

RESEARCH REPORT

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEXTBOOK SUITABILITY AND **EMERGENT LITERACY** IN EFL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Lowering the starting age of learning English has become a trend in non-English speaking countries in recent years (Rixon, 2013), however, not much attention has been paid to the need for trained staff. Chile is no exception. The government launched an initiative to teach English from the first grade of primary in some schools in 2014 (Ministry of Education); until then, English was compulsory only from year 5 on. Although the initiative was good, it overlooked important factors. Firstly, most teachers of English lack the methodological knowledge to work with children below the age of 10 (Inostroza, 2015; Barahona, 2016), and while primary teachers may know how to work with children, they generally have little knowledge of English (ibid). To close this gap, the government commissioned the creation of textbooks, ignoring, however, children's literacy skills. Secondly, there is the issue of emergent literacy skills in this context. An astonishing 96% of first year students in public schools do not know the letters of the alphabet (Melo, 2022) (and the Spanish phoneme-correspondence). Nevertheless, that knowledge is assumed by the government's textbooks, which focus strongly on acquiring writing and reading skills in English. Research shows that neither English teachers nor primary teachers have a sufficient set of methods to teach literacy (Medina et., al, 2015; Morales & Pulido-Cortés, 2023).



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RESUMEN

Recientemente, disminuir la edad de aprendizaje del idioma Inglés se ha vuelto una tendencia en países cuyo idioma oficial es otro (Rixon, 2013), sin embargo, no se ha prestado mucha atención a la necesidad de personal calificado para esto. Chile no es la excepción. El gobierno lanzó una iniciativa para enseñar inglés como idioma extranjero desde primer año de enseñanza primaria en algunas escuelas el año 2014 (Ministerio de Educación); hasta entonces, el idioma Inglés se enseñaba obligatoriamente solo a partir de quinto año. Aunque la iniciativa era buena, ignoraba factores importantes. En primer lugar, la mayoría de los profesores de inglés no tenían el conocimiento metodológico para trabajar con niños menores de 10 años (Inostroza, 2015; Barahona, 2016), y mientras que profesores de primaria sí sabían trabajar con niños pequeños, por lo general tenían poco conocimiento del Inglés (ibid). Para disminuir esta brecha, el gobierno encargó la creación de libros de texto para enseñar inglés a niños, ignorando las habilidades de lectoescritura de los niños. En segundo lugar, existe el problema de las habilidades de lectoescritura emergente en este contexto. Un sorprendente 96% de los estudiantes de primer año de primaria en las escuelas públicas no conocen las letras del alfabeto (Melo, 2022). Sin embargo, los libros de texto del gobierno dieron por hecho estos conocimientos, presentando un fuerte foco en las habilidades de escritura y lectura en Inglés. Esta investigación muestra que los profesores que trabajaron con estos libros de texto encargados por el gobierno no eran adecuados para el nivel de alfabetismo de los estudiantes y por lo tanto no fueron de ayuda en la enseñanza.

KEYWORDS

Emergent Literacy; Materials; Young Learners; Cognitive Development; Literacy; Oral Skills.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Alfabetismo; Materiales; Lectoescritura; Desarrollo Cognitivo; Alfabetización; Habilidades Orales.

INTRODUCTION

Within a context where children from public schools historically exhibit low emergent literacy skills – numbers that declined almost by a 50% after the COVID-19 pandemic (Melo, 2022) – it can be expected that introducing literacy in a foreign language before or at the same time as literacy in the first language is acquired, can be quite problematic (Cameron, 2010; Clark, 2022; Moon, 2008; Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021; Pinter, 2017; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). The issue of low emergent literacy skills in Chilean public schools is directly linked to factors such as socioeconomic status (Balladares & Kankarâs, 2020; Hannon et al, 2020). It is also important to note that this country has the largest average class size among the OECD's countries, with a mean of 28 pupils (OECD, 2020). Class size has been signaled as a negative impact when learning literacy, according to previous research (Guardia & Mendiveo, 2016). Finally, as formerly mentioned, the lack of properly trained staff is a considerable element that has been extensively discussed worldwide in the literature (Inostroza, 2015; Barahona, 2016; Garton et., al. 2011).

1. EMERGENT LITERACY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

For the purposes of this study, literacy will be regarded as the ability to read and write (Clark, 2022), while emergent literacy will refer to the knowledge of letters/alphabet (the process previous to reading and writing).

Teachers must be aware of the children's capacities, both physical and cognitive. Knowledge about the children's abilities in their native language allows teachers to set realistic goals (Pinter, 2017). As previously mentioned in this paper, during their first year of primary school, children are still learning the alphabet; they are not able to read or write more than their names, and they are just being taught the Spanish grapheme-phoneme correspondence of some letters. Expecting them to engage in writing or reading English would exceed their current developmental capabilities (Moon, 2008; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). As Cameron (2010) mentions, having young learners copy words in their notebooks would be physically very demanding: Focusing on doing the correct traces on the paper would leave no time to remember the words. Moreover, a study carried out in 2015 (Ijalba & Obler) found that first language cognitive processes, related to reading, not only influence but also constrain the cognitive processes for reading in a foreign language. Herrera et al., (2022) mentions that, having sufficient literacy skills in the first language promotes literacy learning in a foreign language.

Moon (2008) mentions the problem to introduce literacy in the foreign language before or at the same time that the children acquire their first language literacy, highlighting how it has an

effect over the general agreement in both EFL and ESL contexts: Ideally, children should have a firm basis of the second language oral skills (Escamilla et al., 2022); along with a foundation in their first language literacy, before they begin with second language literacy (ibid). Singleton and Pfenninger (2019) refer to the difficulties faced by children who first learned literacy skills in a foreign language when transferring them to their first language. In contrast, children who first gained the skills in their mother tongue, can easily transfer them to the foreign language. Along those lines, Pinter (2017) states that, when children start learning another language, it is not necessary for them to have fully developed literacy skills. This is confirmed by the Spanish Language section of the National Curriculum for Year 1 (Ministerio de Educacion, 2018) states that having a good command of the mother tongue is the basis of a good education and the key to success at school. Furthermore, the grapheme-to-morpheme correspondence in Spanish is much more transparent, compared to English (Ijalba & Obler, 2015), which contributes to the challenge of acquiring literacy skills in both languages simultaneously. The previously mentioned establishes the importance of having developed literacy in the first language before introducing it in a foreign language (Cameron, 2010; Clark, 2022; Moon, 2008; Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021; Pinter, 2017; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019).

Crucial for foreign language teaching are school books because their quality is extremely important (Carabantes, 2020; Nordlun, 2016) so the books' focus, e.g. on literacy, has a significant influence on how languages are actually taught in practice, particularly in the context previously described, where having useful, quality materials, is vital (Copland & Garton, 2014; Rixon, 2013). However, the textbooks that the government had issued for Year 1 tended to be highly focused on literacy, and presented many activities that were too challenging for children, this will be discussed in more depth in the results part of the paper. Regardless of the literacy issue, task difficulty is an area of particular interest when teaching and assessing young learners (Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021): children need activities that are challenging but achievable (Cameron, 2010; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021).

In consideration of the foregoing, this study reviews relevant research on the fields of first and second language literacy, advocating that when children have not yet developed literacy skills in their first language, they should not be exposed to tasks that demand literacy in a foreign language (Cameron, 2010; Clark, 2022; Moon, 2008; Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021; Pinter, 2017; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). Although counterarguments have been offered by studies such as Dlugosz (2000), the profound differences between the contexts in which such arguments were made, suggest the results are unlikely to be replicable in this country.

2. METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods study highlights two key findings: the importance of developing literacy skills in the first language before learning a foreign language, and the observation that government-issued textbooks place a strong emphasis on literacy. Exploring teachers' perception of the suitability of two English textbooks and one activity book for Year 1, used in public schools in 2017 (Kniveton et., al., 2016) and 2022 (Dunne & Newton, 2021a; Dunne & Newton, 2021b) is the main aim of this mixed methods study. In order to achieve this, an anonymous online survey (APPENDIX A) was created in Google Forms; it was answered by 48 Chilean teachers of English who had taught using the aforementioned textbooks between 2017 and 2023. The survey was posted in two Facebook groups of teachers of English in Chile. Previous to this, the survey was piloted by three teachers who met the criteria. Ultimately, 52 people answered the survey, but only 48 met the criteria. The survey was processed automatically by Google Forms, and further analyzed using spreadsheets and SPSS; open-ended questions were manually categorized and separated into themes: Knowledge of the alphabet/names (questions 6, 7, 9, 10), general literacy (questions 8, 11, 12), and book appropriateness (questions 13-16).

A follow-up interview was applied to 22 of the participants in order to clarify some answers and to delve deeper into the more relevant aspects. Finally, the author of this study also provides a brief analysis of the characteristics of the activities in each textbook, based on relevant literature (Breen, 1987; Tomlinson, 2013; McDonough, 2012; McGrath, 2016). The detailed analysis can be found on APPENDIX B.

3. FINDINGS

This survey found that 65% of the participants believe the textbooks are not suitable for the context, which confirms the results of the textbook analysis. 83% of the teachers surveyed claimed to create or adapt their own materials to improve their lessons, a finding that supports previous research in the context (Carabantes, 2020). The survey also showed that after the pandemic, there was a decline in children's literacy and emergent literacy when starting first grade: the number of students who were not able to write their names doubled, and the number of students who do not know the alphabet or cannot read or write grew by almost 20%, those findings are in accord with those of recent research on this topic (Melo, 2022).

The survey also showed that before the pandemic, more than half of the teachers (60%) had students who did not know the alphabet, or were not able to read or write. One third of their students were not even able to write their own names. After the pandemic, there was a decline in children's

literacy when starting first grade: The number of students who were not able to write their names doubled, and the number of students who do not know the alphabet or cannot read or write grew by almost 20%. This is the reality that teachers face when teaching English in Year 1 which may explain why, in this context, introducing literacy in a foreign language can be challenging or even counterproductive, according to most participants: In fact, 8 out of 10 teachers surveyed believe the textbooks are not appropriate for the context due to the strong literacy focus. It is important to mention that the survey defined literacy as "the ability to read and write".

A higher-than-expected number of participants (35%) believed that teaching literacy in English at the same time students are learning it in Spanish is favorable. However, it is very interesting to observe that 42.5% of these teachers also consider the textbook not appropriate, which is somehow contradictory, considering all the literacy-related tasks that it provides. This discrepancy is further discussed in the interview results.

More than half of the participants believe that teaching literacy in both the first language and a foreign language simultaneously is detrimental to children; those results are consistent with previous research in the topic (Cameron, 2010; Clark, 2022; Moon, 2008; Pinter, 2017; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019).

Regarding the interview, slightly over a third of the teachers (36%) expressed that teaching literacy in the first language at the same time as in a foreign language was not harmful, claiming that both languages complemented each other. Interestingly, two of these teachers said that teaching literacies in both languages at the same time "didn't get in the way as long as you don't ask students to read or write" which raised a red flag about the level of understanding of the question by these teachers. Although during the interview participants were asked to clarify this discrepancy, at first, the teachers insisted in advocating for the fact that teaching both literacies at the same time was harmless, given that students were not asked to read or write in English. These participants seemed to be unaware of the discrepancies in their answer, however, they later recognized the issue, and expressed their opposition to teaching literacy in a foreign language before it was established in the first language.

More contradictory answers were given by other participants that considered the books to be very appropriate, despite their strong literacy focus, but then added comments such as "to learn words in English, children should already know the Spanish alphabet", "teaching both literacies at the same time gets in the way of learning English, I prefer to focus on oral activities" or "I don't include reading or writing in this level because it is too difficult for the children". Despite expressing a preference for oral skills and the avoidance of literacy at this level, as well as recognizing the importance of first language literacy, these participants consider appropriate a textbook that prioritizes literacy, minimizes oral skills, and expects faster progress in foreign language literacy compared to first language literacy. When further inquired about this, two of the teachers mentioned they rarely use the textbook, preferring their own materials, adding that they considered the

textbook to be good because it “seemed to have many activities”, but that they, in fact, had never examined it in detail. The other teacher previously referred to, later acknowledged that the textbook was not appropriate for the level, and recognized it conflicted with her/his teaching beliefs.

From the participants who considered that literacy in English should be introduced after literacy in Spanish, the vast majority (87%) claimed that trying to read or write was highly difficult for the students and it hindered their English learning; some claimed students “took a long time only writing their names”, which is consistent with the literature reviewed in this article (Cameron, 2010; Clark, 2022; Moon, 2008; Pinter, 2017; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). Accordingly, most of these participants expressed focusing on spoken activities, so the children can learn English orally first “since they don’t know how to read or write”, claimed some participants. Others referred specifically to the fact that teaching both literacies at the same time hindered English learning, pointing out that “it interferes, particularly if writing is involved” or “sometimes children get confused with both languages”, for example.

All the teachers quoted in the previous paragraph considered the textbooks to be unsuitable for children at this level. Nine participants claimed that not only the textbooks relied too much on literacy, but the activities were beyond the students’ cognitive abilities (they considered them excessively difficult for the level and skills of the students).

4. LIMITATIONS

This small-scale study focused only on emergent literacy in Year 1, and the suitability of the first-year English textbooks. Hence, there are limitations. This study focused only on the Chilean public schools’ context; results would likely be different in private schools, as literature suggests (Balladares & Kankarås, 2020; Hannon et al, 2020). This research would benefit from a larger sample and a stronger focus on interviews, in order to inquire deeper about teachers’ perception of the textbooks. Only the textbooks provided by the Ministry of Education were considered, and any extra materials created by teachers were excluded.

5. CONCLUSION

Thus far, a number of scholars have highlighted the benefits of introducing foreign language literacy after acquiring it in the first language. This is particularly relevant in a context like Chilean’s public schools, because students who attend public schools usually come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which, as research suggests, correlates with their literacy skills in their first language.

Notwithstanding, none of the points previously mentioned were considered by the government when commissioning the English textbooks. National context, as well as teacher's input, should always be at the core of any public education policy, especially when commissioning textbooks, if we consider how much teachers rely on them. By failing to consider the background in which the textbooks will be used, little advantage could be taken from "the younger the better" motto; a phrase often spread as the "magical recipe" for teaching English to young learners. Acknowledgement of the work it conveys, consideration of contextual factors, and the necessity of materials, infrastructure, and teacher training, must be the very basis on which educational policies regarding teaching English as a foreign language to young learners should be built in order to succeed.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no competing interests.

STATEMENT OF DATA AVAILABILITY

The data, codes and materials that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

REVIEW AND AUTHORS' REPLY

Review: <https://doi.org/10.25189/2675-4916.2025.V6.N2.ID786.R>

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APPENDIX A – SURVEY

LITERACY IN FIRST YEAR PRIMARY

This survey is aimed at teachers that have previously worked with (since 2017), or are currently working in first year primary with the English books from the Ministry of Education, in public schools.

The objective of this questionnaire is to enquire about literacy skills (the ability to read and write) in children of first year primary in public schools.

Your answers are completely anonymous and will only be used for this small study. The survey takes about 5 minutes. You can contact me for further information at my personal email: ramirez.moya.erika@gmail.com

Thank you for your participation.

Erika Ramirez, English teacher.

Click accept to participate.

Section 2 - General Information

This section gathers general information about your profile to ensure you meet our criteria. This information will help us conduct a more in-depth analysis of the data.

1. In which type of educational establishments have you work with first year primary between 2017 and the current year? (you can select more than one)

- ☐ Municipal
☐ Subsidized
☐ Private

2. What is your profession?

Mark only one

- ☐ Primary teacher
☐ Primary teacher with an English diploma
☐ English teacher

3. How many teaching years of experience do you have? *

Mark only one

- ☐ 0 to 2
☐ 2 to 5
☐ 5 to 10
☐ 10 or more

4. How old are you?

Mark only one

- ☐ 20 or 30 y/o
☐ 31 or 40 y/o
☐ 40 or 50 y/o
☐ 51 or more

5. Where in Chile do you live? (consider the place you were living when you taught first year between 2017 and now)

Mark only one

- ☐ North zone (Regiones de Arica y Parinacota, de Tarapacá, de Antofagasta, de Atacama, de Coquimbo)
☐ Central zone (Regiones de Valparaíso, Metropolitana, del Libertador, del Maule, de Ñuble)
☐ South zone (Regiones del Biobío, de La Araucanía, de Los Ríos, de Los Lagos, de Aysén, de Magallanes)

Section 3 - About literacy in children from first grade – open questions

This section enquires about your experience and beliefs about the abilities children may have or lack, to read and write when they are in first year primary.

1. Considering a normal year (pre-pandemic), approximately how many students per class started first year without knowing the full alphabet? (Please respond in the following manner: 3 out of 35):

_____.

2. Considering a normal year (pre-pandemic), approximately how many students per class started first year without knowing how to write their name? (Please respond in the following manner: 3 out of 35)

_____.

3. Considering a normal year (pre-pandemic), approximately how many students per class started first year without knowing how to write or read in general? (Please respond in the following manner: 3 out of 35):

_____.

4. In the current year (post-pandemic), approximately how many students per class started first year without knowing the full alphabet? (Please respond in the following manner: 3 out of 35. If you are not teaching first grade this year please write N/A):

_____.

5. In the current year (post-pandemic), approximately how many students per class started first year without knowing how to write their name? (Please respond in the following manner: 3 out of 35. If you are not teaching first grade this year please write N/A):

_____.

6. In the current year (post-pandemic), approximately how many students per class started first year without knowing how to write or read in general? (Please respond in the following manner: 3 out of 35. If you are not teaching first grade this year please write N/A):

_____.

Section 4 - Personal Perception – open questions

This section enquires about your personal opinion as a teacher, about the use of literacy in first year primary.

1. In your opinion: teaching English at the same time than teaching a child how to read and write (teaching letters and written words) in English is something that helps or hinders the literacy process? Please explain.

_____.

2. In your opinion, how appropriate are the books from the Ministry of Education, to work with primary year students, in regards to its literacy focus?

Mark only one

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Not appropriate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Somewhat appropriate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Appropriate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I haven't used those books to teach first year primary |

3. Please explain your previous answer

_____.

4. In your opinion, how do the books for first year from the Ministry of Education include literacy?

Mark only one

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | In an appropriate way |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | In a minimal way |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | In an excessive way |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I haven't used those books to teach first year primary |

5. Please explain your previous answer

_____.

6. If you would be willing to take part in a further interview, please leave your contact email here (the email will not be made public, nor will be your identity).

_____.

APPENDIX B

Area 1 – Methodology <i>At least examples of 3 pages illustrating each answer are given as examples.</i>		Page Example <i>Kniveton et al., 2016</i>	Page Example <i>Dunne & Newton, 2021a</i>	Page Example <i>Dunne & Newton, 2021b</i>
a) Are the skills covered in an appropriate way for the context?	No. The textbooks have a very strong literacy focus that, as it was previously stated, is not appropriate for this level. In the newer 2021's textbooks there are mostly "listen and point" activities, and the speaking activities are just songs with very complex language.	8, 9, 10, 11	14, 15, 16, 18	All
b) Are the listening skills engaged in an authentic way?	No. The vast majority of the audios are either songs or "listen and point" activities.	18, 20, 21, 22	12, 14, 15, 16, 20	10, 12, 23, 30
c) Are speaking skills encouraged in an authentic way?	No. They are just repetition without much meaning. Besides, there is no recycling amongst units. Very little speaking practice is encouraged in the textbooks.	11, 22	15, 20, 22, 31	22, 24, 28, 36
d) Do the materials encourage the use of classroom language?	Only imperatives such as "listen and point, listen and say"	All	All	All
e) Does the material allow children to develop motor skills?	Yes. Two of the textbooks have tracing practice.	7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 17, 18	No	5, 7, 8, 9
f) Is the material suitable for different learning styles?	No. It doesn't vary much the type of activities	No	No	No
Area 2 – Development and characteristics of the activities <i>At least examples of 3 pages illustrating each answer are given as examples.</i>		Page Example <i>Kniveton et al., 2016</i>	Page Example <i>Dunne & Newton, 2021a</i>	Page Example <i>Dunne & Newton, 2021b</i>
a) Does the material state clear aims and contents?	Very vaguely. Each unit only mentions the goals (listen to a song, identify animals, etc).	4, 16, 28	13, 21, 29	No
b) Does the material present a variety of activities?	Not really. The same type of activities is reused throughout the textbooks: trace, match, point and say, draw, listen and point, listen and repeat.	No	No	No
c) Are there enough activities for each lesson?	Yes, considering there is a student's book and an activity book which has several activities for each unit.	Yes	Yes	Yes
d) Does it provide extra activities?	Yes. Both study books are accompanied by an activity book	n/a	n/a	n/a
e) Are the activities sequenced?	Not really. They don't seem to progress in difficulty, they are very similar in the first and last unit.	No	No	No
f) Is there task-continuity?	No.	No	No	No
g) Does the material give a sense of progression?	Not really. Units are not related to each other; vocabulary is not recycled amongst units.	No	No	No

h) Are the activities challenging enough?	No, they are highly challenging.	No	No	No
i) Does it present activities that are more cognitive demanding than they should be?	Yes, several.	9, 26, 32, 33, 34, 36	10, 22, 47, 48	6, 9, 11, 18
j) Does it present opportunities to revise and recycle vocabulary?	No.	No	No	No
k) Is it flexible? Does it allow teachers to add or adapt the material?	Yes. Teachers can adapt or modify the material.	Yes	Yes	Yes
l) Is the layout clear or cluttered?	Clear in the 2021 versions, but cluttered in the 2016 version.	44, 52, 54, 58	Clear	Clear.
Area 3 – Suitability <i>At least examples of 3 pages illustrating each answer are given as examples.</i>		Page Example <i>Kniveton et al., 2016</i>	Page Example <i>Dunne & Newton, 2021a</i>	Page Example <i>Dunne & Newton, 2021b</i>
a) Is the material age appropriate?	No. The contents are very cognitively demanding for the context.	No	No	No
b) Is the material level appropriate?	No. It appears to expect more of what children may be capable of.	No	No	No
c) Are the illustrations appropriate?	Yes.	10, 11, 12, 13, 17	9, 10, 12, 13	6, 21, 23, 28
d) Is the vocabulary appropriate?	No, there are phrases and words that are beyond students' comprehension. Some lower frequency words are present. Dunne & Newton textbooks attempt to teach many vocabulary items in only one unit, but the activity book reinforces only part of that vocabulary.	30, 32, 34,	9, 10, 54, 68, 69	9, 24, 51, 53
e) Is the vocabulary understandable?	Sometimes. Since it is presented mostly in isolation and with words that are not very common for the children. Songs, however, present vocabulary that is highly complex for students.	30, 32, 34	9, 10, 54, 68, 69	9, 24, 51, 53