

Conditions for the teaching of English as a foreign language to very young learners in Chile

Condiciones para la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera a aprendientes de edad temprana en Chile

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Recibido:

07 de julio, 2025

Aceptado:

01 de marzo, 2026

Publicado:

08 de octubre, 2026

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Como citar

Scarlota, N., & Cerda-Oñate, K. (2026). Conditions for the teaching of English as a foreign language to very young learners in Chile. *Revista De Estudios Y Experiencias En Educación*, 25, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.21703/rexe.v25i.3307>

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the conditions for teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) to very young learners in public schools in Chile. Through document analysis and reflexive thematic qualitative analysis, the policies for personnel, methods and materials policy, and curriculum from Kaplan and Baldauf's model were explored concerning the necessary and sufficient conditions related to (a) teacher training, (b) suitable teaching methodologies and materials and (c) foreign language curricula aligned with native language curricula (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović 2023; Rixon, 2013). As for teacher training, the personnel policy was found to be insufficient for the Chilean school system requirements. Concerning suitable teaching methodologies and materials, although methodologies were pertinent, they did not align with the first language curriculum, and the materials were hard to access. Regarding the foreign language curricula and their alignment with the native curricula, there was an incongruency in the development of language skills. The results from the analysis shed light on the importance of establishing policies that provide adequate conditions for teaching English as a foreign language to very young learners in Chile and internationally.

KEYWORDS

Very young learners; EFL policy; language planning and policy; early childhood education.

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene por objetivo analizar las condiciones para la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) a aprendientes de edad temprana en la escuela pública chilena. Por medio de un análisis cualitativo, basado en análisis documental y análisis temático reflexivo, las políticas de personal, métodos y materiales y currículum se exploraron con base en el modelo de Kaplan and Baldauf's. Específicamente, se analizaron las condiciones necesarias y suficientes relacionadas con (a) la formación de docentes; (b) las metodologías y materiales adecuados para la enseñanza-aprendizaje de ILE y (c) la alineación del currículum de lenguas extranjeras con el currículum de lengua materna (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović 2023; Rixon, 2013). En cuanto a la formación de profesores, las políticas de personal observadas resultan insuficientes para los requerimientos de la escuela chilena. Respecto de metodologías y materiales ad hoc, se observó que, si bien las metodologías son pertinentes, no se alinean con el currículum de lengua materna y, además, los materiales son de difícil acceso. Acerca del currículum de lengua extranjera y la alineación con el currículum de lengua materna, se apreció una incongruencia en el desarrollo de las habilidades lingüísticas. Los resultados del análisis muestran la importancia de establecer políticas públicas que garanticen condiciones adecuadas para la enseñanza del ILE a aprendientes de edad temprana en Chile y en otros países del mundo.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Aprendientes de edad temprana; políticas de enseñanza ILE; políticas de planificación lingüística; educación inicial.

1. Introduction

1.1 The concept of *very young learners*

In 2014, Ellis published a note on the multiple meanings of the concept of a *young learner* found in the literature of teaching English as a foreign language (from now on, EFL). The author indicated that the concept of a *young learner* had been blurred due to the increasingly early teaching of English globally as a lingua franca to children and adolescents. Ellis pointed out that the term *young learner* was often used in EFL materials and publications to refer to children aged five to seventeen. In other words, a *young learner* could be any underage learner of EFL.

Due to the conceptual ambiguity observed in the literature, Ellis (2014) proposed the concepts of (a) *Early years* (2 to 5-year-olds); (b) *Primary* (6 to 10/11-year-olds); (c) *Lower secondary* (11 to 14-year-olds); (d) *Upper secondary* (15 to 17-year-olds); *University* (18-25) to delineate the concept of *young learners* (p. 77). Although the distinction Ellis proposed is relevant and based on the ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education, 2011), the current transition of the Chilean school system makes it difficult to be guided by these educational levels¹. For the same reason, in this paper, we will follow what Reilly and Ward (1997) proposed regarding the concept of *very young learners*. The authors define the concept concerning (a) compulsory schooling and (b) the acquisition of literacy, both criteria that are aligned with the Chilean educational system and the distinction between early childhood education and primary school. Along the same lines, Slattery and Willis (2001) distinguish *young learners* from *very young learners* based on the age of the learners. Children under 7 are considered *very young learners*, and children older than 7 and up to 12 are considered *young learners*. For the purposes of this paper, Reilly and Ward's (1997) and Slattery and Willis's (2001) definitions of *very young learners* will be followed, but with a modification in the age range. Specifically, *very young learners* will be considered as pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children in the transitional level of early childhood education², namely, girls and boys 4 to 6 years of age (Ayuda MINEDUC, n.d.; Ministerio de Educación, 2017), who, according to the Chilean curriculum for early education, are still in a very incipient stage of the literacy process (MINEDUC, 2018).

1.2 Teaching English to *very young learners*³

In 2013, the British Council published a report based on a survey of English language teaching professionals in 64 countries on public policies and practices in teaching EFL to primary school students. The document mentions the explosive growth of English language teaching in primary education in the last thirty years and the trend of starting EFL teaching-learning in the preschool cycle. Specifically, the report included a chapter on teaching EFL in the *early years*. It was informed that 14 of the 64 participating countries had already included English as a compulsory subject in public early childhood education⁴. Notably, many EFL professionals indicated that although the teaching of EFL was not mandatory in preschool education in their countries, more than half of the participants mentioned that the subject of EFL was part of the initial cycle.

The report also emphasizes the diversity between and within the public policies for teaching EFL to *very young learners* in the 64 countries surveyed. Specifically, Ellis (2013) indicates that "children are receiving language learning experiences of varying types, quality, and quantity⁵" (p.2). The report also warns that these decisions are not always supported by public policies on initial teacher training and teacher professional development, both at the level of the foreign language and teaching methodologies, as we will discuss later in this paper.

¹Although not yet implemented in practice, the General Education Law (20.370) of 2009 changed how educational levels are categorized. Namely, the primary cycle, which incorporated grades 1st to 8th, with their respective first and second cycles, was simplified to only 1 cycle from 1st to 6th grade. This also meant that the secondary cycle, which includes 9th to 12th grades, was amplified to include 7th to 12th grades and to incorporate 2 cycles, namely the first cycle from 7th to 10th grade and a second cycle from 11th to 12th grade.

²The transitional level in Chile refers to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten as they are the transitional grades from early childhood education to primary education.

³For reviews of the impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in a range of international contexts, see Copland et al., 2014; Copland et al., 2024; Enever, 2018; Garton et al., 2011; Nunan, 2003; Zein, 2017; Zein & Coady, 2021).

⁴Data from private schools is also reported but have not been included in this article, as this particular study will focus on Chilean public schools, since 35.4% of learners in Chile attend this type of establishment (Centro de Estudios, 2023). Students from these schools typically present the lowest English proficiency test results (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2017).

⁵Emphasis ours.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Conditions for the teaching of EFL to *very young learners*⁶

The British Council report also highlighted the lack of necessary and sufficient conditions to promote the early teaching of EFL in many of the contexts surveyed (Ellis, 2013). Many EFL professionals reported that the conditions for learning and teaching English were insufficient and inadequate since teachers lacked initial teacher training and there were no professional development opportunities for teachers once they entered the school system. In this same venue, Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović (2023) and Rixon (2013) underscore the conditions to make pre-primary foreign language (henceforth, FL) programs successful, (a) sufficient teacher training, (b) ongoing teacher development, (c) suitable teaching methodologies and materials, (d) positive attitudes and dispositions to FL program, (e) FL curricula aligned with L1 curricula and (f) strong coordination and support between school and home learning. Thus, a set of at least six conditions must be met to provide good quality teaching of foreign languages in any context. In the case of this study, we will focus on (a) sufficient teacher training, (b) suitable teaching methodologies and materials, and (e) FL curricula aligned with L1 curricula.

2.2 Conditions for the teaching of *very young learners* in Chile

As previously noted, the literature indicates that *very young learners* around the globe are receiving EFL language learning experiences that are very diverse and sometimes do not meet the necessary conditions for the provision of foreign language education (Ellis, 2013; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023; Rixon, 2013). In Chile, learning a foreign language, either English or French, became compulsory from the second cycle of primary education in 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1996)⁷. The reform also included the compulsory teaching a FL at the secondary level. Thus, teaching a FL became compulsory from the fifth grade of primary education to the twelfth grade of secondary education in Chile. Teaching foreign languages at the preschool level and during the first cycle of primary education⁸ was left to the schools' discretion. Shortly after that, in 1998, the Ministry of Education, MINEDUC, focused solely on the teaching and learning of one foreign language, English, thus excluding French as a FL from the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1998).

Since 1998, the policies on teaching EFL at the primary level have undergone two modifications⁹, 2009¹⁰ and 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2009, 2012). Furthermore, Chile has attempted to implement EFL into the curriculum at younger levels more provisionally. First, providing a suggested curriculum¹¹ for 1st to 4th graders in 2013 and shortly thereafter promoting the use of the curriculum by supplying schools with materials to incentivize the introduction of EFL for young learners (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Regarding the preschool cycle, although the teaching of EFL is not mandatory, as mentioned above, proposals were introduced by the Chilean Ministry of Education for the teaching of EFL in the transition cycle of early childhood education in 2019 (MINEDUC, 2019a, 2019b). Given the recent creation of these documents, there is little research on the documents and their implementation, nor has there been much research in general conducted about teaching English to *very young learners* in Chile¹².

In this sense, Chile has a "hard" policy of EFL from 5th to 12th grade and a "soft" policy of EFL from pre-kindergarten to 4th grade. The complexity of the two policies working concurrently allows for both the centralization and localization of EFL policies simultaneously, depending on the grade level. EFL policy from 5th to 12th grade is centralized with ministerial textbooks and a curriculum, while the soft policies allow each institution to make curricular decisions regarding the teaching and learning of EFL for young and *very young learners*. Furthermore, a

⁶For reviews of the impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in a range of international contexts, see Copland et al., 2014; Copland et al., 2024; Enever, 2018; Garton et al., 2011; Nunan, 2003; Zein, 2017; Zein & Coady, 2021).

⁷The second cycle of primary school at that time was from 5th grade to 8th grade. Therefore, children from 10 to 14 years of age. However, as mentioned previously, the organization of primary and secondary school changed with the General Education Law 20.370 in 2009.

⁸The first cycle of primary school refers to grades 1 to 3.

⁹At the time of writing this manuscript, there has been a new proposal by the MINEDUC to update the EFL curriculum, proposing compulsory EFL from 1st to 12th grade.

¹⁰This curriculum was never implemented in schools.

¹¹The suggested curricula are not legal mandates as they have not been approved and revised by the National Education Council (Consejo Nacional de Educación). For a norm to be created it must be established by the MINEDUC and approved by the National Education Council (Cox, 2011).

¹²See Fuentealba et al. 2019, Werlinger & Inostroza, 2024.

strong push for opening access to English in schools occurred in 2013 with the distribution of textbooks using the proposed 1st to 4th-grade curriculum; however, decisions are still handled at the institutional level. Unfortunately, without proper conditions for the provision of the teaching and learning EFL, unanticipated outcomes can occur with "soft" policies because the language is seen as a commodity, creating demand for parents willing to search for institutions that provide an early EFL start, thus enlarging the inequality gap concerning the foreign language¹³ (Enever, 2020).

The literature on teaching EFL to *young learners*¹⁴ in Chile reports phenomena similar to those reported by Rixon (2013) and Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023) on teaching English to *very young learners* globally. For example, (a) the lack of teachers specialized in teaching EFL to *young learners* (Abrahams & Silva Ríos, 2017; Lizasoain, 2021; Rojas *et al.*, 2013), (b) the absence of professional development programs for novice EFL teachers in the school system (Barahona, 2016; Toledo Sandoval & González Hermosilla, 2016), and (c) a lack of resources (Inostroza, 2015). In sum, research warns of a lack of necessary and sufficient conditions for teaching EFL to *very young learners* in Chile (Lizasoain *et al.*, 2016).

While these works describe problematic conditions, none have actually used a framework to analyze the existing conditions for teaching EFL to *very young learners*. In this work, and based on Rixon's (2013) and Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović's (2023) proposals about creating conditions for the teaching of English to *very young learners*, we will use Kaplan and Baldauf's language-in-education planning framework (2003) to understand the current language ecology of *very young learners* based on the proposed EFL curriculum for *very young learners* by the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC, 2019), along with other normative and informative documents, which will be described in section 3.

Notably, Kaplan and Baldauf's language-in-education planning framework is directly related to language learning and teaching decisions necessary for developing effective language education programs that provide sufficient conditions. The language-in-education framework is constructed of seven overlapping and interconnected policy components: (a) access policy, (b) personnel policy, (c) curriculum policy, (d) methods and materials policy, (e) resourcing policy, (f) community policy, (g) and evaluation policy. This study will focus on three of the seven policies for *very young learners* in Chile. We will discuss the (a) curriculum policy, (b) personnel policy, and (c) methods and materials policy for teaching EFL to *very young learners* in Chile. Namely, curriculum policy outlines the goals of language teaching and learning, its purpose, and the rationale behind language acquisition. Personnel policy encapsulates where teachers come from (e.g., second language teacher education programs) and how they are trained (e.g., professional development). Methods policy is related to the approaches or methodologies to language teaching (e.g., total physical response), and materials pertain to the teaching and learning resources used (e.g., storybooks). The following sections will refer to these three dimensions in the proposed preschool curriculum for teaching EFL in Chile and Kaplan and Baldauf's (2003) language-in-education planning framework, to assess the conditions for teaching and learning of English in Chile based on Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović's (2023) and Rixon's (2013) proposals.

3. Methods

3.1 Curriculum, personnel, materials, and methods policies

As previously stated, to be successful in the teaching and learning of English to *very young foreign language learners*, certain conditions must be met, (a) sufficient teacher training, (b) ongoing teacher development, (c) suitable teaching methodologies and materials, (d) positive attitudes and dispositions to FL program, (e) FL curricula aligned with L1 curricula and (f) strong coordination and support between school and home learning (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023; Rixon, 2013). To explore and discuss these conditions, a corpus including normative and informative documents from different institutions of the Chilean State will be analyzed. Concerning this corpus, the focus will be placed on the suggested curricular documents for the teaching and learning of EFL for prekindergarten and kindergarten from the Chilean Ministry of Education. This corpus documents will be

¹³Results from standardized tests in Chile are usually biased based on students' socio-economic groups (SEG), with students from high and medium-high SEGs more likely to achieve stipulated Common European Framework of Standards, whereas students from medium-low and low SEGs are less likely to achieve the same levels of English (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2018).

¹⁴Literature from young learners was used as there are currently only 2 studies conducted on very young learners in Chile (Fuentealba *et al.*, 2019; Werlinger & Inostroza 2024).

analyzed in light of Kaplan and Baldauf's language-in-education planning framework (2003) and its dimensions of (a) curriculum policy, (b) personnel policy, and (c) methods and materials policy for teaching EFL. The methodology for the analysis will be document analysis, which consists of selecting authentic, credible, meaningful, and representative documents (Morgan, 2020); furthermore, we will use reflexive thematic qualitative analysis to make sense of the data found in the documents (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the table below, we present the analyzed corpora.

Table 1.

Corpora for the study

Document	Type	Author	Year	Relevance
Decreto 40	Normative - decree	Ministerio de Educación	1996	Curriculum policy Personnel policy
Decreto 634	Normative - decree	Ministerio de Educación	1998	Curriculum policy Personnel policy
Ley 20370	Normative - law	Ministerio de Educación	2009	Curriculum policy Personnel policy
Decreto 439	Normative - decree	Ministerio de Educación	2012	Curriculum policy Personnel policy
Decreto Exento 1126	Normative - decree	Ministerio de Educación	2017	Curriculum policy Personnel policy
Foreign Language English: Proposed curriculum (Prekinder) (Idioma Extranjero Inglés: Propuesta curricular Prekinder)	Normative - curriculum	Ministerio de Educación	2019	Curriculum policy Methods policy Materials policy
Foreign Language English: Proposed curriculum (Idioma Extranjero Inglés: Propuesta curricular Kinder)	Normative - curriculum	Ministerio de Educación	2019	Curriculum policy Methods policy Materials policy
Oferta Definitiva de Carreras, Ponderaciones, Vacantes Regulares y PACE - Proceso 2024	Informative - brochure	Departamento de Evaluación, Medición y Registro Educacional, Universidad de Chile (DEMRE)	2023	Personnel policy

Source. Authors based on documents from Ministerio de Educación (1996, 1998, 2009, 2017, 2019a, 2019b) and DEMRE (2023).

4. Results

4.1 Curriculum policy - Appropriate content: taking into consideration developmental stages

According to Phillips (1993), Zein (2017), and Pinter (2017), tasks for *very young learners* should differ from those for young learners and teenagers; students are at different developmental stages, and what works for one level may not work with another. In this sense, Butler (2005) and Mourão & Ellis (2020) indicate that governments need to consider developmental factors in their curricula and suggest appropriate activities, being aware of what children can and cannot do at different ages; for example, reading and writing. A detailed curriculum with a research-based framework can help orient appropriate pedagogies for *very young learners* (Ng, 2013).

Nevertheless, reviewing the Chilean curriculum proposed for learning English as a foreign language in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, we can observe that it does not align with the developmental expectations of children attending school in Chile. Markedly, the curriculum for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten includes tasks associated with reading and writing abilities as part of learning English as a foreign language. However, if we look at the curriculum for Spanish as a native language, which is *Lenguaje y Comunicación* (Spanish Language

and Communication), it specifies that students learn to read during their first year of primary school, and they only begin to develop phonological awareness and learn the alphabet in preschool (MINEDUC, 2018a, 2018b). Particularly, the curriculum for the primero básico states, *"In first grade, children acquire knowledge of the written code and learn to read and comprehend texts independently. Phonological awareness is addressed mainly in first grade and consists of understanding that words are made up of sounds and they are broken down into smaller units, such as syllables and phonemes"*¹⁵ (MINEDUC, 2018, p. 295). Hence, Chilean children cannot read in preschool, yet the EFL proposed curriculum assumes otherwise. For example, the suggested curriculum for very young learners indicates that *"(...) they will read some text in English (reading comprehension) and answer questions or perform some other tasks in written form to demonstrate their understanding of what they have read (written expression)."*¹⁶ (MINEDUC, 2019a, p. 12) or *"Experiment with writing the initial sounds of known words and/or words whose spelling has a high correspondence with Spanish (CVC words: consonant/vowel/consonant), with image support and according to a model"*¹⁷ (MINEDUC, 2019a, p. 31) and *"Play at reading known texts and draw according to what you read"*¹⁸ (MINEDUC, 2019a, p. 30). As the reader can note, all these activities involve reading and writing.

4.2 Personnel policy - Transfer of program to students and competence in English

Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2006) advocate that teachers and teacher education are the most important players in any foreign language program for *very young learners*. They classify the two typical types of early language teachers as those with (a) low proficiency but with age-appropriate methodology (most likely a certified preschool teacher in this case) and (b) specialists who are proficient in the target language but utilize inappropriate methodology according to the age group (certified in English pedagogy). Pinter (2017) and Rokita-Jaskow and Król-Gierat (2021) emphasize that teachers for children need to be proficient with methodological skills and knowledge about teaching young learners and being competent in English. This expertise starts with the training and recruitment of teachers. Unfortunately, few teacher training programs in Chile aim to form English preschool teachers. In 2023, there were 32 accredited second language teacher education programs; however, no program focused exclusively on forming preschool teachers, understandably, as the curriculum is just suggested. Three programs offered a minor in English for preschool teachers, and one program provided a teaching degree at three different levels in the same program: preschool, primary and secondary (Consejo Nacional de Educación, n.d; DEMRE, 2023). With so few programs offering training in teaching English to *very young learners*, the question turns to who is teaching EFL to these *very young learners*. Most activities in EFL classrooms with *very young learners* tend to be teacher-led. When working with younger learners, it has been argued that the teacher is at the center of the classroom, as students have not yet acquired enough of the language and are dependent on the teacher (Bland, 2019). Children in pre-primary classrooms receive little input in the foreign language besides the teacher (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). In this context, teachers need to be highly flexible and be able to provide quality input for students. These demands can be a little disconcerting as teachers may be insecure about their competency in the foreign language and unwilling to use it (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). Furthermore, when there are not enough teachers trained to teach a foreign language to young learners, the load becomes even heavier.

4.3 Methods and materials policy – age-appropriate methods and materials

For teachers of *very young learners*, specific underlying beliefs of pedagogical principles should guide their teaching (Mourão & Ellis, 2020). Students need predictable routines to acquire language in purposeful, planned, and familiar play-based activities. *Very young learners* enjoy hands-on activities and having fun (Mourão & Ellis, 2020). As students age, they lose this intrinsic motivation of the fun aspect, and novel activities become less memorable (Myles, 2022). Teachers can help with learning a foreign language by linking new information to what students already know and focusing on developing listening and speaking skills to be successful at reading and writing later on. Providing positive and meaningful learning environments is central to teaching EFL to young learners (Mourão & Ellis, 2020). Activities that are effective at this level are games, songs, chants, stories, plays, dances, routines, total physical response activities and art, as they provide a way for students to practice and experience the language in a child-friendly atmosphere (Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012; Mourão & Ellis, 2020; Nguyen, 2018; Pinter, 2017; Pino Juste & Rodríguez López, 2010; Rokita-Jaśkow, 2022; Waddington et al., 2018). Furthermore, activities should be based

¹⁵Authors' translation.

¹⁶Authors' translation.

¹⁷Authors' translation.

¹⁸Authors' translation.

on developing the whole child in early childhood education (Mourão, 2015), incorporating predictability, patterns, pictures, gestures, and interactive aspects to make understanding easier for children (Pinter, 2017). If we review the suggested Chilean Curriculum, stories, rhymes, chants, and flashcards are mentioned (MINEDUC 2019a, 2019b). However, we again find that the use of these types of activities is linked to the development of receptive and productive language abilities, such as listening comprehension, reading comprehension, oral production, and writing. Thus, even though the curriculum considers the importance of using play-based activities, these activities are used to develop abilities that students do not yet possess, as mentioned in section 4.1.

Another key pedagogical tool is the use of literature inside the classroom; literature develops children holistically, contributing to emotional, interpersonal, and intercultural development as well as helping with thinking skills through rich and authentic use of the language (Cameron, 2001; Ghosn, 2002; Pino Juste & Rodríguez López, 2010; Pinter, 2017; Rokita-Jaśkow, 2022). However, it is up to the teacher to make sure that the use of language, the way it is written, and the language learning opportunities are appropriate for *very young learners*; teachers can adjust stories to personalize them to their classroom (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017). Furthermore, literature allows for the presentation of authentic input and fosters vocabulary development, facilitating retention by presenting context and the accompaniment of gestures. Moreover, the ability to read a story numerous times helps provide children with clarification to their doubts (Rokita-Jaśkow, 2022). Sharing picture books and big books and providing environmental print are all ways to help support children's literacy and engagement without formally teaching them, as children are still in the emergent literacy phase in pre-primary school (Mourão & Ellis, 2020; Pino Juste & Rodríguez López, 2010). Since learning to read in a formal sense usually begins in primary school, listening and speaking skills in a foreign language lay the groundwork to help prepare students for reading and writing later on (Mourão & Ellis, 2020). Nevertheless, the current suggested curriculum does not provide any resources for reading, except for links to flashcards, songs on YouTube, and other links, which may take away from teacher planning time. Although the curriculum does mention using books, even big books, it does not provide access to these resources. Furthermore, the links to the suggested books are all on YouTube in the suggested curriculum, making it difficult for teachers to control the pace of the reading and adjust how they are read. Thus, there is still a need for more teaching materials for *very young learners* in as many formats as possible (Garton et al., 2011).

5. Discussion

As mentioned earlier, achieving success with very young foreign language learners requires certain conditions to be fulfilled (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023; Rixon, 2013). The scope of this study was to explore and analyze a corpus of normative and informative official documents in light of Kaplan and Baldauf's framework (2003) regarding curriculum policy, personnel policy, and methods and materials policy for the teaching of EFL to *very young learners* in Chile to shed light on the current conditions for sufficient teacher training, suitable teaching methodologies and materials and FL curricula alignment with L1 curricula (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023; Rixon, 2013).

Regarding sufficient teacher training, Chile's lack of teacher education programs to teach EFL to *very young learners* creates a prevalent issue in classrooms (Calidad de la educación, n.d.; DEMRE, 2023). The shortage of teacher education programs leads to teachers lacking proficiency in either early childhood education methods or English language skills (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023; Rixon, 2013). To effectively teach EFL to *very young learners*, educators must possess both pedagogical abilities tailored for teaching EFL to *very young learners* and strong language skills. Teachers need to understand the developmental stages of children and communicate spontaneously with students, utilizing appropriate language. Thus, they should be proficient in foreign language instruction and knowledge of child development and early learning processes (Mourão, 2015; Waddington et al., 2018). The shortage of training programs raises important questions about who teaches these classes and the qualifications they hold. Understanding the learning styles of preschool children and applying appropriate methods for this age group is particularly vital, especially in contexts where English has limited exposure (Mourão, 2015).

As per suitable teaching methodologies, it was found that the teaching methodology for *very young learners* is appropriate concerning the planned activities. However, there is a misalignment between the emphasis on developing EFL reading and writing skills in these activities and the current early childhood education curriculum for developing Spanish as a first language. Additionally, resources such as books, songs, and flashcards are accessible online through links to YouTube and other sites. This reliance on the Internet poses significant challenges for

teachers lacking internet access or experiencing malfunctioning websites, limiting their available resources. The absence of physical materials, particularly books and flashcards, further restricts teachers' ability to utilize these resources effectively. Consequently, without adequate resources, teachers must rely on their prior experiences and materials, which may constrain their teaching conditions and negatively impact their pedagogy in the classroom for this age group (Ng, 2013).

In this regard, adopting a more integrated strategy that weaves English into the classroom while leveraging child-initiated play can enable students to engage with their surroundings and grow as autonomous learners instead of relying on materials such as textbooks from the Ministry of Education or Internet-based materials (Mourão, 2015). Embedding the language within the classroom context renders it more relevant and practical for children (Mourão, 2015). Even if a teacher only visits the classroom a few times each week for brief periods, child-initiated play can still be incorporated into designated English learning areas (Mourão, 2015). These areas include resources linked to English sessions and assist in embedding English more thoroughly within the curriculum and daily routines. In contrast to teacher-centered activities, English learning areas allow students to employ the language in meaningful and contextual ways (Waddington et al., 2018). However, it is crucial to foster collaboration between EFL teachers and early childhood educators by establishing a dedicated physical space or ensuring that EFL resources are available throughout the day. This collaboration helps children recognize EFL as an integral aspect of their learning, ensuring it remains embedded in their education rather than dismissed once the English teacher departs, which is the current case in Chile. Rather than being seen as a novelty or an alternative teaching method, incorporating a foreign language into the classroom should be considered a fundamental component of everyday practices (Waddington et al., 2018). Mourão (2015) emphasizes the need for increased child-initiated play within published materials, especially in environments with limited English exposure, such as the Chilean case. Granting students freedom within English learning areas while simultaneously offering structured teacher-led activities achieves a rich balance in their education, promoting a more comprehensive approach (Waddington et al., 2018).

In terms of methodologies and materials, but also related to teacher training conditions, it is important that teachers understand their students and provide age-appropriate, engaging, and meaningful activities within a stimulating and enjoyable environment. This environment should feature diverse tasks and incorporate recycled vocabulary and language (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023; Pinter, 2017). A major challenge in working with children is adapting foreign language tasks to their level of comprehension (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). Effective foreign language teaching requires well-structured programs that include repetition and visual aids. In addition to songs, chants, and stories, which the suggested Chilean curriculum proposes, educators should focus on multisensory activities like crafts, coloring, body movements, and sounds. By offering a variety of input, students are encouraged to predict outcomes, recognize patterns, and make logical guesses. Teaching young learners is ultimately a holistic approach, where teachers progress gradually, emphasizing comprehension first before language production (Edelenbos et al., 2006; Mourão & Ellis, 2020; Pinter, 2017; Phillips, 1993).

Concerning the alignment of L1 curricula with L2, the existing curriculum policy reveals a disconnect between the EFL and early childhood curricula. This misalignment leads students to engage with English tasks before mastering equivalent skills in their first language, especially reading and writing. It is essential for any educational activity to account for the characteristics of the developmental stage (Mourão, 2015). Introducing content that students have not yet practiced in their first language undermines the goal of teaching English, which currently has limited exposure, occurring only once or twice a week in a minimally effective manner (Lightbown & Spada, 2020). The curricular goals for foreign languages should align with pre-primary education, specifically the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten curriculum (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023).

6. Conclusions

According to Rokita-Jaskow (2021), disparities in the quality of early foreign language education stem from various factors, including class size, teacher didactics, linguistic and interpersonal competencies, and the quality of teaching materials. Nevertheless, the lack of research and knowledge about what is happening at these levels makes it difficult to provide support where it is needed or to understand the current situation. Increased research into teaching EFL to *very young learners* is crucial for crafting appropriate conditions for everyone to benefit from early English instruction.

The initiative to teach English to *very young learners* in Chile is still in the initial stages; the policy to create the necessary conditions to teach EFL to *very young learners* is not aligned with the actual needs of the educational system. Chile officially offers English language education from 5th to 12th grade. Meanwhile, the "soft policy" suggests a curriculum for pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and 1st to 4th grade, leading to discretionary language policies. As previously indicated, these localized policies can yield unintended outcomes, as schools may leverage them as marketing tools within the market-oriented educational landscape (Bellei & Muñoz, 2023). Additionally, before achieving a universal and centralized access policy in Chile, it is essential to address the personnel, materials, and method policies critical for effective implementation (Obaidul Hamid, 2010).

Notably, the analysis of nine official documents regarding the curriculum policy, the personnel policy, and the methods and materials policy in light of Kaplan and Baldauf's (2003) framework reveals that the current conditions for sufficient teacher training, suitable teaching methodologies and materials and FL curricula alignment with L1 curricula are insufficient for the goals of the Chilean educational system. The personnel policy, which is related to sufficient teacher training conditions, does not line up with the actual demands of the school system; there is a scarcity of teacher training programs to prepare EFL teachers for young learners, and the situation is even worse for EFL teachers for *very young learners*. In terms of methods and materials, which are linked to suitable teaching methodologies and materials conditions, while the materials and the methods seem to be in line with the developmental requirements of *very young learners*, the access to the resources, as well as the emphasis on linguistic abilities such as writing or reading, do not make parallel with the first language curriculum. Finally, and related to FL curricula alignment with L1 curricula, the EFL preschool curriculum does not align with the preschool or primary curriculum for Spanish as a first language, which is key for learning a foreign language for children in critical developmental stages, such as *very young learners*.

This paper serves as an entry point for exploring the conditions for the teaching and learning of *very young English learners* in Chile. Undoubtedly, more research is required on the training of teachers to teach EFL to *very young learners* (personnel policy), suitable teaching methodologies and materials for the teaching of EFL to *very young learners* (methods and materials policy), and the alignment of FL curricula with L1 curricula for teaching EFL to *very young learners* (curriculum policy). By using the language-in-education framework, the gaps in the language policy and actual conditions can be revealed and addressed to improve the teaching for *very young learners* in specific contexts, such as the Chilean one. As the Chilean government continues to push for an earlier start age, it seems likely that the starting age of language learning will change in the future, contrary to evidence (Lightbown & Spada, 2020; Spada, 2015). Hence, emphasis should shift towards enhancing existing policies and enabling the conditions for the teaching and learning of EFL to *very young learners* in Chile.

At a global level, it is important to explore and analyze the provision of EFL to *very young learners* worldwide. Teaching a foreign language at early developmental stages without a clear plan or the proper structure to support the learning and teaching of English may create a precarious situation for *very young learners* and in-service teachers. Furthermore, it is critical to start raising more questions about the validity of introducing English at such an early stage because many pre-service and in-service teachers, teacher trainers, and parents still believe that "earlier is better" (personal communication, 2024), while the literature has already shown that providing foreign language instruction early on does not ensure success in the foreign language (Lightbown & Spada, 2020; Spada, 2015). To conclude, further research is essential to identify how to establish equitable conditions to facilitate the teaching of English as a foreign language to *very young learners* in different school systems, especially in the Global South where research is rather scarce and the teaching of English at early ages is a trend that does not seem like it will go away any time soon.

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Contribución de los autores

Nicholas Scarlota: Conceptualización – Curación de datos – Análisis formal – Metodología – Redacción, revisión y edición.

Karina Cerda-Oñate: Conceptualización – Curación de datos – Análisis formal – Metodología – Redacción, revisión y edición.

Implicaciones éticas

No existen implicaciones éticas por declarar en la elaboración o publicación de este artículo.

Financiación

El autor, Nicholas Scarlota, agradece a la Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo de Chile (AN(D) / Becas Doctorad Nacional 2024 – 21250760.

Conflictos de interés

Los autores declaran no tener conflictos de interés en relación con la elaboración o publicación de este artículo.