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English Language Education in Primary Schooling in Argentina

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Abstract: This article describes public primary English language education in Argentina. I begin with background information about the country and a brief historical overview of education in general, accompanied by a portrait of primary schooling in particular. This overview involves local, political and economic considerations but also international influences that have played a key role in shaping the direction of language policies in primary education at the provincial and national levels in the country. I describe the national curriculum guidelines (*Núcleos de aprendizaje prioritario*, NAP) for foreign language education, contextualising them within the national education policies for primary school in force since 2003 and the new National Education Act (*Ley Nacional de Educación 26.206*). These guidelines and policies adopt an intercultural and plurilingual approach in the teaching of foreign languages, including English, at all levels of education and embrace a social justice conceptualisation of education in all cases. This approach has been materialised in ELT curriculum developments and programs in several of the 24 jurisdictions of the country with different degrees

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of development. I illustrate with the cases of the provinces of Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Entre Ríos and Chubut using interview data collected in 2015. Program leaders in these provinces describe their local initiatives. The article closes with a brief account of the affordances observed and the challenges ahead.

Keywords: Primary school; ELT; Argentina; Buenos Aires; La Pampa; Entre Ríos; Chubut

Enseñanza del inglés en la escuela primaria pública en Argentina

Resumen: Este artículo describe la enseñanza del inglés en la escuela primaria pública en Argentina. Comienzo brindando información contextual acerca del país y una descripción histórica de la educación en general, acompañada de un panorama de la escuela primaria en particular. Esta descripción incluye consideraciones locales, políticas y económicas, pero también influencias internacionales que han cumplido un papel en la dirección que las políticas lingüísticas para la educación primaria han adoptado tanto a nivel provincial como nacional en el país. Describo los *Núcleos de aprendizaje prioritario* (NAP) para la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras y los enmarco dentro las políticas nacionales de educación para el nivel primario que rigen desde 2003 y dentro de la *Ley Nacional de Educación 26.206* vigente. Estos lineamientos y políticas adoptan un enfoque intercultural y plurilingüe en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, incluido el inglés, en todos los niveles de la educación, y en todos los casos se enmarcan en una concepción de justicia social de la educación. Este enfoque se ha materializado en desarrollos curriculares y programas en ELT en varias de las 24 jurisdicciones del país con distintos grados de desarrollo. Los casos de las provincias de Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Entre Ríos y Chubut, basados en datos recolectados en entrevistas llevadas a cabo en 2015, ilustran esta descripción. Los líderes de los programas de ELT en dichas provincias describen sus iniciativas locales. El artículo cierra con un panorama de los desafíos y las posibilidades a futuro.

Palabras-clave: Escuela primaria; ELT; Argentina; Buenos Aires; La Pampa; Entre Ríos; Chubut

Educação de língua inglesa em escolas primárias na Argentina

Resumo: Este artigo descreve a educação primária pública de língua Inglesa na Argentina. Eu inicio com informações básicas sobre o país e um breve histórico da educação em geral, acompanhado por um retrato do ensino primário em particular. Esta visão geral envolve considerações locais, políticas e econômicas, mas também influências internacionais que têm desempenhado um papel fundamental em dar forma a um rumo das políticas lingüísticas no ensino primário em níveis provinciais e nacionais do país. Eu descrevo as diretrizes curriculares nacionais (*Núcleos de aprendizagem prioritario*, NAP) para o ensino de línguas estrangeiras, contextualizando-os dentro das políticas nacionais de educação para a escola primária em vigor desde 2003 e da nova Lei de Educação Nacional (Lei Nacional de Educação 26,206). Estas diretrizes e políticas adotam uma abordagem intercultural e multilingue no ensino de línguas estrangeiras, incluindo Inglês, em todos os níveis de educação e abraça uma conceptualização de justiça social da educação em todos os casos. Esta abordagem tem sido materializada em desenvolvimentos curriculares e programas ELT em várias das 24 jurisdições do país com diferentes graus de desenvolvimento. Usando dados de entrevistas coletadas em 2015, eu ilustro estas conclusões com os casos das províncias de Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Entre Ríos e Chubut. Líderes do programa nestas províncias descrevem suas iniciativas locais. O artigo finaliza com um breve relato das proporções observadas e desafios futuros.

Palavras-chave: Escola primária; ELT; Argentina; Buenos Aires; La Pampa; Entre Ríos; Chubut

Context

Argentina (the Argentine Republic) is the second largest country in South America after Brazil and has over forty million inhabitants. Its federal system of government is comprised by twenty-three provinces and the autonomous city of Buenos Aires. The official language is Spanish but several minority languages are spoken, such as Levantine Arabic, South Bolivian Quechua, Catalan, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, and Welsh (Lewis, 2009) as well as at least sixteen indigenous languages (Censabella, 1999).

Historical Development of the Argentine System of Education

As described in Porto (2014), many political, ideological, economic, cultural and other forces have played a role throughout history in the development of Argentina's system of education. What follows is a brief overview.

Argentina was a Spanish colony until the Declaration of Independence in 1816. Towards the end of the 19th century the Argentine State was organised (López Armengol & Persoglia, 2009) and it aimed at the unification and homogenisation of the population through education. The process began with Law 1420, enacted in 1884, whose aim was to form and create the Argentine citizen by means of the obligatory military system and the conceptualisation of primary school education as universal, obligatory, non-religious and free. For instance, in the first half of the 19th century, Sarmiento, a key historical figure associated with education in this country, put in motion the imposition of the central culture and language and the elimination of difference (linguistic, social, cultural) represented by the *gaucho* and the several Indian languages alive in those times (Puiggrós, 1990). As Puiggrós (1990, 1996, 2003) explains, the Argentine education system was founded around this paradigm of education for linguistic and cultural unification and homogenisation in the face of the increasing immigration flows from Europe. The white apron that all schoolchildren had to wear is evidence of this process.

This paradigm of homogenisation continued during the 20th century (Puiggrós, 1990). At present, education is still seen as a driving unifying force and a pillar in four interrelated fronts (Rivas, 2005), namely citizenship (as it fosters values and provides students with the necessary tools for democratic life), social life (through the vision of school as a form of social inclusion and integration), economic development and well-being (contributing to the productive capacity of citizens) and cultural development (by fostering cultural understanding in the face of linguistic and cultural diversity).

In 1993 a new Federal Education Act (*Ley Federal de Educación* No 24.195) was passed. With the noble aim of modernising the Argentine school system, it completed a process of decentralisation of education through which the provinces were in charge of initial, primary and secondary education while the State was in charge of higher education, central education policies, and the control and evaluation of the provincial systems of education (Keweitel, Marongiu, Mezzadra & Rodríguez del Pozo, 2003; López Armengol & Persoglia, 2009). In particular for pre-primary and primary education, this process had begun in 1970 and was completed in 1978 (Adrogué, 2013; Candia, 2004). There is agreement in the literature that this process of decentralisation was a top-down initiative imposed vertically on the provinces in order to transfer public expenditures on education to the provinces, with the final aim of alleviating the budget of the national government (Adrogué, 2013; Candia, 2004; Gorostiaga, 2006; Rivas, 2010). The process was fraught with limitations regarding the quality, equity and efficiency of the system and the outcomes were discouraging (Adrogué, 2013; Candia, 2004; Gorostiaga, 2006; Gorostiaga, Acedo & Xifra,

2003; Gvirtz, Larripa & Oelsner, 2006; Keweitel et al., 2003; Perez Centeno & Leal, 2011; Rivas, 2010; Terigi, 2007). For instance, as the Law was not discussed horizontally, there was not firm consensus about it in many aspects; the provincial administrations lacked the necessary resources to face the new responsibilities, which led to fiscal crisis in many cases; many lacked expertise to implement the reform; planning at the administrative, curricular and other levels was poor; the increased autonomy of the provinces resulted in a wide variety of local implementations; consequently, the system was atomised and fragmented, resulting in inequalities. Terigi (2007, p. 9, my translation from Spanish) concludes: “The organisational variety displayed by the provincial educational systems, rather than reflecting strategic options for diverse organisations intended to guarantee common outcomes, is the result of a truncated and fragmented process of institutional transformation which failed to establish a homogeneous basis to cater for the educational rights of the population.” Furthermore, the *Operativo Nacional de Evaluación Educativa* (National Educational Assessment) or ONE, which was the national evaluation system created by the Federal Education Act in 1993, had technical and other problems (Gvirtz, Larripa & Oelsner, 2006; Sánchez, 2014) and was used politically to ascertain a ‘sense of crisis’ intended to push the welcoming of the law’s new guidelines in the context of the lack of consensus referred to before (Gvirtz et al., 2006). The results of these assessments were used for accountability purposes, were provided to the press and included rankings by province and by worst and best schools (Gvirtz et al., 2006).

This scenario, followed by a severe political and economic crisis in 2001, gave way to the enactment of a new National Education Act in 2006 (*Ley Nacional de Educación* No 26.206), still in force at present. It considers education and knowledge as a public good as well as a personal and social right, to be guaranteed by the State. It set guiding principles for education throughout the country such as principles of equality, educational inclusion, plurilinguism and interculturality, social cohesion and integration, and respect for and explicit acknowledgement of linguistic and cultural diversity, among others (Chapter II, Article 11), with the ultimate aim to guarantee conscientious and responsible citizenship as well as social welfare. Following López Armengol and Persoglia (2009), this law changed education in the following ways:

- Education became obligatory since age 5 until the completion of secondary school (17 years of age).
- The national system of education was organised in four broad areas: Initial Education (from age 3 to 5), Primary Education (from age 6 to 11 in two cycles; first cycle ages 6-8 and second cycle ages 9-11), Secondary Education (from age 12 to 17 in two cycles; first cycle ages 12-14 and second cycle ages 15-17), and Higher Education (18 and over).
- Eight modalities were introduced, within one or more of the levels of education: Technical Professional Education, Artistic Education, Special Needs Education, Youth and Young Adults Permanent Education, Rural Education, Intercultural Bilingual Education, Education in Contexts of Deprivation of Liberty, and Home and Hospital Education. They aimed at guaranteeing equality in the right of education for all by catering for specific permanent, temporal, personal or contextual needs.

It is important to note that the academic calendar year runs from March to December. Summer holiday time follows (January and February) and there is a two-week winter holiday break in July. In 2013, there were 22, 227 primary schools in the country (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos [INDEC] and Ministry of Education, 2013), which by Law 25.864 (2004) should guarantee 180 days of classes per year, but in the public system the number is sometimes lower, or significantly lower,

owing to teacher strikes or problems in infrastructure (e.g. schools with no heating in winter, no water in summer, no electricity supply, precarious buildings that in some cases represent a risk for teachers and students alike, etc.) (Rivas, 2010). In an international comparative perspective, Rivas (2010) mentions that Argentina ranks lower than other countries in the region (Brazil, Chile, Uruguay) in terms of school days and class hours in primary school. While there are 774 class hours per year in Argentina, Brazil has 869, Uruguay 813 and Chile 1257 (UNESCO, 2008). Teacher strikes have contributed to this situation: the provinces have suffered an average of 9 strikes per year from 2002 to 2008 (Rivas, 2010), although there are provincial disparities (e.g. in Buenos Aires province the average for the same period per year is 11, in Entre Ríos 28 and in Misiones 1). Economic and political factors impinge upon education in the country. Just to give an example, about 40% of the total public expenditures on the basic services provided by the State (education, health, security, justice) are decentralised in the provinces. Problems arise as the national government collects about 80% of all taxes, and then distributes resources among the provinces through a system of distribution called revenue sharing system, which was first enforced in 1935. The system is in the spotlight at present and in need of revision because resources are allocated using political variables such as the representation of each province in the National Congress (Chambers of Deputies and Senators) (Porto & Sanguinetti, 2001) instead of the criterion of fiscal equalisation recommended by experts (i.e. allocation according to the population, the per capita income and the land of each province) (Mezzadra & Rivas, 2005; Porto, 2004; Porto & Sanguinetti, 2001). To date, the system has not been revised and gives rise to serious fiscal inequalities which in turn result for instance in inequality in investment per student in the public school system. An example illustrates the scenario well. In 2006, Tierra del Fuego, a southern province (benefited by this revenue sharing system and resources from the oil industry) invested \$ 7.171 (Argentine pesos) per student while Salta, a poor northern province, invested \$ 1.497 (Rivas, 2010). This discrepancy means inequality in terms of infrastructure, equipment, teachers, teacher salaries, etc. This inequality affects students and schools but also teachers. In December 2008 a primary school teacher with 10 years of experience earned a monthly salary of \$ 4.345 in Santa Cruz for one school shift while a teacher in Formosa, Misiones and Corrientes under the same circumstances earned \$1.600 or less (Rivas, 2010).

In particular concerning the educational opportunities at public primary schools in Argentina, Adrogué (2013) shows that the system is characterised by profound inequalities - the provinces of Buenos Aires, Corrientes, Chaco, Entre Ríos and La Rioja are in the worst situation and Córdoba, Chubut, La Pampa, San Juan, San Luis and Tucumán in the best. But differences occur not only among provinces but also within each province. Adrogué (2013, p. 21) concludes that “the majority of the schooling inequalities are explained by differences within the jurisdictions, more than 84% corresponds to it. In a word, a poor quality school does not necessarily belong to a poor province”. This inter-school inequality is also described in Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento (CIPPEC, 2004) and Veeda (2014), who affirms that students find very dissimilar learning environments in terms of equipment, teachers’ years of experience, school management, socioeconomic level, infrastructure, resources, etc. depending on which school they go to. For instance, younger and inexperienced teachers work in disadvantaged schools more than in other contexts (CIPPEC, 2004), something that is accompanied by under-qualified administrative staff in general (Terigi, 2007). In addition, while 80.2% of children in the highest decile (the richest 10%) learned computer studies at school in 2009, 77.3% learned a foreign language and 17.9% attended a summer camp, children in the lowest decile (the lowest 10%) did not have the same opportunities: 37% learned computer skills or a foreign language and only 0.4% enjoyed summer camps. Furthermore, Rivas (2010) points out that about one in four children had

lunch at school in 2007, representing 25% of the public school enrolment. Lunch provision in schools is a tendency in the rise given the socioeconomic context in the country, particularly in northern and poor provinces like Santiago del Estero and Formosa, and also in highly populated regions in the centre: while in 1997 it reached 11% of public primary schoolchildren, it grew to 21% in 2003 and 25% in 2007. Breakfast was served to 28% of those children in 1997 and 46% in 2007. However, other poor provinces such as Chaco and Jujuy lack extended lunch services of this kind.

Primary School Education in Numbers

The Federal Education Act (1993) and the National Education Act (2006) contributed to the democratisation of education by extending the number of years of obligatory schooling from 7 to 10 in 1993 and to 13/14 in 2006, resulting in a higher schooling rate when compared to countries like Brazil and Chile (Perez Centeno & Leal, 2011). However, it has already been pointed out that provision in terms of days of classes and hours of classes per year in public primary schools is lower in Argentina than in Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. Furthermore, Perez Centeno & Leal (2011) point out that the educational capital tends to be reproduced in the country, which means that it is possible to anticipate someone's school trajectory depending on the socioeconomic and family context in which he/she was born. Gvirtz and Beech (2014) and Veleda (2014) refer to the high socioeconomic segmentation observed in school enrolment, i.e. children and youth are naturally grouped in schools according to socioeconomic factors, meaning that the school population tends to be homogeneous, or in other words, children and youth interact with peers from similar backgrounds. Not only this, but public schools predominantly serve socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. For instance, in 2006, of the lowest income tercile, 88.2% was enrolled in public schools and 11.8% in private schools (INDEC, 2006; Rivas, 2010). This affects the quality and efficiency of the system, leads to stigmatisation and operates against social integration (Veleda, 2014). It not only produces socioeconomic exclusion but also cultural and symbolic fragmentation that puts social cohesion at risk (Gvirtz & Beech, 2014). In an analysis of the impact of high school socioeconomic segregation on educational equity, Krüger (2013, p. 2) highlights "the need to consider the social composition of schools as a key educational policy factor, and the relevance of analysing ways to promote social inclusion in the system".

Following Cimientos (2014) and Rivas (2010), in 2012, primary school enrolment comprised 4,603,422 students, 74.2% of whom were in the public sector (3,414,473 students) and 25.8% in the private sector (1,188,949). Promotion rates (from one grade to the next) for 2009 show that difficulties to promote in primary school concentrate in 1st form (90.4% promotion rate) while in 6th form the rate rises to 95.11%. Public schools show lower promotion rates and consequently higher school failure than private schools. Grade retention is higher in 1st form (7.4% in 2009), decreases progressively to 2.6% in 6th form in 2009, and is low in the private sector (1 out of 100 in 1st form in the same year while in the public sector the relation is 10 in 100). In 2012, the grade repetition rate was 2.9% for the whole country, with significant disparities among provinces (0.4% in Santa Cruz; 5.6% in Santiago del Estero; 9.9% in Corrientes) (INDEC, 2013). Inter-annual dropout rates are low in primary school, below 2% between 2006 and 2009 (Cimientos, 2014; Rivas, 2010), and 1% in 2013-2014 (INDEC, 2013). Overage is characteristic since the beginning of primary school owing to grade retention and late entry into the system. Overage increases form after form, reached 25.44% in 6th form in 2010, and is higher in the public sector, sometimes up to five times (25.4% in 2010 vs. 4.7% in the private sector). In 2013, the average for the country was 15.6%, again with significant disparities among provinces (22.9% Chaco; 40.9% Corrientes; 27.1% Formosa; 28.5% Misiones; 30.8% Santiago del Estero; 8.5% Tucumán; about 11% Río Negro, Santa Cruz, Tierra del Fuego,

Buenos Aires) (INDEC, 2013). Graduation rate is high: in 2009, 9 out of 10 children finished primary school.

Current Priority Policies for Primary Education

In 2010, the National Ministry of Education set ten priority policies for primary education. The document acknowledges the central role of the State to guarantee quality education for all children. The policies are:

- Social justice and equality for all.
Specific planned actions include the financing of institutional projects in rural schools, special education schools and schools with vulnerable populations; provision of textbooks for children, school libraries and classroom libraries; provision of technology; reinforcement of special needs education; infrastructure plan for rural schools.
- Strengthening of teaching.
Specific actions involve courses, seminars and support for teachers; a network to encourage team work among teachers in schools.
- Attention to grade retention and irregular trajectories.
Actions comprise inter-jurisdictional support; multi-dimensional initiatives (involving teachers, schools, parents, out of class activities, etc.); discussion and agreement of assessment and evaluation criteria, processes and outcomes for each cycle of primary school.
- Social policies aimed at children considered 'vulnerable' or 'at risk'.
Creation of Child Activity Centres (*Centros de Actividades Infantiles*, CAI), aimed at social justice and inclusion by means of specific school support, and technical, cultural, scientific, recreational, sports and other activities.
- Social policies aimed at enriching the educational experience of children.
 - a) Choirs and Orchestras Program for children, involving the creation of 60 choirs and 60 orchestras in different Child Activity Centres (CAI).
 - b) Federal Program of Recreation and Educational Tourism, involving summer camps, educational camps, graduation trips, and tourism. In 2010, 240,000 from all over the country participated in the Program.
- Creation of bonds among schools, families and educational community centres.
The figure of the 'community teacher' is created, encouraged and supported.
- In-service training and professional development for teachers.
 - a) In 2010-2011, the program reached 35,000 teachers. A postgraduate degree in Rural Education was created.
 - b) Training and professional development for supervisors and headteachers /headmistresses.
In 2010-2011, about 2500 supervisor teams received training.

- Extended school day.
A 10-year program aimed to guarantee full and extended education (morning and afternoon) in public schools.
- Policy of inter-jurisdictional support and cooperation for child development.
Creation of Education Roundtables and Councils.
- Use of ICT to improve teaching, teacher education and the administration of schools.

Language Education

Linguistic and cultural diversity is a familiar phenomenon in people's daily lives as in most countries in Latin America due to complex immigration processes. In their education laws, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico and Colombia, have acknowledged the importance of language education at different levels in their systems of education both in compulsory schooling and higher education. As described in Porto, Montemayor-Borsinger and López Barrios (2016), in Argentina Spanish is used as L1 but also as L2 by speakers of indigenous and other languages. The most widely taught languages are English, French, German, Italian and Portuguese - included in the national curriculum guidelines for languages (*Núcleos de aprendizaje prioritario*, NAP).

The role of education and of language education in particular was redefined with the National Education Act 26.206 (2006). After the 2001 crisis, this law aimed at social inclusion and the democratisation of knowledge. English teachers, as all educators, became part of a comprehensive literacy project intended to encourage children and youth to become 'citizens of the world' (Starkey, 2007) while developing a sense of social cohesion and national citizenship at the same time (Tesdesco, 1999). The law also highlighted the importance of native languages (Spanish and indigenous languages) and explicitly recognised the linguistic rights of ethnic minorities throughout Argentina.

Two world models of education have been influential in the country, namely the human capital education model and Progressive Education (Spring, 2009). The human capital education model views (language) education as a tool for learners to open up to the world and have access to knowledge and information, to health, education, employability, economic growth, and social and economic mobility - through different resources and means. In this sense, language education, particularly in English because of its significance as a language of international communication, is seen as empowering and instrumental to development. On its side, Progressive Education, building on Freire's foregrounding of the sociocultural, agency and intercultural experience, rests on a view of education for active citizenship, for social justice and for the protection of local languages, celebrating the students' interests and participation. The combination of these tenets from both models has dominated language education policy (Thisted, Diez, Martínez & Villa, 2007) and curricular developments (Barboni, Beacon & Porto, 2008; Barboni, Beacon, Porto & Sporturno, 2013) from the beginning of the 21st century. Foreign language teaching is conceptualised as *educational*, i.e. aiming at the learners' *literacy* development, not only *language* development, and learners are viewed as responsible, active and conscientious citizens. For instance, the policy documents designed in the province of Buenos Aires are the results of efforts under a recently created Office of Intercultural Education, framed under National Education Act 26.206 (2006), which promotes "policies of recognition that are the centre of debates, policies and practices beyond the Argentine provincial and national contexts toward the Latin American context in countries such

as Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Perú and Bolivia” (Thisted et al., 2007, p. 3, my translation of the original in Spanish).

English Language Education

Focusing on English in particular, it began to be taught as a foreign language in the secondary school system, organised in 1863 (López Barrios & Villanueva de Debat, 2011). Because secondary education was not compulsory then, its teaching was limited. English was also introduced at British community schools, created in the 19th century to provide education to the children of English-speaking settlers (Banfi & Day, 2005; Tocalli-Beller, 2007). In this setting, English was the language of instruction and not a school subject. The British influence was very important in Argentina throughout the 19th century through the railway, farms and other businesses as well as sports (Maersk Nielsen, 2003). This influence is present today through cultural associations such as the Argentine Associations of English Culture and British Council, which aim at promoting English and the British culture. In the early 20th century, many private schools copied the English-Spanish bilingual curriculum of British community schools.

The 1990s saw a significant change with the Federal Education Act mentioned before. English became an obligatory school subject from age 9 (second cycle of primary school) to 14 (first cycle of secondary school). Schools were encouraged to offer a second foreign language but as an option (not mandatory) (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1997). The 2006 Education Act extended English as a mandatory subject throughout secondary education. Since 2007, English is therefore taught compulsorily as from 4th form (nine-year olds) both in private and public schools. A few new primary and secondary education curricula for English were passed in 2007 in several Argentine provinces and since then other provinces have followed.

Currently, in pedagogic terms, English language education follows the latest developments in the field. While in the 1990s foreign language curricula were product-oriented (i.e. they included competence standards intended to serve as a means of standardisation), nowadays the intercultural and citizenship dimensions are acknowledged and valued, at least theoretically. One widespread belief is that schools should provide a common basis to allow for a conscious and critical participation in society, i.e. schools should foster literacy development with the ultimate aim of empowering students for active citizenship. Task-based, project-based and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodologies for the teaching and assessment of language accompany this conceptualisation. However, there are difficulties in implementing intercultural citizenship perspectives and these methodologies in daily classroom routines for a variety of reasons. The most important one is that although English teachers are in general highly qualified, having completed four- to five-year undergraduate programs, the available teacher workforce is insufficient to cater for the positions needed nationwide to comply with language education policies and curricular developments since 2006 (Corradi, personal communication, 2016). As a consequence, unprepared and/or uncertified teachers are hired to satisfy the demand. Corradi (personal communication, 2016), team member in the area of foreign languages of the Ministry of Education of the Nation, in charge of English, reminds us that no statistical information concerning the English teacher workforce in the country exists.

Maersk Nielsen (2003), Tocalli-Beller (2007), Rajagopalan (2010) and Zappa-Hollman (2007) note that English is a dominant and prestigious foreign language in the country. Today, it is used in business with foreign countries, language education (in primary and secondary school curricula in most provinces), and tourism. Maersk Nielsen (2003) remarks that English in Argentina fulfils four key functions:

- Interpersonal: English is predominant and perceived as prestigious in advertising, businesses and consumer goods (particularly clothes, cars, perfumes, music, etc.).
- Instrumental: English is used as a medium of instruction at bilingual schools, and as an international language in international conferences, tourism, etc.
- Regulatory: Business contracts with foreign companies must be written in Spanish and translated into English if necessary.
- Innovative: Borrowings from English are common in the fields of sports, computers, shopping, advertising, fashion, and others.

Furthermore, Rajagopalan (2010) speaks of the nativisation of English in Latin America and mentions the perceived need of English as something vital among Argentines. Overall, English is perceived in utilitarian rather than hegemonising terms. Educators, teacher educators, researchers, authorities, policy makers, curriculum designers, learners, parents and the population in general acknowledge the positive significance of English for their lives. The regulatory function of the State in this respect in Argentina, in particular in education through the National Education Act passed in 2006, acquires significance because it sees ELT (and education in general) as a way of developing the potentialities of individuals to actively construct their future.

This view of English coexists simultaneously with a radically different one. In particular in the field of politics and international relations, English is seen in hegemonic terms, as a form of linguistic and cultural imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas (1996, p. 436) refer to “the infectious spread of English within a wider language policy framework” and “triumphant” English as a result of processes of Americanisation, Europeanisation, and McDonaldisation (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996, p. 440). On this basis, they claim that “these developments embody and entail hegemonising processes that tend to render the use of English ‘natural’ and ‘normal’, and to marginalise other languages” (Phillipson, 2001, p. 191). Phillipson (2008, p. 250; 2009) has recently redefined English as “lingua frankensteinia” in an attempt to capture these devilish effects. Political scientists in Argentina have highlighted this rhetoric of imperialism, stressing the profound evil impact of English in many Latin American countries and their inhabitants (Borón, 2009; Borón & Vlahusic, 2009). More specifically, Borón (2009) argues that this evil influence has led to the crisis of a model of civilisation which has resulted in social unrest, violence, xenophobia and racism, among other diabolic forces. In Borón’s (2009) and Borón & Vlahusic’s (2009) view, the processes of Americanisation, Europeanisation, and McDonaldisation represent the visible elements of a broader imperialist penetration through “mechanisms of domination, and the multiplication of its [the United States’] devices of manipulation and ideological and political control” (Borón, 2005:271; my translation of the original in Spanish).

National Curriculum Guidelines for Languages

The national curriculum guidelines for languages (NAP, 2012) provide general principles for the teaching of English, French, German, Italian and Portuguese as foreign languages both in primary and secondary schools. This document, designed by leading experts in the field, and passed by the Federal Education Council, aims at the unification and harmonisation of linguistic and cultural practices associated with language education in the country. It is concerned with the

development of the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help children and youth shuttle among the variety of languages at their disposal in order to function in increasingly multilingual, multicultural and complex settings. The document highlights:

- A linguistic description of language in a sociocultural perspective that sees language as discourse or in other words as a negotiation of meanings in which interlocutors are involved to produce meaningful interaction. Learning a language and using it is about achieving meanings in context rather than studying *about* the language as a system. The development of multiliteracies is at the core.
- An intercultural and plurilingual perspective to allow for intercultural understanding in the face of a complex multicultural and multilingual world that values diversity. Foreign language learning is seen as a vehicle for intercultural and plurilingual experience. The development of intercultural citizenship is explicitly acknowledged as important.

The guidelines offer four possible trajectories of language learning, each one of different length, to be developed in the different cycles of primary and secondary school. The following table summarises the options. Within the document's prescriptive focus, the flexible trajectories cater for the different contextual realities of language education in the country.

Table 1

Núcleos de Aprendizaje Prioritario

	Primary school First cycle (Ages 6-8)	Primary school Second cycle (Ages 9-11)	Secondary school First cycle (Ages 12-14)	Secondary school Second cycle (Ages 15-17)
Four-cycle Trajectory	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Three-cycle Trajectory		Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Two-cycle Trajectory			Level 1	Level 2
One-cycle Trajectory				Level 1

Note. Adapted from *Núcleos de aprendizaje prioritario* (2012, p. 2).

Finally, the guidelines for each level are arranged around six key areas: reading comprehension, listening comprehension, oral and written production, language awareness and reflection, and intercultural reflection.

The Cases of Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Entre Ríos and Chubut

After this overview of education in general and of public primary English language education in Argentina, with an analysis of documents such as several Education Acts, policies for primary school education and the national curriculum guidelines (NAP) for foreign language education, I now present the cases of the provinces of Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Entre Ríos and

Chubut using interview data collected in 2015. I contacted program leaders in several southern, central and northern provinces in November 2015 and invited them to be interviewed by email. Four accepted and they describe their local initiatives. One foreign language expert from the Ministry of Education of the Nation also accepted and she describes developments with a global perspective. I provided interview guidelines and questions arranged around the key aspects identified in the call for this Special Issue: description of the educational situation in each province/the country with reference to the socioeconomic and political context of education if appropriate; historical development of public primary ELT programs in the province/the country; description of the current program, including aims, contents, theoretical orientation, methodology, materials and resources, and so forth; profiles of teachers; and main problems and accomplishments.

Interview data as well as the experts' real names and occupation are disclosed with their permission. Rather than introducing each case at a time, I have arranged the presentation of findings around the following topics: educational context; public primary ELT programs in each province; limitations and challenges; and accomplishments. An initial general overview by the expert of the Ministry of Education of the Nation contextualises the cases. Clarifications appear between brackets and I highlight the evidence for the points raised in italics.

General Overview

Leonor Corradi, MA, trainer of teacher educators, expert in language didactics, team member in the area of foreign languages (in charge of English in particular) of the Ministry of Education of the Nation, highlights the guiding principles of plurilingualism and interculturality that frame education in general in the country, and also foreign language teaching (FLT), echoing the explicit acknowledgement of linguistic and cultural diversity set in the National Education Act (*Ley Nacional de Educación* No 26.206) (Chapter II, Article 11):

In an intercultural and plurilingual approach, i.e. the principles on which foreign language teaching is based in Argentina, there are instrumental and formative aspects to be considered. This has been stated in the federal documents for the area of FLT which have been written since 2009. Before the National Act of Education (2006), a national agreement known as the A-15 stated that what was compulsory was three levels of foreign language (each level was three years long), one of which had to be English. This led to the inclusion of English to the detriment of the other languages taught. Though the three levels could be taught simultaneously, what was implicit in a way was that the teaching of foreign languages would start in primary school. The main approach during this time was a communicative approach whose focus was mainly instrumental, with little or no reference to formative aspects.

Reflecting on the extent to which intercultural and plurilingual principles are put into practice in the country at present, Corradi claims:

The process has already started and it is manifested in different ways:

- Provincial curriculum designs. These had to be created or modified to show how the principles in the documents are implemented.
- Teaching materials. Two processes are involved. First, there are national funds for the purchase of textbooks for students. A national committee is created to first agree on the criteria to analyse the materials and to second

evaluate samples against these criteria. Once titles have been selected, the list is sent to the provinces, where a local committee is created to decide on the textbooks to buy. The second process is the design of national materials that can be used by teachers all over the country. Some of these materials are listed below:

- a) Projects for the primary school in the context of “*Jornada Ampliada*”, i.e. the extension of the time children spend at school.
 - b) Projects for the secondary school: *Entrama*, a digital collaborative federal project to create projects using ICT resources.
 - c) Adult education: within the area of *Fines*, a program to help young people do or finish secondary school, the book *Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés*, a project based on reading in which students are guided into being competent readers.
- Technical assistance in provinces to work with local teams of experts in charge of rewriting their curriculum designs.
 - Professional development instances in different provinces to show teachers how to teach in this new paradigm.

Two aspects are worth pointing out here. First, regarding teaching materials, Corradi refers to the important role of the national government in the process of book selection for purchase as well as in the design of national materials for several contexts. Concomitantly, Rivas (2010), drawing on UNESCO (2008), refers to the high degree of autonomy that schools have in pedagogic terms. For instance, 98% of the schools in Argentina are allowed to make specific choices in book selection, and the average is 81.8% in Latin America (95.2% in Brazil, 95.8% in Chile, 69% in Paraguay, 74.3% in Perú and 58.5% in Uruguay). This average for the region is high when compared to Asian countries (e.g. 28% in Malasia). Second, with respect to *jornada ampliada*, in 2005 a Law for the Financing of Education was passed and it aimed to offer extended school time to 30% of the public primary school enrolment, which then reached only 5% of those children. A few years after this law was passed, Rivas (2010) mentions that this percentage was not increased due to the high costs involved and the lack of political decision to implement changes in this direction. However, in recent years several provinces such as Buenos Aires, Mendoza, Córdoba, San Juan, Santa Cruz, Río Negro and Tucumán have implemented programmes of this kind, which have not been captured statistically yet (Rivas, 2010).

Educational Context and Public Primary ELT Programs in the Provinces

I begin with the Province of Buenos Aires, the biggest and most populated province. Silvana Barboni, PhD University of London and director of the program called ‘Intercultural and Plurilingual Education’ from 2005 to 2014, offers specific details regarding the plurilingual and intercultural perspective that Corradi refers to at the national level, in this case in relation to ELT in primary school in this province:

English has been a compulsory subject in primary education in the province of Buenos Aires since 1996. Two compulsory teaching hours of English a week were introduced in the second cycle of primary education (ages 9 - 11) with the aim of exposing students to an international language through a communicative curriculum. The system of education caters for the education of 543, 650 children in second

cycle of primary education studying in 4,316 schools. Although English is not compulsory in the first cycle, 1 in 3 schools have included the subject in the first three years of primary schooling as part of special projects.

In 2007 the curriculum was revised after a new National Education Act was passed and a task-based curriculum was introduced with a focus on students' multiliteracies development beyond traditional utilitarian approaches in ELT. In consequence, a set of different objectives were considered, namely an education fostering language teaching situations that would help develop students' multiliteracies and intercultural competence. In line with this, the focus of the curriculum has been on the process of learning rather than the product of it with an emphasis on students carrying out tasks in English that would help them learn by using the language. Among the contents description, the program establishes a basis for the introduction of rich linguistic exponents, generic features of a diversity of texts and numerous topic fields of interest and relevance for children. The curriculum also provides examples of lessons carried out using literature for children that intends to inspire and illustrate teaching strategies.

As Corradi explained before, the National Ministry of Education offers technical assistance to teachers in the provinces as well as professional development initiatives with the ultimate aim of assuring that this intercultural orientation gets to classrooms. For instance, in 2005 the province of Buenos Aires launched a teacher education program for primary and secondary school teachers, covering all school subjects and offering free teacher education in a variety of formats (traditional teacher development courses, online courses and materials, on-site dialogic assistance in schools, etc.). About 8,000 English teachers have participated since then.

Regarding teaching materials, the case of the province of Buenos Aires illustrates the degree of pedagogic autonomy referred to earlier (Rivas, 2010). The province designed and published free materials in 2013 for use in the English classrooms of all public schools, in particular for 4th and 5th forms in primary school and 1st year of secondary school. The booklets (in print and PDF, with accompanying audios and additional suggested activities for the classroom, e-activities, etc.) echo the intercultural, citizenship and human rights education frameworks with the pillar of taking action in the community (for example, the chemical pollution section in the 4th form booklet, the section on bullying in the 5th form booklet and more explicitly in the secondary school booklet).

The 2007 curricular document was revised in 2013 (Barboni et al., 2013) and it purposefully adds the citizenship dimension as an inescapable dimension of ELT, on the basis of the principles of social welfare and cohesion attributed to educational policies by National Law of Education 26.206. Some of its aims are expressed as follows: “develop an intercultural perspective strengthening children’s cultural identities and favouring processes of social integration and interaction with otherness in alignment with principles of peace and human rights”; and “develop children’s path toward democratic citizenship”.

In La Pampa, Estela N. Braun, ELT Didactics Teacher at the University of La Pampa and ELT coordinator at the provincial Ministry of Education, describes her setting and points out disparities with the situation in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and the province of Buenos Aires regarding the capacity of her province to implement the language education guidelines set by the Federal Education Act (*Ley Federal de Educación* No 24.195). Her words reflect the limitations and inequalities that the provinces faced in those times, echoed by education experts in the country (Adrogué, 2013; Candia, 2004; Gorostiaga, 2006; Gorostiaga et al., 2003; Gvirtz et al., 2006; Kewitel et al., 2003; Perez Centeno & Leal, 2011; Rivas, 2010; Terigi, 2007). La Pampa simply

lacked the necessary resources to face the new responsibilities set by the law. Other provinces experienced similar situations, leading to the atomisation and fragmentation of the system (also pointed out by these education experts) as well as inequalities in terms of student outcomes.

An overview of English language teaching as a foreign language in our province cannot be separated from legislation passed in Argentina since the 1990s. In that respect, *the Federal Law of Education issued in 1993 stated the possibility of teaching foreign languages since EGB 2 (primary schools as from the 4th, 5th and 6th forms) but only the province of Buenos Aires and the city of Buenos Aires could implement it at that time.*

In our context, the first experiences of teaching English at primary school level in state schools date back to the end of the 1990s as a request from parents who insisted on having English and computer studies taught to children as extra-curricular activities. The only exceptions were two Normal schools which had been teaching foreign languages since 1985 through project 13. Pupils were taught a period of forty-five minutes of English every day from 1st to 6th form. *For the rest of the schools there were no teaching posts or hours available to make this experience possible.*

In the following interview extract, and with reference to the new National Education Act (2006), Braun brings up the issue of financial resources again ('At that moment there were only 50 schools that had created posts for ELT at that level'). It is interesting to note once again the autonomy that the provinces enjoy in terms of teaching materials ('the publishing of a book about specific didactics for the level'), the possibility to offer professional development opportunities for teachers ('The aims of the professional development course were to reach a consensus about the characteristics of a curriculum for the level and to provide teachers with didactic approaches suitable for young learners') and the overall inequality of the system. While the province of Buenos Aires published its first curricular document for English for primary school in 2007, and produced a revised version in 2013, La Pampa was able to do so only in 2014 for the first time.

In 2008 a project was presented to the Ministry of Education in our province to develop a professional development course aimed at English teachers working at primary school level. Law 26206/2006 was already being implemented and it stated in article 27 that all students should have democratic access to foreign language teaching since primary school level. At that moment there were only 50 schools that had created posts for ELT at that level. The aims of the professional development course were to reach a consensus about the characteristics of a curriculum for the level and to provide teachers with didactic approaches suitable for young learners. One of the outcomes of the course was the publishing of a book about specific didactics for the level (Towards a Didactics of ELT for Primary School Level, EdUNLPam, 2011). However, the design of curricular guidelines for the level was only achieved in 2014.

Braun clarifies that this curricular document designed in 2014 was not implemented until 2015 (eight years behind the province of Buenos Aires) but is appreciative of the financial effort involved:

The process of curriculum development was carried out by following the NAP (Core Learning Aims for Foreign Languages) issued in 2012. Teachers were invited to read and discuss the main tenets present in the curricular materials during 2014 and *they were finally implemented in 2015.* It is interesting to note that at the moment all the primary schools in the province are teaching English at primary school level in 4th, 5th

and 6th forms ranging from one to two periods of forty minutes a week. Several schools in rural areas or schools with extended timetables teach English from the first until the last year of primary school in multi-grade classrooms. *This fact shows the extent of the investment in the budget for education since 2008.*

Finally, she describes how the intercultural orientation was materialised in the curricular document. Her words echo the spirit of the new National Education Act passed in 2006 with respect to linguistic and cultural diversity.

As regards the characteristics of the curriculum it consists of purposes and objectives of the teaching of English at primary school level around six main areas to be developed regarding language practices of reading comprehension, listening comprehension, oral and written production, reflection or noticing of characteristics of the foreign languages in comparison with the Spanish variety of language used at school and there is a strong emphasis on the implementation of an intercultural perspective. A set of didactic guidelines accompanies the materials.

The curriculum aims at the development of citizenship through sociocultural themes which abound in the curriculum for primary and which can be used as a starting point for the development of interdisciplinary activities through the foreign language. It is suggested that children's literature should be included to help develop the wealth of multiculturalism (following Michael Byram's work) and to develop intercultural educational projects that may offer students the possibility of valuing their own culture and at the same time respecting the otherness present in other cultures. To promote the development of intercultural competence and to strengthen cultural identity may favor the processes of social integration. Thus, these curricular guidelines for primary education aim at promoting positive cultural attitudes, improving personal and cultural attitudes in young learners so as to avoid stereotypes and prejudices present in societies with great flows of immigration.

In turn, Romina Buttazzoni, EFL teacher and teacher trainer, Ministry of Education of Entre Ríos, describes ELT in her province within the framework of the current priority policies for primary education issued in 2010 by the National Ministry of Education, described earlier in this article, focusing in particular on two programs, namely Child Activity Centres and Extended School Day. Drawing on interview data herself, she concludes that “these numbers leave 1,011 primary schools without access to EFL in the province” – another illustration of the inequality of the system repeatedly referred to in this article. It is also important to note that the province has not produced a curricular document yet (‘with no official curriculum in the province’), what reveals not only this inequality but also the fragmentation and atomisation of the system.

Entre Ríos has included EFL in public primary schools in two different ways, both non-curricular (i.e. the subject is not graded and it is not necessary to be passed for the student in order to be promoted to the next grade) and *with no official curriculum in the province*. The first comes from the national policy *Políticas Prioritarias para el Nivel Primario*, from the Ministry of Education in Argentina, which seeks to improve the education of students at social risk in primary schools. Two different sub-programs from this piece of legislation have been implemented. One is the Child Activity Centres (*Centro de Actividades Infantiles*, CAI) and Extended School Day (*Ampliación de la Jornada Escolar*); the second is a provincial legal regulation named Full Day School

(*Escuela de Jornada Completa*), with its origins in a national policy by Perón presidency (1946-1955) and reformulated in Entre Ríos in 2003 by Act 486 from the General Education Council.

Both programs, Extended School Day (*Ampliación de la Jornada Escolar*) and Full Day School (*Escuela de Jornada Completa*) (named Escuela Nina in Entre Ríos) have English as a mandatory subject, while the other programs can opt for the subjects the school considers are the best for their students, being English one option among others. *According to Raúl Mendez, the coordinator of these programs in Entre Ríos, all the schools under these legislations are at the moment offering EFL lessons (Mendez, phone interview, 22 Dec. 2015). They form the 20% of all the public schools in Entre Ríos: 269 out of 1,280 (Ibid). These numbers leave 1,011 primary schools without access to EFL in the province.*

Buttazzoni also mentions a non-conventional procedure that schools in the province used to engage in to take care of EFL teachers' salaries, considering the constraints of the provincial administration in this respect. There is agreement in the literature that the provincial administrations have undergone financial difficulties related to the responsibilities that they have had to assume since the 1993 Federal Education Act (Adrogué, 2013; Candia, 2004; Gorostiaga, 2006; Gorostiaga et al., 2003; Gvirtz et al., 2006; Kewitel et al., 2003; Perez Centeno & Leal, 2011; Rivas, 2010; Terigi, 2007) and this interview extract provides an illustration.

Some years ago the cooperadoras (an organisation within the school, formed by teachers and parents, which sought to obtain the financial help the state did not provide) used to pay for EFL teachers' salaries in a system that was in the shadows of legality. A legal resolution from the Ministry of Education in the province disallowed that practice in 2011, although some schools still engage in it.

Just as Buttazzoni says that EFL began to be part of primary education in Entre Ríos as an extra-curricular activity ('Entre Ríos has included EFL in public primary schools in ... non-curricular [option] (i.e. the subject is not graded and it is not necessary to be passed for the student in order to be promoted to the next grade)'), the same point is made by Darío Luis Banegas in Chubut, with a PhD from Warwick University, UK, and Ministry of Education of Chubut.

Subject EFL in primary schools started out in the early 2000 as an extra-curricular activity which some teachers and/or parents promoted to help their children have their first formal encounters with the language before starting secondary education. In the province of Chubut, subject EFL was part of the school curriculum only from year 1 to year 6 of secondary education. With the implementation of the new Provincial Law of Education (Law 91/10) in 2010, ELT is mandatory as from primary education. However, the law states that such an incorporation will be progressively implemented depending on human and material resources available.

In the year 2014, a new curriculum for primary education was implemented. This new curriculum includes subject EFL as part of the subjects that primary school children must take. EFL is now a mandatory subject in years 4-6 of primary education.

The case of Chubut also resonates with that of La Pampa: ELT was prescribed for primary school in 2010 and it was only in 2014 that a new curriculum was implemented. We are once again reminded of the difficulties that the provincial administrations have faced (and still do) in terms of ELT

provision in primary school ('the law states that such an incorporation will be progressively implemented depending on human and material resources available') as well as of the inequalities and atomistic nature of the system as a whole.

Despite the disparities illustrated among the provinces taken as cases here, it is interesting to note that in Buenos Aires, La Pampa and Chubut the ELT curricular documents passed after the National Education Act (2006) all rest on the same principles of plurilingualism and interculturality. Banegas states:

According to the curriculum, subject EFL is underpinned by a sociocultural approach to learning, and it aims at helping learners (a) use English in school-related events, (b) develop language awareness, (c) value interculturality, and (d) develop their oral and written practices in English. As for pedagogical approaches, teachers are encouraged to use an intercultural communicative competence approach which includes task-based learning and the presence of curricular contents from other subjects (CLIL).

The contents are organised around three axes/contexts: (a) I, my family and my friends, (b) My school and curricular contents, (c) Life in the city, the countryside, and the world.

Finally, Chubut is also an illustration of the autonomy in terms of teaching materials referred to elsewhere in this article:

As regards materials and resources, teachers are encouraged to produce their own materials and resort to a wide variety of printed and online tools for learning. They are also encouraged to engage in alternative forms of assessment such as the use of portfolios.

Limitations and Challenges

There are challenges and difficulties that pertain to education in general, not only ELT, such as the low performance of Argentinean students in standardised international testing; high dropout rates in secondary schooling; and the inability of the system to cater for "equality of outcome" (McKay & Warshauer Freedman, 1990, p. 399) or "equality of opportunity to achieve" (McCarty, 2003, p. 149) for a number of reasons. In particular in ELT, interview data show that the different provinces in Argentina share similar difficulties and challenges such as a crisis of recruitment and retention of qualified teachers for the public school sector, resulting in poorly qualified teachers for public schools (because of low salaries and the low reputation associated with being a school teacher in this country); an inflexible and ineffective system of teacher regulation (regarding salaries, compensations, leaves of absence); and a teacher culture in public school contexts that tends to be dominated by a lack of commitment and dedication, absenteeism, and strikes.

Corradi provides a general overview of the main challenges in the country globally, beginning with the fragmentation and atomisation of the system owing to disparities in coverage, something that confirms the point raised by education experts in the country in this respect as already mentioned in this article (Adrogué, 2013; Candia, 2004; Gorostiaga, 2006; Gorostiaga et al., 2003; Gvirtz et al., 2006; Kewitel et al., 2003; Perez Centeno & Leal, 2011; Rivas, 2010; Terigi, 2007):

Even though it is stated in the National Education Act (2006) that a foreign language has to be taught in primary and in secondary school, coverage is not complete yet, in spite of the fact that there has been an important increase in the last few years.

She then refers to the scarcity of qualified teachers and their unsuitable preparation to teach within an intercultural orientation – a challenge that is brought up later by the provincial experts in the four cases reported here.

Since there is a lack of graduate teachers, the result is that in many cases, English has been taught by people with little knowledge of English and very little or no knowledge of pedagogy. As to how the principles are put into practice, there is still long way to go. This is one of the main challenges at present. Most teachers, if not all, are in favour of a communicative approach and they do not deny the importance of knowing a foreign language. However, what can be seen in many classrooms is a traditional grammar approach. Another important challenge is presented in the area of interculturality. Again, most teachers and teacher trainers would agree that it is a crucial aspect of language teaching. Nevertheless, to many, this means devoting a lesson or two to talking about culture. A second misconception in this area is to equate culture and nationality, with teachers speaking of the British culture, for instance. A third misconception related to this is to consider that culture is a monolithic concept rather than a dynamic composite.

In the province of Buenos Aires, Barboni also highlights difficulties related to teacher preparation and confirms for the ELT context what CIPPEC (2004) points out for educators in general, i.e. that inexperienced teachers tend to serve disadvantaged schools: “In addition, research reveals that those children in most vulnerable contexts tend to be the ones who learn the least and it also shows that there is a diversity of coexisting -and often contradictory- methodological practices among teachers”. At the same time, this observation confirms for the ELT context what Terigi (2007) notes regarding the general failure of the system to guarantee common outcomes, something that Barboni attributes to multiple causes, as can be observed in the following interview extract, such as the diversity of her province, insufficient resources, inadequate reach of professional development initiatives and as a result, uneven quality provision in the territory and the impossibility to assure the common outcomes that Terigi (2007) mentions.

This description of the system in the province of Buenos Aires, characterised by a huge intake in thousands of schools which are located in a large territory with social, cultural and geographical diversity as its main distinguishing feature, helps anticipate the complexity of applying curricular mandates and ensuring the quality of its implementation. In addition, the vast number of ESOL teachers working in the system of education in primary education - approximately 3,000- makes it complex to monitor teaching practice and to establish continuous teacher education programs. Also, limited resources (absence of books and teaching resources) and institutional constraints (size of rooms, distribution of working hours, etc.) very often hinder teaching practice. In consequence, the main difficulties faced relate to processes of evaluation and quality assurance since the system cannot guarantee that all children will learn a minimum in all schools.

Buttazonni describes similar difficulties in Entre Ríos, which again confirm the atomisation of the system as well as its inequality:

The amount of time students spend learning EFL is of one hour and twenty minutes per week (two lessons of forty minutes each which are taught together once a week). This, in addition to the necessity of certified teachers, the lack of training by the Ministry for the non-certified teachers at primary schools, the absence of an official curriculum, the working conditions

and the lack of materials make English learning a difficult task for any student at primary public schools.

In La Pampa and Chubut, Braun and Banegas also refer to lack of resources and financial support to implement existing laws and regulations, affecting mainly the availability of teaching positions and qualified teachers. Banegas says: “The main challenge we have is the lack of qualified teachers to cover all the posts across the province. More than 70% of the EFL teachers in primary schools have no formal training in ELT, and a small proportion of those are in the early stages of their IELTE courses.” In Entre Ríos, Buttazzonni notes that 1,011 primary schools do not teach English as a school subject and also that a curriculum design for English has not been written yet. She closes with a specific recommendation: “Educational policies in the province should be revised if the goals proposed are meant to break the gap in education as expressed in the different regulations.”

Particularly regarding the teacher workforce, teacher qualifications and working conditions in Entre Ríos, Buttazzonni describes the difficulties that her province faces, which lead to disparities between primary and secondary education, and also between the public and the private sector.

Public primary schools encounter some difficulties when searching for qualified EFL teachers. In order to work in this level, teachers have to pass through an evaluation process every year, in which the job offer is opened at the beginning of the school year, according to Act 355 from the Entre Ríos Ministry of Education (a piece of legislation that is being used to regulate the working conditions of the teachers under all the national programs). The teacher then is hired from March to December and offered a contract. The examination consists on a project presentation, the defense of that project and the evaluation of the antecedents of the prospective teacher. These working conditions make EFL certified teachers prefer to seek for job positions in secondary schools in which working conditions are different: English is recognised as a curricular subject, there is an official curriculum and the job position is evaluated according to a grading scale by the Ministry of Education, and not by the school principal as in primary education. Secondary EFL teachers have to pass through the process of evaluation for each position only once, in contrast with primary school teachers who have to apply for the same job position year after year. These conditions imply that experienced, well-qualified EFL teachers look for more stable positions in secondary and tertiary levels, leaving the ground open for non-certified teachers to apply for the job positions in primary schools, thus building a precarious scenario.

Other provinces face similar problems and one key issue is that the regulations to hire teachers vary among provinces. Veleda (2014) for instance points out differences in regulations for the public and private sectors in the province of Buenos Aires. Under provincial Law 10,579 (1987), the quantity and type of teaching and non-teaching positions for the public sector depends on the school population (quantity of students). The criterion is quantitative and homogenous for all contexts, despite the contextual diversity that Barboni mentioned before. Veleda (2014) argues that this criterion fails to take into account the particularly harsh teaching conditions that some socioeconomically disadvantaged schools face, resulting in inequalities. Furthermore, this same Law states that teachers can choose which school they wish to work in, following a system of points based mainly on the years of experience they have. As a result, young and inexperienced teachers tend to be relegated to more disadvantaged schools (CIPPEC, 2004; Veleda, 2014). By contrast, provincial Law 11,612 (1994) confers private schools with the capacity to hire and fire teachers at their discretion. Clearly disparities and inequalities result from existing regulations in this case.

Accomplishments

Regarding accomplishments, from a general perspective of the country as a whole, Corradi (personal communication, 5-5-2016) sees that “one of the most important accomplishments is that most curriculum writers and teachers have understood what is meant by focusing on formative aspects without this meaning not teaching the language. They have also realised how teaching a language can contribute to the construction of citizenship, one of the aims of education in Argentina.” Barboni in the province of Buenos Aires considers that “Even though much needs to be done to ensure all students learn English in primary schooling to the standards expected by law, the introduction of the subject in the compulsory school curriculum is in itself the most important accomplishment in that it is the explicit recognition of the importance of language education for children in the 21st century. Also, it is a way of ensuring that all children, notwithstanding their contextual circumstances, can have access to an international language that can facilitate their participation as citizens of the world.” Finally, Braun considers that, despite the limitations and drawbacks identified before, the budget for education (although still insufficient) has increased considerably both at national and provincial levels. For instance, one initiative in La Pampa is a small-scale professional development provincial project (implemented in the framework of a national program called ‘Our Schools II’) that aims at helping educators put the new curricular guidelines into action.

Conclusion

This article has described public primary English language education in Argentina. The brief historical overview of education provided has disclosed significant local, political and economic influences, as well as international influences, which have all played a role in the development of the current language policies in primary education at the provincial and national levels in the country. The national curriculum guidelines (NAP) for foreign language education and the new National Education Act (*Ley Nacional de Educación 26.206*) have been described, among other pieces of legislation. Overall, existing guidelines and policies adopt an intercultural and plurilingual approach in the teaching of foreign languages, including English, at all levels of education and embrace a social justice conceptualisation of education in all cases. This conceptualisation is in tune with current international developments in the field and this in itself is an asset worth pointing out. However, ELT curriculum developments and programs do not exist in all 24 jurisdictions of the country, and where available, there are significant provincial disparities in terms of implementation and development. Interview data collected in 2015 contextualise the illustrations provided around the cases of the provinces of Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Entre Ríos and Chubut. Program leaders in these provinces have described similar challenges and difficulties, mainly insufficient resources and financial support to implement existing laws and regulations, affecting the availability of teaching positions and qualified teachers, the provision of teaching materials, school infrastructure, teacher development options and quality evaluation procedures, among other aspects. These limitations notwithstanding, the main accomplishment resides in the importance of language education as acknowledged in current legislation that has regulated the mandatory teaching of English in primary and secondary schools throughout the country. Furthermore, even though limitations regarding implementation exist (as described in this article), there is agreement amongst all stakeholders about the importance of intercultural citizenship theoretical perspectives intended to foster literacy development using task-based, project-based and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodologies with the ultimate aim of empowering all students for active citizenship.

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