A Case Study on EFL Teachers' Beliefs About the Teaching and Learning of English in Public Education*

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ABSTRACT: Teachers' beliefs have been a fascinating topic for researchers for the amount of input they can provide for reflection and the improvement of the teaching and learning of English. This case study aims at identifying the beliefs held by a group of sixteen Chilean EFL teachers who work in public secondary education. A semi-structured interview and a Likert type survey are used to collect data from the participants. Semantic content analysis and the Atlasti qualitative software are used to transcribe, code, and segment data to then establish seven categories and six subcategories that depict what participants believe regarding English teaching and learning.
Keywords: beliefs, English, teachers, secondary education.

Un estudio de caso sobre las creencias de profesores de inglés respecto a la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés en la educación pública

RESUMEN: Las creencias de los docentes han sido un tema fascinante para los investigadores por la información que pueden aportar a la reflexión y el mejoramiento de la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés. Este estudio de caso tiene como objetivo la identificación de las creencias que sostienen un grupo de dieciséis profesores de inglés chilenos que se desempeñan en la educación pública secundaria. Se ha utilizado una entrevista semi-estructurada y una escala tipo Likert para recoger los datos de los participantes. El análisis de contenido y el software Atlasti han sido utilizados para transcribir, codificar y segmentar los datos para luego establecer siete categorías y seis subcategorías que ilustran lo que los participantes creen respecto de la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés.
Palabras clave: creencias, inglés, profesores, educación secundaria.

1. INTRODUCTION

For Borg (2001:187), a belief is a mental state which has as its content a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual holding it, although the individual may recognize that alternative beliefs may be held by others. Beliefs may have two main characteristics: they can be conscious or unconscious, and they have an important impact on the way a teacher behaves. This case study addresses some teachers' beliefs from the point of view of English teaching in public secondary education. It is a case study that develops an in-depth analysis of sixteen cases and uses an interview and a Likert scale as data sources. Case studies can deal with one single individual or with multiple cases and the small number of subjects is by no means connected with lack of scientific rigour, case studies are an opportunity to study, describe, examine a phenomenom in depth (Creswell, 2007:10). The phenomenon this case study approaches is beliefs.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Beliefs are socially defined interpretation of experience and as mental and affective constructions of experience are integrated into schemata. Beliefs are any simple proportions inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase, 'I believe that'. Stephens *et al*. (2000:535) affirm that "there are four ways that individuals fixate beliefs: believing what one wants to believe (tenacity), believing what someone else has said is true (authority), believing what one always has and which seems reasonable (a priori) and believing what one has tested out through investigation (scientific method)."

Beliefs guide teachers' behavior and inform teachers' practice by serving as a kind of interpretative framework through which they made sense of what they do in their classrooms. For Richards, Gallo & Renandya (2001:50) "teachers' beliefs are formed on the basis of teachers own schooling as young students while observing teachers who taught them". In other words, the first perceptions about teaching emerge as learners, the way teachers perceive teaching raises from their experiences at school.

Beliefs depend on teachers' experience, and are true for the person who holds them (Díaz, Martínez, Roa & Sanhueza, 2010:75; Freeman, 2002:11; Kasouta & Malatmisa, 2009:69; Northcote, 2009:73). They are a frame of reference around which many classroom decisions are made and pedagogical practices are decided. Beliefs affect practices and some practices affect beliefs causing reorientation. In fact beliefs can be changed or reoriented as a result of input from other professionals and activity type interventions (Danielson & McGreal, 2000:12; Díaz & Bastías, 2012:248; Gross, 2008:16). As such beliefs do not require a condition of truth, they are episodic, affective, built on presumptions and have an adaptive function (Erkmen, 2010:22).

Beliefs are the intermediary between knowledge and action; between individuals and their performance. Beliefs are anchored knowledge. They exhibit the knowledge that is most worth and has proven itself in action. Kumaravadivelu (2012:67) distinguishes between core and peripheral beliefs. The former are more influential in shaping teachers' instructional approaches whereas the latter can cause divergence between what teachers claim they do

and what they actually do in the classroom. This distinction between core and peripheral beliefs acknowledges the idea of diversity in teachers to reflect their characteristic perspectives to teach in particular ways. The systematic reflection of the alignment between beliefs and practices can help teachers develop an understanding of both what they want to do in their classrooms and the changes they want to implement to their approaches to teaching and learning (Farrell, 2013:14).

Research (Youngs & Qian, 2013:251; Zhang, 2013:71) on beliefs shows that teachers who possess clearly defined theoretical beliefs teach in a way that reflects these beliefs. Other studies (Northcote, 2009:71) point out that a lack congruence between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices is not necessary a flaw, but an opportunity to interpret language learning and teaching more deeply. Social, institutional and physical settings often affect what teachers can do in the classroom. There is overwhelming evidence from research (Farrell, 2013:9; Kumaravadivelu, 2012:86; Masuda, 2012:239) that indicates the link between beliefs and practice in teacher education is fundamental to understand the quality of language teaching and learning.

2.1. English in Chile

English has been introduced in the national curriculum due to the necessity of educating learners, capable of being active participants in different international areas such as communication, technology, data processing where English proficiency is fundamental to face the challenges of the 21st century (Marzano, 2010:41). The entity in charge of the introduction of English as a foreign language in the language curriculum is the Ministry of Education which states its guidelines in the document entitled "Planes y Programas de Inglés" (The Chilean Syllabi for English).

The Syllabi for English are aligned with the communicative standards proposed by the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR). In other words, Chilean primary and secondary students, and teachers of English are required to achieve the following levels of language proficiency: elementary for 8th graders, preintermediate for 12th graders and upper-intermediate for in-service teachers of English. The Chilean Syllabi for English are executed into three different types of educational realities: public, semi-public and private.

3. Research design

This is a case study whose focus is a group of teachers of English's beliefs about language teaching and learning in the public school context. It is a holistic study because it approaches the participants and the settings in which they move (Mackey & Gass, 2005:66; Sealey, 2010:42; Wei & Moyer, 2008:33).

3.1. General objective

To analyze the beliefs of sixteen English teachers from some Chilean public schools about some key components of language teaching and learning at the secondary school level.

3.2. Research question

What beliefs does this group of teachers of English hold about teaching and learning English?

3.3. Participants

This research is a case study that includes sixteen secondary school teachers of English, both female and male. All of them are teachers of English who have gone through five years of formal training at a university level; therefore, their proficiency level in English is at least upper intermediate or above. Their teaching experience varies from 12 to 32 years. They all work in the urban public school sector in Chile, which means that their students' socioeconomic background is working class. As teachers of English of public schools, they teach English from 9th to 12th grades. Their native language is Spanish and their ages range between 35 and 55.

3.4. Research assumption

Teachers give personal meaning to what they do inside and outside the classroom. An understanding of what happens in the classroom can come up from teachers' cognition and beliefs.

3.5. Instruments

An eight question semi-structured interview (see appendix 1) and a twenty-two statement survey (see appendix 2) were administered to the participants. Both instruments covered teachers' views on their role as teachers, their students' roles in the teaching and learning processes, language contents' selection and teaching, materials and resources, and assessment.

3.6. Procedure

The participants were interviewed orally and individually. The whole interview was read by the participants since knowing the questions in advance helped them to answer what was asked more accurately. The survey was applied to participants after the interview. It was a written instrument that the participants had to complete on their own.

3.7. Data analysis

A semantic content analysis of all the interview responses was conducted to identify categories and subcategories to describe the content (Corbetta, 2007:75). Content analysis investigates the thematic content of text and serves as a basis of inference (Dean-Brown & Rodgers, 2002:55). Initially, manual coding of each response was conducted to identify words, phrases, or word-phrase clusters for the purpose of this analysis. The Atlasti qualitative software was then used to refine the analysis.

Preliminary categories were modified and refined jointly by the researchers based on the data. The steps used during data analysis for this study (Albert, 2007:45; Canales, 2006:67)

are described next: Level 1 (data segmentation), Level 2 (initial coding), Level 3 (categorizing), and Level 4 (exploring relationships) (Brown & Rodgers, 2003:39).

To validate the findings, researcher triangulation was used to make the final results more reliable (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003:56). The process of triangulation took several and constant revisions in order to end with meaningful and accurate information for this research. The answers from the survey were analyzed by the principles of frequency analysis and were organized into graphs (Mackey & Gass, 2012:61; Richards, Steven & Seedhouse, 2012:97).

4. Results and discussion

Seven categories and six subcategories are presented in this section. The categories are: (1) the use of English in EFL lessons, (2) the teacher role, (3) the student role, (4) the teaching components. This category has got the following subcategories: (4.1.) Materials and resources, (4.2.) EFL activities, (4.3.) learning aims, (4.4.) contents, (4.5.) teaching methodologies and (4.6.) assessment. The next categories are: (5) the role of the teaching and learning context, (6) the role of the language curriculum, and (7) the relationship between the language curriculum and the coursebook contents.

4.1. Category A: The use of English in EFL lessons

Interviewees are aware that English should be used during the development of their lessons and that language learning depends on the time students are exposed to English. The use of English on the part of the teacher during the development of a lesson is a very sensitive issue in Chilean English instruction, because professional development conducted by the Ministry of Education in the 90's revealed that some teachers of English did most of their lessons in Spanish and focused their teaching on drilling, translation and grammar. Therefore, all continuing education initiatives from the Ministry of Education over the last two decades have enforced the view that both teachers are the primary source of language input for learners in the classroom and a communicative approach has to be used to develop students' language proficiency.

At least 66% of interviewees state that it is absolutely necessary to use English in the classroom, 17% does it sometimes and 17% does not use English at all. This small group of teachers who doesn't use English, on the one hand, claims that learners' academic and social backgrounds in their mother tongue are so limited that it is impossible to teach a foreign language under those conditions. On the other hand, the Chilean language curriculum claims that through the integration of the four language skills, students should develop a stable linguistic base that will allow them to produce oral and written texts in English.

There exists a surprising contradiction for the 17% of teachers who do not use English in their classrooms because even though they do not use the language, 83% of the whole group of participants considers the language as a tool that benefits students' learning. Those teachers that do not use English are also the senior ones; therefore, it can be thought that their own language proficiency has weakened to the point that they do not feel comfortable with their speaking. Regarding this point, the Ministry of Education has deployed a strong policy for teacher development over the last twenty years so that teachers can update their English proficiency and their pedagogical skills.

For 83% of the participants, however, there is a close match between what is expected by the language curriculum in terms of learning aims and what they think about the role of language inside the classroom. Other participants state that it is a difficult task to use English in the classroom all the time because public secondary school students do not come with solid entry language competences from primary education.

4.2. Category B: The teacher role

Teachers bring their experience, knowledge and values into the classroom and also encourage students to well develop their language skills and attitudes (Díaz, Martínez, Roa & Sanhueza, 2010:76). Teachers no doubt make an important difference in the instructional process. Motivated teachers, for example, transmit this motivation to their students and do their best to facilitate learning, according to interviewees.

However, just 17% of all participants acknowledge that their role as teachers is essential and more important than that of students, even though they have the important task of convincing learners that they always have to learn beyond what is taught (see Graph one). 50% of interviewees affirm that teachers are not the main agent in the pedagogical process, their roles inside the classroom are just as role models, facilitators, guides, mediators and prompters (Burns & Richards, 2009:77).
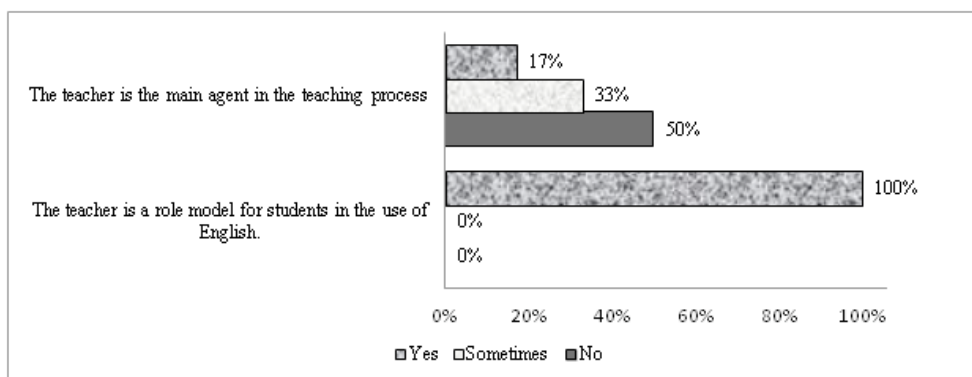
Graph 1: The teacher role.

Teachers should use all available teaching strategies to make students learn and produce new language so that they could achieve the curriculum's learning aims. All of the participants confirm that their role in the instructional process is being a role model for students in terms of English proficiency, since Chilean students' opportunities for interaction with English-speaking users are very limited and it is fundamental for learners to be exposed to aural and oral input as much as possible.

Both instruments, the interview and the survey, reveal that for participants the role of teachers in the instructional process is very important but not more important than that of students (Gonzáles, Río & Rosales, 2001:77), since teaching is about creating the condi-

tions in which, somehow, students can learn autonomously (Harmer, 2003:97). Regarding the teacher roles in the learning process, participants manifest that their role as educators is much more important than their role as language teachers and very often this educating role- even though very necessary- takes away considerable language teaching time, particularly in public school settings.

4.3. Category C: The student role

Regarding the degree of importance between teachers and learners in the pedagogical process, 100% of all participants believe that students are in the same range of importance as teachers, since the teaching and learning processes are closely connected (see Graph two). Under communicative approaches, great emphasis has been placed on learner-centred teaching as a way to make students' needs central to the educational process and the heart of a language course.

Learner motivation and participation in the classroom help the process of language learning. Social interaction among learners and the context in which it takes place are relevant to the process of learning. For 100% of the teachers' active participation and high levels of motivation are necessary to learn a new language and to achieve successful results. The age of their students is also a major factor in their decisions about what and how to teach, particularly because they are working with teenage learners who are experiencing biological, psychological, affective and social changes that could very often interfere with the achievement of language aims.
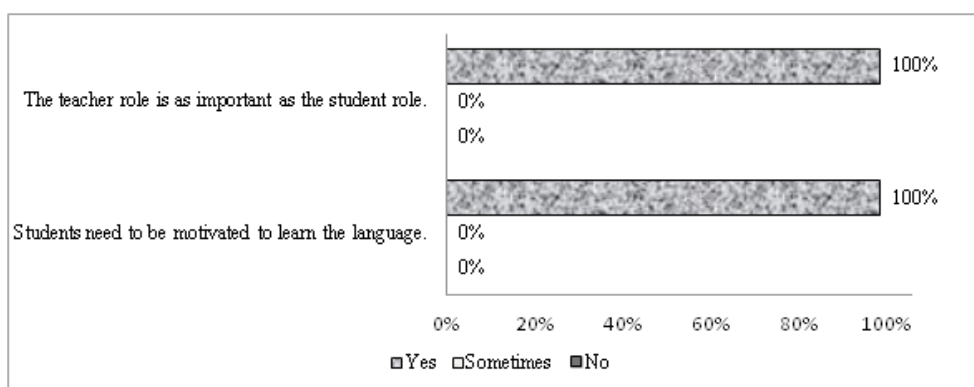
Graph 2. The student role

All interviewed teachers agree with the fact that ideal learners must be active and able to develop communication in English with their peers and teacher inside the classroom. This ideal learner should also have a positive disposition towards learning (Senior, 2006:60).

4.4. Category D: Main components in the instructional process

The pedagogical process not only depends on the interaction between teachers and students but also on the participation of other teaching components such as materials, resou-

rces, context, aims, contents, activities, strategies and assessment. Most of the participants coincide on the fact that all these components interact one another in the classroom. The teaching components that come up from the participants' responses can be classified into teacher-oriented, student-oriented and those that derive from the language curriculum.

For participants, teachers should use a variety of teaching strategies, should create a lot of varied materials and activities for their students as well as should build a comfortable classroom atmosphere to carry out their lessons. Effective language teachers should besides value the importance of team and peer work in their profession. As for students, their social and academic backgrounds, their classroom behavior, their use of the mother tongue in the English lesson and their technology access at home, strongly impact language learning. In the case of the teaching components introduced by the language curriculum, the participants highlight that this curriculum and particularly the English textbooks distributed to the students by the Ministry of Education also influence language learning and teaching as far as learning aims, contents and activities are concerned.

4.4.1. Subcategory D.1.: Materials and resources

When asked about the materials used during their lessons, participants affirm that it is essential to support their lessons with a variety of teaching materials that can foster learning. Participants complain though that in public schools they often experience material shortage and lack of preparation time to design and adapt authentic materials. In fact, 83% of participants sometimes use different kinds of materials and resources in their lessons.

Krieger (2005:13) declares that materials and resources should be modified and adapted in order to fulfill students' language needs. It is well-known that students are different, they have distinct ways to learn a language as well as to accomplish their learning goals. 66% of the participants adapt their lessons according to their students' language needs regardless of what is mandated by the English textbook.

4.4.2. Subcategory D.2.: EFL activities

Language activities are considered crucial both to promote students' understanding and to carry out effective lessons, they are what teachers and students do in order to achieve a specific learning aim (Brown, 2001:59; Erkmen, 2010:11). Certain types of activities and task-based approaches provide important learning experiences in class. When asked about the incorporation of new activities into the development of their lessons, 67% of the participants believe that it is necessary to complement the activities proposed by the student textbook, with additional ones that really respond to the learners' language needs. 33% though manifest that sometimes use complementary activities, because the high number of weekly lessons and students per class, leaves them very little preparation time.

The majority of participants think that activity difficulty level in textbooks is much higher than the students' background knowledge. 83% of participants claim that textbook activities sometimes meet their students' language needs.

It is then necessary, on the one hand, to adapt the language contents in the textbook and, on the other, to complement with other kinds of activities that really meet the students' real level of English (Johnson, 2008:37). For that reason, most of the participants incorporate new activities to make student learning possible.

4.4.3. Subcategory D.3.: Learning aims

Aims are what students will be able to achieve by the end of a lesson and what guides teachers' decision-making; in other words, aims are achieved through a sequence of pedagogical decisions and actions which finally allow learners to fulfill the expected sociocognitive, affective and academic aims. The main aspect that should define aims is student-centeredness; they should state outcomes for students to reach and should be measured through different assessment techniques (Lihua, 2010:43).

Just 67% of participants declare that they sometimes state the aims for their lessons, although they regard informing learners about what they will be able to do by the end of a class as something important. This issue could be explained by the fact that this intentionally selected sample is made up of novice and experienced teachers. For least experienced teachers some classroom routines do not often come out automatically, but they develop over time.

17% of the participants think they always reach their lesson aims whereas 83% sometimes accomplish aims. These results reveal that teachers' beliefs do not necessarily match their classroom practices. This necessarily calls for teachers' reflective skills over what happens before, during and after their lessons and why.

4.4.4. Subcategory D.4.: Contents

According to the interviewees, it is absolutely necessary to adapt the textbook contents to their learners' language needs, 83% does it so, since not always the linguistic and social contents incorporated in the language curriculum respond to the public school context and students' background knowledge (Palmer & Cristison, 2007:34). This point reveals the tension that teachers always face when it comes to decide what to follow when they lesson plan: the language curriculum or their students' real language needs.

4.4.5. Subcategory D. 5.: Teaching methodologies

Teaching methodologies reflect the way the teacher wants to approach the contents and aims determined by the language curriculum. The selection of appropriate teaching methods also depends on the school context and the students' learning styles (Burns & Richards, 2009:91). 67% of participants state that it is necessary to implement a variety of teaching methods to respond to each student's way of learning as well as to be aware themselves of the teaching methods that allow learners to achieve better results.

Through decades a variety of teaching approaches have been implemented in Chilean English education; however, at present the communicative approach and all its variants are considered as essential in Chilean classrooms. When asked about the possibility of developing a communicative approach in their classroom, 50% of the participants consider it is sometimes possible to do so, while 17% believe it is not possible. In general, these teachers are torn between doing communicative classes and facing the reality that public school teaching imposes on them: high number of students per class, high number of weekly teaching hours, material shortage, unsatisfactory employment conditions and students' social vulnerability.

Graph three below synthesizes the main points developed in the previous analysis.
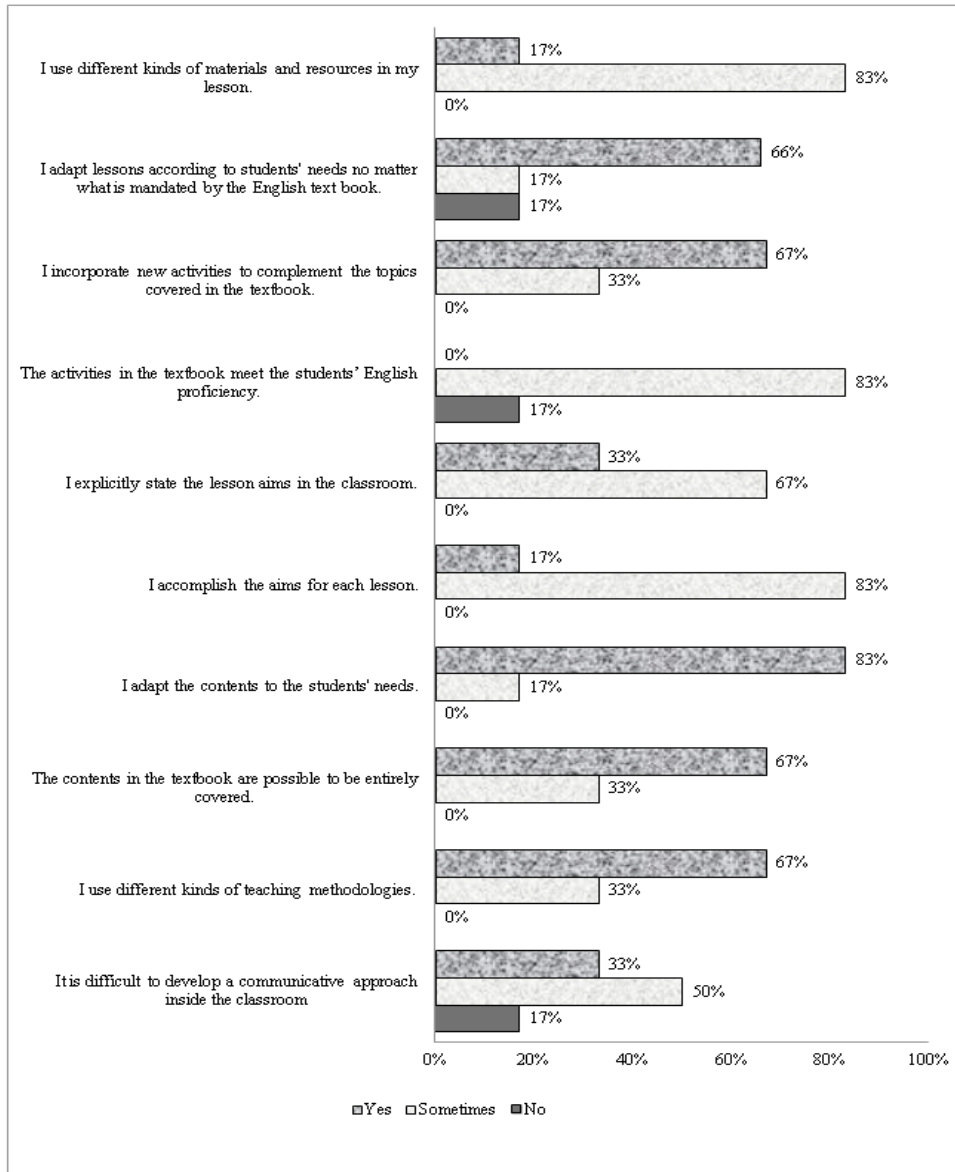
Graph 3: Main components in the instructional process

4.4.6. Subcategories D.6.: Assessment

Assessment, according to Brindley (2001:137) is defined as 'the variety of ways of collecting information on a learner's language ability or achievement'. When asked about

the importance of informal assessment -the unplanned and spontaneous assessments that take place during lessons- just 33% consider informal assessment more important than formal assessment. 67% of them value the importance of formal and informal assessment based on their learning outcomes.

It is crucial for teachers to inform students about how much progress they are making as well as the type of knowledge, skills and attitudes they have developed through the pedagogical process (Coombe, Folse & Hubley, 2007:123). For 83% of teachers, assessment instruments need to be based on learners' needs; therefore, it is necessary to adapt those instruments to the reality of each class and to the learning aims.

4.5. Category E: The role of the teaching and learning context

There are some conditions that teachers consider important in schools to build an appropriate atmosphere in the language lesson. Participants claim that public school teachers need at least the basics for teaching. Consequently, materials, resources and the number of students per class are definitely important parts of those basics that are not fully met in public education. 100% of teachers acknowledge the impact of school context on language teaching.

The interview furthermore reveals that some participants regard the teachers' attitudinal and affective skills as the most important tools in language learning. Creating an atmosphere of care and support and a relationship of closeness and authentic trust with learners contribute to lesson development in the view of participants. Part of this atmosphere is to adapt lesson plans to the students' language needs, weaknesses and strengths. For example, 100% of teachers either always or sometimes adapt their lessons to the school context.

The language classroom is a sub-system within a major system-the school, which is in turn part of a much bigger system: society. Teachers and students together create a mini-society, with its own characteristics, properties, roles, restrictions and expectations. For Larsen-Freeman (2008:47) both the classroom and the school contexts are complex systems in which events and relationships are non-linear, but with patterns that are part predictable and part unpredictable.

4.6. Category F: The role of the language curriculum

The national curriculum introduces a compulsory language program designed to develop the four skills at different degrees from fifth to twelveth grade. For all of the participants the language curriculum is a guide and a way of ordering language teaching to avoid lesson chaos.

83% of the participants think that the language curriculum has to be adapted, depending on the school setting and the particular social and cultural reality they are based in. These participants are probably thinking of the three main educational realities in Chile: public, semi-public and private, where English teaching is realized differently because students' academic and social backgrounds are completely varied.

4.7. Category G.: The relationship between the language curriculum and the textbook contents

When asked about this above mentioned relationship, 67% of the participants conclude that there is a close relationship between the language curriculum and the contents in the

student textbook. However, for them this relationship is incomplete since some of the language contents could certainly be developed in class but others do not match the students' language needs or the school requirements.

For participants the language curriculum is used as a model to deal with language lessons. Despite most participants agree there is a relationship between the language curriculum and the textbook contents, they think that the language curriculum is idealistic and far-fetched from the context of Chilean public schools. Hence, participants believe it is necessary to re-organize what is included in the textbook and to create new supporting materials.

Some participants approve the statement that the language curriculum is a model for teachers to develop their lessons. However, half of the participants approve this statement to a certain extent because they claim that the language curriculum requires contextualization and adaptation to the different educational realities of the country.

In summary, Figure one below synthesizes participants' view of English teaching in public secondary education. Each element of the process is one another under a constant complex non-linear relationship and interaction.
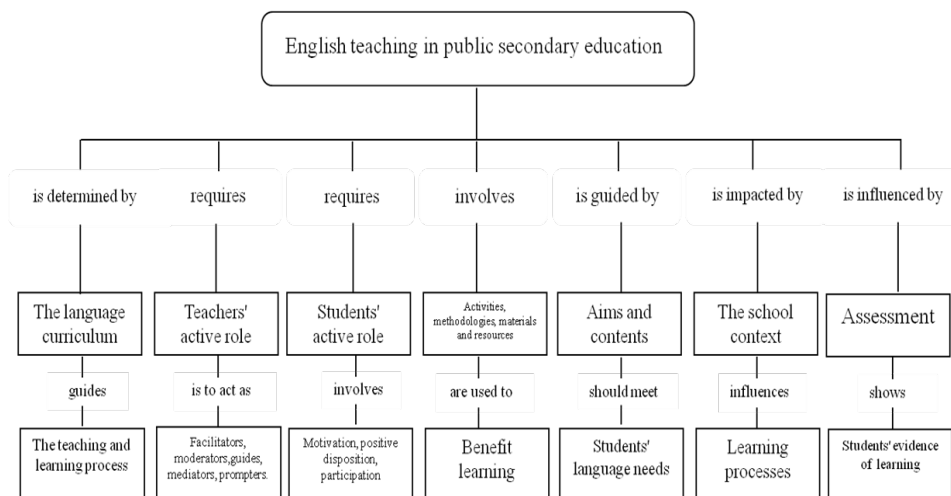

Figure 1. Participants' panoramic view of English teaching

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although this study involves only sixteen subjects and the results are not of course generalizable, they are useful to other teachers in the sense that each individual EFL teacher has a teaching approach; each individual teacher acts out his/her beliefs in the classroom and each individual is somehow involved in change, as the language curriculum suggests innovations to implement. The results of this study show that beliefs are rooted in teachers' semantic memory as cognitive and affective constructs that hold different degrees of fixation depending on the professional, academic or personal experiences that shaped them. These

research participants believe for example that English teaching should follow the principles of communicative approaches; however, that same communicative English teaching in some public secondary schools experiences serious difficulties. It is feasible then to claim that for these participants, beliefs have internal levels of organization that are constantly affected by their school context and their learners' academic and social backgrounds.

In theory, the learner is a key agent in the English language process from the view of communicative approaches; teachers should take a facilitating role; nevertheless, in reality their students' needs are so demanding that teachers end up assuming a more active role than that of learners. It is this type of situations that make teachers experience tensions over what the language curriculum and the school administration expect from them and over what happens in their concrete and everyday EFL classroom. It's inevitably not to think that almost always professional development assumes a 'vertical' approach in school contexts that crave for more 'horizontal' teacher training strategies to ensure that the complexity of English teaching and learning is approached to a great extent.

These participants do believe that effective English teaching requires aligning a series of components that influence and interact one another in the classroom. Aims and contents respond to what to teach; activities, strategies and materials contribute to how to teach and assessment should mirror teaching. No doubt participants believe in this perfect teaching component alignment but once again their beliefs experience tensions when these components are or are not realized in their public school classrooms.

Some beliefs are not then static, they are very much influenced by what works well and unwell for teachers and they are practice-oriented in a bidirectional relationship, in which teachers try out their beliefs in their own pedagogical practices and give shape to other beliefs from those same practices. Consequently, beliefs originate from teachers' own learning experiences, their own classroom practices, their fellow colleagues, their school context and most importantly their own students.

In brief, change in English teaching necessarily implies uncovering teachers' belief system before any other innovative action is pursued to track down those rooted and strongly fixed beliefs that could be in the way of successful innovation. Qualitative research techniques such as interviews, journals, narratives are clearly tools that can contribute to belief elicitation on the first place to then design professional development activities to target those aspects of teaching that teachers really need to improve.

Teachers are finally professionals who can better describe and interpret the conditions in which the teaching and learning processes take place at schools. Then, who else but teachers could contribute to what, why and how the language curriculum could be approached or improved? The answer still remains for further discussion. In the meantime studies like the present one uncovers the need for further classroom-based research that can help teachers, administrators, researchers and teacher educators to make informed decisions about how to improve English teaching and learning, language policy, foreign language research and teacher education programmes at universities.

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APPENDIX 1: Semi-structured interview (some guiding questions)

1.- Do you think it is necessary to use English in the development of your classes?
2.- What is the role of English teachers in the teaching of the language?
3.- What is the role of the student that learns English?

APPENDIX 2: Likert-scale (shorter version)

INSTRUCTIONS

There are three possible answers, put an X in the chosen option.

	Statement	Yes	Sometimes	No
1	I use English around 80% during my lessons			
2	I consider that using English benefits students' learning in the classroom.			
3	I think the teacher is the main agent in the teaching and learning process.			
4	I believe the teacher is a model for students in the use of English.			
5	I think the students need to be motivated to learn English.			

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