English at Preschools: a Necessity or Duty? A Chilean Case Study

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Abstract—This article aims to illustrate the current scenario of English language teaching and learning at preschools in the Chilean context. This study based on bibliographic review highlight show English as a foreign language is considered important in Chile; nevertheless, this has not been properly implemented in the Chilean education system. Chile adventures in becoming a bilingual nation but this is far from becoming a reality due to the fact that English is taught from 5th grade onwards. The results provided by the Education Quality Measurement System (SIMCE) and the International language teaching organization Education First (EF), clearly indicates the urgency to start introducing English in early childhood. This study also reveals how to reduce the language gap from the very beginning of children’s school education. Furthermore, literature evidence that not only teaching in early stages is beneficial and necessary, but it also promotes positive attitudes in children towards the language that they are learning, and at the same time, it brings better outcomes towards the goal of making a nation bilingual.

Keywords—Chilean educational system, English language, Preschool education, Teaching and learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

A language is a tool for learning that enables children to learn about the world around them as well as the cultural practices within a home to the academic content of the classroom (Gutierrez et.al, 2003). It is believed that children are better at learning than adults (Cook, 2008) referring to preschool years as the cornerstone of later learning. In terms of English, many studies have referred to the importance of incorporating English from early childhood since it is globally used in different aspects of life especially in education and also because early EFL education has been demonstrated to have a positive influence on young children’s attitudes towards English (Cepik& Sarandi, 2014). English as a foreign language is considered important in Chile; nevertheless, this has not been properly implemented in the Chilean education system. Chile adventures in becoming a bilingual nation but this is far from becoming a reality because English is taught from 5th grade onwards. The results provided by the Education Quality Measurement System (SIMCE) and the International language teaching organization, Education First (EF), clearly indicates the urgency to start introducing English in early childhood, a stage that is considered as the basis for the development of future learning. In line with this fact, starting from the premise that education from kindergarten is one of the fundamental pillars of human resource development and essential to the development in a country, it is believed that preschool education plays such an important role in the development of a nation. Even though there are 6.089 (Mineduc, 2017) institutions that offer regular preschool enrollment at a national level, the public initiatives to offer children access to English lessons by the government prove null. The current study that looks into what happens in Chile, supported by the bibliographic review reveals the great significance of introducing English at early stages and the benefits that could favor the educational system and the country itself. Hence, this study takes into account the Chilean reality in terms of English and the need for initiating English to preschoolers and the challenges that lie ahead in this task of becoming a bilingual nation.

II. THE CHILEAN REALITY

The expectations of the Chilean government towards making Chile a bilingual country is on the rise, and several initiatives and programs have been carried out through the years in order to improve the level of English in the Chilean society. Different educational programs such as the “English Open Doors”, and the “Penguins without Frontiers” program, were important asserts towards the development of human capital in order to foster student’s English language development. Moreover, as a manner of measuring the effectiveness of
these programs, since 2010, the Ministry of Chilean Education decided to implement a standardized English test every two years to third-year high school students (SIMCE). Notwithstanding, the results obtained in this test have shown that the students are unable to communicate effectively in the target language not reaching the expected competencies established by the national government.

On the other hand, the English proficiency level results issued by Education First (EF), an institution dedicated to fostering international cooperation through the promotion of English language learning, in its 2018 report, states that Chile ranked 46 out of 88 countries. In a matter of just two years, Chile seems to be on the decline rather than moving forward in this proficiency level (Education First, 2017). On the same note, “Education 2020”, a civil society organization that works to ensure quality, equitable and inclusive education for young people in Chile believes that it is crucial to move towards a more thorough understanding of the quality of education. According to the results of the SIMCE, the gap between students who have more access to practice the language than those who do not still remain unsolved. English has been part of the national curriculum in the late 1990s, and since then, the Chilean government has promoted the English language across the country (Barahona, 2015) and after the results provided by the 2012 SIMCE, English started to become part of lower levels as an attempt to start teaching English from an early age.

The idea of teaching English from early stages though found important based on the assumption, the earlier the better, the Chilean reality continues to remain optional in terms of the implementation in the early stages. Contrary to the state policy, a private entity, “Fundación Oportunidad” since 2006, has been promoting the importance of learning English from early childhood. This entity implemented a three hours English project called “We learn” from PreK to kindergarten in public schools at Paihuano, a city in the north of Chile (Fundación Oportunidad, 2018). The goal of the project is to give young learners the opportunity to expand their knowledge about the language at an early age and to create tools and opportunities for their future professional development. Teaching English in early stages is both beneficial and necessary to encourage children’s foreign language development (Kocaman, 2012), and it produces substantial gains in children’s learning and development (Barnett, 2008). Hence, it is fundamentally essential to introduce the English language in the early years of schooling to motivate young learners to be ready and confident in the process of learning English at higher levels of education. Considering kindergarten as a period in which children experience a rapid intellectual cognitive development, especially in terms of language acquisition, it is important to highlight that the involvement of parents and school stakeholders also play a vital role in this process to guarantee successful language learning. Nowadays, language learning is essentially needed for children who are growing and living in this rapidly globalizing world.

### III. WHY ENGLISH TO PRESCHOOLERS?

Teaching English to children is different from teaching English to adults. According to Harmer (2015), young learners learn differently from adult learners. Basically, it is easier for young children than adults to learn a second language since early childhood is a significant period for language learning and development, even in a context with limited exposure to a second language such as EFL (Nikolov, 2009; Larson-Hall, 2008). Teaching English to children should be enjoyable, interesting, repetitive, and understandable, making use of a variety of resources such as toys, puppets, pictures, maps, and calendars (Hamer, 2015). Moreover, using both gestures and body language are very effective strategies for teaching any foreign language at any stage of development, especially to young and very young learners, to help them gain a full understanding of the language they are learning.

Unfortunately, many kindergartens currently do not offer an active, child-centered, and play-based exploration as a means to provide literary opportunities to build a foundation of early literacy skills in children (Miller et al., 2009). This period in which children experience rapid cognitive development, especially in their language growth and capacity to learn words easily. As stated by Werker (2012), the fundamental process of language acquisition, including first words and the first use of grammar, does not differ whether one or two or even more languages are being acquired. This obviously means ensure interest in early language learners, and at the same time constantly encourage and make them involved in a variety of EFL fun activities and experiences. Teaching English to children has become an important aspect of foreign language teaching, and some people seem to be unaware of the perfect moment to expose their children to a new language and hence the question: when to start? It is believed that teaching English to kids aged 3 and 6 years is not an easy task, but scientific research on child’s neuroplasticity has proven

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that children at this age actually have a strong potential to acquire almost an infinite number of new information (Alvarez, 2010). This applies very much to second or foreign language because there is an increase of neurological connections in the brain that facilitates learning of the target language and because it is acquired and processed with less effort (Alvarez, 2010).

Scientific evidence also clearly indicates the benefits of introducing language learning at the early stages and being so; one cannot but question the fact behind the educational policy in Chile for the formal start of the foreign language teaching in fifth grade and with only 2 to 3 hours a week. Without a doubt, the lack of prepared professionals is one reason that determines this condition (Soto, 2018). Another author argues that the problem is due, in part, to the poor use of methodological techniques in the classroom, noting that they are not adequate for the type of content that is intended to be taught (King, 2007). Other theories that seek to respond argues that the difficulties are due to lack of infrastructure and economic and human resources (Wagner, 2001). Based on the aforementioned data, the fact that in early childhood the plasticity of the brain is in the most sensitive period for the incorporation of a new language, which has also been underestimated. It is in this stage wherein the auditory structures can better distinguish phonetic differences from a speech in order to incorporate them into the linguistic repertoire. Also, at this level, the socio-affective development of the child encounters fewer inhibitions when learning a new language (Soto, 2018) leading to the proposal that the introduction of English could be started at this level and later articulated to the following years of primary education.

IV. CHALLENGES AHEAD

Chile is en route to become a bilingual nation and for this, the project “Estrategia Nacional de Inglés 2014-2030” (National Strategy of English) was created. The general objective is to strengthen the proficiency of the Chilean population in the English language, in order to accelerate the integration of Chile into a global world and therefore improve our competitiveness” (Gobierno de Chile, 2014). The challenge of the National English Strategy that is pending is to involve different agents such as family and society, school and students, initial and continuous training of English teachers, and English for specific purposes so as to enhance and promote the effectiveness of teaching and language strategies.

Another challenge is to focus the attention in the preschool setting and take advantage of the capacity that children have to learn a second or foreign language (Alvarez, 2010). An example of this is the international community, which is aware of the importance that the world requires citizens able to communicate in one or more languages in order to perform and interact in different circumstances. Turkey and Spain are examples of countries that have decided to start teaching English from early childhood. In Turkey, the introduction of foreign language education in preschool institutions has had their own discussions on its rational; nonetheless, they welcome the idea of teaching a foreign language from early stages, particularly before the age of seven (Garcia, 2012; World Bank, 2013). Starting at this age means learners could reach higher levels of language proficiency and improve their language awareness of their mother tongue without affecting the mastering of it, as well as, any other cognitive skills (Kocaman, 2012). Meanwhile, public schools in Madrid, Spain, have initiated a bilingual education program for children of age 3. Children have English classes every day with educators specialized in a foreign language and, from the primary level on, all subjects are taught in the target language so that by sixth grade, they would successfully reach the B1 proficiency level. Policymakers could use these realities as a model for the elaboration of strategies that benefit the country.

Another important implication that arose, as a challenge is to offer preschool teachers comprehensive and specialized training in the tertiary education system. This is supported by the idea given by Tekin (2014), that teacher training cannot occur outside of higher education institutions because teaching English as a foreign language in the early years to young children requires great knowledge, responsibility, and capacity. In this sense, all the institutions at a national level could help to prepare knowledgeable and skilled professionals that enter preschool teaching programs in Chile.

V. CONCLUSION

This article highlights the importance of making substantial changes in promoting the teaching of English from early childhood. Research clearly states that introducing English at an early age is both beneficial and necessary and this essentially constitutes a huge contribution to a nation’s development. Kindergarten as a period in which children experience rapid intellectual cognitive development, especially in terms of language learning. Hence, kindergartens are the perfect scenario to introduce English and this means having qualified professionals. In the case of Chile, educators who teach in
preSchool educational settings do not have a bachelor degree or the training to teach English to preschoolers. This study also identified some major challenges that can be overcome by working with the professionals and stakeholders who wish to improve young children’s EFL learning in Chile.

REFERENCES