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# Innovation for English language teaching in higher education

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#### Abstract

This research aims to learn about the perception about didactics of professors who teach English in the study programs of Bachelor of Education and English Pedagogy, and Bachelor of English and English-Spanish Translation at the University of Atacama, Copiapo, Chile. For this, a qualitative pilot research was conducted, using the case study approach and the associative letters method for data collection, using as an inductive concept 'didactics of the English language'. This, in order to gather information about didactics in English teaching, given through the four production and comprehension language skills: writing, reading, speaking and listening. The first findings show a lack of innovation in the field of teaching and unawareness of it. Within the data of the pilot sample, the concepts 'skills' and 'methodology' stand out as central elements in the English Language Teaching didactics. From this small pilot research, the idea of the importance of communication and methodology as key concepts to be included in the next investigation is reinforced, so that the data collection is meaningful, and a close intervention could be achieved, where the teachers reflect on the didactics used in a more comprehensive and less recursive way.

Keywords: Didactics, higher education, innovation, language teaching, second foreign language.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Research carried out within the framework of formative research processes in charge of PhD Carmen Burgos, with a research assistant student, to monitor the acquisition of research skills acquired in the second year of participation.

## 1. Introduction

Currently, public universities in Chile have study programs that include English as a transversal element to the formation of a subject prepared to respond to the demands of a society that is rapidly developing in a globalised context. There is concern regarding the development of the individual in his or her professional life, in which the use of a second language is presented as a highly beneficial tool in this globalising process of which we are part of. For this reason, the Ministry of Education has placed emphasis on the development of public policies on English teaching as a foreign language, including it in the entire process of primary, secondary and higher education. However, there are studies that show that the progress of language learning is lower than the expectations proposed by the government and also show low achievement levels (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). Latin America is situated with a low level of performance in the English proficiency ranking according to Education First (2018) and has shown a slight decrease since 2017. Within the countries considered in its ranking, Chile is in the fifth place in Latin America, within a *low*-performance classification in language use. Within this context, in Chile, compulsory regulation and implementation processes of teaching English teaching do so voluntarily.

Chile's national English strategy for the 2014–2030 period established an action goal to include an English section in the national university entrance exam (University Selection Test, PSU) and eventually include the English qualification in the general PSU score (Ministry General Secretariat of the Presidency et al., 2014). However, these actions have not yet been implemented (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017, p. 21).

The training of competent professionals who effectively use the language is a relevant point in this situation, especially English as a Foreign Language teacher, who are responsible for concretising the social project proposed by the curriculum and bringing the language knowledge to Chilean classrooms. Hence, it is necessary to study the elements that constitute innovation within the didactics applied by teachers in Chilean schools and universities to teach English, in order to understand the way in which the Didactic Operation occurs, and which innovative components facilitate the teaching process.

Consistent with the above, the assumption that the pilot research supports is the following: the lack of knowledge of the impact that learning has on the incorporation of the Didactic Operation in the teaching exercise is reflected in the lack of innovative strategies that contribute to English teaching.

In order to understand the context where the pilot research has been carried out, we will explain certain crucial aspects that have been part of the history of language teaching at the University of Atacama; and what have been the most recent modifications that have allowed us to observe questionable behaviours for the development of this research.

The University of Atacama, located in Copiapo, Chile, has, within its Faculty of Humanities and Education, the Languages Department, which imparts undergraduate programs in Education and Pedagogy in English, and Bachelor in English Language and English-Spanish Translation. Currently, both programs have been part of changes to improve the curriculum, being the most recent translation program, changing its degree from *degree in English* to *graduate in translation*, according to Exempt Decree No. 59 of the year 2018 (University of Atacama, 2018). The Languages Department has an academic group that attends to both programs, of which six participated in this research.

According to the information provided by the University of Atacama (n.d.), the Languages Department was initially founded as the Institute of Languages of the University of Atacama, which taught the English Pedagogy program and various language courses that were offered as part of their programs. This institute was eliminated in 2009, giving way to the creation of the Languages Department, enrolling in the Faculty of Humanities and Education. The English Pedagogy program has undergone changes throughout its creation and regularisation in 1993, in the search for continuous improvement in the programs offered to students, with the most recent update being the change of

its curriculum in the year 2017, changing the focus of the program towards a competence-based proposal. The same update was made a year later for the English-Spanish Translation program, beginning its application for new students in 2019. According to the Languages Department's mission (University of Atacama, n.d.), it 'is committed to the training of highly competent professionals for communication in the English language and culture, in accordance with the standards established in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages'. It is important to note that the University also mentions a strong approach to social commitment for both programs of the Department, aiming to train competent professionals committed to their social environment, the latter being more relevant for teacher training.

# 2. Purpose

It is from the recent curricular changes of both programs that there is concern about the teaching and didactic methods applied by the teachers of the department, who should be part of this change, fulfilling their commitment to stay updated regarding their disciplines, a crucial element for generate significant learning in students of a second or foreign language (Cardenas, Naranjo & Soto, 2015, p. 13). Understanding the complexity of teaching processes, and the relationships generated in them, a case study focused on social representations has been carried out (Moscovici, 1961), in order to understand the teachers' perception that belong to the English language programs of the University of Atacama, about didactics in English teaching. The opinions generated regarding a situation or subject matter are constitutive of the matter and determines it (Abric, 2001), being the interpretation of individuals on the subject matter an essential part of their perception of it. The idea of social representation is presented in various ways according to Jodelet:

Images that condense a set of meanings; reference systems that allow us to interpret what happens to us, and even give meaning to the unexpected; categories that serve to classify circumstances, phenomena and individuals with whom we have something to do; theories that allow to establish facts about them. And often, when they are understood within the concrete reality of our social life, social representations are all together. (Jodelet, 1986, p. 472)

In this article, after the literature review, didactics will be understood as the discipline of the Learning Sciences that refers to the teaching-learning processes, which cover the interaction between its participants (Diaz Maggioli, 2012). We consider the work carried out by the teacher essential to specify knowledge as a subject matter within the process, based on the definition of Didactic Operation of Burgos (2018)<sup>2</sup>. To carry out this work, the teacher must have a series of scientific skills and knowledge, above all, the Pedagogical Content Knowledge, which distinguishes him as a teacher, as opposed to an expert in the field of his discipline (Diaz Maggioli, 2012). Shulman (1986) states that in the teaching task it is necessary to understand the different ways of teaching and representing knowledge to achieve meaningful learning, which also considers the context where the teaching-learning process is generated: the age of the students, their social background, the preconceptions of their discipline and what makes a specific content difficult to understand or not, being able to make transformations to achieve relevant teaching for students.

# 3. Research assumption

As noted above, the research assumption is that the Didactic Operation must be incorporated as a theoretical–methodological element that allows the implementation of innovative strategies in the practical–procedural dimension of the discipline's curriculum.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Emergent category for the analysis of the curricular field. Burgos (2018). Didactic Operation [abstract]. In: Abstracts Book of the 26th Global Conference on Contemporary Issues in Education (GLOBE-EDU 2019); 2019 Aug 29–31; Christian University St. Petersburg, Russia. Russia: The Academic Events Group; 2019. Abstract nr 7.

## 4. Method

The approach of this research is a case study, which is attached to qualitative research, interpretive paradigm. The data collection method used is associative letters, based on the theoretical work of Abric (2001), who bases his work with conceptualisations established by Moscovici<sup>3</sup>. This method allowed us to know some dimensions of the representations and meanings evoked by the subjects from an inductive concept, in this case, *English Didactics*.

#### 4.1. Information collection and analysis process

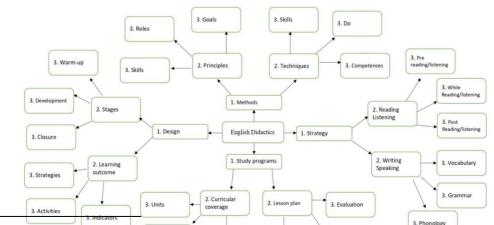
The analysis was carried out through the coding paradigm<sup>4</sup>, taking into account the texts generated and specifically exposed as suggestive phrases concatenated to the generating concept. The reduction and triangulation of information are carried out by contrasting it with the ideas expressed in institutionalised documents, reports and study programs.

After carrying out the exercise of associative letters with the teachers, a general record of all the concepts named in the maps was made, in order to classify the categories of words associated with didactics and its operability. Once the categorisation was carried out, a selection was made of the concepts that have more than five repetitions in the network generated by the associative letters, these being the most relevant to consider for the analysis of the data. This decision was based on the number of participating subjects.

Having done this categorisation, an encoding was done through the Atlas.ti software for the analysis of citations in the context in a detailed manner, using the same categories to classify the participants' discourse, to find in the text, the ideas that underlie the representation of what they imagine and share socially as English didactics.

## 4.2. Research subjects

Currently, the Languages Department of the University of Atacama has 18 teachers who teach or have taught English Language and Communication classes in pedagogy and translation programs. Of these teachers, six were the sample of this pilot research. The only inclusion criterion for the subjects who participated in the research exercise was that they conducted or have conducted English classes in the department's programs.



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Moscovici (2000, p. 228). How is the scientific knowledge transformed into common and spontaneous knowledge?. In the contemporary world it is scientific work and development that invent and propose most of the objects, concepts, analogies and logic forms'. (Moscovici, 1979 [1961], p. 13) that we use to comprehend and act in the different spheres of daily life. <sup>4</sup> Strauss & Corbin (2002). Bases de la investigacion cualitativa. Tecnicas y procedimientos para desarrollar la Teoria Fundamentada. Medellín: Universidad de Antioquia.

Figure 1. Associative letter model. Note: the model is of own elaboration, based on Abric's (2001) model. This is a digitalised example of the letter elaborated by a teacher

Subjects participating in the investigation must follow the following steps when completing the associative letter:

- 1. First, they should visualise and reflect on the central concept of the scheme (English Didactics), presented in Figure 1.
- 2. Then, the boxes identified with the number 1 must be completed, which are around the inductive concept.
- 3. Next, they must fill in the boxes identified with number 2, writing a concept that the person associated with the idea written in box 1.
- 4. Finally, the tables with number 3 must be completed by writing a concept that is associated with the generated chain.

The researchers used the hermeneutical method and inference to articulate with connectors the sentences resulting from the word network that was generated with the associative letters.

It is worth mentioning that this process of creating and identifying phrases can be richer and more meaningful, as the information about the social representation of English didactics if it is carried out by the participants themselves. It is expected to be able to carry out a deeper and thorough exercise when the investigation that follows the pilot research performed is conducted.

## 5. Results

The results that are presented based on the analysis of the associative letters reflect in the first instance – the initial categorisation.

Table 1. Concept results with more frequency			
Category	Concepts	Frequency	Percentage of the word total
Skills	Reading	7	11%
	Listening	6	
	Speaking	5	
	Skills	5	
Method	Strategies	8	6%
	Methodology	6	
Lesson planning	Specific types of activities*	10	12%
	Activities	6	
	Post-reading/listening task	5	
	Pre-reading/listening task	5	
Evaluation/Assessment	Specific evaluation activities*	6	3%
Linguistics	Grammar	6	6%
	Vocabulary	6	

*Note*: \*Unlike the other concepts, which were registered as they were named, these concepts are registered as a grouping of specific examples of activities delivered by the teachers.

The categories of Skills, Method, Lesson Plan, Evaluation/Assessment and Linguistics, which were grouped with mentioned concepts that belong to them, are those that had a greater representation in the responses of the participants. One of the concepts that were mentioned often is the Specific Activity Types, which includes examples of activities delivered by teachers, for instance: listening for keywords, sing to learn or roleplay. This set of concepts belongs, at the same time, to the category of Class Planning, which has a higher percentage of representation of the total number of concepts delivered by all individuals.

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Colour	Category	Frequency
•	Lesson plan	44
•	Skills	26
•	Method	21
•	Strategies	20
•	Linguistics	13
•	Evaluation/Assessment	9

Table 2. Most mentioned concepts analysed in t	the context

*Note*: Table generated from the Atlas.ti software analysis.

The review through the software, in a contextualised way, shows that it is indeed the concepts of these categories that are mostly mentioned by individuals when talking about English didactics. Below are the network examples of associations analysed with the software<sup>5</sup>.

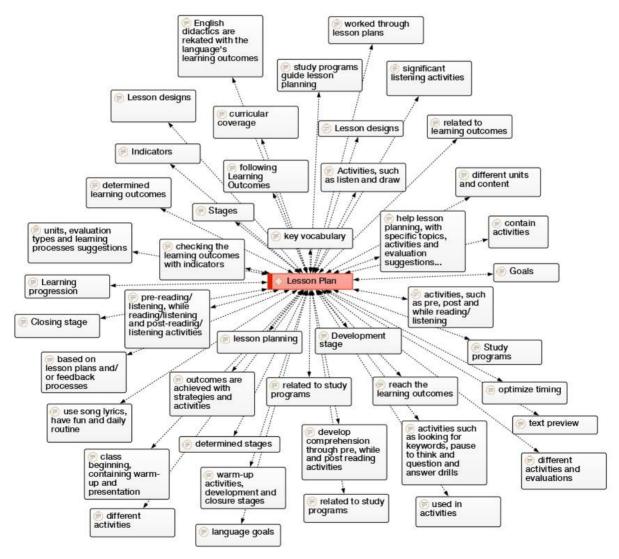


Figure 2. Association network of the lesson plan category

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Generated phrases are within the citations.

The subjects point out a large number of elements related to lesson planning to refer to didactics, within which the stages of a class are referenced, the activities to be used in it, aspects of the national curriculum framework to consider for planning such as learning outcomes, goals and indicators, thematic units and other suggestions of the English study plans and programs of the Ministry of Education. It is also observed that teachers indicate stages linked to the development of receptive skills. Of the six participating subjects, there are three who mention pre-listening/reading while listening/reading and post-listening/reading activities as constituent operations of language teaching, which are part of the stages of a class design and require prior planning around a didactic material.

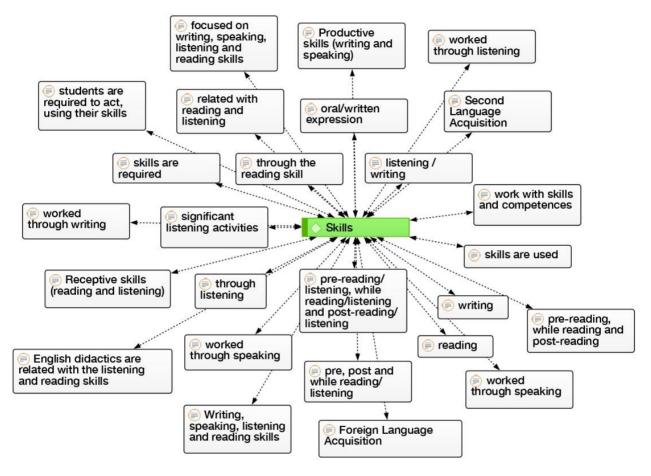


Figure 3. Association network of the skills category

The skills category, in the case of the English language, being the use of a language a skill itself, includes the sub-skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing (Husain, 2015), which presents an important significance for the subjects that participated. These four skills are basic to achieve effective learning and use of the language and refer to the acquisition of the English language through these. Individuals refer to the use of specific activities to develop these skills, usually grouping them into receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (writing and speaking). As observed in the association's network and in the previous tables, receptive skills are mentioned more frequently than productive ones.

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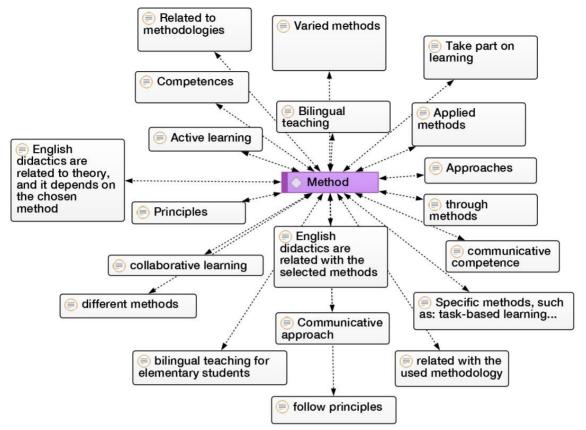


Figure 4. Association network of the method category

The concept of *method* in the Learning Sciences refers to pedagogical practices in general, and not specifically to the method that is actually used in the classroom, so this encompasses from the theories on which these practices are supported until the concretion of these (Diaz Maggioli, 2012). For the subjects, the selection of the methods to be used is connected with the concept of didactics, since the selected methodology follows a series of principles and approaches that affect teachers' practices, the selected tools and strategies.

It is appreciated that the subjects allude to the use of various strategies to carry out the incorporation of the Didactic Operation in the teaching process. Reference is made to different examples of strategies (such as *comparison* or *text analysis*) and their selection based on the method contemplated for language teaching. The mention of techniques for teaching English is considered within this category as these are taken into account from the strategies to be used. From the analysis of this category, it is possible to infer that there is a high concern for the actions carried out by the teacher in the classroom, or when planning, when reflecting on the concept of didactics. The significance that is appreciated is based on the teacher's performance, while the students become a secondary concern.

The participants mention elements belonging to linguistics, such as grammar, phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax when referring to English didactics. It is also possible to perceive that the word-sound association is mentioned at least twice. It is inferred that the knowledge of linguistic elements is crucial for the language's teaching-learning process.

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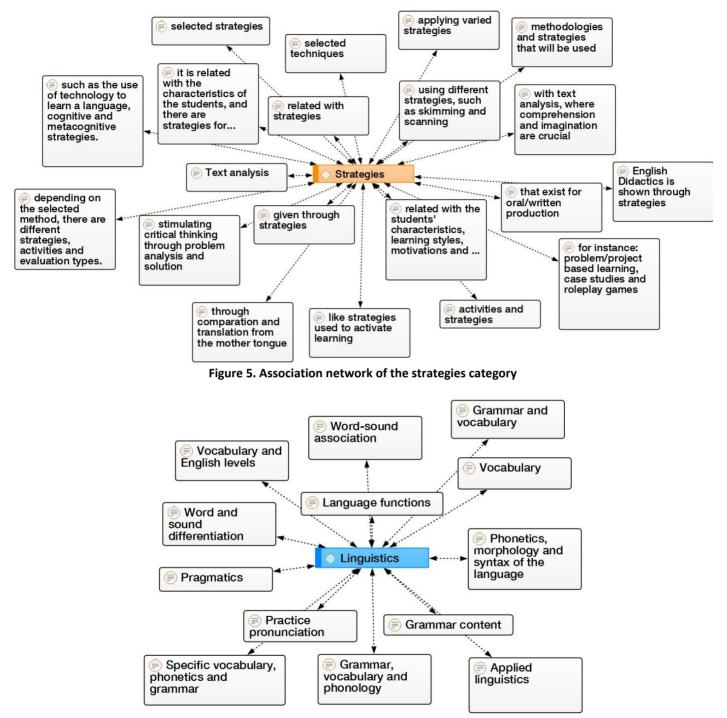


Figure 6. Association network of the linguistics category

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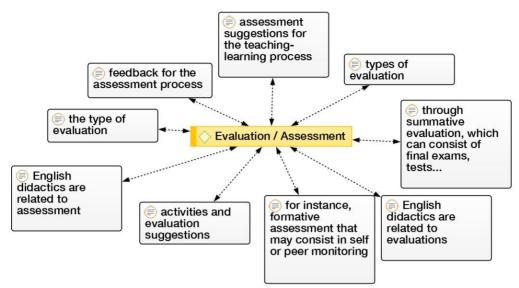


Figure 7. Association network of the evaluation/assessment category

In the subjects' representations around the idea of didactics, it is possible to interpret that the evaluation of learning takes relevance, especially in the consideration taken when selecting different types of evaluation and the feedback of the learning process. The evaluation suggestions are also mentioned, a concept related to the study plans and programs of the Ministry of Education, considering these suggestions for teaching planning.

In consideration of the association networks analysed, a comparative table was made regarding the relationship between the social representation of the six properties that are found in the perception of didactics of English and what is stated in the curricular instruments of the Chilean educational system until completing the secondary education. Although this pilot study is focused on the teaching of English in higher education, we consider it necessary to know the guidelines by which establishments are ruled to deliver a foreign language development for students entering higher education. In addition, the Guiding Standards for English Pedagogy programs are considered comparatively within which, according to the Ministry of Education (2014), 'shows the goals to be achieved by institutions dedicated to teacher education that will be integrated into the educational system of our country.' It should be noted that, in the sample of this pilot research, teachers of the English Pedagogy and also from Translation programs are considered; however, these teachers must meet these standards to conduct classes.

Table 3. Comparative table			
	Evaluation from the subjects' perception	<b>Evaluation from standardised documents</b>	
Lesson Plan	The incorporation of the Didactic Operation requires prior planning or design, with clear stages determined by the teacher. The learning objectives of the study programs should be considered and achieved by guiding the established indicators.	Class planning, according to the Ministry of Education (n.d.), is crucial to the achievement of the learning outcomes established in the curricular bases, but these must be carried out based on an adaptation to the context and needs of the students.	
Skills	The use of the four basic skills for English language learning should be developed through specific activities, focusing primarily on receptive skills (listening and reading).	The Curricular Bases of the Ministry of Education (2009) establish that the use of language skills must be developed to achieve communicative efficiency when graduating from secondary education. If a	

#### Table 3. Comparative table

		student wants to continue studies in higher education, they will have, mostly, a comprehensive base of the language, based on receptive skills, but it is imperative to work on the progression of production. According to the English disciplinary standards (Ministerio de Educacion, 2014), for graduate teachers, all four skills must be worked in an integrated manner.
Method	The methods selected by the teacher have an effect on the strategies and tools to be used and are guided by certain principles when planning the teaching process. Specific approaches and methods already existent are mentioned.	The guiding standards (Ministerio de Educacion, 2014) indicate in different standards the importance of the teachers' knowledge of different methods and Pedagogical Knowledge of the mother tongue and the foreign language (English) to make the necessary adjustments in the teaching process. It is also mentioned that within the basic characteristics that the professional must possess, one must have creative capacity to solve problems, which in the case of didactics, can be linked to the incorporation of the Didactic Operation.
Strategies	The strategies that the teacher chooses in his pedagogical practice are significant in the didactics of English. The student's appreciation becomes secondary.	The guiding standards (Ministerio de Educacion, 2014) emphasise the importance of using strategies relevant to the context and needs demonstrated by the students.
Linguistics	Knowledge of linguistic elements of the language is relevant for language learning. The word-sound association must be worked.	The curricular bases of English as a Foreign Language established by the Ministry of Education (2009) point out that the approach to language teaching in Chilean establishments should put the development of skills as a central object of learning, not the study of grammar, because this content represents only a support for the development of communication skills.
Evaluation/Asse ssment	The evaluation of learning is an elementary part of the teaching process of a language, and it is connected with didactics through planning, for the verification of learning objectives.	The implementation of various assessment tools should be used to check the progression of learning and provide feedback on the process, which should always be appropriate for the context in which classes are held (Ministerio de Educacion, 2014). The teacher must also be able to develop assessment tools for their students.

#### 6. Discussion and conclusions

Taking into account what we have agreed regarding the practical–procedural dimension of the curriculum and its application, didactics will be a discipline that refers to the teaching–learning processes, which comprehends the interactions between the elements of the didactic triangle. It is considered to be essential the work carried out by the teacher to transpose<sup>6</sup> knowledge within the process through logical, divergent, creative operations with a thought logic<sup>7</sup> that intervenes from the known, theoretical–scientific scope and able to adjust the methodological–practical scope. The language specialist should be able to articulate strategies that are relevant when thinking about a daily evolution to the disciplinary content. It is necessary to consider the Didactic Operation of Burgos (2018)<sup>8</sup>.

A conceptual scaffolding encourages the being and didactic endeavour; a possible category of being studied and understood in the teaching exercise. From the analysis of the educational discourse carried out (Buenfil-Burgos, 1993), understanding by this all the events that occur in social dynamics, we consider that teachers give much importance to class planning rather than to innovative teaching. There is a relationship between teaching and planning processes or class design (and what these processes imply). Moreover, the development of language skills<sup>9</sup>, productive and receptive, is preponderant to the variety of methods and strategies to be used, in which the subjects exemplify different types of specific existing activities. It is necessary to reflect on the role of the student at the time of putting didactics into practice since it is the interactions between the actors that make up the didactic triangle.

## 7. Suggestions

Through this pilot research work, information has been collected that allows us to glimpse some of the perceptions of teachers who teach English at the University of Atacama, highlighting the latent dimensions that permeate classroom didactics; however, we consider necessary to go further in the following investigation, collecting information from a significant sample, and complementing it with other data collection tools to be able to perform a much more complete and fruitful analysis. It is perceived in a certain way the lack of signifiers that consider or encompass concepts connected to innovation, creativity and imagination, key factors for the installation of the Didactic Operation.

It is also proposed to work together with the teachers of the Languages Department, to reflect on the pedagogical practices and the roles of the subjects involved in the teaching process, more specifically, in the didactic triangle. It is expected, after completing the full investigation, a work instance that can be generated for the continuous improvement of the teaching processes at the University of Atacama.

It is suggested to open the horizon of interpretation to new possibilities of curricular implementation from the evidence in the work. Consider the rethinking of the strategies to transpose the contents in an exercise that operationalises the disciplinary contents.

It is expected to continue deepening the gap shown and increase the collection of information from the subjects involved in its complexity, thus including students.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See Didactic Transposition by Chevallard (1997).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Logic, according to the imperative.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Emergent category for the analysis of the curricular field. Burgos (2018). Didactic Operation [abstract]. In: Abstracts Book of the 26th Global Conference on Contemporary Issues in Education (GLOBE-EDU 2019); 2019 Aug 29–31; Christian University St. Petersburg, Russia. Russia: The Academic Events Group; 2019. Abstract nr 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Listening, reading, writing and speaking.

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