

The Rationale for A Proposal for English Language Education: The Experience of Developing A Curriculum to Teach English for Young Learners

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Abstract—Research suggests that young learners have remarkable abilities to learn a second language in a natural way; however, educational institutions around the world have not systematized the learning-teaching process of foreign languages for young learners, and this is also the case of bilingual education in Chile. This paper shows the rationale for developing an original program to teach English as a foreign language for young learners, which has been approved by the Ministry of Education for primary education in a private-subsidized school in Chile. The objective of this project was to systematize English language education from year 1 to year 4 as well as the language teaching methodology to integrate the psycholinguistic aspects of the learning processes of young learners with a focus on the Communicative Language Teaching approach, Semantic Fields (within a lexical approach) and Processability Theory. Finally, an overview of the procedure about the development process of the course will be provided using the theoretical models by Graves (2001) and Jolly - Bolitho (1998).

Keywords—primary education; English; curriculum; second language instruction; young learners

I. INTRODUCTION

In Chile, English is taught from year 5 in public institutions, but schools are increasingly offering English courses at younger ages, even as early as kindergarten, specifically with 3.500 schools offering the English subject before 5th grade and approx. 1.700 schools requesting books for 1st- 4th grades (Ministry of Education, 2013) . The Ministry of Education partly influences this demand for English courses for young learners, students themselves and parents who have realized of the importance of English in the globalized world (Inostroza, 2015). In particular, the experience outlined below is the fruit of a pedagogical proposal in a private subsidized school in the south of Chile to offer English courses from years 1 to 4.

The Chilean Ministry of Education accepts school proposals to change or adjust the curriculum according to the needs of the educational institutions in order “to determine what English language skills are necessary to enable students to participate in all schools’ activities” (Richards, 2001, p. 52). Therefore, teachers can prepare a curricular proposal based on institutional needs, to be sent to the national government for its approval and execution. Once the Ministry approves the resolution, the educational institution can implement the curriculum; however, it must send corrections and adjustments to the Ministry after one or two years of the implementation depending on the first approval.

Firstly, the general objective of this pedagogical project was to systematize English language teaching from year 1 to year 4 “to support teachers in making the curriculum work within the contextual constraints they face” (Orafi & Borg, 2009, p. 252). Specifically, this pedagogical experience aimed at providing the school with a new language program to regulate English language teaching to beginning learners by presenting a didactic proposal according to the scientific knowledge of English teaching as a foreign language. Secondly, it was expected to create and use an original set of pedagogical material to support

and develop English learning together with the validation of the formal pedagogical proposal through the valid documentation at the Chilean Ministry of Education.

A. Language Planning and Language Policy

Governments around the world have been endorsing English language programs in the last decades in an attempt to turn countries into bilingual nations, despite the fact the outcomes of these endeavors are not always easy to achieve (Byrd, 2012). For doing this, governments need to plan how to approach the challenge of teaching English as a foreign language, and this includes Young Learners in a process where the school can also participate. Cooper (1989) states that language planning (LP) relates to the “deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition of structure, or functional allocation of their language codes” (p. 45), which means - in the context of this project - to systematize the way English tuition is delivered in schools.

One way of doing this is by using language policies (Lo Bianco, 2008a), which are normally “ensemble of activities, some of which are textual (laws, reports, authorizations)” (p. 157) aimed to provide a legal background to educational experiences. However, when language policies are not only coming from central governments, but also from the educational institutions themselves, the focus of the EFL teacher changes from merely an implementer to be an active participant in the curricular process (Zhao, 2011) in which the local needs and interests of the educational community can be highlighted and represented in the school curriculum.

B. Psycholinguistic Aspects When Teaching Young Learners

It is widely known that English is being used as an international language for international business, academic communities and academic reasons (Kachru, 1985, Crystal, 2003, Kumaravadivelu, 2013) which most of the time is connected to the experience of becoming bilingual. Here, Hamers and Blanc (2000) highlight that mastering two languages provides both linguistic and non-linguistic advantages such as the greater capacity for language analysis, metalinguistic awareness, a better understanding of other cultures and better access to jobs and study possibilities, among others.

Consequently, in relation to bilingualism in children, it has been historically believed that young learners have an advantage when learning a second language over adolescents or adults because “the child’s brain plasticity makes for superior ability especially in acquiring units of language” (Zhao & Morgan, 2004, p. 2). Also, Cook (2001) expresses this idea by saying that “undoubtedly children are popularly believed to be better at learning second languages than adults” (p. 133).

It is believed that this efficient learning is more common in children than in adults because of the age factor that has long been considered a successful component of language learning (Singleton & Lengyel, 1995). This can be explained by the critical-period-hypothesis (CPH) originally proposed by Penfield and Roberts (1959) and then further developed by Lenneberg (1967). The critical period hypothesis for second language learning - also present in other biological functions - is based on the assumption that a person has a limited biological timeline for efficient second language acquisition (Hakuta, Bialystok & Wiley, 2003). Therefore, learners during their childhood period will learn more easily and naturally compared to those who are trying to acquire the language after the critical period. This hypothesis is also related to Universal Grammar (UG) proposed by Chomsky, in which he claimed the brain possesses an innate faculty, which is considered the basis of all language acquisition (Chomsky, 1966). This theory has also been applied to explain second language acquisition in the last decades with tremendous influence in research and teaching (White, 2003).

However, this belief of a superior advantage has been debated over the recent years as “several studies show that learners post-puberty are capable of achieving native-like competence” (Marinova-Todd, Marshall & Snow, 2000, p. 7) as it is true that children have an easiness to imitate phonemes and suprasegmental aspects of speech, but adults possess other advantages too as they are superior cognitively and therefore they can utilize more strategies and lexicogrammatical choices actively as compared to kids. In addition to that, it has been suggested that learning a foreign language as a child assures more time of exposure and a possibility for learning a language naturally without being afraid of making mistakes (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010), which provides additional arguments to start instruction as early as possible in the school.

Finally, and according to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), learning can happen in the EFL classroom (and beyond) when children learn through real experiences with immediate objectives (ideally based on their realities) while considering the short concentration span children have. Additionally, Roth (1998) emphasizes that linguistically, children learn best when they are exposed to linguistic items in context, there is an emphasis on orality, with outstanding input provided by the teacher and the material, but with changes in the methodology in order to generate motivation and surprise in the classroom.

C. Listening Skills

Undoubtedly, listening is one of the most difficult skills to be developed since it is cognitively demanding. According to Alderson and Bachman (2001) “it is one of the least understood, least developed and yet one of the most important areas of language” (p. 57) however, it is especially relevant in countries where English is taught as a foreign language.

Within communicative approaches, pre, while and post comprehension stages are normally used to guide the processing of the linguistic data in the different instructional phases. For example, in the pre-listening stage - and especially for elementary learners - the teacher can use compensatory strategies such as title prediction and visual aids to prepare students for the comprehension task. Vandergrift (2007) claims these are relevant strategies if they are in line with constructivist approaches to second language learning by using schemata or prior knowledge. As a consequence, the teacher must design activities to activate the information students already possess to mediate between the topic and the content to be covered in class. Then, students are exposed to texts in the target language normally with a set of questions to check the understanding of it so that later, those predictions from the pre-listening stage can be confirmed or denied. Lastly, in the post-listening stage students can reinforce some lexico-grammatical items, but also pronunciation and suprasegmental elements that are relevant in the curriculum or that have caused problems during the comprehension task.

D. Speaking Skills

Speaking is an interactive skill which involves oral activities through routines and spontaneous encounters (Scrivener, 2005). However, initial instruction in the L2 should base the process of interaction on conversational routines, that is, in the discourse organization and conversational formulas due to the learners’ lack of language proficiency (Hinkel, 2006).

In order to use formulaic language and frequent vocabulary, one of the most important components to be worked is vocabulary teaching (Read, 2004). At first, beginners will not have a repertoire of words in their mental lexicon to interact freely or be involved in language exchanges in the L2, although they will have already developed this vocabulary in their L1. Therefore, the teachers can pre-teach concrete and familiar vocabulary in the L2 grouped into lexical fields to contextualize the speaking practice, for example through songs and games (Cabrera & Martínez, 2001). These activities provide an enjoyable learning experience (Dörnyei, 2007) with visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimuli by the use of concrete material to support language learning. Additionally, it is a way to memorize chunks of language that can foster speaking abilities, as they help to improve fluency and pronunciation.

E. Pronunciation as a Key Factor

Pronunciation is the most apparent aspect of a speaker’s English proficiency, and it is inevitable the one others use to judge, normally by listening to someone’s accent. Those who are intensively exposed to the English language at early ages often have advantages to sound like natives. The adult counterparts, on the other hand, even if they have been exposed to intense English input, may not match young learners in term of pronunciation. García and García (2003) argued that adult learners tend to retain foreign accents in their English pronunciation while young learners often produce native-like English sounds. Better known as positive consequences from the critical period, such privileges seem to only happen to children. Scovel (1988) suggested that neuromuscular plasticity plays a significant role in helping young learners produce such native-like pronunciation of English words. Hence, teachers and educational stakeholders can actually take advantage of this when preparing their teaching materials by allowing young learners to be more exposed to English sounds in the EFL classroom. For instance, incorporating English songs in the class may help students to unconsciously immerse themselves in native-like pronunciation practice in an enjoyable way (Millington, 2011), but also for the development of listening skills, particularly through story-telling (Ramírez & Belmonte, 2007).

F. Reading and Writing Skills

It is not recommended for teachers to emphasize explicitly reading and writing at this stage or at least until students have mastered the writing system in the mother tongue (Spanish in this case). Instead, children should work with communicative language skills in an integrative manner in order to prepare them to interact orally first, so that reading and writing can be developed later (Tarone, 2010) as the relation grapheme - morpheme changes the way the L2 is understood and produced.

II. METHOD

A. Language Teaching Methodology

In general terms, the language teaching methodology behind this project is based on two components. Primarily, the project was based on the reception and production of meaningful messages of the four macro skills under the umbrella of the Communicative Language Teaching approach (Canale & Swain, 1980). However, oral skills were emphasized at first (listening and speaking) since students are still developing literacy in their first language (Spanish) with reading and writing

tasks present in pre/post learning tasks or in the recognition or production of limited words or phrases. Grammar and pronunciation are to be learnt indirectly (Emmit, Komesaroff & Pollock, 2006), as opposed to vocabulary since beginners can be exposed to songs, games and other activities based on pedagogy for young learners, which also prepares them for comprehension and later production. Besides that, most of the class must be conducted in the target language or at least as much as possible (Orafi & Borg, 2009) in order to have exposure to meaningful and substantial input before asking students to produce original language samples. Secondly, the notion of semantic fields with a connection to other areas of the curriculum was used. Kreidler (2007) defines semantic fields as groups of lexemes “by telling what set it belongs to (lexeme) and how it differs from other members of the same set” (p. 87). This project uses principles from hyponymy, that is, categories with subcategories related to concrete and familiar lexical groups. Topics were based on the selection of semantic fields used in other subjects of the curriculum to assure students’ prior knowledge while providing meaningful learning based on what students face on a daily basis (e.g. not only teaching about wild animals, but also about animals from the countryside as this is what they see after they finish the school day, especially in rural areas). This approach to lexical teaching is very useful since it provides opportunities to represent vocabulary through visual aids and it is an alternative to move away from a synthetic approach while helping students to recognize and produce language in written form at a later stage due to the familiarity of the lexis (Shaw, 2009).

B. Course Development Process

In relation to the elaboration of the curriculum, two theoretical models were considered in the construction of this autonomous program. On the one hand, the model of processability theory (Pienemann, 1984) was used indicating that students should be developmentally ready to go through certain grammatical phases - taught implicitly and in context - in which stages cannot be skipped (DeKeyser & Prieto, 2015) especially considering that “a knowledge of grammar is often taught to children who have not the maturity, intelligence, or knowledge to understand it” (Wilkinson, 1971 as cited in Emmit, Komesaroff & Pollock, 2006, p. 89).

This theory postulates that language learning has a natural order that is evident in the learning of L1 and L2 (Pienemann, 2007), bearing in mind that the language must be authentic. According to Brown (2001) non-authenticity will not optimize children’s learning since language must be presented with context and in familiar situations and finally, it must be presented not by decontextualized units, but in communicative segments. This must be done following the natural order of acquisition in the production of the language which will allow an understanding adjusted to the level of the student. Then, when this stimulus is acquired, the teacher will be able to expose the students to a second stage with a more specialized lexicon.

In this sense, earlier exposure to the language saves time so that the acquisition of the natural order can be temporarily divided, allowing the child the possibility of concretizing their general and linguistic habits at the same time as it gives the opportunity for further processing of the language. Together with this idea is that not only skills but also other elements should be considered when implementing a new language program such as culture, learning strategies, competencies, functions, notions, and topics, among others (Graves, 2001).

Additionally, it is important to state that the path used to create the course was based on the model provided by Jolly and Bolitho (1998). This covered a year of design with non-linear steps for the creation of documents to be sent and approved by the Ministry of Education and materials while emphasizing the idea of the local needs of the school, whose data was collected through interviews, focus groups and class observations (Graves, 2001). In these terms, the identification and exploration of needs were highlighted in the first place, before the realization and production of the program documentation and EFL material. Later, the students used the created / adapted / selected materials for one semester - with a teacher with experience within young learners - in a piloting scheme to then evaluate the efficacy of the documentation in comparison to the objectives of the course with local experts, including changes for future implementations of the EFL material (which included the printing of special covers for the set of handouts created). The summary of this process can be found in figure 1.

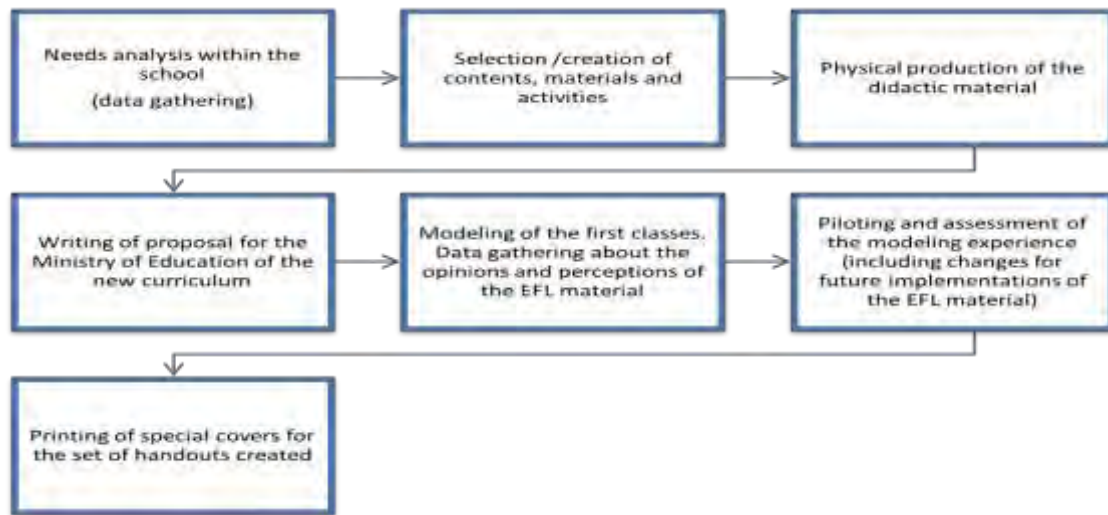


Figure 1. Flowchart with the Macro-Steps of This Pedagogical Experience

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

One innovation in this program was the help of highly motivated students from upper levels from the school who participated in the elaboration of instructional material ranging from drawings for handouts to the audio recording. This experience included the practice through Skype of conversations between the students and native speakers from Australia and Singapore, resulting in a high involvement of the school community to practice the linguistic abilities of the volunteer students (Dörnyei, 2007). Also, and as human resources this language program was led by a specialized English teacher as well as teachers of primary education with training in English as consultants, assistants, and executors of the pedagogical experience. Besides, an English teacher specialized in teaching children was hired and the school provided projectors, computers, radios, and photocopiers for the implementation of this new language plan. It is also relevant to notice that the time from the design of a draft to the approval of the new curriculum by the Ministry of Education of Chile was 1 year and the time to implement the new curriculum was 4 years. An example of the aids provided by volunteer students can be found in figure 2.

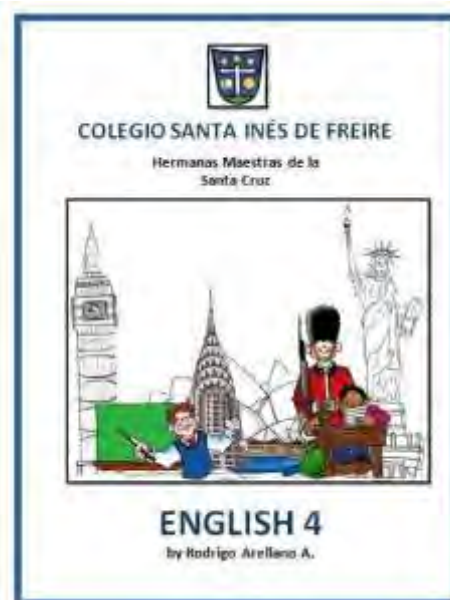


Figure 2. Cover of the set of material used in this pedagogical experience. The drawings and the cover design were created by volunteer students

Finally, and after a year writing a booklet with the course justification, its objectives, contents, unit / evaluations samples and corresponding course calendars, the document “PLANES Y PROGRAMAS PROPIOS DE INGLÉS PARA PRIMER CICLO DE ENSEÑANZA GENERAL BÁSICA” (Autonomous EFL programs for Primary Education (Year 1 - Year 4) was approved by the Ministry of Education of Chile.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed the rationale to create a program to teach English as a foreign language for young learners in a school in the south of Chile. However, some limitations could also be identified. First, one of the difficulties was finding local experts to start validating the accuracy of the language program and second, it was difficult to implement a new program with a high number of students per classroom (35 approx.) which together with 2 English hours a week makes the meaningful input and participation real challenges (Inostroza, 2015). Nevertheless, this curriculum program systematized, regulated and validated documents and institutional practices within the school based on the community's needs, which also fostered professional development and a revival of the English subject for young learners, which made the experience rewarding and significant. Lastly and after the Ministry of Education started to distribute new textbooks for these levels, the material from this pedagogical experience was used to complement those provided by the central government.

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