The task-based language teaching approach as a mechanism to improve classroom atmosphere: a two-year experience with EFL students in their placement process in Santiago[1]

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Abstract
Recent research suggests that meaningful learning is more likely to occur when real life situations are brought into the classroom and students are to use their previous knowledge to deal with such situations. Following this, an important element to consider is the specific context where we want this process to occur, so that the real life situations may actually be relatable to the classroom environment. The Chilean context offers a variety of settings where room for intervention can occur through an active role by the pre-service teachers. The contextual dimension was essential for deciding on the use of Task-Based Language Teaching, as the approach promotes the use of activities that are perceived as appropriate for the specificities of the learners. Although important, developing the four language skills was not the main purpose, but to account for the relationship that there may be between the application of TBLT and the classroom atmosphere. The present study followed a qualitative approach for data collection and analysis, its design was non-experimental and cross sectional and the sample comprised 24 Chilean schools.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching, classroom atmosphere, communicative approaches, school context, situated research.

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El enfoque *aprendizaje basado en tareas* como mecanismo para mejorar el clima en el aula: una experiencia de dos años con estudiantes practicantes en inglés como lengua extranjera en Santiago

Resumen

Recientemente, investigaciones sugieren que los aprendizajes significativos tienden a ocurrir cuando situaciones de la vida diaria son traídas a la sala de clases, y además, cuando los estudiantes pueden utilizar sus conocimientos previos en el desarrollo de las mismas. Desde este ejemplo, se releva como un elemento importante el contexto específico donde los docentes desean que el aprendizaje tome lugar, de manera que la situación de "la vida real" pueda ser relacionada con la sala de clases. El contexto chileno, donde la lengua inglesa es enseñada como un idioma extranjero y que aún necesita más innovación, ofrece una variedad de escenarios en donde hay espacio para intervenciones a través de un rol activo de los futuros profesores en formación. La dimensión contextual fue esencial al decidir el uso de la metodología llamada aprendizaje basado en tareas (*Tasked-Based Learning*), debido a que esta promueve el uso de actividades que son percibidas como apropiadas para las especificidades de los estudiantes; El objetivo de esta investigación es identificar las relaciones que podrían existir entre la aplicación del "aprendizaje por tareas" y el clima de aula. El estudio corresponde al tipo no experimental transversal con un diseño cualitativo de recopilación de datos y análisis, teniendo 24 escuelas chilenas como muestra para el periodo de dos años.

Palabras clave: Enfoque por Tareas, clima de aula, enfoques comunicativos, contexto escolar, investigación situada

Introduction

Teaching English in the Chilean educational context has several characteristics that have resulted in the unequivocal evidence that the students' level of English is low, even when English was established in 1998 as a compulsory subject at school from 5th grade onwards[5]. According to the Education Quality Agency of the Ministry of Education (2013, p. 1), only 18% of the students who took the national standardized test SIMCE in 2012 received a certification for an A2 or B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which means that all other students scored below these levels. Taking into consideration that the students who took the SIMCE test were in 11th grade, it is safe to assume that they had received some type of English language instruction for at least six years. This evidence shows that the teaching-learning process has been inefficient in that students do not achieve the level of English expected by the Ministry, which aims for a B1 level by the time students are in 11th grade according to the national curriculum established in 2015. Different studies (Khazaei, Zadeh & Ketabi, 2012; Harfitt, 2012; Serrano, 2011) illustrate that circumstances such as a high number of students per class and little time of exposure to the language through the allotted time given to English, as it happens in practice with our national curriculum, are clearly insufficient for effective learning.

Additionally, affective factors such as motivation, language anxiety, and self-confidence are also important aspects needed for effective learning in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT here onwards) (Krashen, 1981; Dörnyei, 2010; Cassasus, 2014). The aspects previously mentioned relate to classroom atmosphere, which is determined by numerous factors, including student-teacher interaction, student-student interaction, use of materials, and presentation of contents, among others (Scrivener, 2012). Classroom atmosphere has scarcely been addressed in studies in Chilean settings, let alone its development in the English class. Despite this,

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[5] Although compulsory from 1998, it was first named "Foreign Language", which gave certain flexibility for schools to teach languages other than English

Littlewood (2007) gives an account of the implementation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in East Asian classrooms, where the educational context as a whole, and in relation to English in particular, is very similar to that of Chile. He found that classroom management was indeed a concern for teachers when using this approach to teaching English.

In light of this context, the main aim of this two-year research was to determine the relationship between the use of TBLT and classroom atmosphere in Chilean schools. This aim was achieved by means of a constructivist paradigm, as the different stages of the study were co-constructed by the researchers and participants. The first stage consisted in a diagnosis of how teachers include elements that promote a good classroom atmosphere in their praxis, which was done through means of non-participant observation of classes in nineteen schools in Santiago. The second stage consisted in teaching lessons with a TBLT approach in five schools in Santiago, after which the perception of different participants was gathered in order to understand their views on the lessons and their effect on classroom atmosphere. In this paper, we present the results obtained in both stages and their implications.

1. Literature review
1.1. Task-based language teaching

Nunan (2013) has stated that the methodological realization of the communicative approach is Task-Based Language Teaching. This is relevant inasmuch as TBLT is a component of this other much broader concept, and as a consequence uses most of the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT). The realization of CLT, i.e. TBLT, is put into practice by giving a "task" to the students. The concept of task has been defined in several different ways (Long, 1985; Richards, Platt & Weber, 1986; Skehan, 1998; Nunan, 2005), all of which agree at least with one point: the necessity for the task to be closely related to real life. Mao (2012, p. 2431) has defined the concept of pedagogical task as "a classroom activity which involves learners with the help of the

teacher in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language with a communicative goal".

Out of Mao's proposal, it can be inferred that a task must have some properties in order to represent what has been proposed in CLT. From that definition, some concepts seem to be common to most pedagogical practices. However, some of them must be highlighted in order to better understand the benefits of TBLT: the idea that the teacher is not the center of the classroom but a helper for students, the necessity for students to produce language, or at least manipulate it so as to fulfil the task objective, and finally the ultimate goal, which is to establish communication.

A task is not a simple element or a common goal, which must have some characteristics. Skehan (1998) stated five properties a task must fulfil: a focus on meaning instead of form, learners as producers of meaning, a close relation with real life activities, priority on the completion of the task, and assessment in terms of the task outcome. It is clear, by those five characteristics, that one of the strongest elements in TBLT is meaning and this necessity for attaining a meaning is one of the properties of CLT.

Nunan (2013) also presented the principles for TBLT. In brief, those principles make relation to the careful design of the course, in terms of a previous students' needs analysis (Richards, 2001), the language usage as a means for learning the language, focus on processes and strategies, relying on students' previous experiences, and finally the idea of classroom language learning linked to real life language.

Thus, it can be stated that one of the major concepts behind TBLT is to comprehend the process of learning a language as a real-life activity inside the classroom, which is produced by presenting the students with real life activities or tasks.

1.2. Classroom Atmosphere

The creation and management of a classroom in an effective manner will also determine to a great extent the possibilities for a student to learn. An important part has to do with attitudes, intentions, personality and relationship between teachers and their students, as well as having certain organizational skills and techniques (Scrivener, 2012). Ambrose et al. (2010, p. 170) define classroom atmosphere as "the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn". It is highly possible for an in-practice teacher to relate some of their students' behavior inside the classroom to one of the elements presented in the former definition, and most certainly the manipulation of any of those might create consequences on students' behavior.

In foreign language learning, it is widely accepted that the necessity for placing students as the center of the pedagogical practice is of the uttermost importance. In order to use TBLT as a means for students to face their learning as an active process, this will require certain conditions to be provided by the classroom, which is the physical and psychological context in which students are gathered. In this respect, the uncertainty and the out-of-comfort-zone exposition implied by foreign language learning, the management of the affective variables which impact in learning, as well as the classroom atmosphere become of great importance. As a summary, and following Emmer and Sabornie (2015), classroom management is understood as the process through which teachers and schools create and maintain appropriate student behavior in classroom settings.

The affective filter hypothesis in the learning of a foreign language establishes that a high rate filter is caused by a low motivation, high degrees of anxiety from the part of the student and low self-esteem (Krashen, 1981). Krashen's ideas seem to be of relevance because whenever a student is facing low motivation he or she is also blocking the possibilities for learning to take place. At the same time, high motivation will encourage a rapid acquisition of the intended outcome. In the same respect, Cassassus (2014) supports these ideas regarding the importance of classroom

atmosphere by stating that a pleasant and favorable learning climate in the classroom poses a greater influence, in itself, than the mixed effect of all the other factors, both being material or intangible.

Real-life practice of the teaching of a foreign language will require certain conditions to be achieved by teachers; for example, to accept students' uncertainty as normal, as it will be on those circumstances where they will integrate different aspects of the studied language (Kao & O'Neill, 1998), that those uncertainties must be faced as an opportunity and not a threat; to provide challenging and meaningful learning context for students to explore and to design the learning experience taking into account students' needs and expectations. This entails the necessary focus on fluency instead of on accuracy (greater focus on meaning and less on form), which implies the presence of a teacher who promotes cooperation, active interaction among students and considers syntactic, lexical, or phonological mistakes more as learning opportunities than situations to be penalized. Consequently, whenever a conflictive, inadequate, or disruptive situation emerges inside the classroom, teachers should tend to create learning experiences out of them through dialogue and cooperation with their students so as to safeguard mutual respect as an unavoidable value for everyone participating in the process (Nelsen, Lott & Glenn, 2011).

Lastly, this study correlates with an official guidance for school teachers in Chile, which is called Marco para la Buena Enseñanza (MBE). The document is divided into 4 categories or "Dominios" and communicative approaches principles (like those in TBLT) and classroom atmosphere permeate all of them, to a lesser or greater extent; however, Dominio B makes it explicit in all the criteria for it: a) mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion, b) learning culture and c) school life, behavior agreements and classroom arrangement toward effective learning (p. 26-32).

2. Method

The present study followed a qualitative approach for data collection and analysis in two stages. The first stage of the process consisted of identifying teachers' practice regarding classroom atmosphere by means of non-participant observation. The second stage was characterized by an intervention and the creation of the categories of analysis presented in the results section through the data gathered in the first stage.

The design of this study is non-experimental and cross sectional, as it looks into the relationship between TBLT and classroom atmosphere. The participants, UMCE's teachers, preservice teachers and their students, perceived them during the time they worked with this approach in their English class. All of the participants chosen during this study were selected through random sampling.

The study was carried out in two distinct stages: in the first stage, collaborators engaged in the non-participant observation of English lessons in nineteen schools in Santiago, where pre-service teachers were conducting their practicum. Twelve of these schools were semi-private, four were state schools, and three were private schools. These observations allowed us to gain knowledge of the way in which the teachers of those schools incorporate classroom atmosphere elements in their practice. This information was used as a diagnosis of the phenomenon. The results obtained through these observations, and through a focus group where observers could discuss the teachers' performance in depth, were used as a basis for the creation of a methodological proposal that was carried out during the second stage.

The second stage was the application of the methodological proposal created by the researchers with the collaboration of participants and members of UMCE's English Department in five schools, two private and three semi-private. The proposal consisted in having UMCE's preservice teachers include a sequence of six lessons with a TBLT approach in real Chilean educational settings where they did their practicum. The variables regarding number of students, number of sessions per week and time for

classes were untouched; although there must be a certain sense of bias regarding the participation of the pre-service teachers as opposed to traditional classes which include only the in-service teachers. The variable that was changed (independent) was the methodology, as this approach had never been used before in the schools where the interventions took place. The lessons were all structured with a warm-up at the beginning, followed by presentation, isolation, and practice (controlled, semi-controlled, and free), and finished with closures/sharings, following Nunan's principles (2004).

These interventions were monitored by means of the following instruments: interviews to school teachers, focus groups where the school students could participate, and weekly reflection journals created by the preservice teachers who taught the lessons. The aim of these instruments was to know these participants' perceptions and experiences regarding TBLT and classroom atmosphere. The interviews to school teachers were carried out in places chosen by the participants and they were conducted by the pre-service teacher with whom they worked, while the focus groups with school students were carried out at their school and conducted by a pre-service teacher who did not act as their teacher during the intervention process.

Given the nature of these instruments, they were all analyzed by means of content analysis (Preston, 1993), as we understand that what participants say is more relevant for this study than analyzing the structure of discourse itself. This procedure entails a process of systematic classification of the data through coding and identification of themes that emerge in participants' discourse (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The data analysis process was carried out with the following steps:

1. Reading all transcriptions from interviews and focus groups, and entries from the preservice teachers' reflection journals in order to gain insights into the participants' view of the interventions.

2. Researchers selected from the data keywords and text fragments that were relevant for the understanding of the phenomenon being studied, and later compared and contrasted each selection.

3. This selection was used as a basis for the creation of labels, agreed upon by the researchers, which were used as a coding scheme.

4. Codes were created by grouping labels that represented similar ideas according to the participants' narratives, while at the same time observing how these codes related to each other.

5. These codes were organized into categories of analysis, whose criteria stemmed from frequency and/or emphasis that participants provided for certain information. This means that the categories emerged either when the same concept was repeated by 30% of the participants (two subjects in the interview, eight in the focus groups and two in the reflections) or when there was enough evidence and support for the arguments given.

These categories of analysis are presented in the following section according to participants' views on the interventions. Additionally, we included some salient thoughts from the students who participated in TBLT lessons, given that their view is unique inasmuch they were the ones who experienced them, and from the preservice teachers, since they were in charge of the implementation of these lessons.

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, all of the instruments were revised by an expert on assessment instruments before they were used, and the data collected through them was used for triangulation which proved to be consistent. The results of this triangulation took the form of different category analyses, and they will be presented next.

3. Results

3. 1. Diagnosis stage

Over the diagnosis stage, some ideas appeared more prominently, as suspected: a) a great number of school teachers lack skills and tools to promote a healthy classroom atmosphere, b) when applied regularly, communicative approaches tend to help school teachers to improve classroom atmosphere, along with creating a more effective learning environment and c) schools in Santiago do have room for pedagogical innovation, as long as such changes happen either within their own ideals for professional development or the framework established by the Ministry of Education.

Apart from the confirmation of such preconceived ideas, other elements emerged from all the subjects' opinions and, therefore, were incorporated in the methodological sequence designed for the intervention stage. One of these elements was the idea that school teachers prefer not to expose their students to challenging activities. Rather, they stick to preconceived complexities when planning, delivering and evaluating their lessons, which slows down both the acquisition of the target language and critical thinking skills. Another element was the fact that there seems to be a tendency towards randomness in the class structure. The classes primarily consisted of a succession of activities and contents suggested in the textbooks, with the sporadic inclusion of contents seen in previous sessions. Finally, the affective dimension was identified as key by most school students. Bonding is a fundamental part for pre and in-service teachers when attempting to promote a proper classroom atmosphere and effective learning process, according to what was pointed out by the participants of the study.

3. 2. Intervention stage

As explained in the previous section, 5 schools were included in the intervention stage. In each, there was 1 pre-service teacher who applied the designed sequence of 6 sessions (see fig. 1). As an important element in the study was the attention to

contextual differences, all 6 sequences differed, resulting in 30 different sessions. When applying the sessions, the pre-service teachers considered school students' interests to plan their lessons. They did sharing at the end of each of the sessions and engaged in more fluent interaction with the school students. Along with the application, the pre-service teachers met once a week to share their experiences and resolve classroom atmosphere issues with their peers. The process ended with a three-session project using TBLT principles.
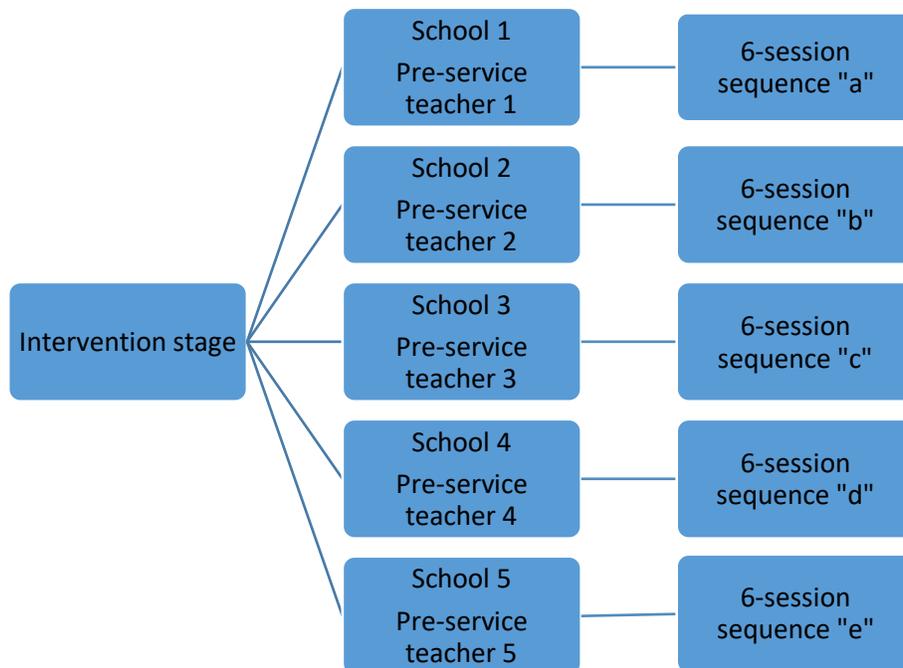

Fig. 1 structure of the intervention stage

During the interviews with school teachers, we were able to identify several aspects that participants deemed relevant about the implementation of TBLT lessons, which are summarized in Table 1. In general terms, positive aspects were related in particular to the creation of bonds with the teacher and among students, and to one of the main principles of TBLT: contextualization of the content with real-life situations. By taking into consideration students' interests, opinions, feelings and previous

knowledge, these lessons managed to engage students' attention. This is also related to the aspect of bonding, as the preservice teachers' attitude towards their students, together with the intervention, succeeded in creating better teacher-student and student-student relationships. It is not possible to isolate any of these two aspects: contextualization and bonding, as they occur simultaneously and they interrelate in such a way that they develop each other. As students bonded with the teacher, their participation in the classes improved, and as they participated more, they were able to create bonds with other participants of the class.

Some negative aspects identified by the school teachers had to do with a view of classroom management that considers being noisy as inappropriate behavior in a classroom, and other misbehaving attitudes that were not explicitly clarified by teachers.

Table 1: Positive and negative aspects of the intervention with TBLT lessons according to teachers
Positive aspects of the intervention
● The students' opinions and previous knowledge were taken into account in every step of the stage, which encouraged students' interest in the lessons.   ● The group work promoted by the pre-service teachers enhanced students' motivation resulting in improvements in their teamwork and social skills.   ● Students' feelings were essential to the successful development of the lessons.   ● The methodology implemented enhanced students' participation in classes. Most of them were involved and willing to participate in the project. The teachers paid close attention to the participation of every one of them.   ● The students had a great time (for example, they got more involved when engaged in activities of their preference), which helped their learning process.   ● The teachers took into account different learning styles and ways to teach which resulted effective for the students.   ● Using sharing helped to improve classroom atmosphere.

- The approachable attitude from the pre-service teacher positively influenced the students' response towards the activities.
- The TBLT activities created instances to explore students' backgrounds and emotions, increased students' active participation and their disposition to the activities.
- Students' attitude towards the activities had noticeable improvements through the sessions.
- The students showed a positive relationship with the pre-service teachers. They created a meaningful bond.

Negative aspects of the intervention

- As the methodology implies a lot of talking time, sometimes the class was too noisy.
- In some cases, the methodology led to misbehaving attitudes.
- The TBLT approach worked. Nevertheless, other strategies should have been included so the students realized what they were learning.
- Students' feelings towards the activities developed were rather negative when they considered content more important than performance.

The focus groups, in which only students who experienced TBLT participated, seemed to concentrate on the relationship they developed with the preservice teacher that implemented these lessons, as can be seen in Table 2 below. They described this relationship as positive and made a correlation between this and good classroom atmosphere. These students seemed to also value the new experience as it was different from what they were used to; these "more dynamic" lessons allowed students to practice skills they do not normally practice in English lessons, which in turn motivated their participation.

Table 2: Most common opinions about TBLT in students' focus groups
● The attention to emotional aspects was beneficial for the students' learning process.
● Dynamic lessons produced a more effective learning environment.
● The pre-service teachers' efforts to motivate students triggered more participation in class (innovative lessons through the promotion of speaking activities and the incorporation of games).
● Sharing enhanced students' confidence to give their opinions.
● The activities based on the TBLT Approach were more meaningful for the students.
● Constant monitoring was beneficial for the students' learning process.
● A positive student-teacher relationship improved classroom atmosphere (negotiation and mutual respect were given as examples of such relationship).
● In turn, a positive classroom atmosphere improved students' participation and helped the pre-service teachers enhance group bonding.

Finally, the reflection journals kept by preservice teachers were examined in order to understand their perceptions about the experience of implementing TBLT in their lessons. The most relevant findings of these reflections show that preservice teachers have a tendency to build significant bonds with their students, which greatly improved classroom atmosphere as students were more motivated to participate in lessons and more willing to work with their classmates in the activities presented by their preservice teacher.

One of the main aspects that helped in building this bond was sharing. By including sharing at the end of lessons, students were able to reflect on their own performance, evaluate each lesson from their perspective, and discuss topics of importance for them that arose during those lessons. This space contributed to bonding by taking students' opinions and feelings into consideration in the creation of the experience in the classroom.

In terms of methodology, preservice teachers highlighted the importance of using warm ups and short monitored activities in lessons, as they helped with the motivation of students, thus contributing to classroom atmosphere. As for TBLT, these participants considered that its implementation was successful because lessons were contextualized to students' realities, making them feel that English has a real-life use for them.

The most salient results of the reflection journals are summarized in table 3 below:

Table 3: Preservice teachers' perceptions of the implementation of TBLT
• The relationship between the pre-service teacher and students improved classroom atmosphere.
• Pre (stage) activities to check previous knowledge worked for the students to understand what they were learning.
• The TBLT Approach was successfully implemented using the students' personal experiences and real world tasks. Likewise, the pre-service teachers used focused and unfocused grammar activities.
• The pre-service teacher used contextualized strategies for a specific classroom, which contributed to improving classroom atmosphere.
• The pre-service teacher's main function was that of a facilitator.
• Teamwork helped accomplish meaningful learning.
• A variety of short monitored activities and warm-ups which included the students' personal interests were proven effective motivational tools.
• Sharing worked as both self-evaluation and a bonding exercise. Also, they allowed the students to talk about topics that were important to them. Lastly, sharing made the students reduce their fears and feel more comfortable when making mistakes.
• Self and peer evaluation helped the students interiorize the knowledge more easily.

- Students learned by playing.

- A healthier classroom atmosphere enhanced the students' participation.

- Group work took the pressure off individual students and improved their performance.

- Effective presentation of the activities caused effective participation from the students.

- Creating bonds with the students improved their participation and motivation.

These results show that the most important aspect for all participants of the study was the creation of a bond between students and preservice teachers, which allowed everyone in the classroom to feel acknowledged as an important participant. This greatly improved participation and cooperation during activities. In order to achieve this bond, preservice teachers showed to have an approachable attitude that allowed for teacher-student negotiation in the classroom. This attitude answers not only to these particular preservice teachers' personal characteristics but also to the nature of lessons with a TBLT approach. The implementation of these lessons entailed the use of different activities that motivated student participation in each step, taking into consideration their experiences to make use of real-life tasks, and required preservice teachers to take on the role of facilitator. Also, by taking into consideration emotions and feelings in these lessons, students were able to perform in a safe environment, forgetting about their inhibitions and acquiring a more tolerant way of dealing with frustration and failure. Following Cassassus (2014), it appears evident from the participants' experience that a good classroom atmosphere made by interaction among students and teacher is key for effective learning, even more so than the principles of TBLT as put forward by Nunan (2013).

Conclusions

This paper presented the results of a two-year investigation on the effects of using TBLT in order to improve classroom atmosphere in different schools of Santiago, Chile. The evidence showed that the implementation of lessons planned following a TBLT approach significantly enriched the bond shared by students with their preservice teacher, which became the key to improving classroom atmosphere according to the participants. In this respect, it can be argued that TBLT presents a good opportunity for teachers to place students at the center of the teaching-learning experience in such a way that their views, opinions and emotions are taken into consideration and acknowledged during lesson planning and implementation. By only shifting this focus and allowing for teacher-student negotiation in the classroom, which resulted in a good teacher-students bond, classroom atmosphere was greatly improved.

The diagnosis stage shed light on the reality of teaching English in Chile: many schools do not follow a communicative approach when teaching the language. Whatever reason there might be behind this is not particularly relevant for this study (even when it is of the utter importance for pedagogical practice in general), but we were able to observe that there is little room for innovation in Chilean classrooms that could be used to systematically incorporate at least some activities with TBLT principles, or sharings as they were deemed fundamental, in pedagogical spaces. The role that preservice teachers can play in this has barely been explored.

It is clear that more evidence is needed on this subject in order to have a more comprehensive view of the effects of communicative approaches in Chilean classrooms. Future research might cooperate with more schools in developing new strategies to improve classroom atmosphere, and, therefore, effective learning.

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