the TOEFL. But each time I have to take this test, I will be under stress—nothing will change—so I won't improve.

Time and *needs assessment*[*]

The following student voices focus on the school's current approach to eliciting opinions and feedback from students at the end of each term. They seem to agree that when the surveys happen, in other words scheduling, impacts how well they function in supporting students' experience at our school.

S5: Maybe they should come in week 9.

S6: Maybe they should be done at the midterm. Teachers could try to improve. At the end, teachers can't do anything for the students.

It is notable that Student 6's mental model includes the expectation that teachers need to "try to improve" their own work in helping their students. This may not be a perspective that is shared by all teachers.

S7: Maybe they should change this method. The end-of-term evaluations sometimes don't work: students focus on their feeling instead of grading the teacher's approach.

S8: I think, in the beginning of the term, to ask about what we need to learn—so that they have suitable ways to teach students. (So, to help teachers find the most suitable ways.) Yeah.

Interestingly, the last speaker refers to needs assessment that can be done by teachers themselves at the outset of a course to help a teacher find out "about what we need to

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[*] *Time and needs assessment:* regarding the timing of the standardized end-of-term evaluations, which include questions about specific courses, teachers, and general questions about the program as a whole.

learn—so that they have suitable ways to teach students." This person's mental model of

education includes the need for a collaborative approach between teachers and students

(Graves 2000). S8's comment here foreshadows the discussion of teachers' comments

about *needs* which appears later in this chapter.

Time and *practices*

The first of the final two voices highlights the speaker's mental model of the role

of teachers. In assessing students' progress, teachers not only need to use a variety of

tools or methods, but they must also train students how to take assessments and

specifically help them learn to work more efficiently.

> *S9: (In addition to timed tests and quizzes, what other ways of checking your*
>
> *progress do you experience? How often? Do you commonly experience other*
>
> *ways?)*
>
> *Not really. No. And I think the time, here especially at this school—uh, the*
>
> *teachers give the students more time than they need. I believe that they have to*
>
> *learn how to be faster.*

The final voice, actually the same person, recognizes that teachers do have choices

regarding approaches, methods, and techniques, and that such choices sometimes do not

allow adequate time for learners to practice.

> *S10: Sometimes teachers just, you know, avoid—not avoid—by the way that they*
>
> *decide to teach, doesn't allow us to practice more. (Right. OK.) Which is not*
>
> *helping us to, you know, to understand or… (Get enough practice.) Get enough*
>
> *practice in order to make that rule become more natural.*

Any experienced teacher would agree (in fact, almost anyone would agree) that becoming "more natural" or fluent with language not only requires sufficient practice, but it is also the *de facto* goal of perhaps every language learner. This person observes that teachers' decisions about how they teach can, in fact, provide insufficient practice, undermining the achievement of that goal.

2. Pressure

This category includes varied and occasionally somewhat conflicting responses from teachers and administrators. Only one person felt that the general approach to grading is too lenient, but this sentiment was echoed or shared at least partially in the voice of the final speaker who cautioned against "fluffy" assessments and giving easy As. Two people felt that typically too much formal, high-pressure assessment is going on at our school. One felt the opposite way: that our school's approach to standardized testing is not a problem in contrast to larger trends toward standardization of testing in the U.S. Another focused on the requirements of our students' target contexts, which include regular formalized tests. One person focused on the necessity of grading, not only in school, but also in the broader context of society, i.e. the need to fit in with the norms of a much larger complex system. Still another noted that while most students attending intensive English programs such as ours had parental pressure fueling their decision to come study in the U.S., they mostly lacked intrinsic motivation, and this hindered their success in school.

According to Peter Senge, People "pay attention to different details" because of their mental models:

"Differences between mental models explain why two people can observe the

same event and describe it differently: They are paying attention to different

details" (Senge 2012: 99).

Teachers' voices regarding pressure:

While only one of the following voices mentions the need for adherence to standards, this

topic comes up regularly in faculty meetings at our school. As mentioned above, the

final voice, T10, echoes T1, but in a very different way, highlighting both sides of the

issue. Again, this says something about how mental models work as they bring into

focus different perspectives on *pressure* and what it means for our school. Perhaps a

common thread among all of the following voices is the consideration of extrinsic factors

that influence students' motivation.

Lack of pressure **or** *lack of challenge*

As mentioned above, this first voice draws attention to a recurring topic of discussion

among teachers, one, which several consider to be an issue.

> *T1: Our grading is generally too easy/lenient. A 'B' should be considered*
>
> *average, rather than a 'C'.*

Pressure **and** *creativity* **or** *freedom to make mistakes*

The following two voices seem to agree that the pressure of formal assessments,

with their focus on getting answers right, discourages beneficial attitudes and behaviors,

such as taking risks and allowing oneself to make mistakes, which are both important for

learners' progress.

T2: I think that too much formal assessment stifles students' risk-taking, their

chance to interact with the language in a creative way.

T3: I like the idea of self-assessment. It can lower anxiety about mistakes

because students can work privately.

Helpfully, the second speaker offers "self-assessment" as a possible strategy. Other

teachers might immediately counter that self-assessment is not rigorous enough, or that

since it does not fit the expectations of many students, as a practical tool for teachers, it

does not work. While such observations may be true, and teachers may have examples

and personal experiences to which they may refer in backing up their concerns, the

discipline of mental models challenges participants to allow all perspectives to be

considered. "The core task of the discipline of mental models is to bring tacit

assumptions and attitudes to the surface so people can explore and talk about their

differences and misunderstandings with minimal defensiveness" (Senge 2012: 99-100).

The following four voices seem to highlight extrinsic factors that either serve or

fail to motivate learners. T4 refers to students who may not want to be here in the first

place. T5 emphasizes students' "target context", and how this needs to inform decisions

about teaching. T6 and T7 seem to be in agreement about the necessity of grading as a

motivator, both within our school, and within the broader society.

Parental pressure

Parental pressure is a common extrinsic factor motivating young international

students to come to the U.S. But how well does it serve them? It is interesting that T4

chooses the word "confess" here to hint at the tone of the conversations had with

students:

T4: I meet a lot of students who confess that they did not want to come the United

States—their fathers made them or their parents pressure them toward academic

success.

Pressure related to testing

T5: If students' target context (e.g. university-level study) requires test-taking

skills, then taking tests is a necessary feature of any program that promises to

help them to succeed.

Pressure, grading, and *the norms of society*

T6: I feel that grades are necessary. I think that there has to be some way to

determine where people stand. Whether it's a society or it's a school. It's a

reward system or a punishment system – whichever side you're on. And

sometimes that's the feedback that you need which forces you to choose

something different down the road.

Pressure as *a motivator*

T7: Grading serves as a necessary motivating factor.

Pressure and *testing*

The final three voices seem to take more of an overall system view. The first two,

highlight summative and other "higher stakes" formal assessments that students

experience at our school.

T8: I don't have a problem with our approach to standardized testing at our

school – it's not used to the extreme degree that it's used elsewhere.

T9: So, high-stakes testing here… you know, (there are) some concerns that

we've gotten into just summative—a certain number of summative assessments…

Consider now, the same teacher, T9's final comment.

> *T10: Of course, the complaint there was… and not just in our setting but in other*
>
> *settings, is that some teachers are giving lots of "fluffy" "fun" "kind"*
>
> *assessments and giving As on them. And when it comes time to figure out the*
>
> *grade, all those "fluffy" things outweigh some of those "stronger" assessments –*
>
> *those summative things—and the student passes when they shouldn't have passed.*
>
> *So, we've swung the other way of trying to make sure nobody gets through the*
>
> *class unless they can get through these assessments… which doesn't feel good to*
>
> *anybody either, so… It's that fear of moving someone on who doesn't know.*

While this last teacher's voice apparently concurs with T1's concern about leniency in grading, the primary concern here seems to be an awareness that the system has in fact "swung the other way" to rely more heavily on summative assessments. T10 recognizes how this trend has a negative emotional impact on all participants, not just students.

Students' voices regarding pressure:

In contrast to the teachers and administrators, as a group, the students were much more unified in that their responses generally highlighted an inverse relationship between *pressure experienced as "stress "* and *performance*.

Pressure* and *student performance

While only four voices are here featured in connection with the subcategory of pressure and performance, all seven respondents were in agreement about the need to minimize the experience of stress. S1 states this simply and directly:

S1: Students do better with less stress.

S2 sees the balancing of these two as the teacher's responsibility. Most teachers would probably agree. S2 suggests an alternative, "Maybe the best way to grade students is…", and then describes his/her perception of the way stress is experienced by students, including details about the excessive duration. Again, this is the person's mental model, which may or may not be the same as that of other students, and yet it affects not only this person's opinion of the way the system functions, but also his/her behavior within the system.

> *S2: I think sometimes tests put us under stress, and sometimes we don't do our best. Maybe the best way to grade students is classwork and homework. I think this is better. If students are serious, this will be clear for teachers. They don't have to put students under stress by taking tests—for two hours, for one hour—and students will feel comfortable. It's better; they will feel more relaxed and they will do their best.*

Similarly, S3 agrees that it is important to decrease the stress experienced by learners, but frames the issue in a different way, highlighting a difference between "bad tests" that "include the whole information", or in other words, test too much at one time, and better tests that assess students' progress with less material. Clearly, S3 is articulating how summative tests can support learners' progress if they are both designed well and timed right.

> *S3: The final tests include the whole information, the whole knowledge, in the term, so usually it's a bad test because we never remember all the information from the whole term. (So, tests that are too big are not really helpful?) Yeah, usually one test a week (is good) so we can remember. (I know some teachers*

give a midterm test. Do you think it would be better to give a midterm and then a

smaller final?) Yes.

We hear from S2 again in S4, and this was his/her final comment on the issue:

S4: This is my first time to meet friendly teachers, but as for grades—it's the

same stress, same problem.

This comment is interesting because the speaker is clearly making a comparison with

other schools from his/her past experience. This is perhaps also an understanding that the

issue is a systemic one.

Pressure **and** *motivation*

The following voices see the necessity for balance, where pressure is used as a motivator

but is not allowed to dominate and upset the balance in favor of stress.

S5: Students do better with less stress. But students wouldn't study without tests

and quizzes as motivation.

S6: My previous school didn't have tests, books, homework, etc. I liked it. I

learned a lot. I liked it because there was less pressure and we felt that we were

going to have fun every day. Motivation was not a problem at that school.

S7: However, a certain amount of pressure can help you to take your learning

more seriously. This school has a good balance between practice and testing.

S6 and S7 were actually spoken by the same person. It is notable that he/she ends on a

positive note describing another important balance "between practice and testing" which

in his/her opinion, our school has in fact achieved. Since processes are also elements or

parts of system structure, this person is actually describing both an explicit feature of that

structure and an implicit perspective on it, now made explicit. Clearly, other respondents

would not necessarily agree, each having their own mental models.

3. Motivation

Regarding *motivation,* nearly all teachers formed some kind of connection between

students' *motivation* and *assessment*. The fact that teachers tied student *motivation* to

issues of *assessment* invites a brief review of assessment-related terminology: two broad,

basic categories of assessment, *informal* and *formal assessment*; as well as two functions

of assessment, *formative* and *summative*.

> "**Informal assessment** can take a number of forms, starting with incidental,
>
> unplanned comments and responses, along with coaching and other impromptu
>
> feedback to the student" (Brown and Abeywickrama 2010).

According to the same authors, informal assessment is often "embedded in classroom

tasks" and is "virtually always nonjudgmental" in that teachers "are not making ultimate

decisions about the student's performance;" teachers "are simply trying to be a good

coach."

> In contrast, "**formal assessments** are exercises or procedures specifically
>
> designed to tap into a store house of skills and knowledge. They are systematic,
>
> planned sampling techniques constructed to give teacher and student an appraisal
>
> of student achievement" (Brown and Abeywickrama 2010).

In short, informal assessments are supportive, nonjudgmental, and informative ways of

helping students step-by-step in their learning process, and formal assessments are more

controlled, more cumulative, and more concerned with (and careful to ensure) the

accuracy of the results. Two broad functions or purposes of assessment include *formative* and *summative* assessment.

> **Formative assessment** involves "evaluating students in the process of 'forming' their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process. The key to such formation is the delivery (by the teacher) and internalization (by the student) of appropriate feedback on performance, with an eye toward the future continuation (or formation) of learning" (Brown and Abeywickrama 2010).

Clearly, *formative assessment* is concerned with creating opportunities for learners to receive supportive feedback about their language use. There is an obvious connection between *formative* and *informal* assessment with the shared focus on supporting the learner's development. According to the same authors, "For all practical purposes, virtually all kinds of informal assessment are (or should be) formative." Clearly, informal assessment without supportive feedback would not qualify as formative. In contrast, *summative assessment* looks at what students have achieved after a certain period of time:

> "**Summative assessment** aims to measure, or summarize, what a student has grasped and typically occurs a the end of a course or unit of instruction. A summation of what a student has learned implies looking back and taking stock of how well that student has accomplished objectives, but it does not necessarily point the way to future progress" (Brown and Abeywickrama 2010).

> With the above assessment concepts in mind to help frame the discussion, an

overview of teachers' responses reveals five different threads. Two teachers saw a strong

connection between *motivation* as evidenced by students' degree of engagement and the *accuracy* or *validity* of the associated assessments. In other words, they consider highly motivated and engaged students as being more able to show what they can really do.

Several teachers contrasted *formal*, more *traditional* approaches to assessment, such as tests and quizzes, with *alternative assessments.* They tied *alternative assessments* to *fun* and *adding interest,* or to *reducing tension,* but seemed wary of assessments that might lack *rigor* or that might be somewhat *intimidating* for a teacher to manage.

Interestingly, two people connected motivation with *formal assessment*, but expressed completely opposite opinions, describing either a very positive relationship between the two, or a highly negative one. In only one case was motivation tied directly to *grades,* but this connection was also made in the previous section by several other teachers under the category of *pressure*. One person emphasized the importance of *intrinsic motivation* by reflecting on his/her own language learning in contrast to that of current students.

As outlined above, teachers' comments touch on several other concepts related to assessment: validity, reliability, traditional assessment and alternative assessment. The first two are important principles of assessment. Brown and Abeywickrama cite the following helpful definition of *validity*:

"The extent to which inferences made from assessment results are appropriate, meaningful, and useful in terms of the purpose of the assessment".

They also explain how, in contrast to validity, *reliability* has more to do with possible "measurement errors" associated with a particular assessment which may occur due to

various factors such as the participants involved, the context of the assessment, and the quality/nature of the assessment itself. Obviously, these two concepts are closely linked, but in the discussion which follows, it may be helpful to recall their differences to better understand participants' unique perspectives.

In terms of teachers' comments about different kinds of assessment, it may be helpful now to consider some characterizations of *traditional* and *alternative assessment,* again, made by Brown and Abeywickrama. In contrast to "traditional test designs", **alternative assessments** offer "alternatives that are more authentic in their elicitation of meaningful communication." Because they are focused on communicative use of language, alternative assessments may bring important benefits to both students and teachers in the form of "more useful feedback to students, the potential for intrinsic motivation, and ultimately a more complete description of a student's ability" (Brown and Abeywickrama 2010).

Teachers' voices regarding motivation:

The first two voices below are noteworthy as sort of polar opposites. They represent the perpetual challenge that all teachers face whenever they are required to participate in the cultural and institutional practice we all refer to as "the faculty meeting". Setting the humor aside, Senge explains why considering ideas that stand in stark contrast to one's own can be so difficult: "In any new experience, most people are drawn to take in and remember only the information that reinforces their existing mental models" (Senge 2012: 100). So, the following represent a possible instance where the discipline of mental models—learning to explore them with "minimal defensiveness"— applies and could prove beneficial. Ultimately, finding ways to express and entertain

divergent perspectives is essential to better understanding and identifying avenues for change.

Motivation **and** *formal assessments*

T1 apparently sees formal assessment in a completely positive light as not only a source of motivation, but also as an opportunity to provide students with feedback. In contrast, T2 sees the practice as fraught in regard to motivating students.

> *T1: Formal assessments, like tests, pressure students and motivate them, making them work harder, and they give students feedback.*

> *T2: Using tests and quizzes to motivate students to be accountable for their work, i.e. dangling this carrot of a grade, is something that this teacher does not agree with.*

Any outsider to this discussion might agree with either or both of the above two opinions. But how could these two teachers begin to consider and explore the other's perspective when people typically only "take in and remember" information that reinforces their own perspective? Since, as Senge explains "…unexamined mental models limit people's ability to change" such a hurdle would need to be overcome.

Motivation **and** *grades*

T3 adopts a more matter-of-fact tone in acknowledging grading as a kind of necessary evil. It may also be important to note that this opinion is expressed similarly to a maxim or truism. It is a simple but powerful statement, which might easily come into conflict with other simple but powerful beliefs about the classroom.

> *T3: Grading serves as a necessary motivating factor.*

Motivation **through** *alternative assessments*

This next section's voices center around the subcategory of *motivation* and *alternative assessment*. Voices T4 and T5 were spoken by the same person. This teacher sets up two contrasting pairs: "fun" and "life-giving" vs. stress, and "fun" vs. rigor. The second voice, T5, seems to hold out hope of striking a balance. In other words, it seems that this person believes that it is possible to design fun assessments that are also academically rigorous.

> *T4: Alternative assessments are more fun and the students recognize that. They are more life-giving than the kind that stresses them out.*

> *T5: But at the same time, it's a tricky line—having a "fun" kind of assessment but making sure it's still academically rigorous enough to count it.*

The following voice comes at the same issue from a different angle that includes both a description of regular practice and an admission of discomfort.

> *T6: I think of "teaching tools" vs. "assessment tools". I use alternative assessments for providing feedback, so they are often not graded. I love the idea of alternative assessments in general, but it's also somewhat intimidating.*

This person avoids the challenge highlighted by the previous teacher by choosing not to grade alternative assessments. Instead, they function as practical "teaching tools" that are used formatively to provide students with feedback on their work. Although these teachers express different attitudes about assessment, it seems likely that since they both share positive opinions about alternative assessment, they might not only be able to offer one another helpful insights, but they might also be more open to sharing other opinions—other mental models.

"It should be noted here that considerably more time and higher institutional budgets are required to administer and score assessments that presuppose more subjective evaluation, more individualization, ad more interaction in the process of offering feedback" (Brown and Abeywickrama 2010).

The next voice simply ties variety of assessment to students' degree of interest. It is similar to the voice of T3 in the way it is stated concisely and firmly as a fact of the classroom. Although it is perhaps less controversial than T3's statement above, it is also likely that this opinion might not be viewed or valued in the same way by different teachers. In such a case, various questions arise: What does variety look like to this person? What might it look like to others who teach within the same school? Does it have to look the same?

T7: Variety makes class more interesting.

The following voices were once again shared by one person. In response to questions that centered around alternative assessment, this teacher offers vivid descriptions of past activities, remembering them fondly and in great detail.

T8: One person would have to write a biography about their partner, and take a picture—and we made a whole book and distributed it around the whole school so everyone could get to know the level two students. They loved it.

T9: We would have cooking classes, when they were studying imperatives, they would write recipes in an imperative form. They would do the cooking at home, and then we would have a big party with all the food that they had written the recipe for. Different kinds of things. It was a different way of having them— instead of a test, they would be producing something that was very concrete and

> *very real. And fun. I think learning should be fun. It should be made to be as*
>
> *much fun as possible, especially in the lower levels when they are really*
>
> *struggling; to do something that's fun takes some of the tension off.*

The teacher speaks nostalgically of past teaching and learning experiences, which can no longer be managed within the school's schedule. These anecdotes may serve to highlight a preferred communication style of this particular person. They may also serve as examples of this person's mental models—the "tacit assumptions and attitudes" that determine what a person sees (Senge 2012: 99). Here, for example, these might include: valuing experiential learning over testing; valuing relationships and project-type activities that help build a sense of community among teachers and students.

Motivation **and** *intrinsic factors*

The following voice draws a start contrast between current students and his/her own intrinsic motivation:

> *T10: The big difference for me is I was clearly, extremely motivated. I just love*
>
> *learning languages.*

Motivation **and** *validity*

The following voice relates learners' "enthusiasm" and degree of engagement in an assessment activity to the accuracy of that assessment in measuring "their ability". This comment touches on several principles of language assessment, including validity and student reliability. Voices T12 and T13 seem to agree.

> *T11: My best experience with an assessment: I knew from the amount of 'buy in'*
>
> *and enthusiasm among the students that they were giving their best effort – their*

motivation helped affirm that the test was a more accurate assessment of their

ability.

T12: I think that students, if they are really caught up in some project, can really

do a lot to demonstrate their learning, but which might not fit into a more

standard practice that everybody in the classroom has to do the same way.

T13: When I think about just the excitement that that photography contest

generated, or the essays that we have up on the wall… those are things that… and

the word wall in the back hall with the writing… where I've seen students really

get engaged… and the trick is, how can that be not just an extra activity but part

of the learning and seen as a way to get at it.

It appears here that T11 might have a possible answer to T13's question. The

particular "best experience with an assessment" that T11 recalls might be a worthwhile

starting point for a conversation. The danger is, however, that T11's story might not

match T13's or other teachers' expectations of what an alternative assessment "should

be". Would T11's story be seen by colleagues as "part of the learning" and "a way to get

at it"? In other words, if T11's story and mental model does not fit other mental models,

then does that mean T11's alternative assessment is not a good one? Is there room in this

teaching context for diverse mental models to be made more explicit and be allowed to

coexist? Without knowing the exact content of the assessment that T11 refers to, it is

difficult to tell. The test would surely be whether colleagues could succeed in exploring

their models thoroughly without dismissing any one perspective.

Motivation **and** ***goals***

Voice T14 comes at motivation from a different angle, where greater responsibility is placed with students to identify their own goals but also align them with the course they are taking.   Students are also tasked to do their own ongoing self-assessment.

> *T14: I'm doing a goal-setting activity with my students where they set a goal from the outcomes for the class, and then they have to determine what they've done both during and outside of class that helps them meet that outcome. They have to track where they think they are week after week, including what they still need to do—it's like a dialog-journal between each student and me. The dialog journal is especially effective with most of the students—once they get into the ongoing dialog with me, it becomes a very worthwhile goal for them.*

One of the students who participated in this study happens to have taken T14's course. The student spoke quite positively about the experience. It would likely be very helpful for T14 to hear from that student, and vice versa.

Students' voices regarding motivation:

Students drew various interesting connections between motivation and learning. Several felt that there is a strong relationship between the *variety* of classroom activity, including the ways students are assessed, and students' motivation or desire to engage the learning process. In general, emphatic responses were made in regard to motivation and *testing* or *grading*. Interviewees spoke of different types of motivation, offering examples of both instrumental and integrative motivation that powered their own efforts. They also recognized the *support* provided by *teachers* as well as the impact of the *system structure* itself, with one person citing the important role that the intensive

program of study has played in making his/her language learning seem more practical

and goal-oriented.

Motivation **and** *variety*

The first two voices here cite two very different kinds of assessments as good

sources of motivation for learners.

> S1: *Formal tests and quizzes provide motivation; grades can be motivating.*

> S2: *Alternative assessments are good for engaging students; teamwork motivates*
> *and exposes students to other perspectives.*

These observations by S1 and S2 seem to be non-exclusive. Whereas other voices have

pointed out shortcomings of formal and alternative assessment, these statements seem to

acknowledge the utility and benefit of these different types of assessment without

excluding other "pieces of the puzzle". In contrast, the next voice bemoans both the

focus on grading and the use of quizzes and tests, framing the issue as a systemic one.

The amount of detail here clearly shows this person's perception of the problem and also

his/her attitude toward formal testing and quizzing. It would seem that a balance of both

formal and alternative assessment (and perhaps informal, as well) might better suit this

person's idea of what a school should be doing.

> S3: *(Should teachers experiment with different kinds of assessments?)*
> *Yes, to make class more interesting. They should focus on how their students can*
> *improve, but in this school and many other schools, they focus just on grades. If*
> *they just focus on quizzes and tests, I will focus with them on the same thing. I*
> *will forget if I improve in this week or in this term. I will just lose time. Students*
> *may also just get lucky on a test—the test won't show their ability.*

S3's comment is notable for its awareness of systemic features and behaviors, including the behaviors and choices of teachers, as well as the way it recognizes a core issue related to the current system structure that greatly influences S3's own behavior. The emphatically expressed details about being distracted from one's own progress, of losing time, and of questioning the reliability of formal testing all show how strongly this person feels about an excessive focus on grades and testing. Interestingly, this student happens to be very successful in terms of grades, achieving consistent As in classes at the IEP. It is likely that most teachers would be surprised to hear about the apparent struggle and stress that S3 has endured.

In contrast, consider the following two voices:

S4: I like surprise quizzes because it doesn't matter if the students studied or not—the teacher knows (by the results) if his/her teaching has been helping the students to learn.

S5: Surprise quizzes also help students to be more serious about the subjects— they will study everyday.

S4 and S5 focus on the practicality of surprise quizzes, and how they offer benefits to both teachers and students.   In fact, S4 sees surprise quizzes as a test of the teacher's own work. Not only do these voices offer more "pieces of the puzzle" of assessment approaches mentioned earlier, but they take multi-faceted view that might be worth taking a bit further. S4 seems to imply that a teacher has a responsibility to help the students to learn *during class time*. Whereas a teacher might ask, "What are my students doing to learn the material?", according to S4, students might think, "How has my teacher been helping me to learn?"

Motivation* and *grades

> *S6: You know, I'm always waiting for my grades. Sometimes I can't sleep. So, I think it's a very bad feeling when I wait for grades.*
>
> *S7: They are helpful but not really helpful. (Can you explain?) Because when we take a test, and we get a high score, it's like it's for fun. Yeah. But it depends on the test measures how the students' work is. (So, focusing on the high score may be fun.) Yeah. (But it may not tell or give enough information about the students' learning? Is that what you mean?) Like I said, the test just focuses on some main points, so, some students just study for the main points—just to get a high score—and they forget the other.*

S6 seems to really suffer from anxiety about grades. With this amount of stress, one wonders how much time and energy this person has left to simply enjoy or feel good about his/her learning process. In contrast, S7 seems to see the potential for students to be equally distracted from their learning process by focusing on the "fun" of trying to achieve the highest grades. S7 sees a limitation of testing and observes that formalized assessment may force learners to "focus on some main points" and "forget the other" information "just to get a high score". This observation here happens to be highly systems-oriented, highlighting the core principle of system *structure* influencing system *behavior*.

Motivation* and *intrinsic motivation

The following voice outlines a mental model about learning which recognizes the importance of intrinsic motivation to a language learner's success. S8 describes

independent choices made about strategies to ensure continued progress and also

indicates an awareness of a broader context and timescale for learning.

> *S8: I read everything in English—even before I came here. I speak English; I*
>
> *listen to English, you know… because I wanted to improve my English skills over*
>
> *time. (Yeah, do you think your… it sounds like you have developed an individual*
>
> *approach to…) And this is what distracts students from their learning: they focus*
>
> *too much on their grades. They just want to pass. But passing is not what you*
>
> *really want—especially when it comes to language—because you want to use it*
>
> *forever. It's meaningless: when you just pass, then the next day you forget*
>
> *everything that you've learned.*

What an interesting way to frame the desired outcome of the language learner! "Passing

is not what you really want—especially when it comes to language—because you want to

use it forever." S8's comments raise the following questions:

- How can teachers help the experience of *passing* a test or other assessment (or

  even an entire course) to be more meaningful for learners—so that they do not

  simply "forget everything that they've learned" as soon as they are finished?

- More importantly, how do teachers help students acquire language

  knowledge/skills/fluency that they can use throughout their lives?

Motivation **and** *testing*

Recall the voice of S6 who spoke of chronic anxiety in connection with being

graded. Similarly, below, voice S9 reveals an aversion to being "tested and checked".

Recall also S7, who described the distraction of chasing high grades and the limitations

of tests that, understandably and by design, often focus on main ideas and miss the

broader picture of the language (or other subject matter). Likewise, S9 speaks of the

need to focus on the resulting ability or proficiency of the learner. While they express

themselves differently, S7 and S9 seem to agree that the structure of a system such as a

language school, including the processes that are in place, has a significant affect on the

attitudes and behavior, as well as the learning outcomes of participants there.

> *S9: Actually, I hate to be tested and checked. I think success is the way to track,*
>
> *you know. (What would that look like? For you?) Like, for example, I have*
>
> *never graduated from any English school, but everybody can tell that I speak very*
>
> *good English. (Right.) It's not the scores or the grades, it's just the*
>
> *performance—or the effort that you put to improve a certain skill… and, I don't*
>
> *know, it's like people do not like that but, it's not about the grade or the degree*
>
> *that you're gonna have, it's just… (Your performance.) Your performance, and*
>
> *how do you use your English, and for what purpose… it's… I don't know. People*
>
> *disagree with that, I know, the majority of people disagree with that, but… Like,*
>
> *trust me, I've never graduated from any English school—I don't have any degree*
>
> *in English—but I do take vacation English courses, for example. I used to do*
>
> *that.*

Clearly, S9 is an experienced language learner who offers many detailed insights about

his/her own learning. Recall voice S8, who described having chosen certain strategies

about "reading everything in English" before coming to the U.S. and focusing on

performance rather than becoming distracted by grades. In fact, both S8 and S9 happen

to be the same very practical, individual. Here, this person describes another strategy of

taking "vacation English courses", pointing to more of an ongoing commitment to

learning English. It is notable that this person perceives that "the majority of people"

disagree with his/her more practical focus. Perhaps this comment raises the question: Are

success for the student and success for the teacher complementary or at odds?

Motivation **and** *support*

Next is a touching perspective, which also demonstrates awareness of the

influence and importance of a system's context.

> *S10: This whole experience from 2013 up to now: I first felt nervous, and I didn't*
>
> *believe that I could improve, but my teachers supported me. If I had to do it*
>
> *again, I would come back. U.S. culture is more supportive (than his/her home*
>
> *culture).*

Motivation **and** *practicality/instrumental motivation*

While *integrative goals* are often highlighted as more influential than

instrumental ones, most teachers would agree that learners who can articulate clearly

their academic goals—i.e. the need to pass a certain standardized test or get accepted into

a particular university—such students often exhibit greater direction and success in their

learning at the IEP. Here, voice S11 seems to bridge both types of motivation, but

perhaps focuses on the instrumental side of learning how to participate in actual

university classes, by doing so.

> *S11: I like to have assessments with university students and teachers at the*
>
> *university – to teach us about the university and what is the language that is*
>
> *needed there—how it's different. (So, you would like to have assessments that*
>
> *model the way they assess students at university.) Exactly. And working with*
>
> *partners from the university or going to interview a doctor/professor at the*

university—it depends on the students' major, but it has to be on the campus and in the environment of the university. (So, actually observing or attending classes.) Yeah. (Even in a short term like we have?) Yes. Listening to one lecture and having questions and interviewing, at, let's say, CCD or any university. And the students attend a lecture there, take notes and ask the professor some questions, and ask the students some questions, and then… (So, participate.) Yeah, participate in the university.

This person is quite clear about the kind of learning experiences he/she would like to have. He/she recognizes the need to learn through experiences in the actual target context of the university. Perhaps this reflects an awareness, of this person, about his/her own challenges with pragmatics and using English more appropriately in context. It is significant that the IEP where this person now studies regularly provides this type of practical learning experience outside the language school, and therefore meets his/her mental model of education. The next voice, S12, echoes this sentiment about the importance for the learner to have a target context in mind.

S12: (Is there anything different about your experience here at this school?) Yes, because here we study English to go to university, so we think English is very necessary for us— for learning. (Is this different than, say, your experience in high school?) Yeah, of course (laughter) because in high school, we just study for the test, we don't use it for life, in real life. (So, does it feel like your experience here is more focused on your goals?) Yeah.

The reference to learning a foreign language in high school highlights a very common experience for both teachers and students at an IEP. Who among teachers and

administrators fails to regret the years spent learning a particular language that seemed to

amount to no more than a body of passive knowledge that could never quite become

active? Here, this learner's mental model highlights the need for using language "for life,

in real life".   Now, recall the many other voices already heard that in various ways place

equally great value on practical use of language. Consider the many other voices that

seem to perceive a different focus on the part of teachers or the overall system of the

language school.

Motivation **and** *systemic structure*

The next voice recognizes the benefit of an intensive program of study over

others.

> *S13: (Has your experience at our school affected your attitudes about learning?)*
>
> *Yeah, because this school is the full-time class, so always focused on study. And*
>
> *like me, I don't study without the teachers, so teachers are like the motivation to*
>
> *study: they give homework, so I do homework. If I don't do homework, I don't*
>
> *learn anything, so without teachers, I will not study anything (laughter). (So, this*
>
> *full-time study—do you think it's necessary for you?) Yeah.*

Clearly, this person is well aware of his/her own needs for extrinsic motivation. In this

case, the presence of teachers in their role of facilitating learning through the assignment

of homework provides a necessary source of motivation. This learner suggests that,

rather humorously, "without teachers, I will not study anything".

4. Variety

For the teachers interviewed, the category of *variety* gathers a range of ideas and

opinions that, in general, portray a shared recognition of the need for variation in the

IEP's approach to facilitating students' learning and assessing their progress. In general, *variety* was consistently tied to meeting *learner needs*. Simultaneously, from the responses there emerges a general admission of the challenge that providing such variety actually poses to teachers who work within a very limited timeframe or tight program schedule. As a result, the perceived *limitations* of the system were also fairly prominent in the discussion. *Mental models* came up again with the mention of the need for *tolerance* among teachers to allow for aspects of *variety* to be discussed more openly and with greater acceptance. This ties in with Senge's explanation of the discipline of mental models: "Two types of skills are central to this practice: reflection (slowing down our thinking processes to become aware of how we form our mental models) and inquiry (holding conversations where we openly share views and develop knowledge about each other's assumptions)" (Senge 2012:101).

Teachers' voices regarding variety:

Variety of assessment

While speaking about assessment, each of the first seven voices touches on the theme of variety. However, each perspective is different and highlights certain values, attitudes, and beliefs about assessment that seem to be of significance to that person.

Already, real-world, practical use of language has been mentioned by several students as a necessary feature of their language learning experience.   T1 clearly agrees:

> *T1: Written tests are not enough. Interviews, writing and any tasks that are*
> *closer to real-world use are better.*

Authenticity is an important principle of assessment practice, and so T1's statement is backed up by theory, especially if the learning outcomes are targeting

communicative competence (Brown & Abeywickrama 2010). It also seems that T1 is

focused on the student's needs rather than those of the teacher. Interestingly, while the

following statement by T2 seems to contradict that of T1, there is clearly a shared focus

on the needs of the learner.

> T2: *Written tests may be good enough for some learners, but it's hard to know*
>
> *without giving different kinds of assessments (for comparison).*

This student-centered perspective emerges as a common thread through the remaining

five voices. T3 focuses on the need to cater to "different learning styles":

> T3: *Variety of assessment is very important to meet the needs of students—each*
>
> *has different learning styles and skills.*

T4 continues this focus on meeting students' needs in the idea of "formative

assessments", which obviously are intended to provide useful feedback to learners about

their progress in a more focused or limited way, as opposed to summative or cumulative

assessments.

> T4: *Formative assessments are most important, summative are less so—but each*
>
> *kind has its value.*

> The thread continues with an opinion about the kind of assessment scenario

teachers should avoid:

> T5: *The worst kind of assessment is summative with no feedback and no*
>
> *opportunity to improve.*

Again, the focus is on the learner's needs, and T5 uses wording that seems to empathize

with their experience: "assessment… with no feedback and no opportunity to improve."

T6 continues this student-centered perspective, introducing a belief about a perceived

challenge that learners face: The tendency to view language in a "compartmentalized" way rather than a holistic way. T6 sees a role for variety in combatting this tendency by utilizing assessments that integrate skills and provide "a more accurate reflection" of real-world language use.

> *T6: That particular type of assessment that integrates the skills is valuable especially for the students because I think they really do see things compartmentalized, e.g. seeing grammar as a separate subject from reading and writing. When they go to university, they do need to use all the skills in tandem, so if we could do more assessments that integrated the skills, it would help them see the relationship between their classes, and it would be better preparation for what they have to do at university—a more accurate reflection of how they'll use the language.*

T6 comments on the benefit that such integrated variety would also have in helping learners see connections "between their classes". The implication here is that, for students, seeing such connections may not be the norm. A further implication is that changes in system structure are necessary to influence the behavior of participants, in this case, the students. Note that this teacher does not suggest simply telling students to see things in a less compartmentalized way. In this way, yet another person implicitly recognizes the core systems concept about the relationship between structure and behavior.

The final voice to speak about variety, T7, seems to shift to a more general perspective that may encompass the needs of both students and teachers:

T7: I don't think there is a most important way. It goes back to variety. I think

that having a variety of ways to assess is more important than any particular kind

of assessment

Variety **and** *perceived system limitations*

Another subcategory of *variety* emerged which highlights certain perceived

limitations of the system. Here, T8 continues the discussion about assessment types.

T8: I just don't see there being that many really big choices for our program. I

don't want to see standardized tests—that's a waste of time and money here.

Some alternative assessments may work well in particular courses or levels, but

not likely across the whole program.

T9 mentions the need for greater integration once again, but seems to look beyond

the classroom and at a slightly higher level of the system structure in implying the need

for more coordination between teachers.

T9: I wish we could have more integration between classes to help facilitate more

integrated tasks being used for assessment.

T9 also reveals a perceived dependency of a teacher's ability to utilize more "integrated

tasks" in their classes upon the degree of "integration between classes", in other words,

between their classes and those of other teachers within the overall program. Given that

most teachers plan their classes independently, such dependence might prove to be a

significant obstacle to integrating language skills. However, one might ask: What's

stopping a particular teacher from teaching lessons that integrate the four skills? Voice

T10 brings the focus back to time limitations inherent in the system. Perhaps such

structural limitations as *time,* which happens to be mentioned by T8 above, lie behind

these perceived limitations of the system.

> *T10: Yes, I would like to give a greater variety of assessments, e.g. in L3, more*
>
> *practice with note taking. But time limits options for assessments. Also,*
>
> *regarding the number of assessments, if teachers only do a few, it's hard to track*
>
> *progress. For example, three summative assessments are better than two.*

Additionally, T10 mentions the need for teachers to utilize enough assessments to

accurately follow learners' progress. This has been a common discussion at the IEP. It

not only touches on several general principles of assessment such as validity and

reliability, but also raises more specific questions about students' perceptions of fairness.

Variety and *students' needs*

The following voice, T11, reiterates the need for teachers to take into

consideration the different learning styles of their students and to cater to them by

providing a variety of assessment types. T11 also highlights the value of variety in

providing teachers with "more perspectives on students' learning". Finally, T11

reiterates the part that variety plays in increasing the level of interest for everyone in the

classroom. So, T11's perspective on variety clearly encompasses the needs of both

learners and teachers.

> *T11: Written tests, worksheets, impromptu speeches; I try to make sure there is a*
>
> *variety. Variety is important, obviously, because everybody has different learning*
>
> *styles. It also shows if students are capable of viewing information in a different*

way and gives the teacher more perspectives on students' learning. Variety makes

class more interesting.

The next voice highlights the challenge that teachers face in assessing students

from varied backgrounds. While T12 does not explicitly suggest assessing students

differently, he/she does "take into account their differences" in order to "assess them in a

way that will help them". This idea that assessment should *help* learners rather than

perhaps just *evaluate* them is another example of a more student-centered perspective.

This teacher also mentions the students' "target culture" or target context as a factor that

informs the teacher's approach to assessment.

> *T12: (Think of the ways that teachers check students' progress. What do you*
>
> *think is most helpful?)*
>
> *It varies. Student's background is key—taking students' background into account*
>
> *is important. But how you assess students who come from various backgrounds is*
>
> *a challenge. How do you assess them equally? The situation is difficult. As a*
>
> *teacher, I try to take into account their differences. We have to assess them in a*
>
> *way that will help them. Again, their target culture, the university, requires*
>
> *written assessment.*

T13 echoes the two previous voices in considering the diverse needs of learners.

T13 also reiterates T11's belief about the teacher's need for a variety of "perspectives on

students' learning". T13 also raises a question about a standardized approach to

assessment, which echoes T12's attempts to "take into account their (students')

differences".

T13: (What do you consider to be unhelpful?) Well, I was going to say

checklists, although I've used checklists. The reason I wanted to say checklists is

that not every student is exactly the same. So, if you're checking people off, and

they've all done it exactly the same, is that correct? In certain ways it is, e.g. if

you're using the s-ending on a verb, that might work for that sort of thing. I think

every type of assessment has a niche where it fits.

In a sense, the above three voices are basically saying the same things, just in different

ways.

Variety **and** *collegial engagement (and acceptance)*

The diversity of voices within any organization presents both challenges and

opportunities. T14 outlines an approach to teaching that includes collaborative

experimentation and non-judgmental observation and feedback.

T14: And I would say that (we) teachers should experiment, not in isolation, but

through collegial engagement. I think we need to trust each other more and talk

more about what we're doing and get away from judging it as good or bad. But

saying, "Huh. Let me know what you learn from it." And trying something out

rather than saying "Oh, I can't do that in my class. My students wouldn't let me

do this." Or, "I don't think that that's very good." So, yes, experiment, but never

in isolation.

The final voice, T15, clearly echoes T14 in emphasizing the need for collegial

engagement. Notice how these two voices serve to reinforce and clarify one another.

T15: For teachers, informal, supportive, non-evaluative feedback from peers is

best—by the way, students need that too!

Interestingly, T15 suggests that students have the same need for "informal, supportive, non-evaluative feedback" as do teachers.

Students' voices regarding variety:

The students interviewed were in clear agreement about the importance of *variety.* Most cited the need for a variety of activities, whether or not they were focused on *learning* or *assessment.* Variety was perceived as essential in meeting the varied needs and goals of learners. They appeared to see a strong connection between *variety* and *degree of learner engagement and interest.* Some, echoing several of the teachers' voices, recognized that a varied approach also benefits teachers by providing a more complete picture of students' progress. In general many practical, logical ideas and examples were offered in support of greater *variety.* Interestingly, in contrast to teachers, these students did not seem to be aware of any *limitations* that might be preventing their teachers from employing a more varied approach to teaching and learning, including a more varied approach to assessment.

Variety **and** *learner needs*

The following eight learners' voices are notable in touching on many of the points mentioned by teachers. Viewed as a collective voice, the students favor variety of teaching, learning, and assessment over a more limited approach. Variety caters to learners' diverse needs and provides teachers with important information about students' ability and progress. Variety also applies to the necessary integration of skills rather than the compartmentalization of language into separate skills. Additionally, variety helps to address issues such as cheating or "rule-beating behaviors" that undermine the performance and outcomes of the system (Meadows 2008). Finally, variety may lead to

more authentic communication in the classroom and unexpected but valuable learning opportunities.

> *S1: There needs to be a variety of assessments.*

S2 on rule-beating behavior; variety of skills:

> *S2: Written tests are not enough: there are great cheaters; there needs to be interviews and speaking.*

S3 on how variety caters to different learning styles:

> *S3: Variety is important. Some approaches work better for me than others: different approaches to fit different learning styles.*

S4 on the need for informal, interaction between teachers and students and non-explicit evaluation/assessment, which might be perceived by students as non-evaluative:

> *S4: Interaction between teachers and students (is a kind of assessment); teachers can see how students respond and how quickly they respond.*

S5 echoes T14 on the need to experiment, partially adopting the voice of the teachers:

> *S5: (Should teachers experiment with different kinds of assessments?)*
>
> *Yeah, they should. Maybe, we don't know, this way could be the model way, but sometimes we discover a way that is very practical for many students.*

S6 on the need for integration of skills or more authentic assessment, echoing T1:

> *S6: (Do you feel that written tests are enough to measure a student's learning?)*
>
> *No, because usually written we don't use all the words to write. (You said: "we don't use…") …all the vocabulary. (So, do you think something like a spoken test is necessary, too?) I think every skill is necessary for learning a new language.*

Below, S7 echoes previous voices in reiterating the need for variety in meeting

diverse learner needs as well as the need for experimentation to find "something really

effective". But S7 adds an interesting twist: that variety, and a willingness to experiment,

can support the teacher's own process of self-reflection. Here, this person essentially

outlines the ELC (experiential learning cycle). It is of note that in doing so, S7

simultaneously implicitly challenges the infallibility of the teacher.

> *S7: Yes… because what works for someone, doesn't work for the other one.*
>
> *(Speaking of teachers adjusting to their students.) Yeah. What works for one*
>
> *student, doesn't work for another student. They might come up with something*
>
> *really effective. If they just keep doing the same thing, they will never know if*
>
> *what they're doing is good or not. (So, experimentation will lead to better*
>
> *methods—finding better methods.) Yeah.*

This final voice provides an exceptional example of an authentic learning experience that

leads to an unexpected but valuable learning opportunity.

> *S8: That is a good example: Today, for example, in the reading class our teacher*
>
> *chose a topic for our reading, which was aging. Then after reading the whole*
>
> *story, my classmate and I didn't get the whole theme of the story. So, we started*
>
> *to talk about it, and then she realized that aging is not a problem in the Middle*
>
> *East. You know, so the whole theme… wasn't the right theme for students from*
>
> *the Middle East. Because, it didn't make sense—the whole story didn't make*
>
> *sense. (So, the theme had a cultural connection—it was dependent on a different*
>
> *culture…) Yeah. Our teacher never knew this, and it was the first time that she*
>
> *did this type of reading: to choose a topic or a theme, and then she led us to*

analyze and practice our critical thinking about the story. So, she realized, that

she has to be so picky next time about the topics—because what works for her as

an American, doesn't work for us from different countries due to the cultural

differences. (Right. Well, it sounds like a success anyway. You know, to realize

what you and your classmate realized through discussing the theme of that

article—or whatever the piece was—that sounds like it was successful.) Yeah. (It

may not have been what the teacher intended…) Yeah. (…or was hoping,) Yeah.

(…but it sounds successful because you were able to compare it and contrast it

with your own cultural knowledge.) Yes. (That's pretty powerful to me!) Yeah.

(laughter) (Speaking of working with a partner… do you think it's important for

students to work with peers?) Of course, yes.

S8's anecdote clearly highlights both the challenge and the opportunity presented by

cross-cultural learning opportunities such as this. While S8 focuses on the challenge,

he/she is helped to see the benefit of the discussion activity, which allowed S8 and a

partner to uncover a significant cultural difference between Middle Eastern and North

American perspectives on aging.

Variety, degree of interest, degree of interaction with peers, **and** *stress*

The connection between variety and interest is reiterated in the following student

voices, several of which outline specific examples of classroom activities. It is of note

that S12 observes that alternative assessments are not only helpful but they reduce

learners' perceived level of stress.

S9: (Do you think teachers should experiment with different ways to check students' progress?) Yes. Because it's more interesting than just one way… always.

S10: (What other ways of checking your progress do you experience and how often?) In listening and speaking class, the teacher asks us to write a report. (To report about something you watched?) Yes. (So, how do you present the report? Do you record it?) Yes, sometimes we record and write summarize. (And about how often do you do that activity?) About twice a week.

S11: I prefer game-like assessments because they are more active, interesting, and fun; they give me a chance to work with other people. It's more challenging, and we can help each other.

S12: When the teacher tries to make the class more interesting, we can improve our skills without stress. So, posters, journals – these kinds of activities – are very helpful, and we will not be stressed when we do them.

Variety **and** *instrumental motivation/target context*

S13 could not be clearer in calling for the need for authentic use of language.

S13: (Would you like teachers to use other ways to check your progress?) Yeah, I would. Because I think doing tests and exams—the traditional ways—are not very practical. They are good, but they are not as practical as a discussion in a campus or in a coffee shop and having a real situation and learning how to deal with it. Real situations. And teaching us what's right and what's wrong. Because we learn how to speak here, we learn the structure of the language, and vocabulary, and how to write, but we don't know how to interact in real

situations. Like when you talk to somebody in the street – what do they mean by

their body language, and if somebody talks fast or slow…

Clearly, S13 believes that a language school should provide learners with training in the

practical use of language for communicative purposes. This mental model may in fact be

somewhat at odds with some of the teachers' mental models, which apparently view

writing and test-taking skills as the main skills required by students' future target context

of the university.

5. Needs

Among the teachers and administrators interviewed, the category of *needs* was

notable among the six emergent categories in that of all six categories, *needs* brought

together slightly more comments centered around learners' needs as opposed to the needs

of teachers'. This focus on learners is in line with Kathleen Graves' definition of *needs*

assessment:

"Essentially, needs assessment is a systematic and ongoing process of gathering

information about students' needs and preferences, interpreting the information,

and then making course decisions based on the interpretation in order to meet the

needs" (Graves 2000).

"Making course decisions based on the interpretation" of the information that a teacher

gathers is an act of adjusting to meet the "needs and preferences" of a particular student

or group of students. Eight out of nine teachers/administrators interviewed agreed on the

need for teachers to adjust to learners' needs in various ways. For a majority of people,

seven out of nine, *needs* was clearly connected to *testing* and *assessment.* For somewhat

fewer people, five out of nine, *needs* was connected clearly to *feedback*, which, much like

needs assessment, is an ongoing process that involves responding to and communicating about students' needs. Three people highlighted aspects of system behavior that they felt were potentially hindering students' learning, such as the common practice of teachers not allowing students to keep their graded tests so that they can continue to review and learn from them, or the negative impact of grades on learners' willingness to take risks and not only tolerate but embrace mistakes—unarguably essential behaviors for progress. While these outline the primary areas of agreement among teachers, other somewhat dissimilar but important opinions and observations were shared.

From another perspective on needs assessment, two people focused on adjusting to help learners meet their *target needs.* One person mentioned the channel or nature of feedback, i.e. oral or written, as a significant factor that could affect a learner's ability to benefit from it. That person reflected on his/her own learning style, describing it as "visual" rather than oral, and observed that "only oral comments from the teacher may not be enough for learners." On a related note, other teachers mentioned the need to adjust the nature of their feedback as necessary. So, at least several teachers suggested that teachers adjust their feedback to meet the needs or preferences of students.

While for many teachers, the terms *feedback* and *needs assessment* may suggest somewhat independent or isolated processes of communicating with students, Kathleen Graves goes further in outlining something much more open-ended. If viewed as cyclical processes rather than linear ones, where information flows not just from one person to the other but continually back and forth between individuals, processes like *feedback* and *needs assessment* become facets of an ongoing dialog between student and teacher.

Graves frames needs assessment as more of an *orientation* that invites teachers to

reconsider their role within the teaching learning process:

> "It (needs assessment) is an orientation toward the teaching learning process
>
> which views it as a dialog between people: between the teacher and
>
> administrators, parents, other teachers; between the teacher and learners; among
>
> the learners. It is based on the belief that learning is not simply a matter of
>
> learners absorbing pre-selected knowledge the teacher gives them, but it is a
>
> process in which learners—and others—can and should participate. It assumes
>
> that needs are multi-faceted and changeable" (Graves 2000).

Right in line with this idea of reorienting one's view of the teaching learning

process, one teacher mentioned the importance of *building relationships* as a key to

learner progress.

Increasingly, reflecting on the learning process is seen as another key to learner

progress. Graves highlights how needs assessment can offer students this opportunity:

> "When needs assessment is used as an ongoing part of teaching, it helps the
>
> learners to reflect on their learning, to identify their needs, and to gain a sense of
>
> ownership and control of their learning. It establishes learning as a dialogue
>
> between the teacher and the learners and among the learners" (Graves 2000).

Ongoing opportunities for reflection may also help learners to align their *needs* and

expectations both within their individual learning process and the broader program of the

school. One teacher emphasized this connection between learners' *needs* and their

expectations.

Additionally, one person described a methodical approach to *needs assessment,*

which he/she would like to try, referring to a CoTESOL presentation that outlined

strategies that individual teachers can use with their students. These included surveying

students' needs and interests and providing opportunities for students' self-assessment at

various stages throughout a course. Graves refers to the challenge of choosing an

approach to needs assessment as "the hows, whats, and whens of needs assessment." She

also emphasizes four "important areas" for teachers to consider in their practical

approach to assessing the needs of their students:

> "The first is the **role** of needs assessment in the development of a course. The
>
> second is the **areas of learning** needs assessment addresses. The third is **when**
>
> one should do needs assessment. The fourth is **how** teachers can do needs
>
> assessment in ways that students understand, that are a good use of students' and
>
> the teacher's time, and that give the teacher information that allows him or her to
>
> be responsive to students' needs" (Graves 2000).

This diversity of opinion generated around the category of *needs*, not only

outlines the complexity of the system structure of this IEP, but hints at the challenge this

topic likely presents the participants of this school in finding common ground. While

certain areas of agreement are clear, such as on *teachers adjusting to learners' needs*, on

the connection between needs and assessment, and on the *need for appropriate feedback*,

there are many other somewhat disparate ideas that emerged for just one or two and

which did not emerge for others. This difference in opinion likely extends to the

definition of *needs* itself and what different teachers consider to be the needs of students.

Herein lies the challenge. On a more positive note, this diversity of opinion undoubtedly

represents the diversity of experience and knowledge present within the system and its participants.

Teachers' voices regarding needs:

While the theme of *needs* is woven throughout this study and has arisen repeatedly in connection with the other categories, here, in the exploration of teachers' voices on the topic, the meaning of this key word and the associations that it has for the participants of this study become more apparent.

Adjusting **to students' needs**

Voice T1 sees adjusting to learners needs as integral to teaching. This stance is notable in that other teachers often agree but offer qualifying statements that may place other factors ahead of the needs of learners. Voice T2 seems to be in agreement, and offers a slightly different but equally general perspective on needs.

T1: If we don't adjust to students' needs then we are not doing our job.

T2: A holistic approach that recognizes how students will need to use the language is important.

Clearly, T2 is also considering students' target contexts.

Needs and learner behavior

The following voice takes a student-centered perspective on the perceived need to be accurate, something that this teacher recognizes is reinforced by their past educational experience and also the current language school's structure, i.e. the general approach to grading students at the IEP discourages them from freely exploring their use of the English language.

T3: It's important to break down students' need to have everything perfect, i.e.

not making any mistakes, because they come in (to our school) with that, our

grading encourages that; so, if you can encourage risk taking, students will have

more opportunities to learn and progress.

The implicit message here is that context—in this case, the past and present structures of

"the school"—influences behavior. T3 sees a responsibility for teachers to counter the

influence of external factors, to reduce students' fear of mistakes and increase their

"opportunities to learn and progress." Here and elsewhere in this study, mistakes are

equated with opportunities. It may be interesting to review the data to gauge how many

teacher and student voices seem to share this view.

Needs **and** *feedback*

Many teachers associate *needs* with *feedback,* specifically feedback about

assessments. Here, T4, revealing his/her perceived awareness of the system, speaks of

extending the feedback process into positive washback for the class through an

uncommon practice of allowing learners to keep their major assessments:

T4: I let my students keep almost all of their tests; they can learn a lot from this;

I think a lot of teachers are not doing this.

T5 on adjusting to learners' different preferences:

T5: Different students need different amounts of feedback.

T6 on the need for feedback and opportunities that allow students to figure out their

mistakes:

T6: It's most helpful when a teacher notices repeated mistakes in a series of

assessments and does individualized checking and noticing of these. Also, before

going over an assessment with students, it's helpful to allow students time to

figure it out – figuring out their own mistakes. For example, instead of telling a

student "you forgot to use and", you say "you need a connector." The downside

to this is it takes time.

T7: Just giving students grades about their work does not allow students to learn

from it; assessment without feedback is unfair to students.

T8 and T9 (same person) on the need to match feedback to students' learning styles and

perhaps informed by Gardener's well-known concept of *multiple intelligences*:

T8: As a visual person/learner, this teacher recognizes that one type of feedback,

e.g. only oral comments from the teacher, may not be enough for learners.

T9: Students benefit from feedback that's physical/tangible in class—a piece of

paper—that they can see and refer back to help them remember their mistakes

and understand.

T9 also highlights the need for feedback to be available to learners more than once. This

ties in with T4's approach in allowing learners to keep their tests.

Needs **and** *alternative* **or** *formative assessments*

This subcategory connects needs with both *alternative* and *formative* assessments.

In a very general way T11 recognizes both challenges and benefits but underscores an

implicit belief that a teacher's decisions are informed by knowledge of the students:

T11: Alternative assessments can be time consuming, but they are valuable and

can be very rich experiences for students. They are integrative, requiring

students to integrate information and utilize different skills. But some learners

don't need them.

Similarly, T12 speaks to students' mental models about education, that from his/her perspective, "often don't" include past experiences featuring attentive, supportive feedback from teachers. Still, T12 outlines his/her own implicit belief about the need to effectively frame new experiences so that students can appreciate their value.

> *T12: Formative assessments often don't meet students' expectations, so they*
>
> *don't see the benefit. So, formative assessments may not be framed right for*
>
> *students.*

It is an interesting comment that simultaneously considers the perceived mental models of students, reveals something about his/her own, and once again points to an awareness of systems and their impact on behavior.

Needs **and** *testing*

Next, T13 offers a very detailed look into a mental model about the validity and authenticity of different activities that can be used for assessing students' learning of grammar. This teacher contrasts "fill-in-the-blank" exercises, which are likely to appear on many more traditional tests (not to mention within virtually all ESL texbooks), with writing exercises that would fall within the category of *performance-based assessment.* According to Brown and Abeywickrama (2010), "**performance-based assessment** of language typically involves oral production, written production, open-ended responses, integrated performance (across skill areas), group performance, and other interactive tasks".

> *T13: I have really altered the way that I test to make my tests more valid and*
>
> *reliable. I think that too many fill-in-the-blank exercises on a test are not*
>
> *valuable—those really hyper-structured tests that aren't based in reality. I*

originally got a lot of pushback from students when I started doing writing in

grammar class. They would say "This isn't writing class. Why are we doing

this?" Eventually, rather than argue, before the students could get a chance, I

started talking to them about 'Hey, we can do worksheets all day long, but you're

not going to do worksheets at the university, so there's really no point. I

understand that worksheets help us learn the form, and so they are not completely

useless, but as far as what you really need to be able to do, it's writing. I think

there is a place for worksheets and hyper-structured activities, but it should

definitely not overwhelm the majority of your class.

This teacher touches on the needs of teachers to accurately assess what their

students can do with language in authentic situations. He/she also considers the

collective need of students to be practicing language use that meets the expectations of

their future learning context, the university. This sentiment ties back to T2, who drew

attention to the importance of a holistic approach to teaching language. Additionally, the

dialog recounted by this person offers a perspective on the application of Senge's

discipline of mental models within the classroom. Although the direct voices of students

are here missing from the discussion, the teacher describes a scenario in which teacher

and students are exploring their different beliefs about what should be going on in a

classroom focused on learning English grammar.

Formal needs assessment

The next voice highlights a belief in the value of ongoing needs assessment while

mentioning some of the challenges that such a process presents learners. The first

reference is to the standardized and formal, teacher, course, and program evaluations that

occur at the end of each term. One clear benefit is that students respond anonymously.
One clear challenge is the inability of students, particularly the lower-level students, to
express themselves in English. This teacher also mentions a long-term interest in trying
out a more methodical approach to needs assessment within his/her own classroom, and
how that idea has been informed and reinforced in various meetings or conferences over
the years.

> T14: You know, the forms that we have, I think you have to look at it at different
> levels. I have low-level students. They write sweet things like "pretty teacher"
> "Wonderful!" (laughter) They don't have the ability to really express what they
> are feeling. Maybe in higher levels, the students are more able to express things
> in writing that are more meaningful. But, you know, it's done anonymously, so I
> think that's really important for them that they feel they can say things or fill out
> check marks that are anonymous; it's important. I would like to—something that
> I've thought about for a long time, and it was a suggestion at one of our meetings,
> or maybe at CoTESOL—to have something that you present the class about what
> you're teaching, what you want them to learn, or what they want to learn and
> then periodically go over that, "Do you feel like you're accomplishing your
> goals?" Ongoing assessment of what they feel they are learning: are they
> meeting their needs, are they meeting what they hope to?   And also, am I meeting
> their needs: what suggestions do they have for me—more specific. It has been
> discussed. It might have been an (after) CoTESOL meeting. I don't think it
> should be too much, I think it needs to be balanced. I think it's a good thing to try
> to figure out. I have not done that, but I think it's a good thing to do.

T14 expresses an interest in the kind of ongoing dialog that Kathleen Graves suggests. It is notable that this voice is the only teacher's voice to do so. Perhaps most other teachers see needs assessment as a more informal process that happens naturally as teachers get to know their students. Perhaps some consider a more deliberate (or methodical, as stated earlier) approach to needs assessment is the responsibility of the broader program of the school. Perhaps this topic is worthy of teachers' attention and worth exploring further.

Needs **and** *systems awareness*

The following four voices once again give a sense of the diversity of teachers' mental models, including what details they notice, and what things they consider to be important. All four recognize different features of the system structure that affect the behavior of the participants. The first two caution against allowing the goals and standards of a particular class to be eroded by a teacher's efforts to meet the needs of learners.

> *T15: (Do you think it's important for teachers to adjust to students' needs and interests?) Yes, but they still have to keep in mind the goal of the class. So, you can't dumb it down and count it as the same.*
>
> *T16: And so, I think that's the danger of adjusting to the needs of the students within a program that has a set curriculum. You can do that. I mean, you can do it, but you have to make sure that the students understand: "OK this is where we have to be, and this is where we're going. This is where I'm going to be assessing you. You're kind of struggling here, so we're going to be doing some exercises— you need to do a lot of this at home—I'm going to give you stuff to do at home—*

you've got to, you know, try to get up here…" But always keeping this end

outcome as the benchmark so that when you're giving them the feedback, they

understand where they are in relationship to that. So that if they don't pass the

level, they understand.

The third voice here, T17, simply points out that there is not comment box for

participants of the school to voice their opinions.

T17: A comment box empowers people.

The fourth voice considers the norms of the broader society—a much larger complex

system within which the school functions.

T18: Grades are necessary, not for learning, but because society doesn't allow

for anything else.

Needs **and** *relationships*

The final two voices effectively reframe teaching as an activity that is centered on

building relationships. Does T19 imply that relationships require compromise and

negotiation between teachers and students? Would T20's description of a kind of

scaffolding of students' relationships meld with other teachers' ideas about "the role of

the teacher"? Do fellow teachers share this person's sense of what is truly joyful about

teaching?

T19: It is definitely important for teachers to adjust to students' needs because

teaching is about building relationships.

T20: Building relationships helps the teacher to build up students' confidence

both individually and before the group, helps to avoid conflicts, and helps the

teacher to know students' individual learning styles. Getting to know students is

really the joy of teaching.

A focus on building relationships surely coordinates conceptually with other ideas

and perspectives mentioned earlier in this section or in other previous categories, but it is

interesting to note that the key word, *relationship*, seldom occurs in this study.

Students' voices regarding needs:

Most students agreed that teachers should not only find out about the *needs* of

their students but also *adjust* to those needs. They also seemed to agree that this is a

necessary and logical aspect of what teachers do, and that it, in fact, benefits both

students and their teachers by helping to guide them together in a kind of shared process

of teaching and learning. While the tone of the responses were generally positive, there

also seemed to be an awareness among several students that the current system was not

fully meeting their needs. For example, they cite the schools' neglecting of the

development of students' proficiency in speaking, not providing enough opportunities for

learners to negotiate meaning with peers during class time by utilizing their peers as

resources, or failing to train students to effectively manage their time during timed

quizzes and tests, and instead allowing learners excessive time to complete them.

Such criticisms at most call out for changes to the system and at least call for a

response and explanation, i.e. a chance for dialog and improved understanding. Peter

Senge describes why change is such an elusive goal for most schools and how students

hold the key:

> "One last comment on why schools seem remarkably difficult institutions to
>
> change, and where the most significant source of leverage may lie. Industrial-age

schools have a structural blind spot unlike almost any other contemporary

institution. This blind spot arises because the only person who could in fact

reflect on how the system as a whole is functioning is the one person who has no

voice in the system and usually no power to provide meaningful feedback that

could guide change. This person is the student" (Senge 2012).

If these key participants, the students, truly do not have the opportunity to make

their voices heard, or have such limited opportunity to speak so that a shortage of

information about their individual and collective experience occurs, then how does this

lack of information and this missing feedback affect the behavior of the system? What

"blind spots" about students' experiences and about the functioning of the school are

participants, particularly teachers, not seeing?

Adjusting to students' needs

What follow are five perspectives on why teachers should not only find out about

their students' needs but adjust to them. It may be helpful to recall T1's assertion in the

previous section that characterized this as an essential aspect of a teacher's job.

> *S1: It's important for teachers to find out about students' needs and interests and*
>
> *then adjust.*

S2 provides a logical rationale:

> *S2: When teachers adjust to students' needs and interests, it's helpful for both*
>
> *students and teachers because teachers learn new and different ways to explain or*
>
> *help.*

S3 perceives that it is simply not happening:

> *S3: (Do you have a chance to talk about your needs and interests?)*

They always ask us in the end-of-term evaluations, but I think nothing changes.

They do what they like to do, I think.

S4 recalls it happening only once:

S4: (Do teachers ask you about your needs and interests?)

Once. But it's important because maybe this helps teachers to do what they have

to do to help their students improve.

For S5, it just makes sense:

S5: (Is it important for teachers to then adjust to them?) Yes. If it's logical—

some logical need—why not?

Needs **and** *relationships*

In the next two voices, S6 and S7 both speak about students' relationships with teachers. S6 speaks directly to the need for teachers to demonstrate that they value and respect that relationship.

S6: It is important for teachers to ask students about their needs and interests

because it shows them that their teacher cares.

On the other hand, S7 describes some limitations:

S7: I have a chance to talk about my needs, but not my interests. Usually, during

breaks, I can ask my teachers questions—they always make us feel comfortable.

But during class, teachers can't focus on all students.

Needs **and** *support*

While the following two voices recall earlier threads about formative assessment, they also offer some new insights into the similar needs of students and teachers.

S8: Compliments are very helpful because even if I have many mistakes, if I see

at least one compliment, I feel "Ah. I can improve myself."

S9 echoes a teacher's feeling that supportive, non-evaluative feedback from peers is best.

S9: Peer feedback is important too, because peers are more free to notice things

that the teacher chooses not to focus on (due to prioritizing). Another student

may have a good idea about how to help. It's best if it's requested, not required.

Needs assessment **as** *mutually beneficial*

Two voices that appeared previously are here revisited and juxtaposed to

highlight their shared perspective on needs assessment. While the first observes that

teachers rarely ask about his/her needs and interests, and the second focuses on the

alternatively positive scenarios in which teachers do ask about students' needs and

interests, the two student voices agree that needs assessment benefits both students and

teachers. So, there's a sense that the process is reciprocal or complementary.

S10: (Do teachers ask you about your needs and interests?)

Once. But it's important because maybe this helps teachers to do what they have

to do to help their students improve.

S11: When teachers adjust to students' needs and interests, it's helpful for both

students and teachers because teachers learn new and different ways to explain or

help.

Needs **and** *systems awareness*

The two voices here make broad statements about the school and classes at the

school. Although these comments would certainly fit into the sixth and final category of

"weaknesses", and although they highlight different problems, they also communicate a shared awareness that the system is not meeting students' needs and expectations.

> *S12: You know, the big problem in this kind of school—they don't focus on*
>
> *speaking. So, I'm now level six, but I'm a bad speaker. They just focus on*
>
> *writing. When I got to the street, I won't write a story or an essay. I have to*
>
> *speak with people. So, they don't focus on speaking. Even with a presentation, I*
>
> *have to prepare and speak in front of people… it's not helpful.*

S12 is not only notable for its highly critical tone, but it also draws attention to teachers' comments viewed earlier that recognize the school's emphasis on writing rather than speaking. While the teachers may be aware of this emphasis and agree on the rationale behind it, as S12's perspective demonstrates, students may not.

Voice S13 observes that certain beneficial opportunities are not typically happening at school.

> *S13: (What do you think may be missing for students and teachers?)*
>
> *Reviewing tests with partners. (Not enough of that is happening?) Yeah. It rarely*
>
> *happens.*

Voice S13 would likely resonate with other teacher voices that cited the importance of learners having a chance to figure out their own answers or being given ample time for review.

Learners' needs

As the same person continues this same thread in S14, it becomes apparent that this student has a very clear idea about what students need to do to learn from a test.

Here that student details exactly what works and what does not when it comes to working with peers.

> *S14: Review your test with a group: a group of three students. They check their mistakes. I think it's helpful. Because, if it's only one student, he probably will not do it. And if they are two students, they will learn from each other, but it will be more helpful to have more than two people to see different perspectives about the answers. And if it's four (people) it won't work very well because it will take so much time.*

It is important to remember that according to S13-14, this kind of peer work and opportunity to negotiate meaning is not typically happening at the school. A different person, S15, sketches a similar scenario in which students first work together to check their answers and later receive feedback on accuracy from their teacher. This student voice is once again focused on learning and how students remember.

> *S15: Yes, to give exercises in class and then students can check their answers. The students do the exercises so the teacher can know how the students learn. (And would the teacher check those exercises or would the students check them?) They would check them together. (So, do you think that students should be part of checking their own answers?) Yes. That's a good way to remember the mistakes. (I've learned that students remember more of what they do together.) Yeah, because when the teacher just talks, students sometimes don't pay attention for the lecture.*

Rather helpfully, S15 also describes what does not work: A review in which "the teacher just talks."

The final voice here makes several points about the system not meeting learners'

needs. S16 first describes how his/her own needs as a more mature learner are not being

met by the overly controlled or "processed" approach to completing assignments; he/she

needs more independence. S16 then explains that the very same approach simultaneously

impacts younger learners, undermining their developing independence and growing sense

of responsibility.

> *S16: And I understand that there are some students who wait to the last moment*
>
> *to do it, but they need to know not to do this. You know, not by forcing them not*
>
> *to do it, or making it very, very processed: day one you do this, day two you do*
>
> *that… It's kind of, maybe because I'm older than everybody in class… it works*
>
> *for them, but it doesn't work for me… I don't know. I'm not good, so I love to do*
>
> *things the way I wanna do it, instead of being told, you know, to go through a*
>
> *process. (As an older, more mature learner, it sounds like independence is*
>
> *important for you. Is that what you're saying?) Yes. And I believe that also*
>
> *younger students need to learn how to be independent. You know, not do—just*
>
> *follow what the teacher said. They have to know it. I don't know how, but they*
>
> *have to learn how to be independent, and just figure out their time and manage it.*
>
> *You know, and hand in the assignments on time… they need to understand this.*
>
> *(Do you think the overly-structured approach that a teacher may take—do you*
>
> *think that it defeats independence? Or interrupts learning to become*
>
> *independent?) Yes, big time.*

6. Weaknesses

Among the teachers and administrators interviewed, the category of *weaknesses* was significant in revealing the simultaneous need to help learners effectively address their weaknesses and the challenge in attempting to do so. This category also brought into focus several weaknesses in the approach of teachers toward assessing learners' progress as well as several weaknesses in the system's structure, e.g. relying on formal assessments that fail to adequately gauge the development of critical thinking skills, and lacking awareness of how to effectively articulate the program's expectations for learners—something that may only be obtainable by teachers who have taught all levels and courses of the program.

Teachers' voices regarding weaknesses:

Assessment and noticing weaknesses

The following five voices seem to agree in viewing assessment as an opportunity for students to learn about their strengths and weaknesses and especially to learn from their mistakes. They all emphasize what teachers do or can do with the information that they gather through the assessments that they use. In other words, these voices seem to focus on the principle of washback and how assessment can positively impact students' learning and teachers' decisions about a course (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 37). T1 on broadening the teacher's view:

> *T1: The primary purpose of assessment is to see both what students know and what they are confused about.*

Here, T2 speaks of drawing students' attention to what they can learn, thus outlining positive washback for both teacher and students:

> *T2: 'This is what you got wrong, and here's your grade.' For me, I try to do*
>
> *more than that by emphasizing what students can learn from the assessment.*

T3 and T4 offer other descriptions of positive washback:

> *T3: Then, if I notice patterns (among students' answers), I can recycle/review*
>
> *those in my lessons with them.*
>
> *T4: Feedback should include letting students know both what they did well, and*
>
> *what they still should be working on, with some examples of each.*

By reviewing an assessment with the students, T5 not only generates positive washback, but gathers evidence of the quality of the assessment itself:

> *T5: Reviewing students' mistakes with them alerts the teacher to students' needs*
>
> *and also to important factors in assessment like validity.*

Weaknesses or challenges as opportunities

This theme has already occurred among the voices of both teachers and students, and so it is a fairly common one.

> *T6: Learning a language is all about making mistakes—it's not the mistake that's*
>
> *the issue, but it's whether we learn from it.*

What may differ from one voice or group to the next is most likely the mental model: what does "learning from mistakes" actually look like to these different people? If the perceived reality of the system does not match people's models, then also, how does that affect them? How do they respond?

The danger of focusing too heavily on learners' weaknesses

Of course, there is a danger in focusing too heavily on mistakes.

> *T7: Some students can feel overwhelmed by too many mistakes and may even*
>
> *refuse to review them out of embarrassment.*

Helpful teachers may perhaps "over do it" in identifying and trying to capitalize on students' errors. Additionally, as perceived by T7, apparent disinterest on the part of students may in fact be due to embarrassment.

Weaknesses that teachers may be missing

Just as T7 points out the danger of focusing too heavily on any one facet of students' learning, testing may also miss part of a broader picture. In the following two observations by the same individual, a complex mental model that includes students, their background, challenges of testing and teaching, and the future is revealed.

> *T8: Information about students' critical thinking ability and their ability to think*
>
> *logically is often missing from formal assessments.*
>
> *T9: Being able to articulate critical thought processes is important for success in*
>
> *university. But this ability is difficult to assess and difficult to teach—especially*
>
> *with students who don't have an academic background.*

Weaknesses of the system

Broadly speaking, the following voices collectively describe significant issues in communication between teachers and students within the system of the school. The individual perspectives below offer examples of this, with students "just focusing on feelings" or "just not listening for feedback", and teachers confused by students' irregular responses to the official evaluation questions or not effectively "articulating well" to students the expectations (and standards) of the school. T11 expresses doubt that students are even able to answer some of the questions that elicit their feedback on the

program. T13 considers the same formal evaluations from the perspective of their lack of meaning for teachers as well as their inability to gather constructive feedback from students. T14 highlights the need for teachers to have a more thorough understanding of the system as a whole. What are the real barriers to communication here?

> *T10: The great contrast between students' positive and negative comments on the end-of-term teacher evaluations is confusing for the teachers. Students are focusing just on their feelings 99% of the time.*
>
> *T11: (Regarding the end-of-term evaluations:)*
>
> *I'm not sure if students are equipped to answer some of the questions.*
>
> *T12: I think that's kind of the perfect world. I really don't think that most of the students—and I'm talking a high percentage here—are looking at that, reading that, using that… you know, and when I hear them speaking to each other, it's what grade they got. Period. And then they will fight you tooth and nail for one point without really understanding why that was taken away. They're just not listening for feedback. I really hate to say it that way, but I really, really think that that happens here.*
>
> *T13: I don't see that our evaluations really get at giving teachers feedback on their strengths and weaknesses—their true strengths, areas that they need to improve, and where they have made progress. Students either grade the teacher and course highly or use the opportunity to vent about low grades.*
>
> *T14: I'm sensing that there's another issue. And for me, the issue is: Are our classes and our teachers who are teaching those classes truly articulating well to the next level? So, someone might pass the class, but have we thought at all of*

what they need to be able to do in the next level, and how they are going to be

judged when they walk through that door? Have we articulated it enough so that

they've got an entry into the next level – where someone's not going to instantly

say: "I know this student is going to fail this level." Everybody doesn't say that,

but there is that sense sometimes that someone has been passed on, and I worry

that it might not always have to do with the passing on but with the expectation of

what they should be able to do in my class. You only really get to know that well

if you've taught every level, every class in the program, so that you actually see

that that level 6 expectation – which is really strong – you actually see how to get

there in 14 months when you have someone who's an absolute beginner. It's a

HUGE challenge that EVERYBODY has got to buy into… for that success to be

there.   But they're not going to come out of level 6 fluent… brilliant… able to

write research papers that everyone can understand… you know, that just doesn't

happen in an intensive English program no matter how hard you try. I think

there's something other than "Some teachers are easy and pass people who

shouldn't be passed." I think our articulation between levels is something to

really try and talk about. And we have tried sometimes to say what should a level

4 coming in be able to write? Given a prompt, where you're going to figure out:

does he fit in the class? Or, does she fit in the class? What do you have to see?

What's the "bare" level? You have to see it.   If someone says "they don't have

that s-ending, third person singular verb marker, I just go… read the news papers

and look at the grammar mistakes – that one thing shouldn't cause you to judge

someone that harshly.   What should we look for?   Not: What SHOULDN'T they

have?   What ARE they doing right?

According to Donella Meadows, "information flows" are one of the primary

points of leverage within a system. In her list of "places to intervene in a system" the

processes and connections that facilitate the flow of information rank number six out of

twelve (Meadows, 2012, p. 194). This ranking places information flows in a "position"

of relative significance and influence in regard to the functioning of the system.

Consequently, the above examples of weaknesses in the communication between teachers

and students can instead be seen from a systems perspective as potential opportunities.

Students' voices regarding weaknesses:

All the students interviewed in the course of this study agree that noticing

mistakes or weaknesses and working to improve them is important. The particular

responses that are featured below recognize that this is not just the teacher's duty, but is

really a responsibility that is shared by both teachers and students. At the same time, the

responses imply a belief that the primary responsibility for harnessing students' mistakes

lies with teachers. Several voices warn that this kind of help can be overdone and can

become counterproductive. Several mention the need for instruction in specific strategies

to help them work on identified weaknesses. One person implies that there is actually a

weakness in teachers' general approach to giving feedback in that it often lacks

instruction in appropriate strategies for improvement.

S1: Teachers can use feedback to guide students to work on their weaknesses.

S2: It's important for teachers to point out a learner's mistakes, but if they only

point out the mistakes, it's a problem.

S3: Written tests and quizzes work well, but they miss the benefits of informal

assessments and feedback.

S4: The teacher needs to make time to help me focus on my mistakes. The

*teacher and student—both of them complete each other. **F**eedback about my*

work helps me improve.

S5: Not really. Sometimes I... teachers see my mistakes when I'm learning, but

sometimes I know what are my mistakes—what I need—I look at the feedback, but

at the same time, I think they don't write what I'm missing. Sometimes, for

example, I have weaknesses in many parts, but they don't care about them. They

care about other kinds of mistakes. It (the feedback) doesn't cover what I'm

scared of in English. For example, I'm really scared of spelling. And most

teachers notice that I don't have good spelling, and most of them don't give me

feedback about my spelling—how can I learn spelling. (So, feedback should

include what you can do.) Yeah, what can I do to correct the mistake. (Like a

strategy.) Yep. (Not just the mistakes.) Uh huh.

This final voice above is unique in that he/she very openly describes a sense of

fear about confronting a particular weakness, in this case, spelling. Perhaps this is not

unlike other human responses to problems that are perceived to be beyond our control or

ability to manage—we ignore them, hide them from others, and avoid addressing them.

Weaknesses of the system

The final student voices in this study align closely with the opinions that teachers

expressed in the earlier section about the same topic. Here, students consider some areas

for improvement in the program. The first three speak of the formal program / course /

teacher evaluation process and the unhelpful responses by students that sometimes occur.

While S6 and S7 focus on the perceived responsibility for students to evaluate teachers

more objectively, S8 helpfully suggests a feature of the system's structure, which may in

fact be responsible for the undesirable behavior.

> *S6: Sometimes with the end-of-term evaluations of teachers students will not be*
>
> *fair—if they hate some person, they will evaluate them badly; if they love some*
>
> *person, they just evaluate them in a good way—I always throw my feelings away*
>
> *and try to focus.*
>
> *S7: I evaluated with my feelings one time, but then I stopped that. I put myself in*
>
> *their shoes. But if a teacher sees that a comment is repeated many times by*
>
> *students, then it should be taken as a suggestion or advice—it will be helpful for*
>
> *the teacher.*
>
> *S8: Students and teachers don't have the opportunity to talk about these*
>
> *evaluations after they have been collected. If they did, maybe students would be*
>
> *more serious about them.*

S8 perceives that there is no response to the formal evaluations—a perception shared by

other students and teachers consulted during this study. Perhaps simply having "the

opportunity to talk about these evaluations after they have been collected" could improve

this formal feedback process and make it more meaningful for both students and teachers.

The following voices mention other matters that easily fit the category of

weaknesses or areas for improvement within the system. S9 perceives that the materials

chosen for courses at the school somehow lack a comprehensive view or coverage. This

comment seems simple but actually includes many different expectations—about courses,

about the school's curriculum—that go beyond mere expectations about the textbooks chosen for the course(s).

> *S9: I don't know because here we study in the particular book, so sometimes it does not have the whole information.*

The final part of voice S10 has already been discussed in connection with the category of *time,* but the earlier part of the quotation is helpful in adding detail to this particular students' mental model about education, which seems to be out of synch with his/her experience of education at the language school.

> *S10: (Think of the ways that teachers check students' progress. What do you think is most helpful?) Practice. Because if they allow students to practice more than listening, you know… for example, I had an argue with one of the teachers about the commas and the punctuation… (That's a fun argument!) …and I don't believe that we should memorize the rules related to punctuation by any means because we will forget them sooner or later. And the better way, is to just practice them using the book… like, by reviewing the rule then you can, you know, instead of wasting time by memorizing the rule itself. And she disagrees, of course. And, especially, we're not gonna use It in our speaking, which is important to interact with, you know, Americans here. And we're not gonna use it when we listen in class. We're just gonna use it when we write formally. Which is in a very, very specific time. It's not an every day rule that you will need to use. And when it comes to essays, for example, you always have your book as a reference, and you can just go back… you need to know that there is a rule for punctuation, so you have to know how to find it in the book and use it and apply it*

in your essay. Sometimes teachers just, you know, avoid – not avoid – by the way

that they decide to teach, doesn't allow us to practice more. (Right. OK.) Which

is not helping us to, you know, to understand or… (Get enough practice.) Get

enough practice in order to make that rule become more natural…

Teachers and students will undoubtedly have different expectations about what is important and what works when it comes to learning. However, if their expectations are not carefully and respectfully shared and explored, then they will remain hidden parts of the system that, nonetheless, influence the behavior and outcomes of both the individual participants and the overall system.

Conclusions

The discipline of *mental models* is the key to this study. In many ways, the emergent themes and the unfolding perspectives on the experiences of teaching and learning at the particular language school represent a model, a kind of what-if scenario, of the discipline in action. If participants could commit themselves to sharing their mental models and hearing those of others, to exploring both their similarity and diversity, then the resulting shared understandings would not only be as complex but also as rich and potentially enlightening as the ones that have been shared in this study.

The data analysis chapter has in effect been a simulation of the kind of process that could take place in this or any school that wishes to better understand why it, and the people and processes within it, function the way they do. Therefore, it makes no sense for one person—such as this researcher—to make specific conclusions or recommendations based upon the data collected. Singular, isolated perspectives are what this discipline is trying to avoid. A true dialog among the participants has not yet taken place, but would have to. Having said that, the simulation is revealing of many features of the system including potential "hot spots" or issues that may be worth further attention and investigation.

Those hot spots emerged out of the mental models of the school that each person revealed in their responses to the questionnaires. The categories that emerged acted as "tags" that showed where and what to start looking at or begin paying closer attention to. Perhaps the six categories are as expected for any intensive program: time, pressure, motivation, variety, needs, and weaknesses. In fact, it is likely that these are concerns shared by most schools. However, they way they were talked about, including the

connections that were made, and the stories that were told, revealed a unique and complex picture of the particular school's system structure. Talking about and exploring that collective emergent picture is the most important recommendation that can be made.

In terms of finding leverage points to effect change within the system, the communication flows and feedback processes that generated the greatest diversity of opinion might be a good aspect to look at. Noticing the convergence and divergence of views both within groups and between groups might also indicate where potential answers already reside or where greater communication is needed.

Maybe there is just one more recommendation. At least from this researcher's perspective, the process of carefully listening to fellow teachers, students, and administrators, more carefully than ever before this study, has in itself been a revelation. Listening to their stories, their challenges, their hopes, their concerns, and their successes truly gave me a new and greater appreciation of everyone. Finally, the basic principle of systems, around which this project also centers, that of system behavior following system structure, has also freed me to become more accepting of others and more interested in our differences.

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Appendix

Themes drawn from the interviews, i.e. *emergent categories*

	time	*pressure*	*motivation*	*variety*	*needs*	*weaknesses*
			Round 1			
Student	Teachers reminding students of the remaining time during a test is the worst thing: very distracting.	Students do better with less stress. But students wouldn't study without tests and quizzes as motivation.	Formal tests and quizzes provide motivation; grades can be motivating. Alternative assessments are good for engaging students; teamwork motivates and exposes students to other perspectives.	There needs to be a variety of assessments. Written tests are not enough: there are great cheaters; there needs to be interviews and speaking.	It is important for teachers to ask students about their needs and interests because it shows them that their teacher cares	Teachers can use feedback to guide students to work on their weaknesses
Teacher	Lack of time prevents teachers from doing multi-skill assessments.	Our grading is generally too easy/lenient. A 'B' should be considered average, rather than a 'C'.	Formal assessments, like tests, pressure students and motivate them, making them work harder, and they give	Written tests are not enough. Interviews, writing and any tasks that are closer to real-world use are better.	If we don't adjust to students' needs then we are not doing our job. Just giving students grades	The primary purpose of assessment is to see both what students know and what they are confused about.

			students feedback.		*about their work does not allow students to learn from it; assessment without feedback is unfair to students.* *I let my students keep almost all of their tests; they can learn a lot from this; I think a lot of teachers are not doing this.*	
	time	*pressure*	*motivation*	*variety*	*needs*	*weaknesses*
Teacher	*I feel that we have to do it (assess and give grades) so much in our context. I know we are always told that we should be assessing formally and informally, but I feel that there's*	*I think that too much formal assessment stifles students' risk-taking, their chance to interact with the language in a creative way.*	*Using tests and quizzes to motivate students to be accountable for their work, i.e. dangling this carrot of a grade, is something that this teacher does not agree with.*	*That particular type of assessment that integrates the skills is valuable especially for the students because I think they really do see things compartmentalized, e.g. seeing grammar as a separate subject*	*It's important to break down students' need to have everything perfect, i.e. not making any mistakes, because they come in (to our school) with that, our grading encourages that;*	*'This is what you got wrong, and here's your grade.' For me, I try to do more than that by emphasizing what students can learn from the assessment.* *Then, if I notice*

	time	pressure	motivation	variety	needs	weaknesses
	an awful lot of formal assessment going on, and one of my biggest issues is: at times I have felt that I was constantly assessing students without having given them enough adequate time to even practice. That seems so unfair.			*from reading and writing. When they go to university, they do need to use all the skills in tandem, so if we could do more assessments that integrated the skills, it would help them see the relationship between their classes, and it would be better preparation for what they have to do at university – a more accurate reflection of how they'll use the language.*	*so, if you can encourage risk taking, students will have more opportunities to learn and progress.* *Different students need different amounts of feedback.*	*patterns (among students' answers), I can recycle/review those in my lessons with them.* *Learning a language is all about making mistakes – it's not the mistake that's the issue, but it's whether we learn from it.*
Teacher	*Suggested changes to the way the program elicits students' feedback: Students get a*	*I meet a lot of students who confess that they did not want to come the United States – their*	*Alternative assessments are more fun and the students recognize that. They are more*	*For teachers, informal, supportive, non-evaluative feedback from peers is best – by the way,*	*As a visual person/learner, this teacher recognizes that one type of feedback, e.g.*	*Some students can feel overwhelmed by too many mistakes and may even refuse*

little angry and upset about it. I'm almost so glad it comes at the end of the term because I know the school's not going to do anything about it, and it's like I just want to save that negative energy for the very end – because I don't want to have to interact with the negative energy and try to address it. Additionally, "a first impression" more towards the beginning of the term might be helpful.	fathers made them or their parents pressure them toward academic success.	life-giving than the kind that stresses them out But at the same time, it's a tricky line – having a "fun" kind of assessment but making sure it's still academically rigorous enough to count it. The big difference for me is I was clearly, extremely motivated. I just love learning languages.	students need that too!	only oral comments from the teacher, may not be enough for learners. Students benefit from feedback that's physical/ tangible in class – a piece of paper – that they can see and refer back to help them remember their mistakes and understand. A holistic approach that recognizes how students will need to use the language is important. A comment box empowers people.	to review them out of embarrassment. Reviewing students' mistakes with them alerts the teacher to students' needs and also to important factors in assessment like validity.
time	*pressure*	*motivation*	*variety*	*needs*	*weaknesses*

| Student | Teachers may spend too much time on a subject that students don't like without knowing it. I have experienced that here.

Regarding the end-of-term evaluations: maybe they should come in week 9. | Schools can provide a high standard of education without tests.

My previous school didn't have tests, books, homework, etc. I liked it. I learned a lot. I liked it because there was less pressure and we felt that we were going to have fun every day. Motivation was not a problem at that school.

However, a certain amount of pressure can help you to take your learning more seriously. This school has a good balance | I like surprise quizzes because it doesn't matter if the students studied or not – the teacher knows (by the results) if his/her teaching has been helping the students to learn.

Surprise quizzes also help students to be more serious about the subjects – they will study everyday. | Interaction between teachers and students (is a kind of assessment); teachers can see how students respond and how quickly they respond.

I prefer game-like assessments because they are more active, interesting, and fun; they give me a chance to work with other people. It's more challenging, and we can help each other. | Compliments are very helpful because even if I have many mistakes, if I see at least one compliment, I feel "Ah. I can improve myself."

Peer feedback is important too, because peers are more free to notice things that the teacher chooses not to focus on (due to prioritizing). Another student may have a good idea about how to help. It's best if it's requested, not required.

It's important for teachers to find out about students' needs | Written tests and quizzes work well, but they miss the benefits of informal assessments and feedback.

It's important for teachers to point out a learner's mistakes, but if they only point out the mistakes, it's a problem. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

	time	pressure	motivation	variety	needs	weaknesses
		between practice and testing.			and interests and then adjust.	
Teacher	A response to the end-of-term program evaluations would look like… a coffee machine!

The course evaluations don't seem to accomplish anything; students' comments are generally very random. I would rather ask students to (take the time) to write a paragraph about their teacher (and the course). | If students' target context (e.g. university-level study) requires test-taking skills, then taking tests is a necessary feature of any program that promises to help them to succeed. | My best experience with an assessment: I knew from the amount of 'buy in' and enthusiasm among the students that they were giving their best effort – their motivation helped affirm that the test was a more accurate assessment of their ability. | Variety of assessment is very important to meet the needs of students – each has different learning styles and skills.

Formative assessments are most important, summative are less so – but each kind has its value.

The worst kind of assessment is summative with no feedback and no opportunity to improve | Alternative assessments can be time consuming, but they are valuable and can be very rich experiences for students.

They are integrative, requiring students to integrate information and utilize different skills. But some learners don't need them.

Grades are necessary, not for learning, but | Written tests may be good enough for some learners, but it's hard to know without giving different kinds of assessments (for comparison).

Information about students' critical thinking ability and their ability to think logically is often missing from formal assessments.

Being able to articulate critical thought |

				because society doesn't allow for anything else. *It is definitely important for teachers to adjust to students' needs because teaching is about building relationships.* *Building relationships helps the teacher to build up students' confidence both individually and before the group, helps to avoid conflicts, and helps the teacher to know students' individual learning styles. Getting to know students is really the joy of*	*processes is important for success in university. But this ability is difficult to assess and difficult to teach – especially with students who don't have an academic background.*

	time	pressure	motivation	variety	needs	weaknesses
						teaching.
Teacher	*While we can definitely get other samples, I think that for the purpose of time commitment and the necessity of having a quick view of what students are capable of doing, I think that tests and quizzes really serve that purpose (of measuring learning). I don't think that anything else serves that same purpose. Looking at, say, a portfolio as compared to a single test: I just don't think that*	*I feel that grades are necessary. I think that there has to be some way to determine where people stand. Whether it's a society or it's a school. It's a reward system or a punishment system – whichever side you're on. And sometimes that's the feedback that you need which forces you to choose something different down the road.* *Grading serves as a necessary motivating*	*I'm doing a goal-setting activity with my students where they set a goal from the outcomes for the class, and then they have to determine what they've done both during and outside of class that helps them meet that outcome. They have to track where they think they are week after week, including what they still need to do – it's like a dialog-journal between each student and me. The challenge is*	*I just don't see there being that many really big choices for our program. I don't want to see standardized tests – that's a waste of time and money here. Some alternative assessments may work well in particular courses or levels, but not likely across the whole program.* *I wish we could have more integration between classes to help facilitate more integrated tasks being used for assessment.*	*Formative assessments often don't meet students' expectations, so they don't see the benefit. So, formative assessments may not be framed right for students.*	*Feedback should include letting students know both what they did well, and what they still should be working on, with some examples of each.* *I think that's kind of the perfect world. I really don't think that most of the students – and I'm talking a high percentage here – are looking at that, reading that, using that… you know, and when I hear them speaking to each other, it's what*

	revising your work and picking the best work that you've done, and on and on, in a nine-week program, is really feasible. Alternatives are just not as objective as a test would be. Are all tests equal? Obviously, not. But if you're looking at the course objectives, they are probably the best indicator of what students have learned from your instruction.	*factor.*	*getting students to really see their progress rather than just doing this ongoing series of tasks that their teacher has asked them to do.* *The dialog journal is especially effective with most of the students – once they get into the ongoing dialog with me, it becomes a very worthwhile goal for them. Grading serves as a necessary motivating factor.*			*grade they got. Period. And then they will fight you tooth and nail for one point without really understanding why that was taken away. They're just not listening for feedback. I really hate to say it that way, but I really, really think that that happens here.*
*Round 2*						
	time	***pressure***	***motivation***	***variety***	***needs***	***weaknesses***
Student	***Have you***	*I think sometimes*	***Should teachers***	*When the teacher*	*You know, the*	*Sometimes with*

experienced an assessment that you thought was unhelpful? *Yes, the 30-minute writing test. Even if I were a writer or author, I would write when I was relaxed. I'll take my time to write an article or something like this. In real life I don't have to write anything in 30 minutes, except in a standard test like TOEFL or IELTS. So, I don't have to waste a lot of time in learning English with this kind of test – many times in each term. I think it's not helpful. Maybe*	*tests put us under stress, and sometimes we don't do our best. Maybe the best way to grade students is classwork and homework. I think this is better. If students are serious, this will be clear for teachers – they don't have to put students under stress by taking tests – for two hours, for one hour – and students will feel comfortable. It's better – they will feel more relaxed and they will do their best.* *I told you, when the teacher tries*	***experiment with different kinds of assessments?*** *Yes, to make class more interesting. They should focus on how their students can improve, but in this school and many other schools, they focus just on grades. If they just focus on quizzes and tests, I will focus with them on the same thing. I will forget if I improve in this week or in this term. I will just lose time. Students may also just get lucky on a test – the test won't*	*tries to make the class more interesting, we can improve our skills without stress. So, posters, journals – these kinds of activities – are very helpful, and we will not be stressed when we do them.*	*big problem in this kind of school – they don't focus on speaking. So, I'm now level six, but I'm a bad speaker. They just focus on writing. When I got to the street, I won't write a story or an essay. I have to speak with people. So, they don't focus on speaking. Even with a presentation, I have to prepare and speak in front of people… it's not helpful.* ***Do you have a chance to talk about your needs and interests?*** *They always ask*	*the end-of-term evaluations of teachers students will not be fair – if they hate some person, they will evaluate them badly; if they love some person, they just evaluate them in a good way – I always throw my feelings away and try to focus.* *I evaluated with my feelings one time, but then I stopped that. I put myself in their shoes. But if a teacher sees that a comment is repeated many times by students, then it should be taken as a suggestion or advice – it will*

we have to practice that, but we could do it like classwork, so we will feel more relaxed and do our best when we have to take the TOEFL. But each time I have to take this test (the 30-minute writing test) I will be under stress – nothing will change, so I won't improve. ***About the end-of-term evals:*** *Maybe they should be done at the midterm. Teachers could try to improve. At the end, teachers can't do anything for the students.*	*to make the class more interesting, we can improve our skills without stress. So, posters, journals, etc. – these kinds of activities – are very helpful, and we will not be stressed when we do them.* *This is my first time to meet friendly teachers, but as for grades – it's the same stress, same problem.*	*show their ability.* ***How do you feel about grades?*** *You know, I'm always waiting for my grades. Sometimes I can't sleep. So, I think it's a very bad feeling when I wait for grades.*		*us in the end-of-term evaluations, but I think nothing changes. They do what they like to do, I think.* ***Do teachers ask you about your needs and interests?*** *Once. But it's important because maybe this helps teachers to do what they have to do to help their students improve.* ***Is it important for teachers to then adjust to them?*** *Yes. If it's logical – some logical need – why not?*	*be helpful for the teacher.* *Students and teachers don't have the opportunity to talk about these evaluations after they have been collected. If they did, maybe students would be more serious about them.*
time	***pressure***	***motivation***	***variety***	***needs***	***weaknesses***

Student	*When should questions about your experiences in our school be asked?* *Maybe they should change this method. The end-of-term evaluations sometimes don't work: students focus on their feeling instead of grading the teacher's approach.*	*Timed tests are stressful. I can't answer questions easily or comfortably – pressure affects my focus.* *But timed assessments can be helpful – not a lot, but some. Even though I don't like tests, and they put pressure on me – how (else) can I know my abilities? But using tests only causes too much pressure.*	*This whole experience from 2013 up to now: I first felt nervous, and I didn't believe that I could improve, but my teachers supported me. If I had to do it again, I would come back. U.S. culture is more supportive (than my home culture).*	*Regarding variety of assessment:* *Variety is important. Some approaches work better for me than others: different approaches to fit different learning styles.*	*When teachers adjust to students' needs and interests, it's helpful for both students and teachers because teachers learn new and different ways to explain or help.* *I have a chance to talk about my needs, but not my interests. Usually, during breaks, I can ask my teachers questions – they always make us feel comfortable. But during class, teachers can't focus on all students.*	*The teacher needs to make time to help me focus on my mistakes. The teacher and student – both of them complete each other.* *Feedback about my work helps me improve.*
	time	*pressure*	*motivation*	*variety*	*needs*	*weaknesses*
Teacher	*Yes, I would like to give a greater variety of*			*Yes, I would like to give a greater variety of*	*It's most helpful when a teacher notices repeated*	

	assessments, e.g. in L3, more practice with note taking. But time limits options for assessments. Also, regarding the number of assessments, if teachers only do a few, it's hard to track progress. For example, three summative assessments are better than two.			*assessments, e.g. in L3, more practice with note taking. But time limits options for assessments. Also, regarding the number of assessments, if teachers only do a few, it's hard to track progress. For example, three summative assessments are better than two.*	*mistakes in a series of assessments and does individualized checking and noticing of these. Also, before going over an assessment with students, it's helpful to allow students time to figure it out— figuring out their own mistakes. For example, instead of telling a student "you forgot to use and", you say "you need a connector."* *The downside to this is it takes time.*	
	time	***pressure***	***motivation***	***variety***	***needs***	***weaknesses***
Teacher	*Conferences open me up to other*	*I don't have a problem with our*	***Regarding alternative***	*Written tests, worksheets,*	*I have really altered the way*	*The great contrast between*

ways, e.g. Folse's ideas are wonderful. I would like to try more projects, but getting them set up and grading them properly is intimidating. But time is also a factor.	*approach to standardized testing at our school – it's not used to the extreme degree that it's used elsewhere.*	***assessments:*** *I think of "teaching tools" vs. "assessment tools". I use alternative assessments for providing feedback, so they are often not graded. I love the idea of alternative assessments in general, but it's also somewhat intimidating.* *Variety makes class more interesting.*	*impromptu speeches; I try to make sure there is a variety. Variety is important, obviously, because everybody has different learning styles. It also shows if students are capable of viewing information in a different way and gives the teacher more perspectives on students' learning. Variety makes class more interesting.* *I don't think there is a most important way. It goes back to variety. I think that having a variety of ways to assess is more important than any particular kind of assessment.*	*that I test to make my tests more valid and reliable. I think that too many fill-in-the-blank exercises on a test are not valuable—those really hyper-structured tests that aren't based in reality. I originally got a lot of pushback from students when I started doing writing in grammar class. They would say "This isn't writing class. Why are we doing this?" Eventually, rather than argue, before the students could get a chance, I started talking to*	*students' positive and negative comments on the end-of-term teacher evaluations is confusing for the teachers. Students are focusing just on their feelings 99% of the time.*

	time	pressure	motivation	variety	needs	weaknesses
					them about 'Hey, we can do worksheets all day long, but you're not going to do worksheets at the university, so there's really no point. I understand that worksheets help us learn the form, and so they are not completely useless, but as far as what you really need to be able to do, it's writing. I think there is a place for worksheets and hyper-structured activities, but it should definitely not overwhelm the majority of your class.	
Student	*In addition to*	*How do you feel*	*I like to have*	*Would you like*	*What feedback*	*Not really.*

timed tests and quizzes, what other ways of checking your progress do you experience? How often? *Having an assignment as homework – interviewing somebody and doing research. Sometimes the teachers give us some resources to learn from. These (other ways) are used often. But sometimes we don't have enough time.*	***about major assessments?*** *Here in this school, I feel they are not very difficult for me because we learn everything about the final, and we have tests on each topic before the final. So, the final and the big assessments are not that hard. (In a way that's good because you know what's coming.) Yeah. (But in a way, I sense that it's also not challenging enough for you?) Uh, yeah, sometimes ☺ (Sometimes it is?) Yeah, from level two to four, they were not*	*assessments with university students and teachers at the university – to teach us about the university and what is the language that is needed there – how it's different. (So, you would like to have assessments that model the way they assess students at university.) Exactly. And working with partners from the university or going to interview a doctor/professor at the university – it depends on the students' major, but it has to be on the*	***teachers to use other ways to check your progress?*** *Yeah, I would. Because I think doing tests and exams – the traditional ways – are not very practical. They are good, but they are not as practical as a discussion in a campus or in a coffee shop and having a real situation and learning how to deal with it. Real situations. And teaching us what's right and what's wrong. Because we learn how to speak here, we learn the structure of the language, and vocabulary, and how to write, but*	***do you think may be missing for students and teachers?*** *Reviewing tests with partners. (Not enough of that is happening?) Yeah. It rarely happens.* *Review your test with a group. A group of three students. They check their mistakes. I think it's helpful. Because if it's only one student, he probably will not do it. And if they are two students, they will learn from each other, but it will be more helpful to have more than two*	*Sometimes I… teachers see my mistakes when I'm learning, but sometimes I know what are my mistakes – what I need – I look at the feedback, but at the same time, I think they don't write what I'm missing. Sometimes, for example, I have weaknesses in many parts, but they don't care about them. They care about other kinds of mistakes. It (the feedback) doesn't cover what I'm scared of in English. For example, I'm really scared of spelling. And*

	time	pressure	motivation	variety	needs	weaknesses
		very difficult. The most difficult thing was remembering the collocations and prepositions, and infinitives and gerunds. (So, would you rather have a bigger challenge at the end?) Yeah. (Like what? What would that be like?) I have no exact idea, but I think we should have something – a bigger challenge. (Would it be something more practical like you've been talking about?) Yeah. Yeah.	campus and in the environment of the university. (So, actually observing or attending classes.) Yeah. (Even in a short term like we have?) Yes. Listening to one lecture and having questions and interviewing, at, let's say, CCD or any university. And the students attend a lecture there, take notes and ask the professor some questions, and ask the students some questions, and then (So, participate.) yeah, participate in the university.	we don't know how to interact in real situations. Like when you talk to somebody in the street – what do they mean by their body language, and if somebody talks fast or slow… **Should teachers experiment with different kinds of assessments?** Yeah, they should. Maybe, we don't know, this way could be the model way, but sometimes we discover a way that is very practical for many students.	people to see different perspectives about the answers. And if it's four (people) it won't work very well because it will take so much time.	most teachers notice that I don't have good spelling, and most of them don't give me feedback about my spelling – how can I learn spelling. (So, feedback should include what you can do.) Yeah, what can I do to correct the mistake. (Like a strategy.) Yep. (Not just the mistakes.) Uh huh.
	time	*pressure*	*motivation*	*variety*	*needs*	*weaknesses*
Teacher	*I used to give*	*I would like to*	**How do you feel**	**Think of the ways**	**Regarding the**	**Regarding the**

back the test and we would go over it in class and really discuss all the possible different answers that they could have. I don't have time to do that anymore. So, what I do now is anyone who did not get an A on the test – you know, if there's a normal bell curve – anyone who did not get an A on the test must come in and go over their test with me at lunch time. I don't have the time to do it in class, and I think it's better to do it individually. So, we go over any questions, discuss	*learn to use more (ways of assessing students). One example: I've used the computer lab in the past so that students could do self-assessment with the help of the computer. I like the idea of self-assessment. It can lower anxiety about mistakes because students can work privately.*	***about alternative assessments?*** *I feel that they are great. Most of the time I'll have my class do a journal. I give them a topic each week. I love journaling – I journal – and I just think journaling is great. And I try to do that from lower levels because it gives them an opportunity to practice writing skills for one thing. It's a private thing; they don't read their journals out loud. But, it also gives me a chance to get to know them,*	***that teachers check students' progress. What do you think is most helpful?*** *It varies. Student's background is key – taking students' background into account is important. But how you assess students who come from various backgrounds is a challenge. How do you assess them equally? The situation is difficult. As a teacher, I try to take into account their differences. We have to assess them in a way that will help them. Again, their target culture, the university, requires written assessment.*	***teacher and course evaluations:*** *You know, the forms that we have, I think you have to look at it at different levels. I have low-level students. They write sweet things like "pretty teacher" "Wonderful!" ☺ They don't have the ability to really express what they are feeling. Maybe in higher levels, the students are more able to express things in writing that are more meaningful. But, you know, it's done anonymously, so I think that's*	***end-of-term evaluations:*** *I'm not sure if students are equipped to answer some of the questions.*

it if they have an issue, if they have a particular problem with something, I try to give them some extra help with that – worksheets or whatever – and come back and try to work on it together. Almost all of my students come and go over their tests, whatever grade they get. They want to see how they did. Even A students, if they had a mistake or two, want to come and see what they got wrong. And so, I wish I could do it in class, but maybe not, maybe it's better		*which I like. I think different kinds of assessments are wonderful.* *One person would have to write a biography about their partner, and take a picture – and we made a whole book and distributed it around the whole school so everyone could get to know the level two students. They loved it.* *We would have cooking classes, when they were studying imperatives, they would write*		*really important for them that they feel they can say things or fill out check marks that are anonymous; it's important. I would like to – something that I've thought about for a long time, and it was a suggestion at one of our meetings, or maybe at CoTESOL – to have something that you present the class about what you're teaching, what you want them to learn, or what they want to learn and then periodically go over that, "Do you feel like you're*	

to do it this way. I think they need feedback is the bottom line. I think they need to know what they got wrong so that they can learn from it. Otherwise, they don't learn from it, and it kind of defeats itself.		*recipes in an imperative form. They would do the cooking at home, and then we would have a big party with all the food that they had written the recipe for. Different kinds of things. It was a different way of having them – instead of a test, they would be producing something that was very concrete and very real. And fun. I think learning should be fun. It should be made to be as much fun as possible, especially in the lower levels when they are really*		*accomplishing your goals?" Ongoing assessment of what they feel they are learning: are they meeting their needs, are they meeting what they hope to? And also, am I meeting their needs: what suggestions do they have for me – more specific. It has been discussed, it might have been an (after) CoTESOL meeting. I don't think it should be too much, I think it needs to be balanced. I think it's a good thing to try to figure out. I have not*	

	time	pressure	motivation	variety	needs	weaknesses
			struggling; to do something that's fun takes some of the tension off.		*done that, but I think it's a good thing to do.*	
Round 3						
	time	*pressure*	*motivation*	*variety*	*needs*	*weaknesses*
Student	***When do you think questions like these should be asked? (questions about students' needs, goals, and preferences)*** *I think, in the beginning of the term, to ask about what we need to learn – so that they have suitable ways to teach students. (So, to help teachers find the most suitable ways.) Yeah.* ***Do you think it's***	*The final tests include the whole information, the whole knowledge, in the term, so usually it's a bad test because we never remember all the information from the whole term. (So, tests that are too big are not really helpful?) Yeah. Usually, one test a week (is good) so we can remember. (I know some teachers give a midterm test. Do you think it would be better to give a*	***How do you feel about grades?*** *They are helpful but not really helpful. (Can you explain?) Because when we take a test, and we get a high score, it's like it's for fun. Yeah. But it depends on the test measures how the students' work is. (So, focusing on the high score may be fun.) Yeah. (But it may not tell or give enough information about the students'*	***Do you think teachers should experiment with different ways to check students' progress?*** *Yes. Because it's more interesting than just one way always.* ***What other ways of checking your progress do you experience and how often?*** *In listening and speaking class, the teacher asks us to write a report. (To report about something you watched?) Yes. (So, how do you present*	***Regarding other ways to check students' progress:*** *Yes, to give exercises in class and then students can check their answers. The students do the exercises so the teacher can know how the students learn. (And would the teacher check those exercises or would the students check them?) They would check them together. (So, do you think*	***Do you feel like you receive enough information about (feedback on) your work?*** *I don't know because here we study in the particular book, so sometimes it does not have the whole information.*

important for teachers to ask students many questions about their needs and interests? *Some questions don't need to be asked. Just ask (students) "What do you need?"* *Yeah, because this school is the full-time class, so always focused on study. And like me, I don't study without the teachers, so teachers are like the motivation to study: they give homework, so I do homework. If I don't do homework, I don't learn anything, so*	*midterm and then a smaller final?) Yes*	*learning? Is that what you mean?) Like I said, the test just focuses on some main points, so some students just study for the main points – just to get a high score – and they forget the other.* ***Has your experience at our school affected your attitudes about learning?*** *Yeah, because this school is the full-time class, so always focused on study. And like me, I don't study without the teachers, so teachers are like the motivation to study: they give*	*the report? Do you record it?) Yes, sometimes we record and write summarize. (And about how often do you do that activity?) About twice a week.* ***Do you feel that written tests are enough to measure a student's learning?*** *No, because usually written we don't use all the words to write. (You said "we don't use…") …all the vocabulary. (So, do you think something like a spoken test is necessary, too?) I think every skill is necessary for learning a new*	*that students should be part of checking their own answers?) Yes. That's a good way to remember the mistakes. (I've learned that students remember more of what they do together.) Yeah, because when the teacher just talks, students sometimes don't pay attention for the lecture.*	

	without teachers, I will not study anything. ☺ (So, this full-time study – do you think it's necessary for you?) Yeah.		*homework, so I do homework. If I don't do homework, I don't learn anything, so without teachers, I will not study anything. ☺ (So, this full-time study – do you think it's necessary for you?) Yeah. (Is there anything different about your experience here at this school?) Yes, because here we study English to go to university, so we think English is very necessary for us – for learning. (Is this different than, say, your experience in high school?)*	*language.*		

		time	pressure	motivation	variety	needs	weaknesses
				Yeah, of course ☺ *because in high school, we just study for the test, we don't use it for life, in real life. (So, does it feel like your experience here is more focused on your goals?) Yeah.*			
Teacher		*(**Paraphrase:** Teacher's don't have the luxury of debriefing themselves) after a class – which is what I see as a weakness in the system: teachers shouldn't have a ten-minute break between classes; they should be able to go back and say "OK, what just happened. Let*	*So, high-stakes testing here… you know, (there are) some concerns that we've gotten into just summative – a certain number of summative assessments because if they're not connected to… Because I do think that everybody informally assesses and uses*	*That's why I think that some teachers are very good – if they really believe in alternative assessment – you are clear with the students on what it is you want to know they can do, and if they can be creative and show it to you somehow, why not? I think that*	***What do you consider to be unhelpful?*** *Well, I was going to say checklists, although I've used checklists. The reason I wanted to say checklists is that not every student is exactly the same. So, if you're checking people off, and they've all done it exactly the same, is that correct? In certain ways it is,*	***Do you think it's important for teachers to adjust to students' needs and interests?*** *Yes, but they still have to keep in mind the goal of the class. So, you can't dumb it down and count it as the same. An example is… a conversation that I had a number of years ago now*	*I'm sensing that there's another issue. And for me, the issue is: are our classes and our teachers who are teaching those classes truly articulating well to the next level? So, someone might pass the class, but have we thought at all of what they need to be able to do*

me do field notes about this class, I'll go back and visit it, but this is my impression of what happened." And we don't give that to teachers in a system like ours or like in the public schools. So, you have to rely on your memory of what went on in the classroom, and I just don't think that's the best thing. I think if you really want to give the value of your training and your knowledge to the students, you have to sit there and debrief yourself. Say "OK, what just happened? What	*that information. The biggest question is: should your informal assessments have some impact to the grade? Or, should the grade simply rely on three or five "real" assessments? You know, summative assessments that show that this is what the student can do at this point in time. Or, can that be for some, you know, watered down by on-going assessments? Of course, the complaint there was… and not just in our setting, but in*	*students, if they are really caught up in some project, can really do a lot to demonstrate their learning, but which might not fit into a more standard practice that everybody in the classroom has to do the same way. (50:03) And if you've… sometimes, in a program like ours, it's harder with just nine-week sessions, to build that like you could in a school year – to build that kind of trust in the teacher and in being able to, sort of, think outside the box*	*e.g. if you're using the s-ending on a verb, that might work for that sort of thing. I think every type of assessment has a niche where it fits. It's if as a teacher you decided: that worked at this class at this time, so that's all I'm going to do from now on. (Ah, so, getting at variety or a lack of variety.) Yeah. Lack of variety, and just assuming that I'm going to give multiple-choice tests and that's going to show me what I want. And that's what you get – and there's no other opportunity for a student to demonstrate learning. Or, to use*	*with a teacher who was – throughout the term – kind of verbal about the weakness of a particular class and level. And then I saw the final grades, and mostly, they were passing. And basically what had happened… she was teaching the lower level. For example (the class was actually at) level four… she realizes the students don't know that stuff – they're not ready – they shouldn't have been passed up. So, she teaches them level three, and she grades them*	*in the next level, and how they are going to be judged when they walk through that door? Have we articulated it enough so that they've got an entry into the next level – where someone's not going to instantly say: "I know this student is going to fail this level." Everybody doesn't say that, but there is that sense sometimes that someone has been passed on, and I worry that it might not always have to do with the passing on but with the expectation of*

do I feel was good, what do I feel was bad, what do I want to work on…?" But we go home, sometimes after a whole day, sometimes a teachers' meeting, and then we have to reconstruct what happened to plan our next lesson. (24:38) And like I said, it's a luxury – and it doesn't take long – you know, it takes about 20 minutes to sit there and say "OK, that's what happened, and this is where I want to go." And then I can spend more time designing it. "This is what	*other settings, is that some teachers are giving lots of "fluffy" "fun" "kind" assessments and giving As on them. And when it comes time to figure out the grade, all those "fluffy" things outweigh some of those "stronger" assessments – those summative things – and the student passes when they shouldn't have passed. So, we've swung the other way of trying to make sure nobody gets through the class unless they can get through these assessments…*	*and show what you can do. But I think that if you can do that, our learners sometimes really knock our socks off. Like, "Wow! Look at what they could do!" When I think about just the excitement that that photography contest generated, or the essays that we have up on the wall… those are things that… and the word wall in the back hall with the writing… where I've seen students really get engaged… and the trick is, how can that be not*	*one model – whether it's anecdotal note-taking, or checklists, or exit questions from the classroom – and you just determine: that and that alone tells me if the students learn.* *And I would say that (we) teachers should experiment, not in isolation, but through collegial engagement. I think we need to trust each other more and talk more about what we're doing and get away from judging it as good or bad. But saying, "Huh. Let me know what you learn from it." And trying something out rather than*	*on their achievement of those standards, but it's supposed to be level four, and she counts it as level four! So the students then move on.* *And so, I think that's the danger of adjusting to the needs of the students within a program that has a set curriculum. You can do that. I mean, you can do it, but you have to make sure that the students understand: "OK this is where we have to be, and this is where we're going. This is where I'm going to be*	*what they should be able to do in my class. You only really get to know that well if you've taught every level, every class in the program, so that you actually see that that level 6 expectation – which is really strong – you actually see how to get there in 14 months when you have someone who's an absolute beginner. It's a HUGE challenge that EVERYBODY has got to buy into… for that success to be there. But they're not going to come out of level 6 fluent…*

	happened, and these are the things I need to check on and assess and make sure they've got them because something that happened in class today made me think that the students really didn't get it. And so I need a different type of reading or a different type of activity." And so, that for me is a fault in the system that doesn't honor thinking on the part of teachers.	*which doesn't feel good to anybody either, so... It's that fear of moving someone on who doesn't know*	*just an extra activity but part of the learning and seen as a way to get at it. But I think for the teacher being really clear on what it is that you're assessing and how that fits in with where we're going with the students... I want to know that you can write a biography about yourself so that somebody else can read it and really know who you are... as a person, what your challenges are, what your interests are... whatever. So that there's a reason perhaps.*	*saying "Oh, I can't do that in my class. My students wouldn't let me do this." Or, "I don't think that that's very good." So, yes, experiment, but never in isolation.*	*assessing you. You're kind of struggling here, so we're going to be doing some exercises – you need to do a lot of this at home – I'm going to give you stuff to do at home – you've got to, you know, try to get up here..." But always keeping this end outcome as the benchmark so that when you're giving them the feedback, they understand where they are in relationship to that. So that if they don't pass the level, they understand. Now that's where my concern is: did*	*brilliant... able to write research papers that everyone can understand... you know, that just doesn't happen in an intensive English program no matter how hard you try. I think there's something other than "Some teachers are easy and pass people who shouldn't be passed." I think our articulation between levels is something to really try and talk about. And we have tried sometimes to say what should a level 4 coming in be able to write? Given a prompt, where you're*

			The trick of course is making sure that you don't step on the student's toes. But I think clarity on the teacher's part is really important. So, they really have to know what the assessment is for		*the teacher really assess that they were not ready for it, and that they needed to be retaught the level? Because, I would say, more often than not, they wouldn't have to go back and teach the whole level.*	*going to figure out: does he fit in the class? Or, does she fit in the class? What do you have to see? What's the "bare" level? You have to see it. If someone says "they don't have that s-ending, third person singular verb marker, I just go... read the news papers and look at the grammar mistakes – that one thing shouldn't cause you to judge someone that harshly. What should we look for? Not: what shouldn't they have. What ARE they doing right?*

	time	*pressure*	*motivation*	*variety*	*needs*	*weaknesses*
Student	***In addition to timed tests and quizzes, what other ways of checking your progress do you experience? How often? (Do you commonly experience other ways?)*** *Not really. No. And I think the time, here especially at this school – uh, the teachers give the students more time than they need. I believe that they have to learn how to be faster. You know, like 60 minutes for a reading test, for example… I think it's a long time. Like, 20 minutes*	***How do teachers usually check your learning/ progress at learning English?*** *I think by tracking our scores from one test to another. (So, by testing and tracking the scores?) Yeah. Do you think it's/they're the best way(s) to keep track of a student's progress? No. Some students are… they have, like, test anxiety, so they don't do well on tests. Maybe there is another ways to test them: maybe verbally, tracking*	*Actually, I hate to be tested and checked. I think success is the way to track, you know. (What would that look like? For you?) Like, for example, I have never graduated from any English school, but everybody can tell that I speak very good English. (Right.) It's not the scores or the grades, it's just the performance – or the effort that you put to improve a certain skill… and, I don't know, it's like people do not like that but, it's not*	***Should teachers experiment with different kinds of assessments (for Ss: "ways of checking students' progress")? Why or why not?*** *Yes. Because what works for someone, doesn't work for the other one. (Speaking of students.) Yeah. What works for one student, doesn't work for another student. They might come up with something really effective. If they just keep doing the same thing, they will never know if what they're doing is good or not. (So, experimentation will lead to better methods – finding*	*And I understand that there are some students who wait to the last moment to do it, but they need to know not to do this. You know, not by forcing them not to do it, or making it very, very processed: day one you do this, day two you do that… It's kind of, maybe because I'm older than everybody in class… it works for them, but it doesn't work for me… I don't know. I'm not good, so I love to do things the way I wanna do it, instead of being told, you know, to*	***Think of the ways that teachers check students' progress. What do you think is most helpful?*** *Practice. Because if they allow students to practice more than listening, you know… for example, I had an argue with one of the teachers about the commas and the punctuation… (That's a fun argument!) …and I don't believe that we should memorize the rules related to punctuation by any means because we will forget them*

is enough. They need to learn how to be fast, you know… and maybe it's gonna be hard at the beginning, but when they get used to it, it's better than, you know, giving them 'their time' and… (Take a vacation while you take the test?) Yes. ***(The following transcribed response is a continuation of the response in the far right "weaknesses" column.)*** *Sometimes teachers just, you know, avoid – not avoid – by the way that they*	*performance in class, um… yeah, homeworks… instead of tests. (So, the stress of tests is a negative.) Yeah. I have that. (I thought so, actually.) Yeah. (And it's not uncommon. I think most people have some test anxiety.) Yes. (Do you think that test anxiety really affects your performance? Regularly?) Yes… I would say, like 15%. Yeah. It takes like 15% down on my score. (Well, it's great that you can quantify it.) Yeah. (You know, you have a*	*about the grade or the degree that you're gonna have, it's just… (Your performance.) Your performance, and how do you use your English, and for what purpose… it's… I don't know. People disagree with that, I know, the majority of people disagree with that, but… Like, trust me, I've never graduated from any English school – I don't have any degree in English – but I do take vacation English courses, for example. I used to do that. I read everything*	*better methods.) Yeah. That is a good example – today, for example, in the reading class our teacher chose a topic for our reading, which was aging. Then after reading the whole story, my classmate and I didn't get the whole theme of the story. So, we started to talk about it, and then she realized that aging is not a problem in the Middle East. You know, so the whole theme… wasn't the right theme for students from the Middle East. Because, it didn't make sense – the whole story didn't make sense. (So, the theme had a*	*go through a process. (As an older, more mature learner, it sounds like independence is important for you. Is that what you're saying?) Yes. And I believe that also younger students need to learn how to be independent. You know, not do – just follow what the teacher said. They have to know it. I don't know how, but they have to learn how to be independent, and just figure out their time and manage it. You know, and hand in the assignments on time… they need*	*sooner or later. And the better way, is to just practice them using the book… like, by reviewing the rule then you can, you know, instead of wasting time by memorizing the rule itself. And she disagrees, of course. And, especially, we're not gonna use It in our speaking, which is important to interact with, you know, Americans here. And we're not gonna use it when we listen in class. We're just gonna use it when we write formally. Which is in a very, very specific time. It's*

| | *decide to teach, doesn't allow us to practice more. (Right. OK.) Which is not helping us to, you know, to understand or… (Get enough practice.) Get enough practice in order to make that rule become more natural. (Right. I think that's a very important point.) You know. (So, in the way that teachers present rules, they may take time away from the students' practice.) Yeah. (I kind of infer that students may not learn to use the language because they're* | *sense of how it affects you. A clear sense.) Yeah.* | *in English – even before I came here. I speak English, I listen to English, you know… because I wanted to improve my English skills over time. (Yeah, do you think your… it sounds like you have developed an individual approach to…) And this is what distracts students from their learning: they focus too much on their grades. They just want to pass. But passing is not what you really want – especially when it comes to language – because you* | *cultural connection – it was dependent on a different culture…) Yeah. Our teacher never knew this, and it was the first time that she did this type of reading: to choose a topic or a theme, and then she led us to analyze and practice our critical thinking about the story. So, she realized, that she has to be so picky next time about the topics – because what works for her as an American, doesn't work for us from different countries due to the cultural differences. (Right. Well, it sounds like a success anyway. You know, to realize what you* | *to understand this. (Do you think the overly-structured approach that a teacher may take – do you think that it defeats independence? Or interrupts learning to become independent?) Yes, big time.* | *not an every day rule that you will need to use. And when it comes to essays, for example, you always have your book as a reference, and you can just go back… you need to know that there is a rule for punctuation, so you have to know how to find it in the book and use it and apply it in your essay. Sometimes teachers just, you know, avoid – not avoid – by the way that they decide to teach, doesn't allow us to practice more. (Right. OK.) Which is not helping us to, you* |

focusing on rules too much.) Yeah. Yes, and practicing allows us to become more natural with the language. You don't have to know the rule sometimes. But you need to be able to tell it sounds wrong – it's not right – because it's not natural. (Right. Right.) Does that make sense? (Yeah, it does make sense. Yeah, you can't have a sense for what is natural until it becomes natural to you! ☺ And that's only through experience and practice. Not		*want to use it forever. It's meaningless: when you just pass, then the next day you forget everything that you've learned.*	*and your classmate realized through discussing the theme of that article – or whatever the piece was – that sounds like it was successful.) Yeah. (It may not have been what the teacher intended…) Yeah. (…or was hoping,) Yeah. (…but it sounds successful because you were able to compare it and contrast it with your own cultural knowledge.) Yes. (That's pretty powerful to me!) Yeah. ☺ (Speaking of working with a partner… do you think it's important for students to work with peers?) Of course, yes.*		*know, to understand or… (Get enough practice.) Get enough practice in order to make that rule become more natural…* **(Speaker's response continues in the "time" column to the left.)**

	through just reading a rule or studying a rule.)				

Questionnaire One: Focus on Assessment and Feedback

1. What are some **different kinds of assessment that you experience** here at our school?
2. What would you consider to be the **most important** assessments?
3. What would you consider to be **less important** assessments?
4. What **other kinds of assessments** do you know of? How often do you use/experience them?
5. Do you **prefer any particular** assessments (over others)? Why?
6. What do you think are the **primary purposes of** assessment?
7. Do you feel that **written tests and quizzes** (are sufficient measures of) **are enough to measure** a student's learning?
8. How do you **feel about major tests** like unit/chapter tests, standardized midterms or finals, etc.?
9. How do you **feel about alternative assessments**, e.g., journals, portfolios, making posters, or different types of in-class performances, etc.?
10. Do you think that **written tests or quizzes accurately measure** what a person can do with language?
    a. If "yes," are there any problems with (or limitations of) written tests?
    b. If "no," what do you think tests can miss about a person's ability?
11. What kinds of **information** (feedback) **do students get** from tests?
12. What kinds of **information** (feedback) **do teachers get** from tests?
13. What **information** (feedback) do you think **may be missing for students and teachers**? (i.e., What helpful and important information cannot be provided by tests?)
14. Do you feel like you **receive enough information about** (feedback on) **your work**?
15. Does **this information** (feedback) **help you to improve**?
16. What about **peers**? Is it **important to get information (e.g., advice, criticism, praise) from your peers**? Why or why not?

17. How often do you get this kind of information?

18. Can people **learn without taking tests**?

19. Can schools **provide a high standard of education without tests**?

20. How do you **feel about grades**?

21. Think about **one of your best experiences with a test or quiz**. Was it the best because of **a high grade? Was there another reason**? Please explain.

22. Do you **believe that people can learn to communicate** in a foreign language **by passing tests** on the four skills?

23. Do you **believe that people need to get used to taking lots of tests** to be successful in the future? (e.g., successfully prepare to function in a college/university environment?)

24. Do you **receive helpful information about** (description of) **your work**? How? When?

25. Do you **have a chance to talk about your needs and interests**? When? How often?

26. Do you think it's **important for teachers to adjust to students'** needs and interests?

27. Have **you ever received a list of questions** about our school, your classes, and your teachers? When? How often? Do you think the questions were helpful? Why?

28. **When** do you think **questions like these should be asked**? E.g., at the beginning of the term; in the middle; at the end?

29. Do students and teachers **talk about the answers to questions** like these after they have been collected?

30. Do you **think it's important for teachers to ask students** many questions about their needs and interests? Why? Why not?

31. Has your experience at our school **affected your attitudes about assessment**? If yes, **in what ways**?

Revised Questionnaire: Focus on Assessment/Feedback (rounds 2 & 3)

1. (for teachers) What is your **definition of assessment**?
   (for students) **How do teachers usually check your learning/progress** at

   learning English? Do you think it's/they're the best way(s)?

2. (for Ts) What are some **different kinds of assessment that you use** here at our school?
   (for Ss) What **other ways** can teachers check your progress?

3. (for Ts) Would you **like to use other ways** to assess learners' progress?
   (for Ss) Would **you like teachers to use other ways** to check your progress? Why?

4. (for Ts) What would you consider to be the **most important assessments**? a
   (for Ss) What do you think are the **most important ways** teachers check your progress?

5. (for Ts) What would you consider to be **less important assessments**?
   (for Ss) What do you think are the **least important ways** teachers check your progress?

6. (for Ts/Ss) Think of the **ways that teachers check students' progress.** What do you think is **most helpful**?
   What do you consider to be **unhelpful**?

7. (for Ts) Have you ever **tried an assessment** that you found to be **unhelpful or unsuccessful**? How did you **follow up** after the
   assessment was given?
   (for Ss) Have you **experienced a test, quiz, project or other way to check your progress** which you thought was
   unhelpful/unsuccessful? If yes, **what happened after it?**

8. (for Ts) In addition to timed tests and quizzes, what **other kinds of assessments** do you use? How often?

   (for Ss) In addition to timed tests and quizzes, what **other ways of checking your   progress** do you experience? How often?

9. (for Ts/Ss) Do you **prefer any particular** assessments/ways to check progress? Why?

10. (for Ts/Ss) Should teachers **experiment with different kinds** of assessments (for Ss: "ways of checking students' progress")? Why or why not?

11. (for Ts) What do you think are the **main purposes of** assessment?

12. (for Ts/Ss) Do you feel that **written tests and quizzes are enough to measure** a student's learning?

13. How do you **feel about major assessments, e.g.** unit/chapter tests, in-class speeches, standardized midterms or finals, etc.?

14. How do you **feel about minor assessments like quizzes?**

15. How do you **feel about alternative assessments**, e.g., journals, portfolios, making posters, group projects, or different types of in-class performances, etc.?

16. Do you think that **written tests or quizzes accurately measure** what a person can do with language?

    a. If yes, why?

    b. If not, what's the problem?

17. Do you feel like you learn from the process of testing/being tested?

18. **To learn from testing/being tested**, what do you think must happen? What must the teacher do? What must the student do?

19. What **information** (feedback) do you think **may be missing for students and teachers**? (i.e., What helpful and important information cannot be provided by tests?)

20. Do you feel like you **receive enough information about** (feedback on) **your work**?

21. Does **this information** (feedback) **help you to improve**?

22. What about **peers**? Is it **important to get information (e.g., advice, criticism, praise) from your peers**? Why or why not?

23. How often do you get this kind of information?

24. Can people **learn without taking tests**?

25. Can schools **provide a high standard of education without tests**?

26. How do you **feel about grades**?

27. Think about **one of your best experiences with a test or quiz**. What made it positive/successful for you? Was it **a high grade? Was there another reason**? Please explain.

28. Do you **believe that people can learn to communicate** in a foreign language **by passing tests** on the four skills?

29. Do you **believe that people need to get used to taking lots of tests** to be successful in the future?

30. Do you **receive helpful information about your work**? How? When?

31. Do you **have a chance to talk about your needs and interests**? When? How often?

32. Do you think it's **important for teachers to adjust to students'** needs and interests?

33. Have **you ever received a list of questions** about your experiences in our school, your classes, and with your teachers? When? How often? Do you think the questions were helpful? Why?

34. **When** do you think **questions like these should be asked**? E.g., at the beginning of the term; in the middle; at the end?

35. Do students and teachers have a chance to **talk about the answers to these questions** after they have been collected?

36. Do you **think it's important for teachers to ask students** many questions about their needs and interests? Why? Why not?

37. Has your experience at our school **affected your attitudes about learning**? If yes, **in what ways**?