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**Introduction to the Special Issue on English Language
Teaching in Public Primary Schools in Latin America**

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Abstract: The guest editors introduce the Special Issue on *English Language Teaching in Public Primary Schools in Latin America* by summarizing articles about public primary English language programs in six countries in Latin America: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. They synthesize the main issues related to English education programs in the region and discuss the common trends and challenges addressed by the authors in the special issue.

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Introducción al número especial sobre la enseñanza del Inglés en las primarias públicas de América Latina

Resumen: A manera de introducción al número especial sobre la enseñanza del inglés en las primarias públicas de América Latina, los editores invitados presentan un breve bosquejo de los seis artículos incluidos en este número y sintetizan los principales temas de discusión y los retos y tendencias abordados por los autores.

Palabras-clave: Enseñanza del Inglés; América Latina; escuelas primarias públicas

Introdução à edição especial sobre o ensino da língua inglesa em escolas primárias públicas na América Latina

Resumo: Os editores convidados introduzem uma edição especial resumindo artigos sobre o ensino da língua Inglesa em escolas primárias públicas em seis países da América Latina: Argentina, Brasil, Chile, Colômbia, México e Porto Rico. Eles sintetizam os principais problemas relacionados aos programas de educação Inglesa na região e discute as tendências e desafios comuns que os autores endereçam na edição especial.

Palavras-chave: Ensino da língua Inglesa; América Latina; escolas públicas primárias

English Language Teaching in Public Primary Schools in Latin America

In Latin America, the push to include English in primary education began to gain strength in the 1990s in countries like Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. Since then, most of the countries in the region have followed suit and currently have English language teaching (ELT) programs in their public schools. Despite the importance and scale of the efforts to implement ELT programs in the region, a 2012 report by *Education First* found that across Latin America most people do not have any appreciable English language skills:

[The 2012 Education First] study comparing rates of English proficiency of adults in 54 countries found that as a region, Latin America has weak English language skills, especially compared to Europe and Asia. Amongst Latin American countries, only adults in Argentina were deemed to have ‘moderate English proficiency’; the rest were rated as ‘low’ or ‘very low’. (Sayer, 2015, p. 259)

Several studies, such as those by British Council (2016), Rajagopalan (2015), and Sayer (2015) have discussed possible explanations for the general low levels of English in Latin America. However, further research is needed to have a more accurate understanding of the problem as well as more spaces to analyze, and discuss the experiences, programs, and policy processes related to the implementation of ELT in the region. Likewise, as language education scholars we ought to assess the progress and challenges as well as the disputes regarding the role of English as a *lingua franca*, and the economic value and cultural aspects involved in teaching English as a second or foreign language.

The aim of this special issue is to contribute to scholarship in this area. For that purpose, we invited authors to identify and analyze the main issues and trends in ELT in primary schools, especially in public schools, in their particular country. We were looking for contributions in which

researchers documented the evolution and current state of public primary ELT programs in each country and examined the following aspects: historical development of public primary ELT programs in the country, expansion and current coverage of the programs, description of the current programs, profiles of teachers, and main problems and accomplishments.

Originally, we received responses from authors in 13 countries in Latin America, an indication of the relevance of topic across the region. Of those, six successfully completed the peer review and revision process. Ideally, we would have liked to cover even more Latin American countries, but we think the ones included are representative of the region as a whole and will permit the reader to have a fair overall perspective of the situation. We have organized the articles by alphabetical order, which coincidentally also resulted in them falling into roughly geographical order, beginning with the countries located in South America and closing with one from North America (Mexico) and the Caribbean (Puerto Rico).

In the first article, “English language education in primary schooling in Argentina”, Porto analyzes public primary English language education in Argentina. She begins by presenting some background information about the country and a brief historical overview of education in general, as well as the main international influences that, from her perspective, have played a key role in shaping the direction of language policies in primary education in the country. In the next section, the author describes the national curriculum guidelines for foreign language education, and she then focuses on the cases of the provinces of Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Entre Ríos and Chubut. The article closes with a brief account of limitations, challenges and accomplishments for English Language Education in Argentinian public primary schools.

In the second article, “ELT in Brazilian public schools: History, challenges, new experiences and perspectives”, Almeida examines ELT in Brazilian public schools, discussing its educational relevance and functions, the challenges faced by teachers and students, and the beliefs and debates concerning the issue. Almeida strongly questions the involvement of private and foreign institutions as well as the role of publishing groups or companies in ELT in public schools. The author also presents an account of the Brazilian cities involved in the implementation of ELT in primary schools and critically discusses Rio de Janeiro’s project for the teaching of English in primary schools.

In the third article, “Challenges and accomplishments of ELT at primary level in Chile: toward the aspiration of becoming a bilingual country”, Barahona presents a historical overview of the Chilean educational system and the policy and curricular framework that has supported the evolution of ELT at primary schools in the country during the last two decades. Then, the author reviews the evolution of the national curriculum for the elementary level, highlighting the core rationale for the *English Opens Doors* program. The impact of the ELT policies in the last 20 years are also discussed based on their effectiveness in the Chilean urban and rural classrooms and on the performance of students on standardized tests. The article closes with a discussion of the implications of the implementation of ELT policy in Chile.

In the fourth article, “English in public primary education in Colombia: Achievements and challenges brought about by the National Program of Bilingualism”, Correa and González summarize the findings and recommendations of other Colombian researchers to present a landscape of the current situation of EFL [English as a foreign language] in this country. The authors, after a description of some general characteristics and problems of the country and its educational system, provide an overview of the programs launched by the government to promote the teaching and learning of English in primary schools, the critiques that they have received from Colombian scholars, and the challenges that elementary school teachers have had to face. In the last

section, the authors present some conclusions and implications for ELT policy design and implementation.

In “The Teaching of English in public primary schools in Mexico: More heat than light?” Ramírez and Sayer seek to describe and analyze, from a critical perspective, the evolution and current situation of ELT in that country. The article opens with a characterization of the Mexican context followed by an analysis of the structure and situation of the educational system. Next, the authors review the Mexican official policy on EFL, summarize the historical development of public primary ELT programs in the country, document the expansion and coverage of the programs, analyze the current program, and offer a portrait of EFL primary education teachers and their working conditions. The article closes with a discussion of the main problems and accomplishments of Mexican EFL programs for public primary education, as well as some conclusions.

Language planning and policy provides the theoretical framework for the last article of this special issue, Maldonado Valentín’s “An exploration of the effects of language policy in education in a contemporary Puerto Rican Society”. The author, after a succinct review of Puerto Rico’s historical and socio-cultural context and a presentation of her framework, discusses the language battle and language education policies in Puerto Rico, as well as their impact on the use of Spanish and English in education. She also analyzes current language policy and public education in Puerto Rico and the Spanish and English curricular framework, as well as effects of language policy in education on Puerto Rico as an English-speaking society. In the last section, the author focuses on Guaynabo City as a case study to exemplify the effects of language policies in contemporary Puerto Rican society as either accepting or resisting to become an English-speaking society.

Current Issues and Challenges

Several common themes emerge from looking at the articles in this volume as a whole. These themes seem to represent the current issues and challenges in the effective implementation and expansion of English language education in public primary schools.

One of the main points of convergence in the articles is the problem of coverage. Given the relatively weak educational infrastructure and limited budgets in virtually all countries studied, one of the great dilemmas they have in common is the question of what to prioritize: the range of school grades attended or the number of schools. The first option involves trying to cover the largest range of grades and to start as early in school as possible. The second option attempts to maximize the number of schools included. The answer in most cases has been to pay greater attention to the number of schools by offering ELT classes beginning with fourth grade primary school students (Argentina) or fifth or sixth grade students (in Chile, Brazil and several states of Mexico). However, regardless of the option, in all countries the coverage has been only partial and insufficient, favoring more well-off students in the urban areas and neglecting children from indigenous, semi-urban, or rural communities.

A second theme that most authors addressed is the objectives or purposes of ELT in public elementary schools. Some countries have emphasized the incorporation of English in the national curriculum as a mechanism to promote democracy, modernize their educational systems, and to prepare their students to be more competitive in the global labor market (e.g., Chile and Colombia). The focus then is on developing language proficiency. Other countries, as seems to be the case in Argentina and Brazil, seek to promote intercultural literacy and development, and thus they emphasize the cultural components and the education of responsible citizens. A related tension many authors acknowledged is the implication for including English in primary school of the ideological value of English in Latin America. English is often seen as a kind of double-edged sword,

on the one hand a modernizing, democratizing and equalizing tool, and on the other as a tool of linguistic and cultural imperialism or neocolonialism.

Given the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the majority of the countries studied, there is a debate in some countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, related to the attempt to enshrine English as a symbol of prestige over other foreign languages in the country and disregard the reality of those who are already bilingual in Spanish and their own indigenous language. Similarly, there is a debate about the use of the label “bilingual education” for English teaching. In most countries in Latin America many educators have struggled for years to support bilingual education, but in relation to the teaching of Spanish and the local indigenous languages of each region or country.

Likewise, the topics or curricular content of ELT in the primary grades will also inevitably raise questions. The discussion here revolves around what topics to include. Should the contents focus on learning to name and talk about their own reality, or focus on foreign, especially Anglo-Saxon (or so-called “Inner Circle”) countries, to facilitate the communication with speakers of those countries. According to some authors, especially those from Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, to assign a higher value to the knowledge produced in English speaking countries, such as the USA and the UK, and undervalue local knowledge and expertise, perpetuates the inequities between local knowledge and the knowledge of the former colonial powers.

Who will participate in the selection of the content of ELT courses is another major issue. The discussion is about who should be in charge of selecting the content: each country’s scholars, teachers of English or personnel from departments or ministries of education, or external agents, such as foreign embassies, councils, or editorial houses. The answer in most cases seems to have tilted toward the external side, especially to the British Council and to large foreign publishing houses, in “collaboration” with staff of the national secretariats or ministries.

The teaching methodology that should be used in ELT is also discussed in most of the pieces. The debate is about whether to use a methodology already successful in other countries (again, usually taking the USA or UK as the reference) or in bilingual private schools, or to create a local model. The trends so far seem to point to the side of those who propose to import or adapt foreign or private schools’ models, as in the case of some municipalities in Brazil or in several Mexican states.

Given the insufficient number of specialized English teachers available in each country, another issue has been who will teach the courses: regular teachers or anyone who can speak English. The articles indicate that the responses have been divided. Some countries, such as Chile and Colombia have decided that regular teachers, in addition to their daily teaching load but with some sort of training, will teach English. Other countries, such as Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and some municipalities in Brazil, have chosen to hire anyone who has some command of English, even though he or she has no special training in ELT or working with children.

The amount of time devoted to English is also an issue in most countries. In the case of Colombia, English classes are one hour long and are taught once a week. In other countries, such as Brazil, English classes are taught twice a week. In others like Chile and Mexico, English classes are taught for 45 minutes three times per week. This suggests that English is be treated as what some scholars refer to as a “limited instruction EFL context”: taught as a foreign language for relatively small amount of time. No author suggested that her/his country has moved towards a truly bilingual model, such as immersion, content-language integrated learning (CLIL), or with English as a medium of instruction. Finally, another issue is the results of English programs implemented so far in each country. Except in the case of Chile, and to some extent in Mexico, in the other countries the authors argue there is a lack of reliable information.

In general, the articles point to several major trends in primary English education in Latin America:

- A move towards starting ELT in the lower grades of primary school;
- The alignment of standards to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels in some countries, such as Mexico and Chile or to other “foreign standards” as in the case of Colombia;
- The implementation of a common national curriculum in most countries;
- The growth of the number of scholars in each country that voices critical positions regarding the teaching of English in public primary schools.

In conclusion, there are multiple challenges to face to improve ELT in most Latin American countries, as each reader will realize when reading the articles included in this special issue. We hope the EPAA special issue will, accordingly, help scholars in their respective countries gain a regional perspective, all the while understanding what each country’s English program is facing and the commonalities of the problems across the countries, with an eye to developing solutions that will improve the access and quality of English language for all students.

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