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Uruguay Supporting Globalization and Access through English Language Education Policy

Dr. Valeriana Colon¹

With a comparatively small population and a little over half the country's population living in the capitol city (The World Factbook: Uruguay, 2019), connectivity internationally and access nationally are important to Uruguay. According to Uruguay's Commission on Language Policy, English language legislation emerged from national demand to know English for global trade, technology, and academia (Administración Nacional de Educación Pública [ANEP], 2008). Public dialog often depicts the universalization of English as a highly valued commodity essential for student success (Canale, 2011). An example of this is the historic use of internationally recognized standardized exams as a means to gain international mobility (Canale, 2011). In this way, English language education policy serves a broader socio-political purpose in shaping the potential of a society. By understanding the history of language policy in Uruguay, the expansion of policy in recent years, and the response to issues of access- one can better understand how legislative goals reflect national values and the prospects of policy supported language programs.

Policy Background

According to Behares (2009), the Common Education Decree of 1877 was the first formal policy to address language education in Uruguay. The focus was on supporting native [Spanish] language instruction while limiting the use of minority languages (Oroño, 2011). During this period of time, foreign language instruction existed in middle school education with French, Italian, and English (Canale, 2011). In 1996, English as a foreign language became mandatory in middle school education (Canale, 2011). Canale (2011) attributes this to European imperialism causing English to be viewed as a necessity with sociocultural prestige. In 2008, the General Education Law and the Commission on Language Policy enacted legislation to formally promote societal and linguistic diversity (Behares, 2009). Chapter I positions quality education as a fundamental human right guaranteed to all inhabitants throughout life (General Education Law, 2008, Article 1). This provision supports Uruguay's free primary through university education, resulting in a relatively high literacy rate and educational attainment (The World Factbook: Uruguay, 2019). Chapter VI recognizes native linguistic varieties and supports multilingual education through second language and foreign language instruction (General Education Law, 2008, Article 40 § 5)

It could be argued that this progression in legislation to linguistic inclusivity is indicative of a country defining its national identity and priorities. Giroux (1994) urges educators to understand identity formation in the context of globalization and technology, so that students can learn how their personal concerns relate to the dominant narrative of national identity, economic privilege,

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and individual authority. Behares (2009) warns that the implementation of previous language policies in Uruguay has been inconsistent with isolated decision-making and low accountability. Canale (2011) stresses the importance of congruency between policy, curriculum, instruction, and real-world application.

Expanding Policy

In implementing the General Education Law of 2008 and guidelines from the Commission on Language Policy, ANEP created a goal called, *Uruguay Plurilingüe 2030*. Uruguay Plurilingüe 2030 aims for all public high school students to achieve a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) proficiency level of B2 upon graduation by the year 2030 (Dubini, Rodriguez & Thessing, 2019). To reach this goal ANEP universalized English language education starting at the fourth grade with an intermediary achievement goals of a CEFR proficiency level of A1 by sixth grade; developed virtual instruction through a program called *Plan Ceibal* to increase qualified teaching capacity; and created the National Reference Curriculum Framework for second language instruction to provide consistent quality (Dubini, Rodriguez & Thessing, 2019). While these initiatives effectively support students in urban schools, they are not suitable for the remaining half of the country's student population in rural schools. Plan Ceibal cannot address the need for qualified language teachers since many rural schools have no or unreliable internet connectivity. The issue is further compounded by the multi-grade classes of rural schools, which makes pacing the National Reference Curriculum a challenge.

Addressing Issues of Access

The Commission on Language Policy acknowledges the differences in achievement and resources of students by socioeconomic status and region (ANEP, 2008). There is a growing need for qualified public education teachers across subject areas and locations in Uruguay, with English ranking the highest in number of teachers practicing without a degree (Canale, 2011). Although all degreed teachers receive English language training and are expected to reach a CEFR proficiency level of B1 upon graduation (Dubini, Rodriguez & Thessing, 2019), many rural teachers have limited language skills.

Chapter II Article 34 of the General Education Law of 2008 speaks to education of students in rural areas. It ensures, as a minimum, compulsory education (nine years) – which includes foreign language education starting in fourth grade. *Inglés sin límites* was created to meet the needs of rural students and address legislative responsibilities (Dubini, Rodriguez & Thessing, 2019). In the *Tema de discusión en Plataforma CREA ISL*, moderated by Rodriguez and Cohen (2019) rural educators stated:

It has really been an innovation for our school, as it is rural and does not have a videoconferencing screen, and our children graduate to secondary school without notions of this Second Language. It is so important in the world in which we have to live. Thank you!! (V. Colon, Trans., see Appendix Comment 1)

Inglés sin límites is a program that is allowing the students of our rural schools to appropriate knowledge of a second language in a playful and fun way. Educational

communities also seem to be "proud" that English is taught in their schools. (V. Colon, Trans., see Appendix Comment 2)

The program can be described as modern frontier education with a student-centered English correspondence course. The curriculum is designed by bilingual subject matter experts who frequently visit rural schools to observe its effectiveness and assess needs.

My first impression of the program is positive, a challenge, but the way it is implemented is accessible to the teacher and students who are very motivated in the face of the tasks. In my case it is a learning together and a search which constants of new tools that give us the possibilities to continue advancing together with the use of sheets, videos, dictionary etc. (V. Colon, Trans., see Appendix Comment 3)

The experiences are successful as they [students] are motivated by the material. To this I added in a playful way; We put together with the children, a domino of images to relate the material to words and listen to it with a separate application to achieve good pronunciation. Together we speak the names of animals; colors; numbers; greetings; food, etc. through the songs. We interact between the visual, auditory, and written to own the foreign language. Good progress has been successfully achieved and is an interesting opportunity for students and the teacher. Thank you. (V. Colon, Trans., see Appendix Comment 4)

Robust with videos, flash cards, and a workbook that are mailed to teachers, the program is designed to support the co-construction of skills as teacher and students learn together (Dubini, Rodriguez & Thessing, 2019).

I don't have much knowledge of English and I'm learning alongside them. They repeatedly appropriate concepts faster. I thought it was great that they can share with everyone, what they've learned in English. (V. Colon, Trans., see Appendix Comment 5)

As I was going through the animals, I had forgotten the word for sheep and a four-year-old student told me "sheep, teacher". (V. Colon, Trans., see Appendix Comment 6)

Future of the Inglés sin límites Program

The first year of the Inglés sin límites Program has produced notable strides in closing the access gap between rural and urban schools. Numerous rural schools volunteered to participate in the program. Program staffing increased to meet the demand and program needs. A year's worth of curriculum was designed, published, and distributed to rural teachers. The *Padrinos* element was conceived, approved, and piloted to provide rural teachers with mentorship and English language modeling. Rural teachers met with program staff in their classrooms, regional meetings, and camps.

The second and third years of Inglés sin límites seek to expand the program's strategic plan by using backwards design, originating from the legislative goals to inform plan priorities. Revised curriculum mapping would then connect legislative goals with practical implementation. An assessment plan will be used with existing and new data to understand student and programmatic achievement and inform a process of continual improvement. Curriculum will be revised and

new curriculum created to reach the next level of language proficiency; address needs for differentiation by multi-grade classrooms and varying English proficiency students; and provide additional opportunities for authentic language modeling for linguistic support.

Will Inglés sin límites help rural students meet the legislative goal of Uruguay Plurilingüe 2030? Will Uruguay Plurilingüe 2030 and a population of second language speakers support globalization and prosperity for Uruguay? Numerous factors inform the answers to those questions. Participation in the global marketplace is a complex phenomenon. From this review of English language policy, two things are certain (1) Uruguay has progressive and some might argue aggressive education policy, and (2) rural teachers and students appreciate equitable access to education.

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Appendix

Original Spanish Texts

General Education Law of 2008 (Chapter 1. Article 1) De la educación como derecho humano fundamental- Declárase de interés general la promoción del goce y el efectivo ejercicio del derecho a la educación, como un derecho humano fundamental. El Estado garantizará y promoverá una educación de calidad para todos sus habitantes, a lo largo de toda la vida, facilitando la continuidad educativa.

General Education Law of 2008 (Chapter VI. Article 40 § 5) La educación lingüística tendrá como propósito el desarrollo de las competencias comunicativas de las personas, el dominio de la lengua escrita, el respeto de las variedades lingüísticas, la reflexión sobre la lengua, la consideración de las diferentes lenguas maternas existentes en el país (español del Uruguay, portugués del Uruguay, lengua de señas uruguaya) y la formación plurilingüe a través de la enseñanza de segundas lenguas y lenguas extranjeras.

General Education Law of 2008 (Chapter II Article 34) De la educación formal en el medio rural- La educación formal en el medio rural tendrá por objetivo asegurar, como mínimo, la educación obligatoria de las personas, teniendo en cuenta las especificidades del medio en que se desarrolla.

Comment 1: Realmente ha sido una innovación para nuestra escuela, ya que es rural y no cuenta con pantalla de videoconferencia, y nuestros niños egresaban a secundaria sin nociones de esta Segunda Lengua, tan importante en el mundo en que nos toca vivir. GRACIAS!!

Comment 2: Inglés sin Límites es un programa que le está permitiendo a los alumnos de nuestras escuelas rurales apropiarse del conocimiento de una segunda lengua de forma lúdica y divertida. Además se percibe que las comunidades educativas sienten "orgullo" que en sus centros educativos se enseñe inglés.

Comment 3: Mi impresión frente al programa es positiva, todo un desafío, pero de la forma en que está implementado es accesible para el maestro y los alumnos que se muestran muy motivados frente a las consignas. En mi caso es un aprender juntos y una búsqueda constante de nuevas herramientas que nos brinden las posibilidades de seguir avanzando en forma conjunta con el uso de láminas, videos, diccionario etc.

Comment 4: Las experiencias son exitosas ya que se encuentran motivados con el material. A esto le agregué en forma lúdica; armamos con los niños un dominó de imágenes para relacionarlo con la palabra y la escucha del mismo con una aplicación aparte para lograr una buena pronunciación. Conjuntamente oralizamos los nombres de animales; colores; números; saludos; alimentos, etc. A través de las canciones. Estamos interactuando entre lo visual - auditivo y escrito propia de la lengua extranjera. Se han logrado satisfactoriamente buenos avances y es una interesante oportunidad para los alumnos y el maestro. Gracias.

Comment 5: No tengo mucho conocimiento de Inglés y estoy aprendiendo junto a ellos. En reiteradas oportunidades se apropiaron de un concepto más rápido. Me pareció genial que ellos puedan compartir con todos, algunos estudian inglés particular.

Comment 6: Al estar repasando los animales, me había olvidado como se decía oveja y una alumna de cuatro años me dijo se dice sheep, teacher.