

**Analyzing the effectiveness of the Ecuadorian Curriculum in English as
a Second Language for students with learning disabilities**

**Análisis de la efectividad del Currículo Ecuatoriano en inglés como
Segunda Lengua para estudiantes con dificultades de aprendizaje**

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Fechas de recepción: 21-OCT-2023 aceptación: 10-DIC-2023 publicación: 15-DIC-2023



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Resumen

En esta investigación se abordó los desafíos que enfrentan el Currículo Ecuatoriano de inglés y los docentes de área del subnivel medio de Educación General Básica. El objetivo principal fue analizar la efectividad del Currículo Ecuatoriano de inglés como segunda lengua para estudiantes con problemas de aprendizaje. La metodología utilizada fue la cualitativa de tipo no experimental por medio del análisis del currículo y la elaboración de un grupo focal y entrevistas a docentes y expertos en el área. Asimismo, se realizó una búsqueda bibliográfica documental de artículos y estudios que han tratado la temática o temas relacionados previamente. Los resultados mostraron que el currículo de inglés se centra en el desarrollo integral de habilidades comunicativas, promoviendo el crecimiento en aspectos lingüísticos, cognitivos, sociales, emocionales y físicos. Desde niveles A1 hasta A2, destaca la importancia de la progresión de competencias y la conexión emocional en el aprendizaje. Para el subnivel medio de EGB, se evalúa la enseñanza de comunicación, lectura, escritura y lenguaje a través de las artes, enfatizando la conciencia cultural y la autonomía estudiantil. Aunque el currículo aborda la inclusión, algunos objetivos podrían ser más específicos. Los expertos destacan avances en la inclusión, pero señalan desafíos en la implementación y la necesidad de mayor capacitación y apoyo. Docentes proponen adaptaciones tecnológicas, reducción de carga y enfoque multisensorial, solicitando más apoyo institucional y capacitación constante.

Palabras clave: Currículo de inglés; subnivel medio; educación básica general; problemas de aprendizaje; necesidades educativas especiales.



Abstract

This research addressed the challenges faced by the Ecuadorian English Curriculum and middle-level Education General Basic Education (EGB) teachers. The main objective was to analyze the effectiveness of the Ecuadorian English Curriculum as a second language for students with learning difficulties. The methodology employed was a non-experimental qualitative approach, involving curriculum analysis, focus group development, and interviews with teachers and experts in the field. Additionally, a documentary literature search of articles and studies related to the topic was conducted. Results indicated that the English curriculum focuses on the holistic development of communicative skills, promoting growth in linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical aspects. Emphasizing competence progression and emotional connection in learning from A1 to A2 levels, the curriculum evaluates communication, reading, writing, and language through the arts for the middle EGB sublevel. While addressing inclusion, some objectives could benefit from greater specificity. Experts acknowledge advancements in inclusion but highlight challenges in implementation, emphasizing the need for increased training and support. Teachers suggest technological adaptations, workload reduction, and a multisensory approach, urging more institutional support and ongoing training.

Keywords: English curriculum; middle level; general basic education; learning difficulties; special educational needs.



Introduction

The evolution of the English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum in Ecuador has been marked by significant milestones from the 1940s to the present. The official 1944 curriculum already allocated three hours per week to English in secondary education, establishing an early foundation for language instruction (Ebaugh, 1947, cited by Bravo, 2018). However, in 1996, the Ministry of Education introduced a new curriculum for General Education (GE), laying the foundation for broader educational reforms (Bravo, 2018).

The year 2007 witnessed an exhaustive evaluation of the 1996 curriculum, giving rise to a new regulatory document for GBE in Ecuador during the following decade (Ministry of Education, 2010). The bilateral collaboration between Ecuador and the United Kingdom in 1992 led to the CRADLE project, a curricular reform aimed at the development of English learning, focused on the four communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) (Haboud, 2009).

Despite these advances, current regulations only cover the last years of middle school and high school (Bravo, 2018). The Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI) in Ecuador recognizes special educational needs (SEN) and establishes curricular adaptations to guarantee inclusive access (Cuenca-Ramírez, 2021; Vélez-Calvo et al., 2016). However, fully implementing these adaptations presents challenges, and insufficient teacher training is a persistent barrier (Andrade-Torres et al., 2022; Angenscheidt & Navarrete, 2017; Vélez-Calvo et al., 2016). And this only gets worse when it's considered the lack of teachers with adequate command of English (Díaz & Morales, 2015). Teacher

Educational inclusion has gained ground, supported by national teacher training campaigns, but challenges remain, such as a lack of effective teaching strategies and insufficient adaptations for students with SEN (Loor-Aldaz et al., 2019; Montaña & Vera, 2012). Training and access to specialized resources remain critical areas to improve the effective implementation of the ESL curriculum in the context of educational inclusion in Ecuador (Montaña & Vera, 2012; Vélez-Calvo et al., 2016). When teachers encounter students with SEN, they do not know how to attend to them and, in many cases, they do not even know how to identify them due to the lack of training in this area. (Pizarro & Cordero, 2015).

It is considered that ESL teaching should be more focused on the content that students really need to communicate, and not so focused on the correct use of grammatical structures. Teachers must encourage students to acquire phrases, vocabulary, synonyms, and idiomatic expressions, which allow them to understand the language and at the same time have fluent communication (Fabre et al., 2016). This needs to be done by using pedagogical strategies with approaches made specifically for students with SEN, for example, Castro et al. (2019) pointed out the importance of the use of information and communication technologies (ICT)



and recreational activities that are very useful for SEN students but that also greatly benefit the learning of the rest of the cl.

The articles vary in their research focus, target population, and approaches, but collectively they emphasize the importance of a well-designed and inclusive curriculum, teacher preparedness, and the adoption of effective methodologies to support the learning needs of students with learning disabilities. These findings provide valuable insights that can be considered when analyzing the effectiveness of the Ecuadorian Curriculum in ESL for students with learning disabilities. By learning from the successes and challenges documented in these studies, education stakeholders in Ecuador can work towards creating an inclusive and supportive ESL curriculum for all learners. In this realm, this research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the ESL Ecuadorian Curriculum for students with learning disabilities by means of a content analysis and ESL teachers' and experts' opinions and experiences about the implementation of the Ecuadorian curriculum in their classes with students with learning disabilities.

Materials and methods

In the present qualitative content analysis research design (Cabrera-Tenecela, 2023), an integrated methodological approach was employed to analyze the English curriculum content designed for children with SEN. A comprehensive review of relevant curriculum documents was conducted, followed by consultations with three experts experienced in inclusive education and curriculum adaptations. Additionally, a focus group involving teachers specialized in teaching English as a second language (TESL) was carried out to gather specific classroom perceptions and experiences. Responses and data collected were meticulously coded and grouped into categories for detailed analysis. Likewise, an interview was carried out with three experts to obtain their opinions on the Ecuadorian curriculum in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. The team was made up of specialists in specific areas. The Curriculum Expert brings extensive experience in language teaching and curriculum development. The TESL Expert, in addition to his career as a teacher at various educational levels, stands out as Academic Coordinator at the Language Center at University of level. For his part, the Inclusion Expert has solid experience in teaching and design at the university level, standing out for his interdisciplinary approach and commitment to research in higher education. Together, these experts offer a comprehensive set of skills to improve the quality of EFL teaching. Then, a focus group with experiences TEFL teachers was carried out in order to evaluate what happens in real classes.

Subsequently, qualitative data analysis techniques were applied using semantic diagrams within the ATLAS.ti 9 software (Friese et al., 2018), facilitating an effective visualization of emerging patterns and significant relationships among the collected responses. This holistic methodological approach provided a comprehensive understanding of perceptions and practices regarding the English curriculum tailored for students with SEN.



Results

The findings of this study are presented across three distinct sections, delineating insights derived from an analysis of the curriculum, perspectives shared by experts, and observations gathered from classroom teachers. Each section offers a unique perspective on the English curriculum tailored for children with SEN. The curriculum analysis outlines the framework and objectives, while insights from experts shed light on the nuanced considerations of inclusive education. Furthermore, the perspectives shared by classroom teachers provide valuable firsthand experiences and challenges faced in implementing the curriculum. Together, these sections offer a comprehensive view of the multifaceted landscape surrounding the adapted English curriculum for students with SEN.

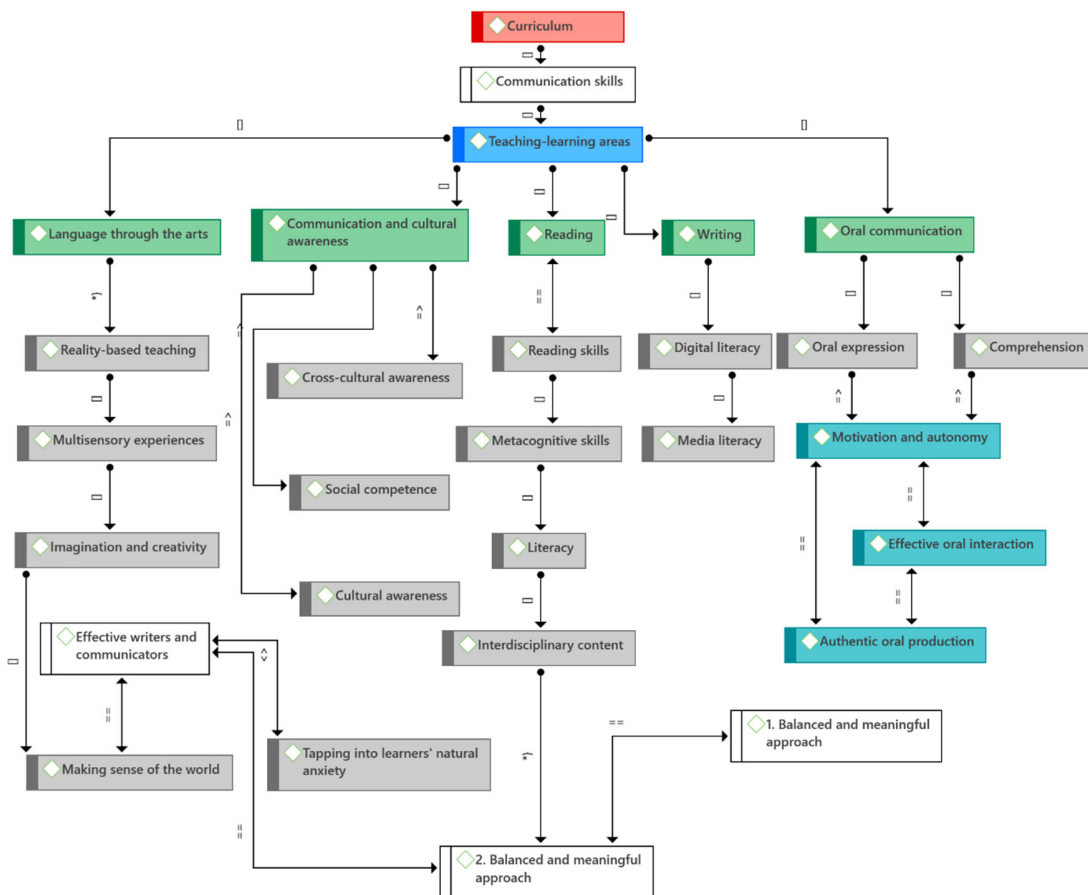
Results of the qualitative analysis of the curriculum

The English curriculum focuses on developing communication skills, promoting the comprehensive growth of students in both linguistic and cognitive, social, emotional, and physical aspects. Emphasis is placed on the progression of skills from levels A1 to A2, and the importance of involving students' emotions in the learning process is highlighted. Relevance, practical experience, consideration of learning styles, and creating a low-anxiety classroom environment are essential elements of the curricular approach, with an emphasis on the practical application of English in real-life situations and adaptation to the individual needs of students.

The English curriculum for the medium sublevel of GE complies with a logical order of learning; however, through this research the teaching-learning areas will be analyzed one by one, and whether their objectives are by the criteria evaluation and proposed methodologies. Figure 1 summarizes the overall structure based on the basic skills of learning English as a second language, as well as language development through the arts.

Figure 1.

Semantic diagram of the learning areas through the communicative approach in the Ecuadorian curriculum.



Note: Besides the curriculum, the Ministry of Education provides official documents guiding curriculum adaptations. However, in these documents, TESL is only briefly mentioned. It mostly focuses on general guidelines for adapting teaching methods and materials for foreign language instruction, emphasizing the use of language-specific formats in lesson planning for language subjects.

Communication and cultural awareness: The content emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness, intercultural awareness, and social competence in teaching ESL at the intermediate sublevel of GE. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of a student-centered approach, which allows students to make decisions and be more autonomous in their learning

process. In general, the text highlights the need for education that promotes equality, tolerance, and respect for diversity in an increasingly diverse world.

Oral Communication: This area emphasizes the importance of integrating listening and speaking skills, developing progressive listening skills, promoting authentic oral production, encouraging effective oral interaction, and creating an environment that promotes the motivation and autonomy of students in the language learning process at the intermediate sublevel of GE. It focuses on a balanced and meaningful approach in teaching oral communication in the classroom.

Reading: The area of reading highlights the importance of teaching reading skills, developing metacognitive skills, creating literacy-rich environments, and integrating interdisciplinary content in the teaching of English. Additionally, it highlights that students must understand the purpose of their reading and be able to apply appropriate strategies to achieve effective comprehension. Altogether, the importance of a balanced and meaningful approach in teaching reading in the classroom is emphasized.

Writing: Teaching writing is essential in the development of literacy in the area of English. Teachers should tap into students' natural writing anxiety and gradually develop their skills, focusing on writing for a specific purpose and audience. Additionally, this area highlights the importance of digital and media literacy in today's world and how these aspects are integrated into the development of writing skills. Taken together, the importance of teaching students to be effective writers and communicators in a variety of contexts is highlighted.

Language through the arts: The area of Language through the arts highlights the importance of balancing reality-based teaching with the promotion of imagination and creativity in the classroom. Literary texts, creative writing, and creative thinking activities are key elements in this process. This approach not only helps students develop language skills, but also fosters their ability to make sense of the world and express themselves creatively. The assessment of self-expression and the construction of students' confidence and self-esteem are essential components for their educational development at this sublevel. In summary, this area seeks to enrich language learning, through multisensory experiences, imagination, and creativity.

In terms of objectives, the curriculum contributes to the development of communication skills, progression in levels of competence, consideration of individual student needs and the creation of a positive and emotionally meaningful learning environment. Its focus is on effective communication and the comprehensive development of students. However, for the purposes of the project and based on the main objective of the analysis, it can be said that the curriculum considers inclusion, without discrimination, as a fundamental value within the learning groups, although it does not detail exactly methods and tools that focus on teaching children with learning difficulties.

The curriculum seems to align quite well with the general objectives of the ESL area, especially because it seeks to promote mental flexibility, creativity, linguistic intelligence, effective communication, and critical thinking among students at this basic secondary level. In addition, it emphasizes the importance of national identity, equality, inclusion, and respect for others and nature.

While the curriculum's overall objectives align with the English learning domain and encompass crucial aspects of holistic student development, there is an opportunity for enhancement through increased specificity and clarity. Some objectives lack the necessary granularity required to comprehensively address the diverse learning needs within a classroom, particularly among regular students and those with learning disabilities. Providing explicit, detailed strategies, methodologies, and adaptable approaches tailored to diverse learners—such as students with learning difficulties—would significantly strengthen the curriculum's effectiveness. Clear guidance on inclusive instructional strategies, differentiated assessments, flexible teaching methods, and specific support for individual learning profiles would ensure an equitable learning environment for all students, maximizing their potential for success.

Interview with experts

Three experts have been selected for their affinities, all of them knowledgeable in the teaching of English as a foreign language. However, they have particularities that allow them to express more confidently on certain areas such as curriculum, inclusion, and TESL in general.

Curriculum Expert: The Curriculum Expert has an extensive background in teaching foreign languages, including teacher training and involvement in advanced educational programs, suggesting a strong experience in language education and curriculum development.

TESL Expert: The TESL Expert has been a teacher in various educational institutions, both at secondary and higher levels. Additionally, they have a four-year track record as an Academic Coordinator at the Language Center of the Catholic University of Cuenca. Their experience and publication of academic articles related to teaching English as a foreign language support their expertise in the educational field, particularly in language instruction.

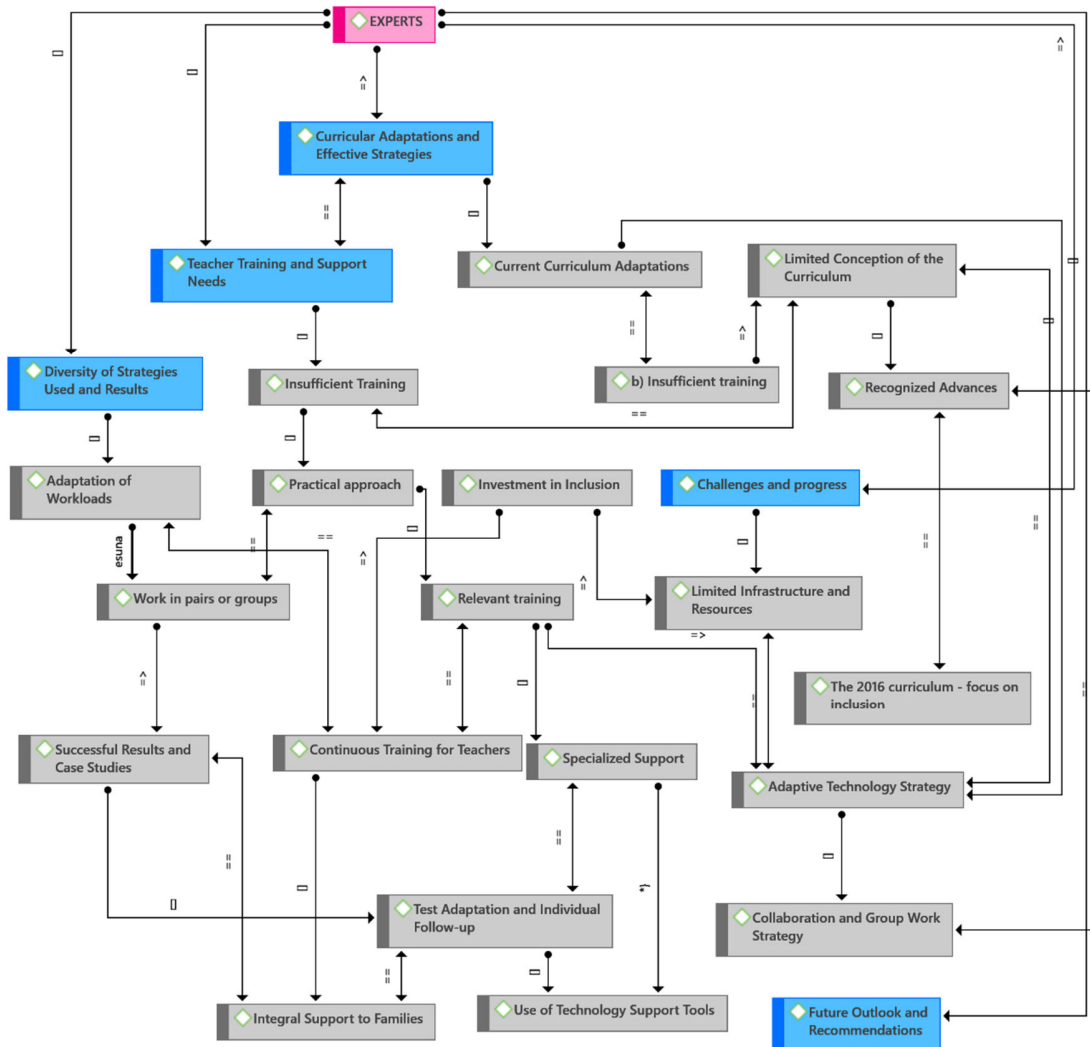
Inclusion Expert: The Inclusion Expert has solid experience in teaching English and design at the university level. Their multidisciplinary background, which includes design, languages, and education, demonstrates their interdisciplinary approach and experience in language teaching and design at a higher level. Being a doctoral candidate in Higher Education emphasizes their commitment to research and academic development in the educational field.



The experts address five topics, offering a comprehensive and valuable insight into the challenges and advancements experienced in implementing the ESL curriculum for students with disabilities. Figure 2 presents four categories of analysis with their respective codes. For instance, the diversity of strategies used, and their outcomes is one element, while another involves teacher training and the support they require. Additionally, on a highly important level, there are curriculum adaptations and effective strategies that, according to the experts, hold more functionality when developing impactful classroom activities. The experts are aware of the challenges in achieving language development in students with special educational needs. Finally, prospective views and recommendations are presented from the experts' standpoint.

Figure 2.

Semantic diagram of the experts



1) Challenges and Progress

In the current educational context, the effective inclusion of students with disabilities faces fundamental challenges that hinder their full integration into the curriculum. These challenges range from limitations in resources and insufficient training for educators to a constrained perception of the curriculum.

Highlighted Challenges:

1. **Limited Infrastructure and Resources:** The lack of suitable infrastructure and limited resources has been identified as a key obstacle in meeting the specific needs of students with disabilities. The absence of access to adaptive technology, specialized personnel, suitable spaces, and teaching materials complicates the implementation of adaptations. According to the TESL Expert, "The issue of infrastructure remains problematic... in some cases, technical equipment and necessary guidance for teachers to apply the required adaptations are lacking."
2. **Insufficient Training:** There is unanimity among experts regarding the scarcity of training and support for teachers. The urgent need for specialized, continuous, and practical training that enables educators to adapt their teaching methods to the individual needs of students with disabilities is emphasized. The Inclusion Expert notes, "Teachers need more than just seminars or talks with psychologists... They require concrete assistance in the classroom, ranging from technology to assistants, appropriate spaces, teaching materials, and playful resources."
3. **Limited Curriculum Conception:** An essential challenge lies in the restricted conception some educators maintain regarding the flexibility of the curriculum. Many teachers still do not fully comprehend the adaptable nature of the curriculum and its potential for allowing specific adjustments for students with disabilities. According to the Curriculum Expert, "The curriculum, as currently drafted, provides a variety of ideas, examples, and mandatory and desirable performance criteria, which could help teachers make necessary adaptations."

Recognized Progress:

Despite these challenges, significant strides have been made in inclusion within the curriculum. Measures such as the inclusion of performance criteria and the use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) have marked notable progress in integrating students with disabilities into the educational sphere. The Curriculum Expert highlights, "The 2016 curriculum was designed with a focus on inclusion... One of the implemented features was the inclusion of mandatory and desirable performance criteria."



These challenges and advancements reflect the inherent complexity and ongoing efforts to improve the inclusion of students with disabilities in the ESL curriculum. Additionally, they identify critical areas that still need attention and urgent development, especially in terms of available resources, teacher training, and a broader and more applied understanding of the curriculum and its adaptability.

2) Curriculum Adaptations and Effective Strategies:

In the continuous pursuit of ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all, the educational sphere faces significant challenges in addressing the specific needs of students with particular educational requirements, especially when learning a foreign language. In this regard, it is crucial to examine in detail how adaptations are carried out and what strategies are most effective for this purpose.

Current Curriculum Adaptations: The current curriculum has managed to provide a wide range of ideas and examples for making adaptations, representing a significant advancement in educational inclusion. Nevertheless, experts emphasize the need for greater specificity, especially concerning the type of disability, to further facilitate the implementation of adaptations by teachers. The Curriculum Expert emphasizes, "The curriculum offers a variety of ideas, examples, and performance criteria, both mandatory and desired, which can greatly assist teachers in making necessary adaptations." However, a more detailed and specific approach is required to provide truly effective and disability-specific adaptations, easing their implementation in diverse educational settings.

Adaptive Technological Strategy: Adaptive technology, such as text-to-speech programs, Braille, and class recordings, has been underscored by all experts as a crucial resource for overcoming barriers and facilitating access to educational content for students with diverse disabilities. The Curriculum Expert emphasizes, "Adaptive technology is one of the best ways to assist students with learning disabilities..." These tools provide support in communication and enable students with disabilities to access and process information more effectively.

Collaboration and Group Work Strategy: In addition to technology, collaboration and teamwork are recognized as highly effective strategies. Peer interaction and collaborative educational methodology are fundamental in fostering learning among students. The Inclusion Expert highlights, "Having specialized technologies and tutors is of great support. However, I have not yet observed curriculum adaptations applied in practice; they are more like projects that have not yet materialized in the classroom." This suggests that although there are available resources and tools, their effective and widespread application in real educational environments remains a challenge.

3) Teacher Training and Support Needs:

Experts identify the lack of adequate training and the need for a more practical and detailed approach for teachers, providing specific tools and real experiences to manage the diverse needs of students with learning disabilities. Additionally, they stress the importance of specialized support and resources for each disability.

- **Insufficiency of Training:** All experts agree that the current training is limited and inadequate to address the needs of teachers in teaching students with learning disabilities. "We consider that there has been very little training for improvement and updating." (TESL Expert). "From my point of view, it is very poor and almost non-existent." (Inclusion Expert)
- **Practical Approach:** The need for a more practical and detailed approach in training is highlighted, providing specific tools and real experiences for teachers. "Teachers need more than just a seminar or a talk with the psychologist... They must have pedagogical courses that thoroughly address each disability with real examples and practices for the subject they teach." (Curriculum Expert)
- **Relevant Training:** Emphasis is placed on providing practical training within classrooms, using technological tools, assistants, and specific material for each disability. Investment in adaptive technology and infrastructure, ongoing teacher training, comprehensive support for families and schools. "Teachers need help within the classroom with technology, assistants, space, playful and didactic materials, etc." (Inclusion Expert)
- **Specialized Support:** In addition to training, having specialized personnel to provide support to teachers in the specific needs of students with disabilities is proposed. "It would be wonderful if there were ways to work in detail with parents, and also to hold meetings with other schools to discuss how they can adapt their classes to help these students." (Curriculum Expert)

3) Diversity of Strategies Used and Results:

3.1. Strategies

1. **Workload Adaptation:** Teachers have adjusted workloads and deadlines for students with disabilities, providing more time when needed. This involves reducing the amount of homework or assignments the student must complete. For instance, granting an extension on assignment deadlines or exams, allowing these students more time to complete activities. This adaptation provides them with a less stressful environment and a more suitable pace for their learning. The Curriculum Expert points out, "Teachers reduce the amount of homework or assignments students have

to do. They provide more time for exams or extend deadlines for assignments and/or projects."

2. **Pair or Group Work:** The use of pair or group work is highlighted as an effective strategy. This dynamic facilitates mutual support among students, which can be beneficial for those with learning disabilities by sharing knowledge and collaborating on tasks. Teachers dedicate specific time to attend to students individually after group instruction. The TESL Expert mentions, "Dedicated practice time solely for the student works very well. The teacher delivers the lesson to the entire group and then reserves specific time for the students."
3. **Successful Outcomes and Practical Cases:**
 - a. **Exam and Individual Follow-Up Adaptation:** Teachers have adapted exams and assignments to meet the specific needs of students. Moreover, they maintain individualized follow-up to assess the progress of each student. This involves creating customized exams according to the student's needs, providing more time for assignments, or reducing the workload. They also conduct close monitoring with the student to assess their performance and progress. The Curriculum Expert mentions, "At our university, we draft special exams according to the student's needs. We give them more time for assignments or reduce their workload. We follow up with the teacher."
 - b. **Use of Technological Support Tools:** The importance of using adaptive technologies and specialized tutors as significant support for students with disabilities is highlighted. These technological tools are fundamental in providing access and support to these students, allowing them to overcome learning barriers and access educational content. The Inclusion Expert points out, "Having specialized technologies and tutors is of great help."

3.2. Successful Outcomes and Practical Cases:

1. **Exam Adaptation and Individual Follow-Up:** Teachers have tailored exams and assignments to meet specific student needs. Furthermore, they maintain individualized follow-up to evaluate each student's progress. This involves creating customized exams according to the student's needs, providing more time for assignments, or reducing workload. They also conduct close follow-up with the student to assess their performance and progress. The Curriculum Expert mentions, "At our university, we draft special exams according to the student's needs. We give them more time for assignments or reduce their workload. We follow up with the teacher."
2. **Use of Technological Support Tools:** The importance of using adaptive technologies and specialized tutors as significant support for students with disabilities is highlighted. These technological tools are crucial in providing access and support to these students, enabling them to overcome learning barriers and access educational

content. The Inclusion Expert points out, "Having specialized technologies and tutors is of great help."

5. Perspectives on the Future and Recommendations:

These recommendations and approaches focus on the need for investment, continuous teacher training, support for families, and the importance of promoting inclusion through a more accessible and tolerant educational environment.

1. **Investment in Inclusion:** Emphasis is placed on the critical need to allocate specific resources to foster inclusion. This encompasses acquiring adaptive technologies and improving educational infrastructure. Investing in adaptive technologies is crucial to provide tools that facilitate access to learning for students with disabilities. The Curriculum Expert underscores this idea by stating: "Investing money in inclusivity, from adaptive technologies to infrastructure." This highlights the importance of allocating financial resources to ensure an inclusive educational environment.
2. **Continuous Teacher Training:** The importance of offering teachers continuous and specific training is emphasized. This training should not only focus on general pedagogical aspects but also on how to handle the individual needs of students with disabilities. The TESL Expert mentions: "Actually, a lot of training and awareness are needed." This underscores the need for teacher training programs that address in detail and continuously the strategies to meet the needs of these students in the classroom.
3. **Comprehensive Support for Families:** Providing support that not only focuses on the educational sphere but also has a familial scope is suggested. This recommendation aims to create a comprehensive support environment for students with disabilities. The Curriculum Expert mentions: "Providing support at all levels, not just in the educational field, to families." This highlights the importance of offering resources and guidance not only to students but also to their families, providing comprehensive support.

Regarding changes and approaches to promote greater inclusion:

1. **Offer Opportunities in "Normal" Classes with Adaptations:** The importance of allowing students with disabilities to study in regular environments is highlighted. However, it is essential to provide the necessary adaptations for these students to fully participate and reach their potential. The Curriculum Expert emphasizes: "Continue offering them the opportunity to study in 'normal' classes but providing the necessary and preferred adaptations." This highlights the need to adjust the regular educational environment to ensure inclusive participation for all students.



2. **Foster Tolerance and Acceptance:** It is suggested to work on creating an environment of tolerance and acceptance among the students themselves. This approach aims to foster an inclusive environment where individual differences are respected. The Inclusion Expert mentions: "We must start by creating tolerance and acceptance among the students themselves to make future changes." This highlights the importance of creating a school culture where diversity is valued and respected, thus promoting the inclusion of all students.

After analyzing the valuable perspectives of the experts, persistent challenges in the education of students with disabilities are identified. The lack of technological resources and adequate infrastructure remains a key obstacle. Insufficient teacher training and the lack of support to implement curriculum adaptations are fundamental barriers that hinder effective practices. Successful strategies include the use of adaptive technology, adjustments in timing and complexity, and the promotion of collaboration and group work, adapting methods according to the type of disability. Although the current curriculum provides a solid foundation, specifying more by disability type is suggested to facilitate its application. Teachers require detailed practical training to address the diverse needs of these students. Successful adaptations involve workload modifications, group work, and exam adaptation. Future recommendations focus on investments in inclusion, continuous training, support for families, and the creation of more tolerant and accepting school environments. Thus, while challenges persist, the implementation of effective strategies and the improvement of resources can promote more significant inclusion in educational environments for students with disabilities.

Focus Group with TEFL teachers.

The experiences of ESL teachers in Ecuador reveal significant advancements in implementing regulations related to the inclusion of students with SEN. While improvements are acknowledged, substantial challenges persist. Educators emphasize the lack of specific training to effectively implement curriculum adaptations and insufficient institutional support, both of which hinder the efficacy of strategies. Additionally, although recognized curriculum adaptations exist in Ecuador, their inadequacy in addressing diverse SEN highlights the necessity for significant enhancements. This analysis examines teachers' perceptions and proposes recommendations to strengthen inclusive teaching in the context of ESL in Ecuador.

Six teachers participated in this focus group; their names are omitted, but their profiles are summarized:



1. Private Educational Institute ¹(EI) Teacher: With 20 years of experience in education, focusing on teaching ESL while prioritizing inclusive and equitable education for all students. Emphasizes the importance of ongoing teacher training, stressing the need to equip them with the necessary tools to meet the educational requirements of students with SEN.
2. Coastal Public EI Teacher: With an 18-year trajectory as an exemplary teacher in the coastal public setting, dedicated to addressing the diverse needs of students. Highlights the need for specific training to effectively implement curriculum adaptations and strategies to handle various SEN in the ESL classroom.
3. Capital City Public EI Teacher: With 14 years of experience in a public school in the Ecuadorian capital, acknowledges existing curriculum adaptations but emphasizes the need for substantial improvements to effectively address the needs of students with learning disabilities.
4. Sierra-Central Public EI Teacher: With 10 years of experience, working with students with SEN in the public education context. Highlights the lack of specific training and external institutional support as challenges for the effective implementation of curriculum adaptations.
5. Amazonian Public EI Teacher: With 15 years of experience in the Amazonian context, facing challenges related to the lack of external support and specific curriculum adaptations to address SEN.
6. Novice Public EI Teacher: With 6 years of experience, facing the challenge of working with students with SEN without extensive teaching experience. Points out the need for more support and curriculum adaptations to address these needs.

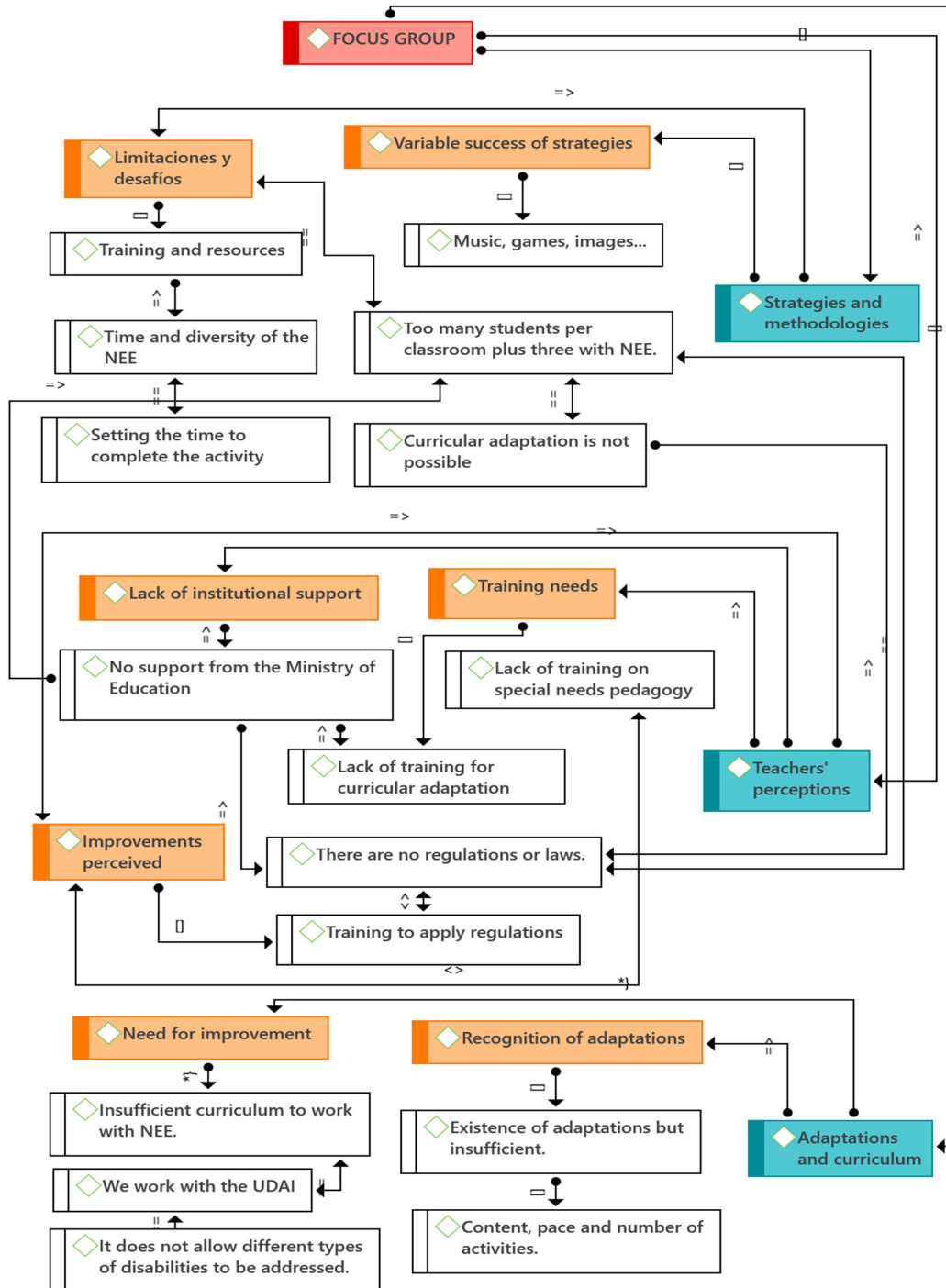
The following sections analyze three categories and classroom teachers' recommendations.

¹ Educational Institute is another way of referring to a school.



Figure 3.

Semantic diagram of the focus group



1) Perceptions and Experiences of ESL Teachers Regarding Compliance and Curriculum Implementation:



• **Perceived Improvements:** There is a widespread recognition among teachers that there have been improvements in implementing regulations and laws related to the inclusion of students with SEN. Emphasis is placed on the ongoing need for teachers' training to meet these requirements adequately.

"I think that there has been an improvement in the application of various processes, although it's necessary to emphasize that there's still much to be done. It's essential to constantly train teachers to equip them with the necessary tools to fulfill each aspect as best as possible." - (Private EI Teacher)

"There has been significant progress in sharing documents related to disabilities, but I truly believe that we lack training on implementation strategies because each case is unique, and we are not professionals in special education. We struggle to find the most suitable strategy for each case." - (Coastal Public EI Teacher)

• **Need for Training:** Participants stress the lack of specific training to effectively implement curriculum adaptations. There's a demand for implementation strategies and specific tools to address the diversity of SEN in the ESL classroom.

"Firstly, it's necessary to consider that there are no specific regulations or laws in ESL... It's necessary to provide training in this regard and work according to the specific educational needs identified for each student." - (Sierra-Central Public EI Teacher)

"It's complex because, as I mentioned, it's very general, and there are different types of disabilities in the classroom." - (Novice Public EI Teacher)

• **Lack of Institutional Support:** Some teachers point out the lack of external support, either from the Ministry of Education or other governmental entities, which complicates the effective implementation of curriculum adaptations.

"There is no support of any kind, neither from authorities nor governmental entities, and it's evident when we have classrooms with 40 students, including 3 with SEN." - (Amazonian Public EI Teacher)

"When identifying a student with SEN, the DECE² department suggests various guidelines for working with these students in meetings. However, there is no support from the Ministry of Education." - (Sierra-Central Public EI Teacher)

² DECE is the Spanish acronym for "*Departamento de Consejería Estudiantil*", which can be translated as Department of Student Counseling.

2) Effects of Used Strategies and Methodologies:

• **Variable Success of Strategies:** Successful strategies like the use of technology, music, games, images, among others, are identified. However, it's emphasized that success can vary depending on the type of disability and individual student needs.

"Technological support, games, a variety of activities with different complexity levels, adjusting times for completing activities." - (Private EI Teacher)

"I have a student with cerebral palsy who can't read or write, has motor skill problems, but loves music. That's where I help because this activity relaxes him, and while I manage to get him to work in his notebook with other material, I always play music to relax him." - (Coastal Public EI Teacher)

• **Limitations and Challenges:** Lack of preparation, resources, class sizes, and the heterogeneity of SEN are mentioned as challenges limiting the effectiveness of used strategies.

"We've always done the same activity as the other students, but with less complexity." - (Amazonian Public EI Teacher)

"It's complex because, as I mentioned, it's very general, and there are different types of disabilities in the classroom." - (Novice Public EI Teacher)

3) Adaptations and Support Provided by the Ecuadorian Curriculum:

• **Recognition of Adaptations:** The existence of adaptations, such as content adjustments, pace, and the quantity of activities, is acknowledged. However, it's noted that these adaptations are insufficient, and there's a lack of specific technological support for visually or hearing impaired students.

"Content adaptations (of lesser or greater complexity), pace adjustments (more or less time) for performing activities, adjustment in the quantity of assigned activities for the student." - (Private EI Teacher)

"To make the adaptations, we've considered what's recommended in the UDAI (District Support Unit for Inclusion) report, where they guide us on how to work in each subject." - (Capital City Public EI Teacher)

• **Need for Improvements:** Teachers express the need for significant curriculum improvements to effectively address the needs of students with learning disabilities. The lack of specific adaptations for different types of disabilities is highlighted.

"I think very little; there's a lot of support missing to teach these students adequately." - (Capital City Public EI Teacher)



"There are no sufficient adaptations and support in the curriculum." - (Sierra-Central Public EI Teacher)

"There are no adaptations or support." - (Novice Public EI Teacher)

Recommendations given by TEFL Teachers:

Ongoing Training: It is suggested to provide regular and specific training for ESL teachers regarding curriculum adaptations and strategies to address various SEN in the classroom.

"Institutions should provide technological means, internet access, and appropriate materials based on the type of need. Similarly, continuous training should be given to teachers to equip them with necessary tools when delivering their classes." (Private EI Teacher) "We should take the issue more seriously and, above all, with empathy, as many colleagues still see disability as a problem and don't see the human aspect that with a little enthusiasm, solidarity, and humanity, we can do a lot for someone who may not become a successful professional but will definitely be a great human being." (Coastal Public EI Teacher)

Reducing Class Sizes: Recommending reducing the number of students per classroom to allow more individualized attention.

"The number of students in the classroom should be reduced. Training should be given to teachers in lesson planning and respective adaptations." (Amazonian Public EI Teacher) "We should receive training every academic year to improve teaching English to these children, to make them enjoy the language as well." (Capital City EI Teacher)

Emotional Support: Teachers suggest more emotional support to address additional demands and emotional challenges associated with teaching students with SEN.

"We need emotional support as teachers, to be able to work with them with a more positive attitude." (Capital City EI Teacher)

Focus on Reality and Individual Needs: There's an urge to consider the diversity of situations and adapt the curriculum and strategies based on the specific needs of each student with SEN.

"The reality in which we live should be taken into account. This refers to both the institution's infrastructure, resources, families, and also that teachers must be constantly trained, especially on how to act in these cases." (Sierra-Central Public EI Teacher) "Firstly, teachers must be trained and informed about the management

of the Ecuadorian curriculum. There should also be professionals to advise teachers on each student's needs." (Novice Public EI Teacher)

These recommendations aim to enhance teacher training, bridge the gap in implementing curriculum adaptations, and provide better support to achieve more inclusive and effective teaching for students with learning disabilities in the context of ESL in Ecuador.

Overall, in English as ESL classrooms, teachers face considerable challenges in complying with inclusion regulations for students with SEN. Although improvements have been identified in implementing curriculum adaptations and strategies, significant deficiencies persist in training, resources, and institutional support. The diversity of SEN, class sizes, and the heterogeneity of disabilities pose obstacles to the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies. While the Ecuadorian curriculum acknowledges adaptations, it lacks specific focus on diverse disabilities, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reform. It's essential to provide resources, continuous training, and emotional support to teachers to enhance inclusive teaching in ESL classrooms for students with SEN in Ecuador.

Discussion

Inclusion in the educational field, especially for students with SEN, has been a relevant topic of discussion. Montaña and Vera (2012) highlighted that inclusion implies the total insertion of each child, with abilities and disabilities, in each school activity. However, reality, revealed by the focus groups and interviews, shows attitudes of rejection, both from classmates and, sometimes, from students with SEN themselves.

Creating a truly inclusive environment presents significant challenges, including lack of resources, insufficient teacher training, limited specialized care, inadequate facilities, and the need for solidarity (Montaña & Vera, 2012). These challenges are intensified in settings with large study groups, where personalized attention is difficult to achieve, specially when there are different types of disabilities in the classroom as pointed out by one of the participants of the focus group. Difficulties associated with class size and adapting the curriculum to individual needs are highlighted as key problems affecting the effectiveness of teaching.

Parental involvement is crucial but is hampered by low financial resources and time constraints. In classrooms with fewer students, it would be possible to provide more personalized attention (Montaña & Vera, 2012). Lack of parental engagement is highlighted as a barrier, according to Broadfoot et al (2008), cited by Díaz and Morales (2015). And there is not only lack of support from the parents, but from institutions as well, there not interest of working with SEN students and the Ministry of Education does not make an important effort to stop that, even so, it is important to highlight that, although progress is still lacking, more and more importance is being given to SEN students, as was said by the teachers: "There has been significant progress in sharing documents related to disabilities" (Coastal Public EI Teacher) .



Regarding pedagogical strategies, it is recognized that students with SEN require different approaches. Playful activities, direct methods and the use of educational technologies are suggested, although the scarcity of inclusive pedagogical models in Higher Education in Ecuador is noted (Castro et al., 2019) that prepares teachers for school education. This fully coincides with what was said by the focus group, who mention that the use of music and games are very useful.

Teachers must adapt and seek training to address the diversity of their students. The lack of skills and resources is presented as a common challenge (Angenscheidt & Navarrete, 2017). The application of adapted teaching methods in regular courses is seen to improve the learning and emotional strength of the entire group (Loor-Aldas et al., 2019), these facts are also perceived by TEFL teachers who participated in the focus groups and experts interviewed in this study.

Assessment in English classrooms for students with SEN is a challenge, with generalized strategies and little adjustment to individual needs (Montaño & Vera, 2012). Furthermore, the lack of teachers with adequate command of English and harmonized pedagogical strategies is presented as a weakness in primary education (Díaz and Morales, 2015). This reality was not mentioned by the participants of this study, it might be due to the experience and expertise these professionals have in the ESL field; however, it does not mean it is not an issue to be considered.

The implementation of ESL curriculum for students with learning disabilities faces various challenges that require specific strategies to overcome them. Although there is progress in awareness of inclusion in the curriculum and laws practical application is hampered by limited teacher training and a lack of strategies tailored to the individual needs of students stipulated by Vélez-Calvo et al. (2016) and also stated by the participants of this study.

Adapting strategies and activities to individual needs emerges as a constant challenge, along with the need to integrate students into a non-inclusive society and manage diversity in the classroom. Teachers employ a variety of approaches, from the use of technological tools to specific methods such as TPR and CLIL, to address these difficulties and promote an inclusive learning environment.

The need to provide teachers with specialized materials, training and inter-institutional agreements for special educational programs is highlighted (Montaño & Vera, 2012). Limited communication and information about inclusion are presented as obstacles in the teaching-learning processes (Montaño & Vera, 2012), however, this study revealed that teachers and ESL experts are willing to participate in training programs to be able to implement effective strategies and activities in their classes with children with SEN. The training of university teachers in inclusive education is essential for their teaching practice (Vélez-Calvo et al., 2016). The importance of raising awareness among education students

about inclusion is highlighted (Varela, 2014). UNESCO defines inclusive teaching as identifying and responding to the diversity of needs of all students (Castro et al., 2019).

Perceptions of existing adaptations in the ESL curriculum vary, pointing to the lack of individualized focus as a significant weakness. The need for more support and specific training for teachers is a widespread concern, highlighting the importance of institutional and government support to improve training and care for students with disabilities.

The crucial importance of individualized adaptation of the curriculum and educational strategies is underlined, evidencing successful cases and limitations in institutions that do not provide adequate support. Recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the curriculum include an emphasis on continuous training for teachers, access to adequate resources and proposals to reduce the load in the classroom, improving planning and adaptation strategies.

In conclusion, effective inclusion requires overcoming challenges through training, parent-teacher engagement, adapted pedagogical strategies and institutional support. Constant dialogue, innovation and awareness of diversity are essential to build an inclusive society (Montaño & Vera, 2012).

Conclusions

As already mentioned, the curriculum contributes to the development of communication skills, progression in levels of competence, consideration of individual student needs and the creation of a positive and emotionally meaningful learning environment, the focus of which is on effective communication and the comprehensive development of students, in a friendly English language learning context, which leads to the following inferences:

In the area of communication and cultural awareness, it is important to promote communicative competence and openness to cultural diversity, which is essential in an increasingly globalized world. In the area of Oral Communication, a range of skills are covered, from listening comprehension to oral expression, with a focus on effective communication in everyday situations, promoting interaction and collaboration in learning, and adapting to the stage of development of students to improve their communication skills in the English language.

Concerning the area of reading, key aspects of reading comprehension are addressed, which involves understanding details and the general meaning of simple texts, identifying relevant words and phrases, distinguishing between facts and opinions, and applying reading strategies such as the use of diverse sources to increase research skills, which allows students to develop critical skills and autonomous learning.

In relation to writing, which ranges from the creation of resources for learning words to the production of various types of texts with a focus on the expression of opinions and the use of



digital tools, the aim is to develop writing skills that allow students communicate effectively in different situations and contexts, preparing them for a globalized and digital world.

And in language through the arts, the aim is to promote creativity and understanding of literary texts, where students can use digital and visual media, create their own literary artistic expression and participate in collaborative activities to explore these literary elements and cultural aspects of their environment and other cultures, which promotes the development of literary skills and appreciation of literature, encouraging creativity and understanding of cultural aspects.

The information contained in the English curriculum for the middle sublevel of GE seems to be designed to meet a series of educational standards and general objectives in English as a foreign language, which are related to the development of language skills, promoting creativity, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking. Likewise, this program focuses on the integration of ICT as a fundamental part of the modern educational process. However, technologies advance and evolve so rapidly that the methodology will soon be mainly digital, and for this.

The evaluation of whether it meets the specific educational standards for the middle sublevel of primary education would require a detailed analysis of the official standards of the Ecuadorian educational system and a comparison with the specific elements of the curriculum. In addition, standards, as well as technology, also change over time, so it is important to be constantly updated.

The English curriculum also promotes diversity and equity, by incorporating elements that encourage the inclusion of diverse groups, with inclusive pedagogical approaches. This includes reflection on Ecuadorian culture, the use of information and communication technologies, the promotion of intercultural skills, working in groups and adaptability to different topics. However, the importance of ongoing evaluation and effective implementation is emphasized to ensure that the curriculum fully meets these diversity and equity goals and responds to the changing needs of students and society at large.

The profile of the Ecuadorian high school graduate, in the last decade, focuses on three key dimensions: Justice, Innovation and Solidarity. Therefore, students are expected to understand the needs of the country and work to build an egalitarian and democratic society, acting with ethics, generosity and respect. Additionally, they are expected to demonstrate initiative, creativity, and communication skills, promoting intellectual curiosity and authentic leadership. The solidarity dimension focuses on social responsibility, emotional intelligence and the ability to work as a team, promoting harmony and empathy. Altogether, this profile seeks to train citizens who are committed and prepared to face the challenges of today's society.



It can also be inferred that through the objectives and evaluation criteria proposed in this curricular program, the aim is to cultivate an education that not only promotes academic development, but also promotes intellectual curiosity, encourages reflection and the application of knowledge. interdisciplinary. In the educational field, we seek to promote creative initiative, authentic leadership and individual responsibility. In addition, the importance of working as a team, respecting the ideas of others, and acting with responsibility and respect towards everyone in general is emphasized.

In general, it can be said that the English program, through the proposed areas and evaluation criteria, meets what is stated in its general objectives, which determines its effectiveness if it is applied in regular classrooms; However, and due to the increasing increase in boys and girls with deficiencies in certain areas and skills, the program requires the incorporation of several curricular adaptations, which include methods and tools focused on teaching the English language for students with learning problems.

Limitations

An identified limitation was the limited information on the topic on the Internet, which forced the study to be compared with related research, focused on similar topics but not expressly concerning the topic being addressed.

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Conflicto de intereses:

No existe conflicto de intereses.

Financiamiento:

No existió asistencia financiera de partes externas al presente artículo.

Agradecimiento:

N/A

Nota:

El artículo no es producto de una publicación anterior.

