Beliefs of Chilean University English Teachers: Uncovering Their Role in the Teaching and Learning Process

Creencias de profesores universitarios de inglés: descubriendo su papel en el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje

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Beliefs continue to be an important source to get to know teachers' thinking processes and pedagogical decisions. Research in teachers' beliefs has traditionally come from English-speaking contexts; however, a great deal of scientific work has been written lately in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina. This study elicits 30 Chilean university teachers' beliefs about their own role in the teaching and learning of English in university environments. Through a qualitative research design, the data collected from interviews and journals were analyzed, triangulated, and categorized based on semantic content analysis. Results of the study indicate that university teachers reveal challenging and complex views about what it is like to teach English as a foreign language in a university context in Chile. The article concludes with a call to reflect on the importance of beliefs unravelling in teacher education programmes.

Key words: Learning, teachers' beliefs, teaching of English, university level.

Las creencias continúan siendo una fuente de importancia para conocer los procesos de pensamiento y los estilos pedagógicos de los docentes. Los estudios sobre las creencias docentes provienen en su mayoría de contextos angloparlantes; sin embargo, en los últimos años se ha escrito una gran cantidad de trabajos científicos en Brasil, México, Colombia y Argentina. Este estudio recoge las creencias de treinta docentes universitarios chilenos sobre su papel en la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés en ambientes universitarios. A partir de un diseño de investigación cualitativo, los datos recolectados por medio de entrevistas y diarios personales fueron analizados, triangulados y categorizados según el análisis de contenido semántico. Los resultados indicaron que los docentes de educación superior tienen visiones desafiantes y complejas sobre lo que significa enseñar inglés como lengua extranjera en un contexto universitario en Chile. El artículo concluye con una invitación a reflexionar sobre la importancia de transparentar las creencias en los programas de formación inicial docente.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje, creencias de docentes, enseñanza del inglés, universidad.

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Introduction

This research is based on the assumption that beliefs directly affect the teaching practice and the potential success or failure of the teaching and learning process (Borg, 2003; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Woods, 1996). In particular, it considers factors that, both directly and indirectly, influence the process of teaching a foreign language, besides the fact that the teaching practice itself can rightfully be addressed from the perspective of the cognition of a university teacher. In this context, the concept of "beliefs" includes all mental, emotional, and reflexive constructs that derive from personal experiences, prejudices, judgments, ideas, and intentions (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). This study aims at identifying university teachers' beliefs about their own role in the teaching and learning of English in university environments.

Conceptual Framework

Although there are various international bibliographical references regarding general pedagogical beliefs about the teaching and learning process of teachers (Borg, 2003), there is little research in this area in Chile, despite the several contributions from other Latin American countries. Consequently, this study addresses the beliefs of a group of 30 university English teachers about their own role in the teaching and learning process at a university level.

In general, beliefs are defined as understandings, premises, or psychological propositions an individual has about the world (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002). Beliefs consist of sets of integrated and generally contradictory and messy ideas that are generated from everyday experiences. According to Díaz and Solar (2011), beliefs are incomplete and simplified versions of reality that have some level of internal organization, structure and consistency.

Through the study of beliefs, the frames of reference by which teachers perceive and process information, analyze, give meaning, and focus their educational performance are made explicit. Thus, studying the beliefs teachers have involves exploring the hidden side of teaching (Díaz, Martínez, Roa, & Sanhueza, 2010). In the scope of this study, beliefs are understood as individual ways a teacher understands the students, the nature of the learning process, the classroom, the teacher's role in the classroom, and the pedagogical objectives (Northcote, 2009).

Freeman (2002) supports the importance of reflecting on beliefs because this may lead to a number of advantages, such as revealing the conscious thinking behind certain actions; it may make teachers choose to teach differently from the way they were taught or want to expand their techniques and practices; it can confirm the positive things that teachers do in the classroom or make teachers reflect on their somewhat negative teaching practices. Borg (2009) and Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) affirm that beliefs can certainly influence classroom practices, but classroom practices can also trigger the shaping of new beliefs.

Stenberg (2011) states that major changes in the quality of university education will not occur if the beliefs that university teachers have about teaching itself do not change. Beliefs vary in intensity and type, and over time, form a system. The ease with which teachers change their beliefs is related to the intensity of those beliefs. The more intense the belief is, the greater the resistance to change it. To reinforce this idea, several authors argue that teachers' beliefs are rooted in their personal experiences and are therefore highly resistant to change (Farrell, 2006; Kasoutas & Malamitsa, 2009; Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

There is no denying the importance beliefs have in education in general; however, the obvious relationship between beliefs and teaching practices cannot be

ignored. Tudor (2001) highlights the importance of researching beliefs university teachers have as a way of emphasizing the important role they play in the teaching practice. Brown and Frazier (2001) argue that teachers should be treated as active learners who build their own understandings. Humans are agents that interact in their environment with a purpose and learn from their actions and use this knowledge to plan future actions (Levin, 2001). If teachers feel the need to improve their teaching practice, to reflect on it and to look for alternative teaching strategies, it indicates an improvement in their teaching practices is near. However, for this change to be effective and permanent, this process should take place at an early stage in order to renovate those deep-rooted and ineffective pedagogical behaviors and criteria.

On the other hand, it is interesting to quote Gross (2009), who argues that important possibilities exist for change, development, and enrichment, and even conceptual changes toward epistemological positions that could be considered more complex and richer in the teaching projection in a more flexible and multi-perspective way. From this point of view, Brown and Frazier (2001) raise the importance of researching the thoughts and decision making of teachers, the nature and content of these thoughts, how these thoughts are influenced by the organizational and curricular context in which teachers work, how the thoughts teachers have relate to their classroom behaviour, and ultimately, to students' thoughts and behaviours. All of this would enhance the level of understanding of instructional processes that occur within the classroom and the consequent improvement of the teaching practice.

The beliefs English teachers have are very closely related to the didactic approach that dominates the discourse of the participants interviewed for this study. That is to say, either a communicative or traditional teaching approach greatly influenced the participants' beliefs about their role as teachers in the classroom (i.e. the role teachers have can be seen as the person in charge of transmitting knowledge or facilitating the learning process).

Research Design

This is a non-experimental and transectional study based on an analytical and interpretive case study (Bisquerra, 2009), as it explores the beliefs 30 university English teachers have about their own role and functions in the process of learning and teaching English as a foreign language in higher education at two Chilean universities. In a case study, data and analysis are deeply and thoroughly examined, and become relevant inasmuch as the readers contextualize them to their own psycho-pedagogical reality.

Participants

The 30 participants of this research make up a non-probabilistic and intentional sample (Corbetta, 2003) where, taking into account specific characteristics, subjects were selected one by one. In the case of this current study the participants should be university teachers who teach English as a foreign language at Chilean universities and they should have more than five years of work experience.

Research Question

What beliefs shape the cognitive dimension of a group of 30 university English teachers about their own role in the teaching and learning process of English in higher education?

Research Assumption

Beliefs influence the teaching practice. During the process of teaching and learning, teachers must take a series of decisions that are guided by their linguistic and pedagogical beliefs which define their performance in the classroom.

Instruments

- A semi-structured interview was used as a specific model of verbal interaction with the objective of understanding the phenomenon of linguistic and pedagogical beliefs of the participants about their role as teachers. The dimensions that were taken into account for the interview were as follows: theoretical principles of teaching English, theoretical approaches of the teaching role and functions of teachers, the English teacher as a professional in education, the role of students, the different learning styles, the relationship between objectives, contents, methods, activities, context as well as teaching resources, materials, information and communication technologies (ICT), and assessment. This article focuses the attention on some of the most important actors in pedagogical innovation: teachers, their role and functions in the learning process.

- A self-reflection interview was applied in which the participants created a time line with the experiences they considered most relevant to their teaching practice and then explained the reasons they considered to choose the different experiences.

- An autobiographical diary was used as a procedure to find out what teachers thought about different aspects of their teaching over a period of six months.

Procedure for Data Analysis

After validating the data generation techniques mentioned above, we collected from the auto-biographical diaries, semi-structured interview, and self-reflection interview and then performed the data analysis. The data analysis is a representation of the social phenomenon and creates a vision of different social contexts and its actors. An analysis of initial structural content was performed and then the data were submitted to the ATLASTI qualitative analysis software, which allowed us to find coherence as well as explicit and implicit meaning of the data through the dialectics between text comprehension and interpretation of the different actors. The data analysis was performed following the subsequent steps: transcription, segmentation, codification, initial categorization, a systematic search of the different properties of the found categories, integration of categories, and finally the search for relationships between the categories to establish sub-categories.

The categories and subcategories obtained were subjected until saturation occurred, thus ensuring data reliability in qualitative studies.

Analysis and Discussion of the Data

This section addresses the following dimension: "the university teacher of English in the teaching and learning process of a language." This dimension includes the role of teachers in the teaching and learning of language. Nine categories were set up, most of them divided into subcategories that emerged from the participants' discourse either in the semi-structured interview, self-reflection, or autobiographical diary (see Table 1).

Sources of Beliefs About Teaching English

The teachers participating in this research stated that the sources of their beliefs about teaching English were mostly based on literature and their own work experience. Additionally, a significant percentage of the participants affirmed that their professional development had influenced their views of teaching English. It is interesting to note that a very small group considered undergraduate university studies as a source for their beliefs. The main sources of beliefs about teaching English identified by the participants are shown in Figure 1.

Table 1. Categories and Subcategories
of the Role of English Teachers in the Teaching
and Learning Process

Categories	Subcategories	Techniques of data generation
1. Sources of beliefs about teaching English	• University degrees • Work experience • Professional development • Literature	Autobiographical diary
2. Strengths of teachers	• Relationship with students • Class preparation • Personal features • Language proficiency • Expertise in ICT • Expertise in the different language contents	Autobiographical diary
3. Weaknesses of teachers	• Relationship with students • Personal features • Expertise in ICT • Team work • Professional development • Time management	Autobiographical diary
4. Personal features of good English teachers	• Language proficiency • Ability to provide a good learning environment • Ability to transmit the foreign culture • Planning classes using a variety of methodologies • Personal features	Semi-structured interview
5. The role of English teachers	• Facilitator • Teaching materials and resources supplier • A person who controls, directs, and monitors the teaching activities • A person with a combination of roles within the classroom	Semi-structured interview / Autobiographical diary
6. Most frequent functions carried out by teachers	• To answer students' questions • To give positive feedback • To teach linguistic strategies • To demonstrate different activities • To monitor students' work • Class management	Semi-structured interview / Autobiographical diary
7. Learning strategies used in the English classes	• The use of a variety of strategies • The use of some particular strategies • No use of strategies	Semi-structured interview / autobiographical diary
8. Suggested changes for English teachers in Chile	• Methodological aspects • Attitudinal aspects • Undergraduate teacher training • Administrative aspects of the educational institution • Type of professional development	Semi-structured interview
9. Teacher assessment	• Specialist observation • Direct observation • Participation of all actors involved in the educational sector	Semi-structured interview

Figure 1. Frequency of Different Sources of Beliefs About Teaching English
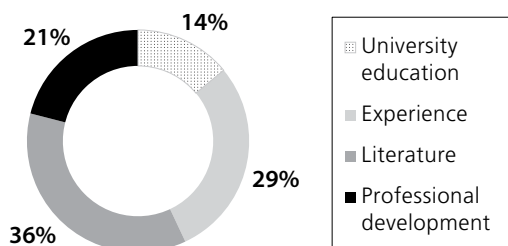
The fact that most teachers' beliefs come from literature in the first place and from working experience in the second place poses a real challenge for the kind of professional development teachers would likely need to reshape those pedagogical practices that could be in the way of students' effective learning. In other words, if literature is strategic for the shaping of beliefs, teachers should be exposed to publications and reading that can really help them to make appropriate classroom decisions on behalf of effective language learning.

Strengths of Teachers

In the category called Strengths of Teachers, the participants agreed on mentioning aspects such as language proficiency (English), their ICT expertise and their expertise in the contents of the subject they teach. They also emphasized the good relationship teachers should have with their students and the teachers' planning of their classes. Certain personal features the participants possess are said to contribute both to establishing a good classroom environment and to an effective learning process. In Table 2, some fragments of autobiographical diaries are shown to support the category mentioned above.

These beliefs reflect that in order to be effective classroom managers, teachers should possess subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge of conceptual, procedural, and attitudinal natures. For the research participants, any teacher of English should

know English very well (conceptual knowledge), should be able to use the language effectively (procedural knowledge) and should be capable of creating the necessary affective and emotional classroom conditions for learners to learn the language.

Table 2. Strengths of Teachers

Participant	Fragment
No. 13	I always enthusiastically answer if my students ask questions about some information.
No. 15	One of my strengths is language proficiency, as well as my expertise in ICT, and the use of strategies in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Figure 2 summarizes the strengths participants considered important in their teaching practice.

Figure 2. Frequency of Strengths of Teachers
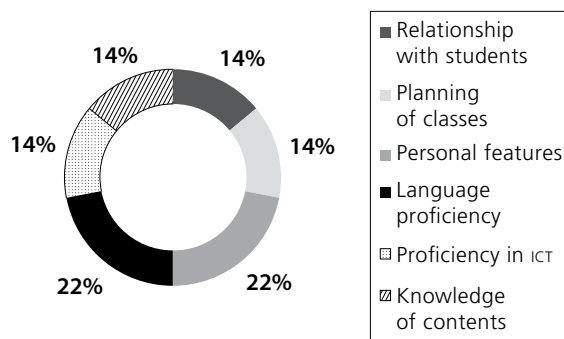
Weaknesses of Teachers

The participants' own personal features such as the lack of systematicity in their work, impatience, and insecurity in some areas, among others, were some of the most referred weaknesses. Lack of rapport with students, poor expertise of ICT, deficient continuous professional development, poor time management, and lack of teamwork were identified in second place. In

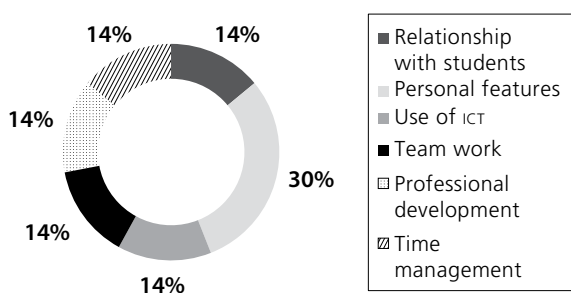Table 3 there are some fragments from autobiographical diaries to support the subcategories mentioned above.

The nature of beliefs is context oriented. Teachers of similar socioeducational contexts tend to hold similar beliefs. The participants of this study share a similar educational context because all of them work in tertiary education and teach English to students of common social backgrounds under very similar institutional conditions. Therefore, diagnosing teachers' beliefs constitutes a fundamental starting point to later on identify teachers' professional development needs.

Table 3. Weaknesses of Teachers

Participant	Fragment
No. 3	On some occasions, one of my weaknesses is the lack of systematic work.
No. 4	I have to plan my classes more regularly.

Figure 3 summarizes the weaknesses that teachers claim to possess.

Figure 3. Frequency of Weaknesses of Teachers

14% 14%
14%
14%
30%
14%
14%

- ■ Relationship with students
- Personal features
- ■ Use of ICT
- ■ Team work
- □ Professional development
- ▨ Time management

Personal Features of Good English Teachers

Regarding Personal Features of Good English Teachers, most of the participants mainly chose those traits that allowed them to create a relaxed learning atmosphere in classes, some of which were maintaining a good relationship with students or taking the different types of learning processes into account. On a second level of importance, participants mentioned both the importance of feeling confident about their language proficiency and also some personal features among which they included the use of humour, patience, and their own motivation. Being able to plan lessons according to new methodologies and transmitting the foreign culture to the students were mentioned by a smaller percentage. In Table 4, there is a fragment selected from the semi-structured interviews to support the abovementioned ideas.
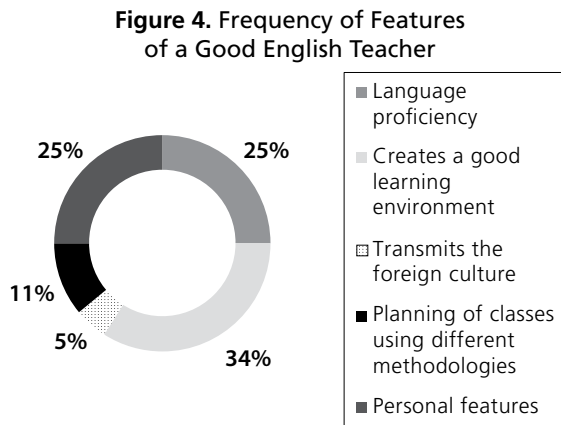
Table 4. Personal Features of a Good English Teacher

Participant	Fragment
No. 12	Teachers should be spontaneous, dynamic, and fun people, especially when they are teaching a foreign language. They cannot consider themselves as just being lecturers; they have to be able to communicate with students, promote a ludic learning environment, and make the necessary connections between the different cultures.
No. 11	I am definitely not a controlling teacher. Most Chilean teachers are controlling and tend to transform their students into people that are not able to think for themselves.

Beliefs also mirror the kind of classroom practices teachers declare to be conducting. Hence, the analysis of teachers' beliefs also represents a strategy to identify effective and ineffective classroom practices that either foster or hinder students' language learning. The beliefs held by these research participants reveal interesting communication-oriented teaching practices that

match with what empirical research claims to work for the development of communication.

Figure 4 summarizes the opinions of the participants about the features of a good English teacher.

Figure 4. Frequency of Features
of a Good English Teacher

- ◼ Language proficiency
- ◻ Creates a good learning environment
- ◻ Transmits the foreign culture
- ◼ Planning of classes using different methodologies
- ◼ Personal features

The Role of English Teachers

To inquire about the role teachers often have in the classroom, the participants were asked to identify with one or more alternatives from a list proposed by Brown and Frazier (2001). Most identified with the premise that teachers should be a source of information, a role in which they take a back seat to allow students to be in charge of their language development, but are always available to give suggestions when students ask for any kind of help.

The second most frequent role mentioned was that of facilitator of the learning process; teachers help students to overcome difficulties and find their own paths to communication. The third most stated opinion was that, depending on the activity or the type of students, the roles teachers have change or become intertwined. A smaller group of the participants believe their role is to plan lessons and then allow students to be creative within the established parameters. Finally, a minority of the participants mentioned the role of controlling teachers that do not give many opportunities for the different learning processes to develop. Table 5 contains a fragment selected from the semi-structured interviews to support the subcategories mentioned above.
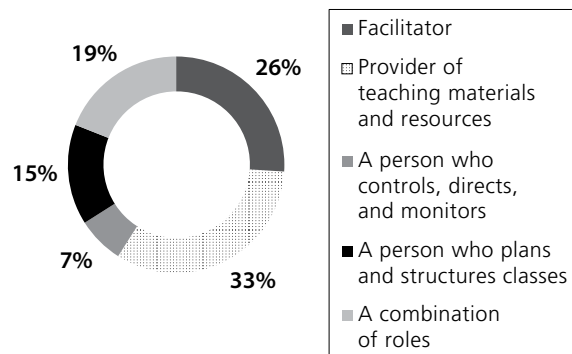
Table 5. The Role of English Teachers

Participant	Fragment
No. 11	I am definitely not a controlling teacher. Most Chilean teachers are controlling and tend to transform their students into people that are not able to think by themselves.

These research participants hold beliefs that align with communicative teaching regarding the different roles teachers assume in the classroom in order to promote negotiation and communication. This way the language classroom becomes a dynamic space for learners' interaction, in which teachers assume a wide variety of roles based on what they encounter in the complexity of the teaching and learning process.

Figure 5 illustrates the beliefs teachers have about their roles within the classroom.

Figure 5. Frequency of the Roles of English Teachers

- ◼ Facilitator
- ◻ Provider of teaching materials and resources
- ◼ A person who controls, directs, and monitors
- ◼ A person who plans and structures classes
- ◼ A combination of roles

Most Common Functions Performed by the English Teacher

With reference to the different strategies used by teachers, the participants claimed not to have a lot of knowledge about this issue thus they are reluctant to use these strategies overtly in the teaching and learning process. Regarding classroom management, the participants stated that teaching university level students does not present any problems requiring

this function. Table 6 shows excerpts taken from the autobiographical diaries and semi-structured interviews to support the categories mentioned above.

Figure 6 shows the most common functions performed by English teachers as stated by the participants.

Table 6. Functions Frequently Performed by English Teachers

Participant	Fragment
No. 4	I answered questions and I monitored group work.
No. 15	Within the functions I use a lot as a teacher is the one to ask questions. In my opinion, asking questions is vital because they are tools that do not only help teachers to reflect on certain issues, but they can be seen as mirrors of the way they are working.

Figure 6. Frequency of the Most Common Functions Performed by English Teachers
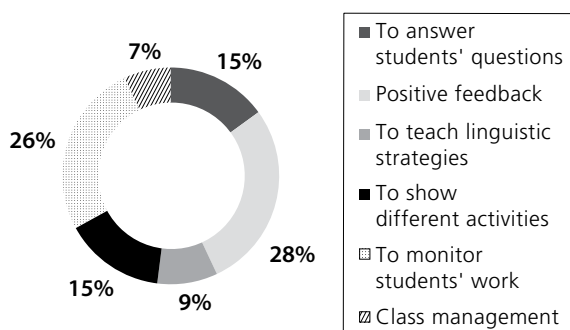
An effective language teacher should be able to demonstrate a wide array of classroom management strategies that obviously will be activated by the learners' language needs and the requirements of the tasks. Teachers should be able to turn to the appropriate classroom management strategies based on their position of active and critical classroom decision-makers.

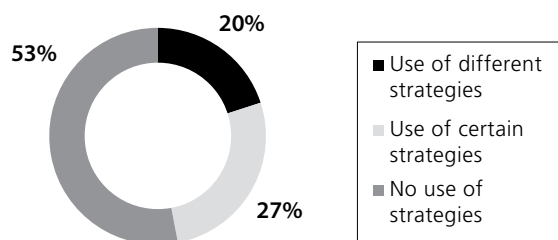## Learning Strategies Promoted in English Classes

When being asked about the category called Learning Strategies Promoted in English Classes, most of the participants answered they did not teach learning strategies either because of their ignorance on the topic or their lack of knowledge to distinguish the appropriate strategies for the different skills. Just a small number of participants stated they not only taught some kind of linguistic strategies but also some other strategies that were useful in the learning process itself. They also declared that in order to teach a language, it was essential not only to know the learning strategies and use them during class, but also to explicitly teach them so that students are able to apply these strategies in other contexts. Table 7 shows a fragment selected from the semi-structured interview to illustrate the abovementioned opinions.

Table 7. Learning Strategies Promoted in English Classes

Participant	Fragment
No. 12	While reading about the teaching of linguistic strategies, I realize that it is a weak aspect in my teaching. I think I have not taken enough time to reflect on how to put this into practice.

The use of the current research instruments helped us to identify which teaching strategies were at a disadvantage for these research participants. For learners to be effective language users, they should be explicitly exposed to the teaching of learning strategies that can help them to consciously use resources to overcome any language problem that could interfere with communication. These research participants' beliefs reveal that their knowledge and use of strategic teaching is weak; therefore, this is an area of their teaching that requires reinforcement through reflection and professional development.

Figure 7. Frequency of Learning Strategies Promoted in English Classes

Figure 8. Suggested Changes for Teachers of English in Chile

In Figure 7 the learning strategies that teachers claim to promote are shown.

Suggested Changes for Teachers of English in Chile

This category emerged when participants were asked whether they considered it necessary to make changes in the way English is taught in Chile. In first place, issues related to changes in attitude, such as self development, teamwork and greater autonomy were mentioned. The second place is shared by methodological and administrative issues such as reduce the number of hours a teacher has to be in front of a class, diminish the number of students per room, and the professional development teachers can obtain within their own schools. It has to be said that there was only a small number of participants suggesting changes in the initial training of teachers. Table 8 contains a fragment of semi-structured interviews to illustrate this last aspect.
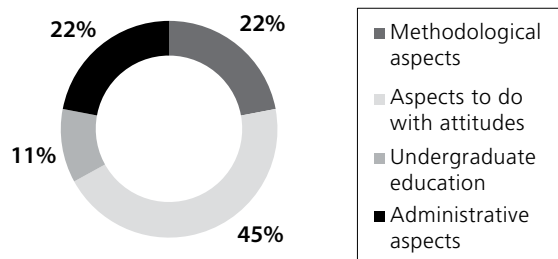
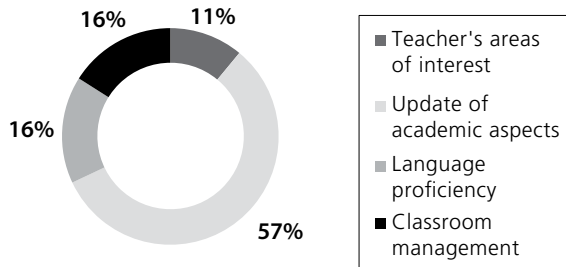Figure 8 illustrates the changes suggested in the teaching of English in Chile

Regarding the type of professional development suggested for teachers of English in Chile, the participants primarily manifested the need to update their knowledge on new methods of teaching languages, ict and different learning styles, new learning strategies, the capacity for reflection, and the evaluation process. Secondly, importance was given to the improvement of language skills and classroom management. Finally, in the subcategory called Areas of Interest, the following aspects were mentioned: the neurosciences (set of sciences which researches the nervous system with particular interest in the way that the brain activity relates to behaviour and learning) and also internships for teachers, defined as a set of practical activities carried out by teachers that will allow them to apply knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in the educational field in a integrated and selective way (see Table 9).

Table 8. Suggested Changes for Teachers of English in Chile

Participant	Fragment
No. 7	The importance of updating our knowledge; I think teachers are just realizing the need to keep learning.

Table 9. Type of Professional Development Suggested

Participant	Fragment
No. 4	I think we need to know about the different learning styles and the strategies used; we must learn to understand that not all of our students learn in the same way.

Figure 9 illustrates the type of professional development suggested.

Figure 9. Frequency of Teachers' Areas of Interest

field, such as area coordinators, fellow teachers, and/or students (see Table 10).

Table 10. Suggestions on Teacher Assessment

Participant	Fragment
No. 3	In any kind of job, one should be assessed through direct and continuous classroom observation…performed by a person that has more academic experience and more professional development.

Diagnosing the changes and type of professional development required by teachers of English at a university level through belief identification is an inductive approach for determining teachers' professional development needs. Very often organizations and institutions tend to have a deductive approach as far as professional development is concerned. Institutions frequently determine in advance what kind of training teachers need, which obviously creates resistance and reluctance on the teachers' part to participate in pedagogical change and innovation. Beliefs strongly reflect what someone truly accepts as truths that guide their actions.

Teacher Assessment

As for Teacher Assessment, all participants were fully in agreement of this process. In the next category, the best ways to assess teachers, most of the participants suggested direct classroom observation because it allows an immediate and accurate view of the various phenomena that occur within the classroom. The second most noted opinion was the importance of the teacher assessment process to be carried by a specialist who can provide specific ways to overcome weak areas observed. A third group suggested that this process should take into account the participation of different actors in the educational

Teacher assessment is a sensitive and context bound issue because just the mere suggestion of any kind of assessment or appraisal generates resistance on the part of teachers. For this matter, belief identification on teacher assessment before conducting this process constitutes a key step for the implementation of a robust system of teacher assessment.

Figure 10 summarizes the suggested format for teacher assessment.

Figure 10. Frequency of Suggestions on Teacher Assessment
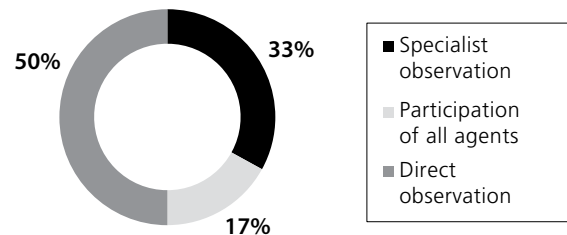
Conclusions and Implications

Research on beliefs of teachers is becoming important because there are theoretical and empirical reasons suggesting they affect the teaching practice. The present study explored the cognitive dimension of a group of 30 university teachers of English. The number of participants allowed a snapshot of what

teachers think, know, and believe regarding what they do in the classroom and of the learning process in general. It seems interesting to note that the participants readily expressed their beliefs about the various issues raised and recognized that these beliefs are generated mainly from theory or from their own professional experience.

Revealing the beliefs of a group of university teachers contributes valuable information to the constant concern about instances of teacher training designed to meet the needs and interests of teachers in such a way that it is meaningful for them so it can contribute to the improvement of their teaching practice and the achievement of effective learning by students.

The use of an interview and an autobiographical diary as instruments for collecting qualitative data from the respondents is very useful for maintaining the richness and necessary subjectivity of teachers' discourse. Beliefs anchor themselves in people's long term semantic memory and can probably be reshaped when they are confronted against evidence that does not fit in people's cognitive framework. The responses from both the interview and the diary really depict teachers' inner classroom world; teachers reveal their strengths, weaknesses, personal characteristics, classroom roles, and views on the teaching and learning of English.

In brief, belief identification encourages teachers to self-reflect on their own views and classroom practices and contrast their views with those of other teachers. Besides, teachers are seen as active decision-makers and not just as mechanical implementers of the prescribed language curriculum. The beliefs held by the research participants filter new information and experiences and are very much influenced by their own experience as learners.

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