English language teachers' evaluation of a belief elicitation technique

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Abstract

In this small-scale study an adapted version of a repertory grid as proposed by Donaghue (2003) was used as a tool to elicit the teacher beliefs of six English teachers working at a Turkish private middle school. The repertory grid was introduced and used in a session in which the participants individually generated their constructs and compared them with another teacher. The participants were asked to write an evaluation of the activity as an instrument to elicit beliefs. Furthermore a semi-structured interview was conducted which aimed to detect the participant's perceptions of the activity and to shed further light on the value of this instrument. Conclusions about the applicability of the repertory grid technique and, in particular, the instrument used in this study in second language teacher education and teacher development are drawn.

Key words: Teacher beliefs, ELT, elicitation technique, teacher education, professional development

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that people's beliefs have an impact on their behaviour. Thought and action are interactively related: "What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (Bandura, 1986, p. 25). Applied to the teaching profession, beliefs have been defined as a kind of personal knowledge teachers have about all aspects of learning and teaching shaping their instructional practice and perceptions of what they encounter in teacher education and development programmes (Borg, 2006).

Teacher Beliefs

Reviewing the relevant literature, Gabillon (2012) has recently explicated the nature of foreign language teacher beliefs and their influence on teaching practice in a set of five dichotomies: (1) teacher beliefs are *personal* as they represent an individual understanding and interpretation of teaching practice and *social*, as the understanding and interpretation is shaped in a social and cultural context; (2) teacher beliefs are *practical* and *theoretical* in a way that theoretical knowledge (e.g. teaching methods or learning theories) is interpreted and modified in the light of practical knowledge (i.e. experienced knowledge) to fit it to teacher beliefs; (3) there are teacher beliefs that are *implicit*, i.e. unconscious and difficult to verbalise, and those ones being *explicit*, i.e. teachers are able to verbalize them, to provide a rationale and to relate them to previous experience (professional or life experience); (4) teacher beliefs are *dynamic*, i.e. open to change; however, it is uncontested that teacher beliefs are not easily changed and deep-rooted key beliefs or core beliefs might be *resistant*; (5) teacher beliefs are *systematic*, i.e. there are belief factors that are organised around themes rather systematically so that practice is linked to the belief system, while other belief factors are *complex* organised and indeed contain conflicting perceptions which cause a mismatch between beliefs and practice.

Borg (2006; 2003) has coined the term teacher cognition referring to the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think" (ibid, p. 81). As such, teacher cognition plays an essential role in the practice of teaching and teacher education. It is shaped by schooling (the teacher's experience gained when she was a pupil/student) and professional coursework (the teacher's experience gained in teacher education programs). Furthermore, teacher cognition is affected by contextual factors (physical conditions, material, curriculum etc. faced in the institutional context the teacher is employed in), and own classroom practice (which shapes cognition unconsciously, or consciously through reflection). Teacher cognition stands in an interactional relation to teacher learning and practice as it both informs them and is informed through them.

Importance of Belief Elicitation

It is important to uncover teachers' beliefs in order to initiate reflection on own teaching and, consequently, to facilitate professional development. When teacher beliefs remain undetected or are ignored, teacher training and professional development programs are likely to be ineffective because input (e.g. new approaches or techniques) cannot be connected to existing teacher beliefs; consequently, new content is unlikely to be transferred into classroom practice (Freeman, 2002; Vélez-Rendón, 2002).

Instruments to Elicit Teacher Beliefs

Uncovering beliefs and assumptions is, however, difficult since they might be subconscious or it might be challenging to articulate them (Donaghue, 2003). Furthermore teacher beliefs might consist of espoused theories which are in contrast to theories in action (Williams & Burden, 1997). Among other instruments, the use of belief inventories (e.g. Richards & Lockhart, 1996, pp. 48-51) or awareness raising activities (e.g. Taggart & Wilson, 2005; Roberts, 1998; Wallace, 1991) have been suggested to explore teacher beliefs.

Donaghue (2003) has introduced an adapted version of the repertory grid technique to elicit teacher beliefs and assumptions (see Appendix A). Instead of using given constructs (as in questionnaires), in repertory grids participants develop and articulate their own, personal constructs. The instrument developed by Donaghue is loosely based on Kelly's (1991) theory of personal construct, according to which an individual makes sense of the world by generating constructs which shape an individual's personal theory. Constructs are viewed as "dichotomous abstractions" (ibid., p. 75), i.e. individuals perceive elements of their experience in such a way that they "never affirm anything without simultaneously denying something" (Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2004, p.7). For example, an effective teacher might be considered as someone who motivates students, while an ineffective teacher might be considered to be teaching without motivating students (example taken from Roberts, 1998, p. 31). Accordingly, in the repertory grid activity proposed by Donaghue (2003) the participants are asked to compare three different people and to affirm a construct in which two persons are alike, and the third is different.

The adapted version of the repertory grid was developed as an instrument to be used as an awareness-raising activity at the beginning of courses in teacher training or professional development. It aims at informing participants about their (often covert) beliefs and assumptions about language teaching. Different from other repertory grids it does not contain a scale through which participants indicate how near a construct is related to an element. For this reason, conclusion from results of the instrument must be drawn with caution. It is rather "a catalyst to thought and reflection" (Donaghue, 2003, p. 350) than a research tool to gain generalisable results. Consequently, this study is concerned with the applicability of the instruments and not with the elicited beliefs themselves.

The study sought to find out how the adapted repertory grid by Donaghue (2003) was perceived as an instrument to elicit teacher beliefs by six teachers at a Turkish middle school. For this reason, the participants were asked to evaluate the instrument and it was intended to find out which dimensions of teacher cognition the participants related their own beliefs to. It was assumed that the participants' comments would indicate the appropriateness of the instrument in terms of initiating reflective thinking. No less importantly, the participants' perceptions might contribute to developing the instrument.

Following these considerations the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do the participants evaluate the elicitation technique used in this study?

2. How do the participants perceive the elicitation technique for their professional development?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were six teachers at a private middle school in a southeastern city in Turkey. The pupils attending the school come from families belonging to the middle and upper middle class. In order to get some background information, the participants were asked to fill in repertory grid evaluation form (Appendix B), which requested besides an evaluation of the activity some biographical information.

Table 1

Background of the Participants in the Study

| Participant	Sex	Age	Qualification	Teaching experience
1	female	33	bachelor	11 years
2	male	45	bachelor	17 years
3	female	27	bachelor	4 years
4	female	29	bachelor	7 years
5	female	29	bachelor	4 years
6	male	32	bachelor	6 years

Table 1 shows that all participants held a bachelor's degree in ELT and varied in teaching experience as evidenced by the years of teaching. Participants 1, 3 and 5 had exclusively been working at private schools while participant 4 had been working at a private teaching institution (*dershane)* for five years and participant 6 at a public school for three years before they started their current job at the private school. Participant 2 is of Syrian nationality. He had working experience at state schools abroad (e.g. Kuwait), and had been working at the private school for two years.

Data Collection Procedures and Tools

Repertory Grid/Session

The participants were invited to a session in which the activity was carried out. The activity procedure followed these steps (cf. Donaghue, 2003, p. 347f.):

1. The researcher introduces the aim of the study and explains all steps. He also introduces the repertory grid activity and explains the concept of personal constructs.
2. Participants are divided into pairs. Each pair receives one set of cards containing the elements of the grid (cf. Appendix A). They think of a real person that matches the element best. Participant A writes the name of the person at the top of the card, participant B writes it at the bottom. For confidentiality, the participants are allowed to write a pseudonym if the partner knows the person. An example is given in Figure 1.

Murat

A teacher you learned well with

Ayşe
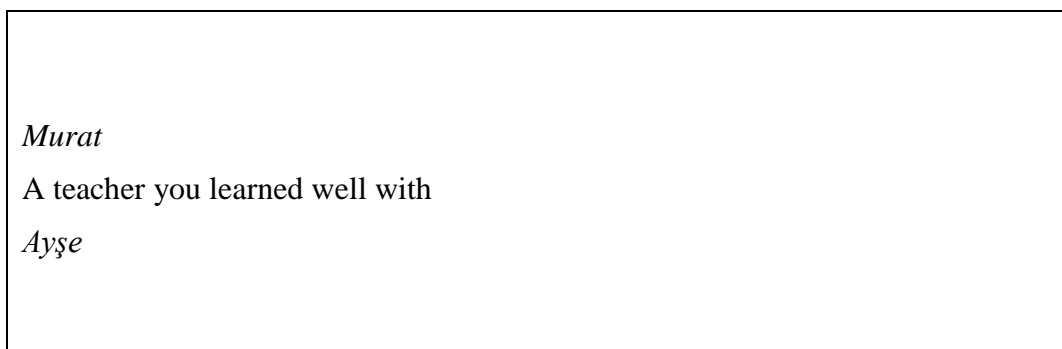
Figure 1.

Card Used in Repertory Grid Activity (Sample)

3. Cards are shuffled. Each participant is given a grid (Appendix A). Pairs choose three cards at random, and individually think how two persons are similar and one is different writing their personal constructs in the 'construct' column. Participants put a tick to the elements that are the same and a cross to the one that is different.
4. Pairs compare their constructs and discuss.
5. Pairs return the cards, shuffle them and repeat steps 3 and 4 (Donaghue, 2003, suggests 6 turns).

Repertory Grid Evaluation

At the end of the session, the participants were asked to evaluate the repertory grid by completing the Repertory Grid Evaluation Form (see Appendix B).

Semi-Structured Interview

Each participant was interviewed separately. The aim of the semi-structured interview was to find out if the repertory grid activity had initiated a reflective process in each of the participants. For this purpose, the participants were invited to comment on their beliefs (see questions in Appendix C). The interviews were held in English and audio-recorded. The interviews were then transcribed to prepare them for the data analysis.

Field Notes

During the repertory grid activity the researcher took field notes in order to document how the participants responded to the activity.

Data Analysis

Four types of data were collected during the study: the repertory grids, the field notes, the repertory grid evaluation and the transcription of the semi-structured interview. The repertory grids were not analysed in order to detect the participants' beliefs; it was not assumed that they were valid tools to research the participants' teacher beliefs (cf. the related remarks in the introduction of this paper). The data gained from the other data collection tools were analysed

through content analysis in order to answer the research questions. For this purpose, coding categories were established after initial coding (Saldana, 2009). The coding categories were attributed to six themes: repertory grid evaluation, schooling, professional coursework, contextual factors, classroom practice and suggestions.

Findings

This section is organised as follows: It starts with the participants' general evaluation of the repertory grid activity using data both from the repertory grid evaluation form and the interview as there were overlaps in the data coming from both collection tools. Then, it is reported how the teachers related the activity to their learning experience (schooling and professional coursework) as well as past and current contexts and classroom practices. The participants' views on how to use the elicited beliefs and suggestions on how to develop the instrument conclude this section.

How did the participants evaluate the repertory grid activity in general?

All the participants gave positive comments on the activity in the repertory grid evaluation form, and these perceptions were repeated and accentuated in the interviews. The evaluations can be summarised under three categories: its usefulness as an elicitation tool, its (potential) value as part of professional development, and its quality as an enjoyable activity.

The activity as an Elicitation Tool

The participants regarded the tool as a powerful instrument to elicit beliefs as the elicitation process was based on real people the participants were familiar with. Participant 1, for example, stated that the activity helped her raise the awareness of the need to apply social skills in the teaching practice:

> *I didn't think about some of the qualities of my teachers, my colleagues (...) I didn't think that my colleagues are cheerful persons or friendly persons. (...) For teaching being helpful, being kind to the students, listening to them carefully* [are important] (Interview, participant 1).

Two participants emphasised that that the procedure helped them to formulate honest answers; a teacher noted:

> *I felt that I was giving away my experiences about my job* (Repertory Grid Evaluation Form, participant 6).

Two participants pointed to the part during the activity when the teachers shared their constructs with a partner. They recognised sharing beliefs as a central point of the activity as the following excerpt from the interview illustrates:

> *I learned much from the activity because one of my colleagues wrote interesting constructs and by the way I learned them and I think this activity is something like a psychological test, but not individual-psychological, it's just prepared for the profession and our experiences* (Interview, participant 6).

Professional Development

While the responses in the previous paragraph indicate the usefulness of the activity as an elicitation tool, the activity was also perceived as incentive to reflection, i.e. it was perceived

as going beyond a mere verbalisation of beliefs and, thus, as potentially contributing to professional development:

> *You think, you remember and you evaluate yourself and the other person* (Interview, participant 3).

Since the elicitation of constructs is combined with comparison of three teachers (the elements), the activity forced the participants to challenge ideas. Participant 2 illustrates this by discussing a personality trait that is negatively connoted, but in fact might be valuable as a quality of a teacher:

> *In my point of view I think I have to think again and again of so many things; for example one of the characteristics of the teacher I ticked – a strict teacher, for example, I learned a lot from a strict teacher in the past; he never laughed, but really I loved him very much, although he was not so friendly with the students, but as a teacher he was a good teacher. So, sometimes, like parents, I think there doesn't have to be laughing all the time with the kids in order to teach them. Sometimes we have to be strict a little bit. Of course, we have to be patient, kind, friendly and so on. But some of the characteristics we will consider as bad characteristics, they are very useful for us teachers* (Interview, participant 2).

Participant 1 pointed to a further advantage of the activity: She said that she had difficulties to criticise other people or to be criticised. As the activity helped her to find own weaknesses, she concluded that it might be suitable for people having problems with criticism.

Enjoyment

Two participants perceived the activity as enjoyable, as expressed in this excerpt:

> *Also it was enjoyable because it made me think of the past and sometimes I laughed at those days* (Repertory Grid Evaluation Form, participant 1).

The enjoyment the participants found can be confirmed by the researcher's observations of the teachers' active participation in the activity and the willingness to elaborate on their constructs in the interviews; the following comment indicates that the feeling of enjoyment was linked to the perception of contributing to professional development:

> *It was enjoyable. I liked being a participant in such an activity. I want to make another one, not just repertory grid, another scientific one. I want to be a participant for my profession* (Interview, participant 6).

What did the participants relate their beliefs to?

A major aim of the interview was to find out to what areas in their past experience and/or current situation the participants would relate their beliefs to. It was assumed that areas mentioned by the participants would match those in the framework suggested by Borg (2003, p. 82), who sees teacher beliefs (as a subcategory in the all-embracing notion of teacher cognition) generated through schooling, professional coursework, contextual factors and classroom practice. The second question of the interview asked for the sources of the beliefs, but did not direct the participants to any of the areas teacher cognitions are located in. Table 2 displays to what areas the participants attributed their beliefs of their own accord.

Table 2

Participant's Initial Attribution of Beliefs to Areas

participant	area mentioned initially
1	professional coursework
2	contextual factors
3	contextual factors
4	schooling
5	contextual factors schooling
6	professional coursework

Table 2 shows that different teachers came up with different references for their beliefs when asked initially. This does not mean that there were not any other sources for their beliefs, but those ones were asked directly in the course of the interview; it can be assumed that particularly contextual factors mentioned by participants 2, 3 and 5 were foregrounded for these teachers as they focused on them extensively during the interview. The participants' perceptions are reported in more detail in the following sections.

Schooling

Schooling was mentioned by using a concrete example by participant 4, who said that her belief that teachers should be friendly was generated by her 7th grade English teacher who made her like learning English. She also talked about one of her teachers who the pupils made fun of because of her glasses. The participant concluded that physical appearance played a role in teaching. Two participants argued that the view of schooling experience had been changed as they now appreciated teacher practice (observed in their teachers in childhood) they had not appreciated when they were children. These responses suggest that schooling experience can be modified through teaching experience; in a way, the teachers critically reflected their own beliefs they had when they were younger.

Professional Coursework

Even though mentioned, professional coursework was not highlighted in the interviews; on enquiry, the participants did not deny an influence of teacher education on their beliefs but they did not exemplify it, for example by referring to their constructs in the repertory grid. Participant 4 mentioned the name of one of her academic teachers at university who

> *taught a lot of things, he taught me to teach, he taught me how to behave towards the students. We learned by living, by acting* (Interview, participant 3).

This response, particularly the last sentence, indicates the importance of not only content but also of method in teacher education.

Contextual Factors

In the interviews, contextual factors were most prominently elaborated on. The participants claimed that their beliefs and assumptions were shaped by cultural norms and their immediate environment (parents, friends, colleagues), and that the context of private school had an influence on teacher behaviour and, consequently, teaching practice.

Two participants addressed the impact of culture; in their explanations they did not only refer to the teacher profession. The following excerpt summarises the responses:

> *I think our beliefs come from our experiences, this is one of the sources – one of them is our home. That is very important: How did our parents teach us in the past? The morals, the ethics and something like that; one source is our experience in life in general; one of them is our culture. For example, we are Muslims, our culture is different from that of others, from Jews or Christians or other people; one of them comes from our close friends – the people we love. Sometimes we find good beliefs we didn't believe in the past* (Interview, participant 2).

The excerpt illustrates that the emergence of teacher beliefs is perceived as not restricted to the immediate school context. Virtually all areas of life can contribute to professional beliefs.

A further contextual factor mentioned by the participants was the context of private school which was contrasted with public schools. Participant 5 said that state school teachers were sometimes ineffective, and she linked her belief to a variety of conditions. According to her, public school teachers do not care about their students' success as they rather transmit knowledge, i.e. grammar, than teaching the four language skills; they are not supervised by principals and parents do not come to school and ask about their children's progress; additionally, public school teachers are 'relaxed' about salary (as private school teachers' salary is likely to be performance-based, and there is the danger of being sacked); these factors contributed to state school teachers' attitude of indifference towards their profession. In a similar vein participant 3 pointed to the reduced amount of class hours and restricted use of material in public schools on the one hand and the willingness of private school students to learn English on the other hand. Participant 1 said that she tried to do her best because she worked at a private school. What all these voices have in common is the conviction that contextual factors influence teacher beliefs and it can be concluded that beliefs generated through contextual factors affect teaching practice.

Classroom Practice

Similar to schooling and professional coursework, the participants did not come up with concrete examples illustrating how their beliefs interacted with their own classroom practice. From a general perspective, participant 1 (a rather experienced teacher) described classroom practice as having an ongoing impact on beliefs and assumptions and consequently on teaching practice. She claimed she adapted her beliefs as a response to change in student behaviour:

> *I change my ideas because every generation is different (...) I have to change my style, my ideas, my behaviour almost every year. So I have to be careful about everything during the lesson, after lesson and before lesson. So, they change my ideas, I can say day by day* (Interview, participant 1).

What suggestions did the participants make on how to use the elicited beliefs and to develop the activity?

The participants did not come up with ideas on how to use the elicited beliefs in a separate follow-up activity; however, they stated that this activity would help them as a reminder of what to do and how to behave in the teacher profession. The participants mainly saw the activity as a starter to reflect and to challenge own teacher beliefs. Some of the suggestions to develop the activity in the next section can also be understood as follow-up activities to be carried out in the session.

Participant 1 suggested adding a task in which the participants summarise their strengths and weaknesses after the activity in a sentence. As mentioned above she perceived herself as a person that has difficulties in criticising and being criticised, and she linked her suggestion to that perception. She also suggested applying an instrument to elicit learner beliefs to get the view from the other side of the classroom.

Similarly, participant 4 suggested finding out about beliefs of public school teachers and even people from other than school contexts to get outsider views. To elicit beliefs of teachers coming from different contexts was also suggested by participant 3 who held strong beliefs that the contextual factors at public school had the potential to 'produce' ineffective teachers.

Participant 2 reflected how outcomes of the activity could be utilised in the classroom:

> *Maybe we could add something to it* [the activity]*, for example how to make your students better, how to make them better students every day (...). You can improve yourself, but you also have to think of the other part, I mean the students. How can we attract our students more? Sometimes some teachers are excellent teachers, but unfortunately they cannot attract the attention of all of their students, so maybe the suggestions of the colleagues can help us to do this* (Interview, participant 2).

Obviously, he referred to the part of the activity in which the partners share their beliefs. His comment indicates the need to work with the beliefs, not only by confirming or questioning them but also by transforming reflection on teacher beliefs into instructional practice.

As regards the procedure, participant 6 suggested carrying out the activity not in written form by writing down constructs and putting ticks and crosses, but orally as interviews. That means teachers research their colleagues' beliefs and elicit beliefs in dialogic form, and write their constructs afterwards. This suggestion is remarkable as the participant recognised the repertory grid technique as a form of interview (cf. Fransella et al, 2004, p. 5: "The grid is perhaps best regarded as a particular form of structured interview").

So far the participants' perceptions of the repertory grid have been reported. In the following section, the results are discussed and conclusions are drawn for second language teacher education.

Discussion

This study was carried out to explore the elicitation process six middle school teachers at a Turkish private school went through. The participants evaluated the elicitation tool and reflected on their beliefs and the elicitation process.

The elicitation tool, which was an adapted version of the repertory grid, was positively evaluated as the participants perceived it as capable of eliciting beliefs and acting as incentive

to reflection about own beliefs. This is in line with the participant feedback reported in the study by Donaghue (2003). It qualifies the instrument for further application, e.g. in pre-service or in-service. The fact that the activity was perceived as enjoyable is of particular relevance as the willingness of teachers to participate in professional development is not a matter of course (Karaaslan, 2003).

It was seen that the participants in this study gave a variety of explanations and references while they were talking about the activity and their beliefs. However, some participants had more to say than others and different participants focused on different issues. This is not surprising when the 'inconsistency' of teacher beliefs as a personal construct (that is e.g. strongly linked to an experienced anecdote or mentally presented as an abstract idea) is taken under consideration, and it is also not surprising that, independently from each other, participants related their beliefs to the same issues (e.g. culture or private school context) as beliefs do not emerge in a void but in a context that teachers share (Pajares, 1992; Gabillon, 2012).

Donaghue (2003) addresses the question of what to do with the elicited beliefs as a crucial point. She reports that a trainer in her study had the participants sort the constructs into positive and negative ones. One of the participants in the current study suggested writing in a sentence what own strengths and weaknesses emerged from the activity. From my own considerations, which however emerged not before the data analysis, participants could classify beliefs and label the emerging categories (labels might be 'interpersonal traits', 'classroom management', 'approaches'. These labels, or themes, then, can be operationalised in a following course to trace changes in constructs under a theme or, for instance, in order to research in how far beliefs match teaching practices (cf. Farell & Bennis, 2013, who summarise statement beliefs under themes). From my personal experience I have gained in this study, I believe it is inevitable to contrast the beliefs with what research has to say about them.

Conclusions

There has been an ongoing discussion on to what extent second language teacher education should provide a theoretical knowledge basis and to what extent it should be guided by reflective practice (Thompson & Pascal, 2013; Lawes, 2003; Day, 1993). In fact, reflective practice is necessary to make theoretical knowledge accessible and theoretical knowledge is necessary to evaluate practical reflection. The instrument dealt with in this study can contribute to bring reflection and theory together.

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Appendix A: Repertory Grid

Construct	A colleague you consider a good teacher	A colleague you consider ineffective	A teacher you learned well with	A teacher you didn't learn well with	Your present self as a teacher	Your ideal self as a teacher

Appendix B: Repertory Grid Evaluation

Repertory Grid Evaluation

Dear Participants,

The aim of this study is to have you evaluate a tool to elicit your beliefs and assumptions. Please fill in the requested information. Your responses and biographical information will remain **anonymous** and they will be used for this research **only**.

Thank you for your cooperation.

<div style="text-align:center">

AUTHOR

English teacher

</div>

Name:

Sex: ..... female   ..... male

Age: .....

Academic qualification: ..... Bachelor's degree   ..... Master's degree

..... Doctorate degree   Other; please specify

Number of years of teaching experience: ..... years

Number of years teaching at private/state school: ..... years

Please evaluate the repertory grid activity by answering this question:

What do you think of this activity?

Appendix C: Semi-structured interview

1. Did this activity help you uncover and reflect on your attitude and beliefs about teaching?

2. Do you have an idea where your beliefs come from?/What are the sources for your beliefs?
    2.1. Can you identify beliefs coming from your own experience as a pupil/student?
    2.2. Can you identify beliefs coming from your teacher education?
    2.3. Can you identify beliefs coming from your own classroom experience?
    2.4. Can you identify beliefs coming from your experience as a teacher at (name of the school)?

3. What do we do with the constructs after they have been elicited?

(Explanation: The activity was originally developed to elicit teacher beliefs at the beginning of a development course)

4. Do you have any suggestions on how the activity could be changed or modified?