*Conexión. Revista de Investigaciones y Propuestas Educativas*
**Número especial: 90.° aniversario de los Profesorados de Inglés y Francés**
**N.° 22 - Año 2026**
**ISSN: 2362-406X**

# Literacy in transition: The Common Ground Between the Santa Fe Foreign Language Curriculum for Primary Schools and The Balanced Approach

# Alfabetización en transición: Puntos en Común entre el Diseño Curricular de Lengua Extranjera para la Escuela Primaria en Santa Fe y el Enfoque Equilibrado

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**Abstract**

Santa Fe is navigating a period of change in its curricular design by moving towards the education of plurilingual, critical citizens. This article examines the pedagogical alignment between Santa Fe's new provincial curricular design and the Balanced Approach advocated by Dominic Wyse and Charlotte Hacking. By comparing these frameworks across key areas—specifically phonics instruction, the use of authentic texts, reading aloud, and assessment, a shared commitment to holistic, meaning-centered instruction is revealed. Mechanical decoding and isolated, summative testing are part of the past; in contrast, the new provincial curriculum provides a model of rich input, critical text appropriation and formative feedback. All this enables EFL teachers to act as real change agents, serving as a bridge between local policy and international evidence-based standards- The goal is not to teach students to read and write in a foreign language, but to open the door to a new spectrum of possibilities, empowering them to be active participants in the world around them.

**Key Words:** Balanced Approach, Santa Fe Curriculum, Plurilingualism, Literacy Instruction, Formative Assessment

**Resumen**

Santa Fe atraviesa un periodo de cambio en su diseño curricular, avanzando hacia la formación de ciudadanos plurilingües y críticos. Este artículo examina la alineación pedagógica entre el nuevo diseño curricular provincial de Santa Fe y el 'Enfoque Equilibrado' (Balanced Approach) propuesto por Dominic Wyse y Charlotte Hacking. Al comparar ambos marcos en áreas clave —específicamente la enseñanza de la fonética, el uso de libros auténticos, la lectura en voz alta y la evaluación—, se revela un compromiso compartido con una instrucción holística centrada en la construcción de sentido. La decodificación mecánica

y las evaluaciones aisladas y sumativas son parte del pasado; por el contrario, el nuevo currículo provincial ofrece un modelo de entrada (input) rica, apropiación crítica de textos y retroalimentación formativa. Todo esto permite que los docentes de lengua extranjera actúen como verdaderos agentes de cambio, sirviendo de puente entre la política local y los estándares internacionales basados en la evidencia. El objetivo no es simplemente enseñar a los estudiantes a leer y escribir en una lengua extranjera, sino abrir la puerta a un nuevo espectro de posibilidades, empoderándolos para que sean participantes activos en el mundo que los rodea.

**Palabras clave**: enfoque equilibrado, diseño curricular de Santa Fe, plurilingüismo, enseñanza de la lectoescritura, evaluación formativa.

## Introduction

Learning to read is the key that unlocks the door to a child's academic journey. For primary school educators, the task of guiding children from decoding symbols to constructing meaning is both a profound pedagogical responsibility and a complex challenge.We are currently living through a significant moment of change in Santa Fe. Since 2024, Plan Raíz has been implemented in all the classrooms of our province to teach literacy in the language of schooling. According to the Ministerio de Educación de la Provincia de Santa Fe (2024), Plan Raíz is an Argentinian early literacy continuous training plan. This initiative consists of a series of stories and activity books created "to carry out a policy and training practice that will benefit the students enrolled in the first years of state and private primary schools" (Ministerio de Educación de la Provincia de Santa Fe, 2024, p.1). With the implementation of the new provincial curriculum (Resolution No. 2422/2025), not only is there a renewed emphasis on literacy as a pillar of social justice and equity, but the policy also introduces a historical shift in foreign language education: moving towards a model that celebrates the student's entire linguistic repertoire [repertorio lingüístico].

Since the curriculum now promotes the strategic use of Spanish as a scaffold for intercultural citizenship, the need for evidence-based pedagogy becomes even more urgent. But as we adopt these new guidelines, we must ask: how does this provincial approach -with its emphasis on cyclic progression and translingual practice- interact with the global conversations on literacy happening in the wider academic world?

One such significant framework to do so is the Balanced Approach, supported by Prof. Dominic Wyse and Charlotte Hacking. Built upon the Double Helix of Reading and Writing model, this approach advocates for the continuous integration of reading and writing as interdependent, non-linear processes. As educators seek to refine their practice, it becomes imperative to evaluate how local policy aligns with international, evidence-based standards.

Through a comparative analysis of these two frameworks, this paper evaluates their pedagogical implications for the primary classroom, considering the characteristics and

diversity of the students who attend primary school in Santa Fe. I hope to provide a surer path for teachers working within these new educational guidelines to ensure we are not just teaching children how to read, but empowering them to thrive as critical, plurilingual citizens.

## Research goal

To start comparing them, I would like to introduce The Balanced Approach, proposed by Wyse and Hacking. It seeks to integrate various instructional methods to cater to diverse learning needs. It often combines explicit phonics instruction with whole language strategies, emphasizing meaning-making and engagement with authentic texts. It proposes The Double Helix of Reading and Writing as a new theory, moving beyond polarized debates about phonics and advocating for a holistic approach that connects reading and writing. According to it, literacy is not linear. It's two interconnected strands: Reading (decoding, comprehension) and Writing (encoding, expression). They must constantly intertwine since if one strand is prioritized over the other, the balance will be lost.

Plan Raíz, for its part, also explicitly states its focus on teaching literacy with a balanced, integrative approach. It aims to provide teachers with a structured, systematic approach to instruction.This shared philosophical ground is where our investigation begins. My research is a comparative analysis, looking at how these two frameworks align or differ across four key pedagogical areas: phonics instruction, using real books, reading aloud, and, most importantly, assessment. By examining these pillars, we can see how a concrete roadmap towards educational success in Santa Fe is offered.

## Reflecting upon phonics

Wyse and Hacking (2024) consider Phonological Awareness, the ability to recognise and manipulate the sound parts of spoken language, allows the child to break words into chunks, syllables, which is perennial for decoding. This goes together with what is expressed in the Plan Raíz Teachers' Activity Book (Ministerio de Educación de la Provincia de Santa Fe, 2024), the objective is for children to understand the sound of words. They both recognize the value of developing a deep understanding of sounds and grapheme-phoneme correspondence. However, Plan Raíz focuses only on Spanish literacy, facilitating the instructional process, allowing the program to focus primarily on the sound itself without the necessity of explicitly addressing the more complex sound-letter correlations found in other languages.

The new curricular design moves from the "English only" approach to propose the use of the students' whole linguistic repertoire [repertorio lingüístico] (L1 + L2) to decode meaning, focusing on the student's own learning process and their intelligibility together with the explicit comparison between both languages to find similarities, differences, regularities and exceptions. It must be highlighted that the focus is on the cultural and linguistic diversity

that students are expected to value in order to act as real bridges, breaking down stereotypes and reflecting upon their new identities from their daily, historical and local contexts.

## The use of authentic material: "real books" vs. "coursebooks"

The powerful idea of using real books and providing rich language input through stories is essential for true literacy development, aligning with the stated goals of Plan Raíz. The systems are united in their overall goal: to create confident readers and writers who can apply their skills across varied texts. This theoretical alignment gives us a strong common foundation. All this is accompanied by bright and interesting illustrations -- in Plan Raíz, by Vanesa Zorn and in "Stanley's Stick" by Neal Layton (Hegley, 2012) -- in order to ensure the input is maintained at the comprehensible (I + 1) level required for acquisition and for children guide themselves and develop their creativity and imaginative side.

The new Santa Fe curricular design marks a decisive shift in how students engage with texts. It promotes access to diverse, increasingly complex materials across various formats, prioritizing the meaningfulness, the aesthetic and the exploratory approach of the learning process. This shift toward 'critical appropriation of coursebooks' (MEPSF, 2026, p.596)—moving away from mechanical exercises in favor of building constant bridges between the learner's native language and the target language—finds a powerful theoretical ally in the Balanced Approach advocated by Wyse and Hacking.

This alignment between provincial policy and international theory is significant. By encouraging the "re-creation" of texts and collective reading practices, the Santa Fe curriculum is not merely suggesting a new resource; it is institutionalizing a pedagogical shift that trusts the teacher to plan lessons with materials that resonate with the diversity of their students. In doing so, it moves the classroom toward a more holistic, creative, and imaginative engagement with language.

## Reading aloud: a bridge to plurilingual development

Both models highlight the crucial role of reading aloud, in the hands of the teacher, to deliver comprehensible input. Plan Raíz's use of material like "Días Animados" aligns perfectly with the Balanced Approach's emphasis on contextualized reading for meaning, supported by research that shows that rich input is the fuel for L2 acquisition. That is the case with Krashen's (2019) Optimal Input hypothesis which posits that language and literacy development primarily originates from comprehending auditory and textual input, rather than from productive skills such as speaking and writing, further asserting that "increasing Input, increases the quality of output" (Krashen, 2019, 3:00). The Input Krashen discusses has four characteristics: it is comprehensible, rich, abundant, and compelling—often being so interesting that students forget they are learning another language that is not their mother tongue. The new Curricular design emphasises that if this is done during the 'Intensification and expansion pathway' [recorrido de intensificación y ampliación] it will prove as a vital

tool for children to start perceiving themselves as readers and speakers of the foreign language and aid the building of mental frameworks for understanding culture and acquire vocabulary—essential, non-negotiable elements in the EFL setting. In this way, reading aloud is transformed from a simple classroom routine into a powerful, communicative stage to foster the development of critical and plurilingual identities.

## Assessment: an integrated instance of the learning process

Santa Fe's new curricular design aims at moving away from the typical end-of-unit tests provided by coursebook towards a more holistic, learner-oriented evaluation. The new curriculum provides, apart from test, a wide range of testing instruments, such as observation grids, rubrics, portfolios, and self-assessment guides, which align perfectly with the Balanced Approach.

Wyse and Hacking advocate for continuous, flexible, and formative assessment, urging teachers to observe children "over a period of time and during a range of different activities" to prioritize comprehension and meaning-making over mere word fluency. In agreement to this, the new curricular design aims at formative assessment [evaluación formativa] (MEPSF, 2026) too, highlighting the importance of providing an instance in which students are made aware of their progress and also to open a collaborative space for them to explicitly talk about the struggling areas with their teachers, this bilateral process receives the name of formative feedback [retroalimentación formativa] (MEPSF, 2026). Thus, assessment is not "the end of the evaluation process" anymore, but another instance to foster the child's metacognitive awareness and support the development of a critical, plurilingual identity.

## Conclusion

Santa Fe province is undergoing a historical shift in its educational landscape. Primary education and foreign language learning are not separated concepts anymore, but rather tools to educate children with intercultural awareness and foster the development of critical citizens. By moving away from mechanical decoding and isolated testing, and toward a model of rich input, critical text appropriation, and formative feedback, we are equipping our students with the tools to navigate a complex, plurilingual world.

This pedagogical change empowers teachers to become active designers of learning experiences capable of bridging the gap between provincial policy and international evidence-based standards. By prioritising meaning-making, collaboration and reflection we ensure that students are not just learning to read and write in a foreign language - they are learning to read the world that surrounds them. Our job, then, is to keep the double helix spinning.

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