

*Vertentes e Interfaces II: Estudos Linguísticos e Aplicados***REFLECTING ON ENGLISH TEACHING  
AT AN EARLY AGE IN THE CHILEAN CONTEXT***Pilar Escobar Cid\***Gloria Jara Quezada\*\***Claudio Díaz Larenas\*\*\**

**ABSTRACT:** Little is known about teaching English to young learners in Chile. Despite the importance given by the Chilean government to the English subject, its instruction is not compulsory until 5th grade. Although the Ministry of Education designed optional *Planes y Programas* to teach English from pre-schoolers to fourth graders, this material might not necessarily meet the students and teachers' communicative needs. This article aims to understand and compare the Chilean NT2<sup>1</sup> considering education professionals, their training, and authorities' guidelines and the context to what the literature has explored on the area of early childhood education, from young learners' features to classroom environment. Final considerations and reflections are included in relation to what can be improved.

**KEYWORDS:** Teaching very young learners; English as a foreign language; Chilean context.

**Introduction**

Nowadays, the importance of English around the globe cannot be questioned, not only for its status of lingua franca, but also for being a tool which guarantees access to different sources of information and entertainment. In fact, the Chilean educational system is conscious of this global reality as it states in the National Curriculum that learning English allows students to develop at a personal and academic level and that English will benefit the students' future work life (MINISTERIO DE EDUCACIÓN [MINEDUC], 2012). As a matter of fact, different educational reforms' implementations have developed in Chile to improve the level of English in the country. In 2003, the MINEDUC launched *Programa Inglés Abre*

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<sup>1</sup> Preschool level in Chile is divided in three stages, 1° *Nivel (Sala cuna)* that provides education to babies up to 18-24 months, 2° *Nivel (Medio)* that works with kids from 2 to 4 years old, and 3° *Nivel (Transición)* that covers 4 to 6 years old children's education. The final stage is divided in two grades, *Nivel de Transición 1*, or pre-kinder aimed to 4 to 5 years old kids, and *Nivel de Transición 2* or kinder that is compulsory and is aimed for kids from 5 to 6 years old (Ministerio de Educación, 2018).

*Puertas* (English Open Doors Program), which was an initiative to promote the learning of English as a foreign language to the students from 5th to 12th grade to boost the Chilean economic and social development.

Later, in 2014 the Chilean Government launched a National English Strategy 2014 – 2030, which aimed to improve not only students' level of English, but also workers. Despite there is an improvement on the proficiency levels, as in 2019 the country was scored as medium level for the very first time on the English Proficiency Index (EPI) (Education First [EF], 2019), Chile faces another challenge: the lack of qualified teachers to work at early stages. That is because, even though some researchers have concluded that a foreign language should be taught from birth through age 10 (Ghasemi; Hashemi, 2011), the English language subject is only compulsory from 5th grade onwards in Chile. For that reason, English teaching programs do not always prepare pre-service teachers to teach young learners, while not every early childhood education program provides pre-service teachers the knowledge and competences needed to teach the foreign language.

Consequently, there are English teachers with no formal instruction to teach young learners or preschool teachers without a high level of English in the Chilean preschool classrooms. Therefore, it is worth considering that the neoliberal system also affects the country's educational affairs. Yilorm and Acosta (2016) stated that there is a great number of teachers that feel overwhelmed by their duties and society in general. Hence, teachers finally use traditional teaching methods such as grammar-translation or audiolingualism to such a degree that their materials end up being artificial and complex. As that type of resources do not portray students' realities or experiences, it would be difficult for them to feel motivated with the class.

This article aims to understand and reflect upon the contrast between the Chilean English language teaching (ELT) context and what the literature reveals on the field of teaching English to young learners.

## **Chilean ELT context**

### **Current situation**

Awareness of the importance of English in Chile has been shown since 1998 when its instruction became mandatory from 5th grade (British Council, 2015) but it was not until 2002 when the Ministry of Education set specific goals and principles to teach English in 3 pedagogical hours per week in all levels with a communicative focus. MINEDUC has

designed *Planes y Programas* for each grade (in 2012 they launched proposals for preschool until 4th grade), documents that orient the development of content and offer ideas for activities.

Also, MINEDUC provides books for both students and teachers. The coverage of English teaching has expanded throughout

- 2004, English Open Doors Program better known as PIAP for its name in Spanish *Programa Inglés Abre Puertas*. The objective of this program is to improve the level of English of students from 5th to 12th grade by the creation of national standards for learning English and supporting teachers during their instruction and also inside the classrooms. PIAP promotes collaborative work between students, teachers, and parents. They support teachers' professional development and provide students with opportunities to practice the language and get closer to it. (Programa Inglés Abre Puertas, n.d.).
- 2006, We Learn is a program that aims to improve the quality of young learners of English (4 to 7 years old). They encourage schools to work in networks that can strengthen both their pedagogical and leadership practices. The program consists of 3 hours of English with the support of native speaker volunteers and materials for the schools in relation with their needs. It has been implemented in rural locations with important touristic activity where English is considered a priority among the communities such as Valle del Elqui and Puerto Natales. (Ayuda Mineduc, n.d.)
- 2014, National Strategy of English 2014 - 2033. As its name implies, it exposes strengths and weaknesses of the current English learning situation: Low level of English, poor support for teachers and the need of English speakers for the economic development of the country. There, a comparison is made in terms of SIMCE test results; it was claimed that students who receive English instruction during preschool or 1st grade had better results than the ones who started learning in 5th grade. On the other hand, as a result of the strategy, it was made explicit in *Estándares Orientadores para Carreras de Pedagogía en Inglés* that English teachers must show to have a C1 level based on the CEFR scale.

### Shortage of qualified teachers

Schools that offer English at primary levels often hire secondary teachers because there are not enough qualified professionals to teach English at primary or preschool level (British Council, 2015). A qualitative research study conducted by Toledo and González (2016) exposed the reality of some teachers who claimed to have acquired the skills to teach English to young learners on their own, while teaching, reading papers and consulting primary teachers to understand how kids learn and behave. Universities play a crucial role here since they are not offering the programs the Chilean education system needs to reach its objectives for English language learning.

Considering the 30 CRUCH Universities (from its name in Spanish *Consejo de Rectores de las Universidades Chilenas*), early childhood education programs are given by 23 universities, 4 of them offer a minor in English as a Foreign Language, 3 of them specify on their graduate attributes that teachers would be able to communicate in English and to use the language as a key to have access to more opportunities and 9 universities include on their programs an average of 3,7 compulsory English modules; 17 the other 7 institutions do not include English courses. On the other hand, just one of the 21 universities that offer English teaching programs claim that its teachers would have the tools to work on the preschool level. Just five programs are not enough to cover the high expectations of the Ministry of Education; Consequently, there might be early childhood teachers providing instruction of English with a poor level and secondary English teachers with non-appropriate methodologies.




### Curriculum proposal for Nivel de Transición 2 (NT2)

Preschool education in Chile is divided into three levels, *1° Nivel Sala Cuna*, *2° Nivel Media*, *3° Nivel Transición*. The last one considers 4 and 5 years-old students who are also divided into two groups, *Nivel de Transición 1* and *Nivel de Transición 2* (also known as *pre-kinder* and *kinder*). The level receives that name because it is considered a link between elementary and primary education.

As it was mentioned before, it is not compulsory to teach English until 5th grade. However, the government efforts of raising the level of English have concluded in curricular proposals for those years without compulsory instructions. The proposal designed for NT2 highlights the importance of starting the instruction of a new language at a young age and provides a background of the methodologies used and some orientations for teachers. Then, four units can be found with lots of activities, vocabulary, and guidelines for assessment. However, these activities do not always follow an order or are connected to each other.

Furthermore, some language used might be too difficult for students that face formal English instruction for the first time. For instance, songs or self-assessments sheets that contain long sentences (see figure 1).

**Pauta de auto evaluación:**

			
Identifying parts of the house	<i>I can identify the parts of the house shown in the picture.</i>	<i>I need a little help to identify the parts of the house shown in the picture.</i>	<i>I need a lot of help to identify the parts of the house shown in the picture.</i>
Identifying initial sound	<i>I can identify the missing initial sound.</i>	<i>I need a little help to identify the missing initial sound.</i>	<i>I need a lot of help to identify the missing initial sound.</i>
Writing initial sound	<i>I can write the initial sound of each word.</i>	<i>I need a little help to write the initial sound of each word.</i>	<i>I need a lot of help to write the initial sound of each word.</i>

**Figure 1** Self-assessment on MINEDUC's proposal

Considering the difficulties teachers might have while working at the preschool level and the low number of hours allotted to prepare learning material, it would be useful if all activities in the proposal had specific instructions in English. Despite the fact that it might seem a minor detail, the proposal is not consistent with its format as some of them switch between English and Spanish without a clear purpose.

## Literature review

### Young learners' features

Cameron (2001) described that there are some differences between teaching young learners and adolescents. Usually, young learners are described as more enthusiastic, lively and eager to learn. They also want to please the teacher and they will do an activity even though they do not completely understand why or how it is supposed to be done.

Nevertheless, we have to consider the different features of children to understand them as learners, from the biological features to the cognitive ones.

Firstly, we need to define what a very young learner is. Ellis (2013) exposed that the term young learners differed widely among the English Language Teaching (ELT) field. As the term can lead to confusion and young learner seems too broad, Ellis (2013) described the importance of having a specific category as there are physical, social and psychological changes in the transition from a toddler to a teenager. He concluded that we should adopt the terminology used by the different educational systems. Thus, we are going to consider as very young children to the children between 2-5 years old (pre-schooler).

The brain at a young age is described as flexible, or colloquially speaking plastic. As Center on the Developing Child from Harvard (2007) stated, the brain becomes more specialized in certain functions and, as it matures, it becomes less capable of adapting and reorganizing for unexpected tasks or challenges. However, we have to take into consideration that each child brain is unique. There are multiple genetic factors which influence the brain structure that have consequences on the behaviour of children (Thompson; Cannon; Narr, et al, 2001) and these identified genes show different variations which affect the child temperaments.

At the cognitive level, children from 4 – 5 years old can maintain interest in exploring new topics and they can realize their favourite activities and even the ones that they do not like for a longer period of time (15 minutes approximately). The 25 Connecticut Early Learning and Development Standards (Ctelds, 2014) described children as capable of testing different ways in which they can use certain materials, they try new strategies in order to solve unexpected problems and they can complete more complex tasks even if they get frustrated in the process. They are willing to learn as they can demonstrate pride when they have accomplished a certain task or ability and share their experience with the rest of the class. It is suggested that the caregivers/parents encourage their children to do certain tasks in order to develop their cognition by making questions about the weather and taking decisions throughout the day, using the daily routines to indicate patterns (First, wash your hands. Then, we will eat), etc. (Ctelds, 2014).

Early education settings possess a socially rich community as there are the students, the teaching staff and non-teaching staff. Thus, it is important to consider the social-emotional skills from children that can be seen in their interactions and activities. According to American Psychological Association (APA, 2017), by the age of 5, children are expected to understand the social rules dictated by the school and act accordance to it, differentiate doing

things on purpose and by accident and being able to take turns and enjoy playing with others and cooperate in different tasks. Even though they start using less physical aggression than before, children this age start with verbal aggression to others triggering situations of bullying or teasing others. However, they can read and interpret emotions of their peers and use different ways to control their emotions without having to respond verbally (APA, 2017).

### **Teaching very young learners a new language**

Considering the different features of young learners mentioned earlier, teachers have different strategies and considerations at the moment of teaching pre-schoolers. However, the first thing to keep in mind is the classroom environment.

#### **Classroom environment**

Cuellar (1992, cited in García-Chato, 2014) suggested that the space of the classroom should be wide and with sufficient ventilation. Moreover, the class furniture should be proportional to the students' height, thus the children could be able to realize the different classroom activities successfully. García-Chato (2014) also mentioned that preschool classrooms must count with an infrastructure which provides physical security to the toddlers.

García-Chato (2014) described that the learning environment is an important instrument at the moment of promoting the students' learning, thus the classroom environment should be similar to a house in which the toddler could develop daily life activities such as washing their hands, using cutlery, etc. It should also promote the linguistic, musical, artistic learning while respecting the children's spontaneity and promoting experimentation and manipulation of a wide range of objects, materials which can develop their five senses. That environment can be put into practice, creating conditions in which teachers can support language learning in the classroom.

Cameron (2001) mentioned that classroom routines may provide opportunities for meaningful language development as it allows children to actively make sense of new language from daily life experiences. She exemplifies that the language suited for different tasks i.e. give out the scissors, provides the opportunity to students to predict meaning and intention. As time goes by, the commands can evolve to more complex language i.e. give out the scissors to each group. Moreover, Moon (2000) pointed out the importance of making children feel at home in the classroom, making them eager to participate and take risks. In order to achieve it, she outlined how teachers can create the right environment for children learning a foreign language:

- Creating a real need and desire to use the foreign language.
- Providing opportunities for children to experiment with the language and plenty of opportunities to practise and use it in different contexts.
- Creating a friendly atmosphere in which children can take risks and enjoy their learning.

By having the right conditions for learning a foreign language, learners will be able to use the following abilities: using language creatively, going for meaning, using chunks of language, joining in the action, having fun (Moon, 2000). Moon (2000) emphasized the importance of the conditions mentioned before when we are set in a 29 foreign language situation, as the students will depend mostly on the school environment for input, being the teacher the only source of language.

### **Advantages and long-term benefits of teaching a foreign language to young learners**

There are some aspects that we need to point out in order to support the earlier implementation of English language teaching in the country. The idea that teaching a foreign language is better at a younger age rather than an older one has been discussed by different theorists. However, the benefits of teaching young learners go beyond the cognitive aspects. There are advantages and long-term benefits of teaching foreign languages since an early start.

Firstly, starting and earlier instruction of a foreign language has some advantages. As Shin and Crandall (2014) briefly described young learners as spontaneous and not afraid to speak out or participate, this can be used as an advantage in order to improve oral proficiency through repetition, as the children are not very inhibited unlike older learners which can be more self-conscious of their mistakes and they are concerned of how people see them. They are also good at imitating a language, even if they do not know every single word from rhymes, dialogues etc. (Shin; Crandall, 2014). Besides, starting earlier is better in the long term, as the higher time of exposure of English will make children achieve a higher level of proficiency unlike the ones starting later (Moon, 2005).

Secondly, Curtiss's work (2018) pointed out that children have the capacity to develop several languages and that it has a positive effect on intellectual growth. As Moon (2005) highlighted the exposure to a foreign language and what conveys requires the acquisition of new learning strategies. In Curtiss's (1990) terms, exposing a child to new and different experiences, such as a foreign language, results in a catalyst for cognitive development.



Thirdly, due to the status of English as a lingua franca, learning has a value for future education and employment. The largest number of English learners' lives in what is called the Expanding Circle, Chile included (Crystal, 2012), in which English has the status of foreign language. Different job agencies and higher education programs demand learning a foreign language, as Weatherford (1986) described learning a foreign language as a long-term investment as it can produce different benefits from one's career and personal growth.

As Lightbown and Spada (2013) commented, being able to communicate in more than one language can increase the chances for cross-cultural communication and economic cooperation. Finally, children who have the chance to learn a foreign language are able to have other cultures' exposure, having the chance to have different cultural patterns such as literature, music and arts (Çağaç, 2018).

### **Final considerations**

The main objective of this article was to reflect on the Chilean ELT context in the light of the literature on teaching English to young learners. Firstly, even though the importance of English language teaching in our country is not questioned by the authorities, the focus is mainly given to 5th grade students onwards, because preschool to 4<sup>th</sup> English language curriculum is still optional for schools. Bearing in mind young learners' features, well qualified teachers are needed in the educational system. In that sense it is crucial to strengthen teacher training programs in order to meet young learners' needs. Early age is a stage that has been defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO) as a highly influential period for the children in which the context that surrounds them plays an important role for their development; the organization even describes the aim of early childhood care:

It aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. (Unesco, n.d.)

Children development and learning of a foreign language should not be isolated goals. However, it was shown that some English teaching programs do not offer proper instruction to teach pre-schoolers; on the other hand, some early childhood programs do not prepare professionals qualified to teach the foreign language. Despite there are some universities that offer early childhood education programs with a minor in English or English teaching with a minor in early childhood and there are some post graduate options, they are not enough opportunities to address the system requirements. Therefore, the promotion of learning

communities among teachers of English and preschool educators may help professionals to address this issue as their collaborative work could forestall the lack of techniques or language proficiency demands. It is vital to acknowledge the significance of not only learning a foreign language at a very young age, but also early childhood education as a key element for children development.

### REFLEXÕES SOBRE O ENSINO DE INGLÊS NA FASE PRÉ-ESCOLAR NO CONTEXTO CHILENO

**RESUMO:** Pouco se sabe sobre o ensino de inglês a jovens aprendizes no Chile. Apesar da importância dada pelo governo chileno ao assunto inglês, sua instrução não é obrigatória até a 5ª série. Embora o Ministério da Educação tenha projetado planos e programas opcionais para ensinar inglês desde o pré-escolar até a quarta série, este material pode não necessariamente atender às necessidades comunicativas dos alunos e professores. Este artigo visa entender e comparar o NT2 chileno considerando os profissionais da educação, suas diretrizes de treinamento e autoridades e o contexto ao que a literatura tem explorado na área da educação infantil, desde as características dos jovens aprendizes até o ambiente da sala de aula. As considerações e reflexões finais estão incluídas em relação ao que pode ser melhorado.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ensino pré-escolar; Inglês como uma língua estrangeira; Contexto chileno.

### REFLEXIONES SOBRE LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS EN LA ETAPA PREESCOLAR EN EL CONTEXTO CHILENO

**RESUMEN:** Muy poco se sabe acerca de la enseñanza del idioma inglés a estudiantes de preescolar en Chile. A pesar de la importancia que le ha dado el gobierno a la asignatura de inglés, su enseñanza no es obligatoria hasta 5to básico. Aunque el Ministerio de Educación ha diseñado Planes y Programas para enseñar inglés desde preescolar a cuarto básico, el material puede que no supla las necesidades comunicativas de los estudiantes y profesores. El objetivo de este artículo es entender y comparar, el contexto chileno del NT2 considerando profesionales, su formación y los lineamientos dados por las autoridades con lo que ha explorado la literatura en el área de enseñanza a edad temprana, desde las características de la primera infancia al ambiente del aula. Consideraciones finales y reflexiones se incluyen en relación con lo que se podría mejorar.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Edad temprana; Inglés como idioma extranjero; Contexto chileno.

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