

CHILEAN STUDENTS SCORE POORLY ON CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH EXAM

Only Five Percent Are Reasonably Fluent

(July 4, 2005) The University of Cambridge English Exam results for first and secondary school students were released Friday, confirming the limited English language capacity of Chilean youth. According to the exam, only 5 percent of the students possess a reasonable English language speaking ability.

Chile's export-driven economy is premised on strong international trade relations, where a command of English, the world's lingua franca, is a must.

Sixty-seven percent of eighth graders and 45 percent of twelfth graders scored at the "Lower Breakthrough" level, meaning they can only understand simple oral and written instructions in English, read short messages and recognize words and expressions by ear.

Twenty percent of eighth graders and 37 percent of twelfth graders scored at the "Breakthrough" level, meaning that they can understand necessary expressions and phrases, can comprehend English when it is spoken slowly and clearly, and can extract the central idea from a text.

The exam results also showed that Chile's English teachers are emphasizing passive skills like reading and writing, rather than spoken English.

The University of Cambridge test consists of 60 multiple-choice questions, of which 40 are written comprehension and 20 oral comprehension. Eighth grade students answered 45 percent of questions on the written section and 35 percent of oral questions correctly. Twelfth grade students answered 48 percent of written questions and 40 percent of oral questions correctly.

Education Minister Sergio Bitar believes that teachers are not speaking enough English in the classroom and not interacting enough with students. This, he says, causes student oral comprehension ability to lag dramatically.

Director of the British Council John Nagg agreed with Bitar, saying, "If English isn't spoken in English classes in schools, the people aren't going to understand, are not going to know, English. It's like trying to teach someone to ride a bicycle without the bicycle."

Bitar also affirmed that the low scores resulted from a lack of high-quality English language teachers in Chilean schools.

The testing showed that student scores corresponded directly to the education level of the teacher. Although many English teachers in Chile have a degree in English pedagogy, this is not true for all English teachers. In classrooms where the English teacher did not complete his or her undergraduate studies or did not go on to the postgraduate level, the student's scores were significantly lower.

"What we have seen is that many teachers are translators, and so they have the English but not the ability to teach it, or we have seen cases in which French teachers give English classes and have a knowledge of teaching, but not the language," explained the Coordinator of the Ministry of Education's national program "Inglés Abre Puertas" (English Opens Doors).

According to an INACAP and University of Oxford evaluation in April, the majority of English teachers in Chile possess an ALTE 2 level of English, meaning that they can manage in most English-language contexts. The ALTE (Association of Examiners in European Languages) scale has five levels, Level 1 being the worst and Level 5 the best.

"We have until 2011 for the rest of our teachers to prepare themselves and reach ALTE 3, which means they have the ability to interact with fluidity with native speakers," he said.

Low student scores did not result from an insufficient amount of class time, according to the University of Cambridge.

Between fifth grade and twelfth grade, students need between 300 and 360 hours of English classes to reach an appropriate level of language ability, according to Cambridge. On average, Chilean students

spend 648 hours in English classes during that time period, more than twice as much time as is necessary. This leads experts to conclude that the problem is not the amount of time spent in English classes, but rather how the class time is used.

Exam results also corresponded to social class. The higher the quality of the education and the family income of the student, the higher he or she scored on the exam.

The exam results are causing the Chilean government to set new goals for English proficiency in schools. The government aims to have 80% of students speaking a passable level of English (which only 5% possess currently) in 2020, essentially inverting this year's results.

According to Bitar, Chile will begin to provide training courses in English teaching to 1,200 teachers in 2006, 500 more than it provided this year. The government also intends to work with education faculties to satisfy the high demand for qualified English teachers in Chilean schools. It is also going to seek more teachers with post-graduate degrees in English pedagogy. A volunteer program aimed at incorporating more English speakers into the educational environment may also be initiated.

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