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**Public and Free? Still Not Good Enough.**  
**English Language Teaching in South American State Schools**

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**Abstract**

International studies on educational quality highlight the fact that more schooling years without adequate quality control do not necessarily bring about more learning. Based on this premise, this article aims at inspecting the spread of English Language Teaching in countries of the Southern Cone in a critical approach. In order to embark upon this evaluation, it is vital to acknowledge the presence or absence of reliable and valid evaluation tools that may be used for general application. These instruments would account for the level of English proficiency which learners achieve by the end of the secondary school system

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## **Introduction**

Following a worldwide tendency, school systems have grown in the so-called developing world during the last few decades. More students are attending school for more years than ever before. As part of this trend, public education systems in the Southern Cone have expanded their offer of English language to cover wider parts of formerly excluded population. A wide variety of actions have been taken in South American countries to make English instruction more readily available. The measurable positive outcomes of such changes remain, nonetheless, uncertain. Part of the explanation for this possible disconnect between growing schooling and dubious cognitive progress may be provided by educational researcher Lant Pritchett (2013) in his study *The Rebirth of Education*. After conducting extensive research on student performance in the Global South, Pritchett suggests that more schooling without appropriate quality control often leads to lack of basic skills at the time of graduation. Schooling is thus perceived by the author largely as a “mimicry”, where an outer appearance of education is presented, while very little is gained in terms of key intellectual abilities.

A number of newspaper articles featured in the South American media in 2014 brought the issue of English language proficiency to public attention. The news was that an international ranking of English proficiency (Index) placed Argentina in the 15th position worldwide, with the country boasting an alleged “Very High Proficiency level”. Other countries in the region, lagged far behind. Both Argentine neighbours Uruguay (ranked 40th) and Chile (41st) were classified as having “Low Proficiency”. Colombia did not fare better and ranked 42nd, despite recent reforms aimed at upgrading English language teaching nationwide (OECD, 2012). However, a closer look at the methodological procedures used for the elaboration of this ranking raises broader questions on the efficiency of educational systems in general, and of English language instruction in particular.

Independent standardized testing is applied in a number of countries to collect data on educational output and student performance. The most respected of such assessment procedures is probably the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) program. PISA tests are often utilized as an element to compare the efficiency of different national educational systems. This paper attempts to provide a brief overview of educational quality measurement in the Southern Cone, with a focus on English language teaching quality as expressed by quantifiable results.

## **EF English Proficiency Index**

Since 2011, the company Education First (EF) has been releasing a yearly report on the findings of the English language proficiency tests administered online around the world. The results (over 750000 samples in the 2014 edition) are grouped according to test takers’ country of residence. The subsequent EF English

Proficiency Index (EF EPI) ranks countries and territories with a numerical score and a corresponding designation ranging from “Very High Proficiency” to “Very Low Proficiency”.

Educational First claims to be “The world's largest ranking of English skills” (EF, 2014); however, here are a number of factors regarding its data collection which may considerably limit the validity and representativeness of EF EPI as an indicator of the level of English proficiency of the average citizen of a given country.

For one thing, the EF EPI does not offer details on the number of people assessed in each country, --which might pose lesser validity. Neither does it include breakdowns of results by region, city, or province. More importantly, sampling bias seems to be an evident problem in the EF EPI if its results were to be extrapolated to the population of a whole country. For example, the English proficiency tests were taken online, outside any institutional context and without monitoring. The tests were taken by people who chose to click on an internet advertisement. A number of doubts arise regarding the value of EF EPI as an instrument for knowing a country's level of English proficiency. The most obvious one is the fact that since this is an online test linked to an EF advertisement displayed on certain websites, only a fraction of a country's population is likely to find it. The chances of low- income, less educated people coming across the test appear to be relatively scarce (regardless of whether such group represents the majority of a country's population). It also seems unlikely that people whose level of English is insignificant or very low would choose to take the test, leaving out of the sample a potentially large section of a country's population.

### **Schooling and Learning**

The American economist Lant Pritchett published in 2013 the results of a large-scale transnational study on educational development in the developing world. His book *The Rebirth of Education* describes the expansion of school systems in a number of Asian and African countries from the mid-20th century to the early 2010s. The subtitle of the book: *Schooling Ain't Learning*, however, may provide a more revealing insight into a problem faced by numerous educational systems in the Global South. Despite the fact that the author did not focus on, nor did he mention the Argentinean situation, this study aimed at shedding light on, to a certain extent, what that situation is.

Pritchett argues that while school enrolment has grown exponentially in most developing countries in the last decades, educational quality has not matched such progress. Extensive testing on a variety of academic disciplines performed by international researchers on school children seem to indicate that most students do not acquire basic skills in key areas such as numeracy and literacy. Even though there has been a marked tendency in recent time among previously excluded groups to attend school for more years, schools do not seem to be providing students with learning experiences necessary for future development.

According to Pritchett, one central aspect of this issue is the fact that the focus of governments has been in increasing input while neglecting output. In practice, this means that an important number of schools have been opened, more people have enrolled, and longer periods of free, compulsory education have been implemented (input). On the other hand, very little has been done to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning--assessed by means of reliable tests which measure a student's competences (output)--is satisfactory.

Pritchett illustrates what for him constitutes the difference between schooling and learning with an example borrowed from biology: *isomorphic mimicry*. Certain species in nature have a curious survival feature: They outwardly resemble another species, but they do not possess the same capacities as the original one. For example, the scarlet king snake (a harmless animal with no venom) outwardly resembles the eastern coral snake, which is deadly. Thus, the scarlet king snake does not need to be venomous as its colors project the idea of being dangerous. Animals and people equipped with survival instinct do not normally dare to get close to a scarlet king snake, which benefits from looking deadly without bothering to have sharp teeth or poison. This is one example of isomorphic mimicry in which an organism resembles another on the surface and benefits from its physical similarity, while actually lacking its central effectiveness.

Instances of isomorphic mimicry seem to be present in our educational systems too. Different social actors participate in what from the outside looks like education and learning. Governments build and open new schools, which are daily filled with students, teachers, and material supplies. Argentina, following a global trend, has growing numbers of students attending school for an increasing number of years (CEA, 2013). But the result of compulsory secondary schooling is not necessarily educated graduates armed with the intellectual tools and cognitive capacities which education laws claim to promote and that the world demands. As comprehensive tests of students achievement reveal (OECD, 2012), Argentinean high school students tend to rank in the bottom of the list, displaying low ability to solve basic math problems, or to comprehend simple texts, among other essential expected educational outputs.

One possible method for assessing whether an educational system is offering meaningful learning or mere isomorphic mimicry is by means of summative testing. Such approach, if reliably designed, can offer a comprehensive diagnosis of students' general capacities in a specific area of knowledge. This has been the philosophy behind the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the battery of tests introduced in

2000 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). PISA tests aim at measuring 15-year-old students' real educational gains in mathematics, reading and science. Administered on the format of standardized exams in 65 countries and economies in its 2012 edition, PISA tests are sometimes considered as a measure of a country's educational quality. As of 2015, no equivalent large scale comprehensive standardized testing exists for the assessment of English language skills around the world.

### **Current Situation in the Southern Cone**

Having reviewed two general instruments used for the measurement of educational quality and English language proficiency worldwide, we will now turn to consider the situation of public TESOL in the Southern Cone. The purpose of this section is to analyse and compare features of the implementation of English language teaching policies (including teacher training, workload, and strategic plans) in a selection of Spanish Speaking South American countries such as Colombia, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina with a focus on Córdoba province.

Colombia, as other Spanish-speaking South American countries, shares features with nations of the Southern Cone in terms of history, challenges, and deficiencies. Regarding the application of English teaching, this country has opted for a long term programme on English tuition in all levels of education: from nursing to higher education and skills development programmes for adults between the years 2004 and 2019. Furthermore, this array of linguistic policies encompasses the teaching of Spanish as a second language for indigenous groups, English as a second language learning for state-run Spanish speaking schools, and English as a foreign language for learners in bilingual schools. In terms of the explicit nature of the programme, English is perceived as key for competitiveness and improvement. For this aim, there was a diagnostic period (2005-2006), a gradual implementation of more demanding objectives, and, as a goal, having advanced teachers and upper-intermediate graduates for 2019 with continuous assessment and training: There is a proposal for a national evaluation system (2007), immersion programmes for teachers via the internet and TV, as well as classroom continuous tuition.

### **Chile**

Since 2005 Chile has been implementing *El Inglés Abre Puertas* (“English Opens Doors”) programme. One of the highlights of this programme is that it has been designed as a consistent, long-term state policy independent of the political affiliation of the party in power. The programme is not expected to undergo significant changes in the coming years; whether the leaders and political wings are replaced or not. Another highlight is that clear goals both for teachers and students were set (B1 level of proficiency for secondary school graduates and B2 for English teachers). This policy was set up by the president and the Ministry of Education and caters for improvement and radical change in three key areas: governmental projects, students' acquisition, and teachers' training. First, the Chilean Ministry of Education, together with embassies from English-speaking countries, and the support of Fulbright NGO have developed the first steps in the design and implementation of this long-term project. Second, a shift in the approach is given: English is used to teach English; thus, a communicative, functionally-oriented approach is fostered. According to the programme lead advisor, Andrew Sheeran (*Educación en Chile*, 2005), it is vital to seize the class time to use the target language, practise it, and fulfil communicative goals so that learners would acquire the language rather than learning the rules of grammar which brings about no actual benefits. Finally, teachers see in this project a great

deal of change and opportunities. One of them is the access to scholarships such as *Un Semestre en el Extranjero* (“A Semester Abroad”). This is a set of state-paid grants for students at English language and pedagogy teaching training courses that enables them to spend six months in an English-speaking country. Another resource which has been made available is continuous coaching and support through the “*red*” (a network of English teaching mentors, workshops and virtual training). Likewise, teachers in charge of English tuition who have a low command of English language have access to “It’s my Turn”, which has been specifically designed for these teachers and students learning simultaneously.

### **Uruguay**

Uruguay also takes part in the implementation of ESL in state-run schools. Uruguayan legislators passed a law that would create Ceibal project in the year 2010. This ambitious project would encompass a great deal of investment in technology, technology-oriented material, online tuition, virtual platforms, and on-line training for teachers of different areas. Likewise, an ambitious project from Ceibal was launched in cooperation with the British Council. According to official sources, “The Ceibal English project began as a small-scale pilot (proof of concept) in July 2012, when we started teaching 50 remote lessons each week in 20 urban schools outside Montevideo, using teachers based in Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, delivering interactive lessons in real time using videoconferencing technology.” (Ceibal en Inglés. 2013). Proficient ESL/EFL teachers overseas use high speed broad band, a wide range of resources, and pre-arranged lesson plans to teach over 4,000 lessons a week in virtually all primary level schools in a remote fashion (Ceibal, 2014). This resourceful project depicts one of the educational priorities in terms of investment in attaining English proficiency.

### **Argentina**

Argentina poses no exception in terms of its neighbouring countries' tendencies. Regarding the proficiency level, this country has a relatively low mark. Only a self-reported 6% of the population considers themselves communicatively competent in English (Sociedad, 2013). For the sake of contrast, other figures (Ethnologue 2015) in a random number of countries are: Israel 84 %, Finland 70 %, Germany 64 %, Jordan 45 %, Italy 34 %, and Chile 9 %. This seems to contrast the EF ranking which places Argentina 15th globally, within the high proficiency group. In line with the republican system of political organization, individual provinces decide on internal issues. Thus, the number of years in which English takes part in compulsory instruction varies significantly, from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 14. Furthermore, English lessons take between 50 to 120 minutes per week (OECD 2012). In all cases, the length of weekly English instruction falls short of the recommended minimum amount of 150 minutes (ACTFL 2015). Another aspect is class size: While Argentina has as an average of 27 students per class in primary school and 29 in secondary schools, the recommended size is 15 for an ESL class (ACTFL 2015). In accordance with the

global tendency of implementing and increasing the number of years of English lessons in primary and secondary schools, Argentina has likewise had its evolution. According to Bein (2011), English was administered as any other language spoken by English speaking immigrants' children's schools during the 19th century, together with other languages during the 20th century, and, by the end of it, in an almost exclusive fashion. Thus, the decision to foster one or more foreign language(s) is subdued to political, economic, and global issues.

### **Córdoba, Argentina**

Córdoba Province is the Argentine district that has been explored the most for the sake of this article; consequently, more facts and analysis will be described concerning primary, secondary, and higher education programmes. First, the Ministry of Education announced in the year 2010 the creation of "Programa Jornada Extendida" (A two-hour- extra-class per day). Among a number of areas of study, one day a week is devoted to an English workshop with an aural-auditory approach to the teaching of English. The plan envisaged the extension of *Jornada Extendida* to all schools by the year 2015. Like Uruguayan programme Ceibal, the Cordoba Ministry of Education has developed a pilot programme with IBM that offers a programme called Reading Companion in 50 primary level schools. This programme is used by students to try out pronunciation, grammar, and reading comprehension (Jornada Extendida, 2011). Jornada extendida project may sound appealing for ESL teachers, but it was not set up without a heavy load of criticism: Teachers of English, English language teaching trainees, and training centres resented and complained about the fact that the vast majority of people in charge of this new kind of tuition were not English teachers, nor primary level teachers with the minimum required command of the foreign language (La Voz, 2011). Second, all secondary schools in Córdoba have ESL in its six years, ranging from two to four hours a week. Due to lack of trained teachers, only a minority of teachers who have completed the four or five year programmes take over classes. What is more, 15 % per cent of people in charge have only completed secondary instruction (La Voz, 2011). Third, the lack of teachers who have undergone Practicum (supervised practical teaching practice) not only affects primary and secondary levels: The absence of an objective chart and unified criteria to select teachers, together with a pressing necessity to fulfil vacancies quickly, may have allowed workers with little training in English and scarce or inexistent knowledge on methodology to take over subjects in the higher education system. These three current issues in the three levels bring about the notion of *Isomorphic Mimicry* (Pritchett, 2013) as parents, learners, citizens, and political candidates seem to rejoice in the existence of English in the course programme.

### Conclusion

Universal public education has experienced remarkable expansion in the Southern Cone. Primary and secondary school are within reach of social groups which generations ago could hardly have had access to this valuable element for social mobility. Among the contents taught by public schools in the region, the presence of English language has been steadily becoming more common and extensive. Despite some encouraging signs, ensuring quality education seems so far to be an exceedingly challenging task still pending fulfillment. In order to achieve such objective, it seems necessary to systematically diagnose in a reliable manner the results obtained by schooling, measured by students' demonstrable capacities. Just as PISA tests reveal students' abilities to apply knowledge they should have acquired during their educational trajectory, statewide standardized exams of English language proficiency could provide relevant insights into the effectiveness of massive learning processes.

One step to assess real gains in terms of English competences developed at school is the independent administration of a standardized summative exam for students who are about to finish their secondary education. If conducted on a representative scale, such actions could offer a picture of the level of English proficiency students have achieved after a certain number of years of instruction. The data to be collected could be focused on those students who report not having received private English instruction outside the classes at public school. An example of such attempt to gather local information on English proficiency has been designed by one of the authors of this work (Vergara) and is being considered for finance by the Argentinian National Institute of Research (CONICET).

The role of education in enhancing both individual opportunities for progress and national development is widely known. In the context of an increasingly competitive and highly integrated global economy, English language appears as a necessary part of the educational repertoire public schools have to equip their students with. Considering that for many children and adolescents, private education is not affordable, ensuring that they receive a high quality service at public schools is a crucial factor in shaping the scope of opportunities they will have available upon graduation.

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