

## High school diploma center students and teachers debate over the EFL curriculum

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### Abstract

This research study lied in the paradigm of criticism with a mixed method based approach. It was conducted in two *Centros Integrados de Adultos* (High School Diploma Centers, HSDPCs) located in a working-class neighborhood in the Gran Concepción and examined the issue to what extent the nationally centralized Adult Education EFL Curriculum (AEEFLC) is addressing the evening high school education program student`s language needs and professional expectations.

Data was gathered through two group-administered semi-structured surveys answered by 44 equally male and female students and 2 certified EFL teachers. Data collected was analyzed under the AEEFLCD content basis and students´ professional endeavors.

Key findings showed the centralized EFL curriculum did not address learner`s language immediate nor long-term needs as its analysis revealed the language program focused on enhancing reading comprehension skills rather than productive skills. In fact, HSDPC students expected to develop oral communicative competence to be ready for either the professional/labor market and for the higher education language requirements as well. In that respect, teacher showed awareness of the language program limitations by adapting the EFLC to both student`s interests and available school material, resources and facilities. Teachers suggested that the AEEFLC should prepare students for higher education and should enhance the four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking. Key finding also contributed to the debate on the very limitations of nationally centralized curriculum as it does not show articulation between formal education and the labor market.

*Keywords:* Adult education, EFL curriculum, school majors, mixed method, language needs

The post-transition democracy education policies implemented in Chile face challenges such as no articulation between the formal, non-formal and informal education modalities, weak links between formal education and the labor market, as well as the lack of an informational system that updates individuals on the demands of the productive sector and the offers of the educational

system (Kormos, 2013; UNESCO, 2011; Sehnbruch, 2009; Matear, 2008). Yet, little or no research has been done on adult education, long regarded as a vehicle for social change and transformation (Blanden, Sturgis and Urwin, 2009; Baumgartner, 2001; Delors et al., 1996; Mezirow, 1990, 2000). Within this frame, this research study lied in the paradigm of criticism whose design was based on a mixed- methods approach (Denscombe, 2010; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2007) and examined the issue of whether or not the Adult Education English as Foreign Language Curriculum (AEEFLC) addresses today's learner's expectations of students in the public *Centros de educación Integrada de Adultos* (Evening High School Diploma Program Centers, HSDPCs).

While the primary motivation of HSDPC students is to complete the high school diploma to pursue higher education, little is known whether or not the HSDPC English core subject is addressing students' real expectations. The study was conducted in two High School Diploma Centers (HSDPCs) located in a working-class neighborhood in the Gran Concepción area which examined to what extent the nationally centralized Adult Education EFL Curriculum (AEEFLC) is addressing the evening high school education program student's language needs and professional expectations. Data collection was gathered through two group-administered semi-structured surveys answered by 44 students and 2 certified EFL teachers.

Data collected was analyzed under the AEEFLC contents and students professional agendas and reveals that despite the AEEFLC is mainly topic-based, enhances reading comprehension skills and offers limited time to oral-language production practice, students expect to develop oral communicative competence skills in the EFL classroom work to make themselves ready for higher education and job immersion. Furthermore, findings showed teachers make efforts to adapt the centralized AEEFLC to their students' needs and interests what ultimately raises an awareness on the limitations of centralized curricula.

The *Centros de Educación Integrada de Adultos* are Evening High School Diploma Program Centers (HSDPCs) under municipal governance. HSDPCs can adopt two study modalities, scientific-humanistic or vocational, and organize their school year under three types of school programs -regular, flexible, and leveling- to offer young adults and adults a relevant and meaningful education which provides them knowledge, skills, and attitudes through core subject areas such as Spanish, Math, Social Studies, Social Science, English, Labour Integration, *Inserción Laboral*, Consumption and Quality of Life, *Consumo y Calidad de Vida*, and Social Coexistence, *Convivencia Social* (*Educación de Personas Jóvenes y Adultas*, 2014).

The HDCPCs' curriculum compasses namely political and technical dimensions as they compromise the process of planning, implementing and evaluating courses of study (MacKernan, 2008; Kelly, 2009). Within the domain of language curriculum development, studies showed that curriculum development highlights all processes that focus on designing, revising, and implementing and evaluating language programs (Graves, 2008; Richard, 2001; Brown, 1995). Thus curriculum development and language curriculum development are interwoven (Graves, p. 149).

Yet adults learn under the so-called andragogical learning principle (Holyoke & Larson, 2009). According to Knowles (2005), five assumptions underlie the andragogical model of adult learning: self-directness, self-participating, self-readiness, self-external motivation, and self-internal motivation. Regarding learning styles, Illeris (2007) pointed out three dimensions of learning: content, incentive and interaction. The content dimension refers to the prior knowledge

and skills every person has; technically the incentive dimension refers to motivation, emotion and volition whereas the interaction dimension deals with the concepts of action, communication and cooperation (p. 3). Spruck-Wrigley and Powrie (2002) stated some of the common characteristic of adult language and literacy such as goal-driven, interaction, and risk taking (as cited in *World Education Services*, 2011, p. 3).

## Method

### Participants

The study was conducted within a non-probability sampling principle, that is to say, members of the wider population were deliberately excluded (Denscombe, 2010; Cohen et al., 2007). The sample was purposive and participants were included on the basis of their school enrollment (Cohen et al., 2007). A sub-categorization of this sample was a convenience one as researchers selected a sample based on time, and location (Merriam, 2009).

The sample of the present study consisted of 44 HSDPCs students, 22 male and 22 female whose ages ranged between 17 to 51 years old, and two certified teachers of English Language. Participants were numbered to be identified, 1 to 20 were enrolled in the HSDPC1, and 21 to 44 were enrolled in the HSDPC2. The English language teachers were numbered as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2.

### Procedure

First, AEEFLC activities were organized on a topic and skill basis. This content analysis technique also fell into a semantical-designation content analysis that “provides the frequency which certain objects (persons, things, groups, or concepts) were referred to, that is, roughly speaking, subject- matter analysis” (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 50).

Second, the AEEFLC directions were identified by given patterns that represented the intention, ideology and aim (Krippendorff, 2013).

### Semi-structured questionnaire

The semi-structured questionnaire was conducted to find out to what extent teachers tailored the AEEFLC to their students post completion interests. The questionnaires were group-administered semi-structured surveys (Denscombe, 2010) and that procedure enabled any queries or uncertainties to be addressed immediately with the questionnaire (Cohen et al., 2007).

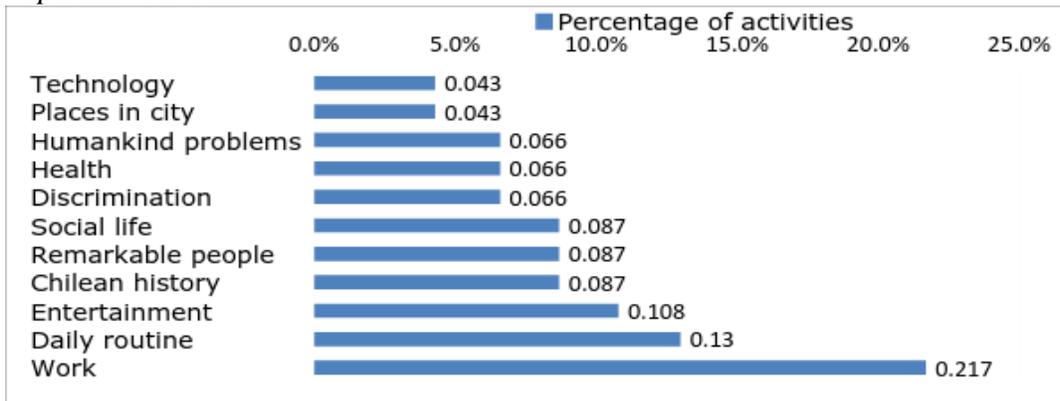
The piloting of the students' questionnaire was done with non-participants from HSDPC 2. The teachers' questionnaire also underwent a piloting procedure with one EFL teacher who worked in an HSDPC in the same location.

Regarding to confidentiality, teachers and students voluntarily signed an informed consent. Six categories emerged from the semi-structured questionnaires: (i) Reasons to study in these HSDPCs, (ii) Reasons to find English useful, (iii) Changes to be done to the AEEFLC, (iv) Type of material, methodology, and (v) Further suggestions.

### Results

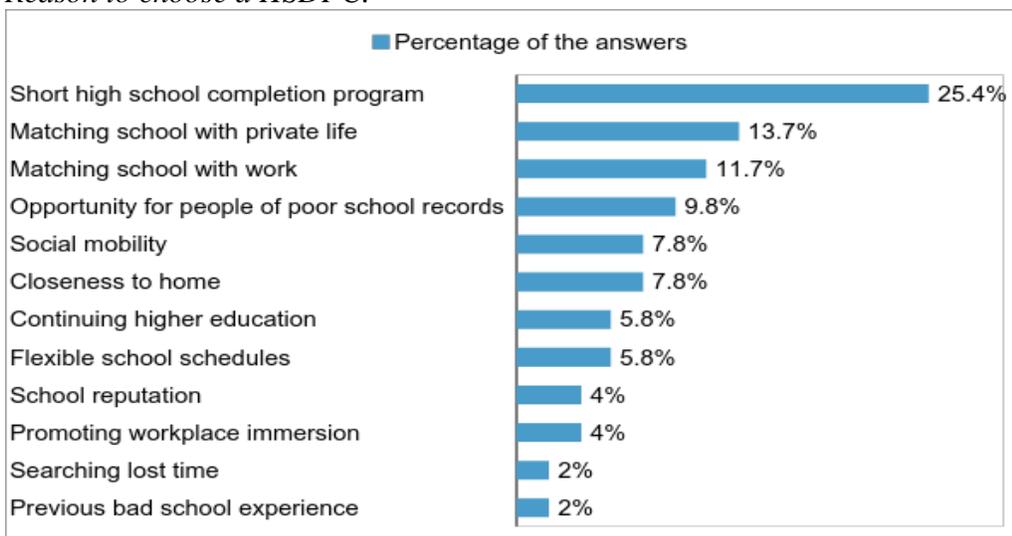
The analysis of the AEEFLCD shows the school program was arranged within 11 different topic-based activities related to everyday issues to promote students’ language skills. Regarding productive skills, speaking and writing, were not the program’s focus; rather they were included as a subsidiary element to the reading and listening comprehension skills.

Table 1  
*Topic score areas.*



Results addressing the reasons that brought students to choose a HSDPC, results showed 25, 4% of the students did because they believed they offered a flexible high school program, whereas 13,7% of the participants stated they did because HDPSCs allowed them to match the school with their private and professional live.

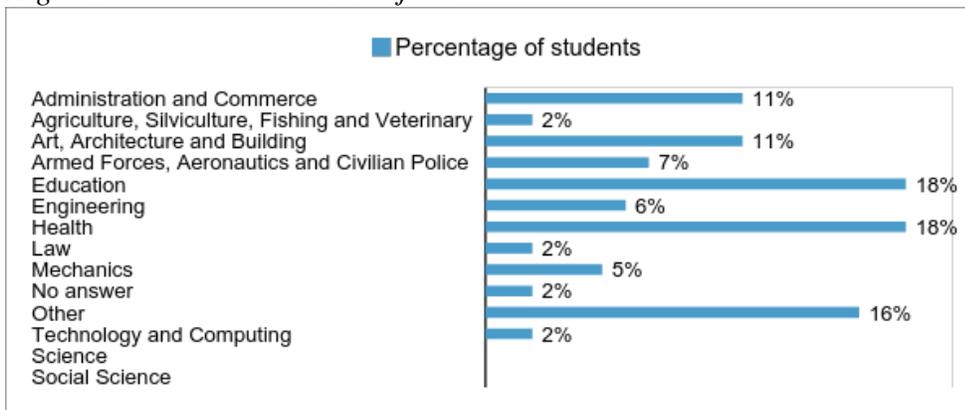
Table 2  
*Reason to choose a HSDPC.*



While addressing their professional plans, findings showed 98% of students stated their interest in pursuing higher education offered by the national higher education system: University or college education and higher technical education.

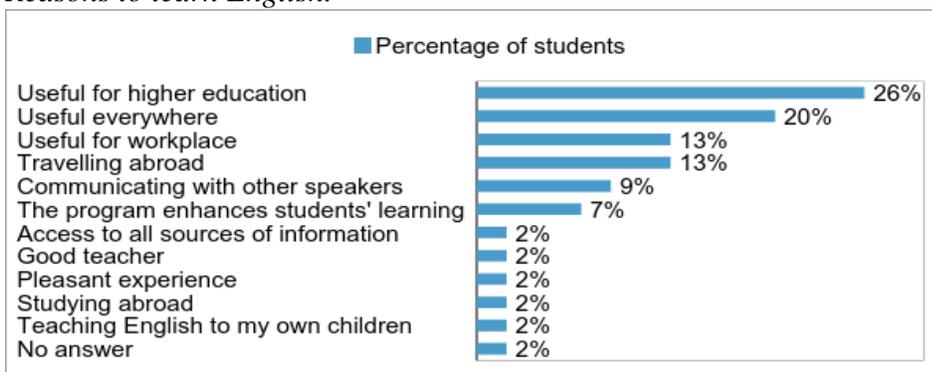
When responding to the importance given to the English language and their expectations about their learning experiences, 95% of the participants considered English to be useful considering their major choices for higher education as Table 3 shows. Only 2,5% stated that learning English was not significant for their professional and higher education plans whereas 2,5% did not answer the item.

Table 3  
*Higher education student's majors.*



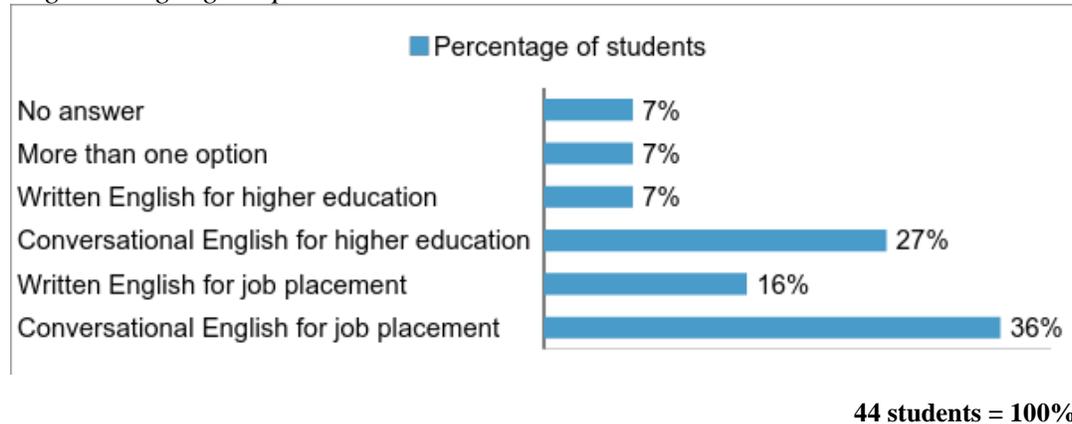
While addressing the meaning of the English language in their curriculum, students stated it as useful to make themselves ready for higher education. Furthermore, it can be interpreted that the participants recognized the impact of the globalization nationwide, when they declared that English is useful everywhere (Kormos, 2013; Matear, 2008).

Table 4  
*Reasons to learn English.*



Regarding the student's expectations on the AEEFL program, they stated their interest in developing their speaking skills, they saw the language as a means of communication to be useful for their workplace or higher education. However, the student's expectations differed from the aim of the AEEFLC which is to develop comprehension skills, especially reading.

Table 5  
*English language impact.*



The participants also stated that they were satisfied with the AEEFL. 73% of them answered that they would not modify anything. With regard to material, they suggested to include more material. 5% of the students considered that the contents were very basic for their language level. Referring to evaluations, they suggested to have more oral reports to build confidence and improve pronunciation; this proposal is consistent with the results where students expected to develop their speaking skills.

Regarding the points addressed by the 2 teachers through the semi-structured survey, they expressed their views on the nationally centralized AEEFLC. First, they stated that they considered that the curriculum did not address their students' real needs. Figure 11 summarizes the work that these teachers did in their classrooms and their suggestions to improve the AEEFLC.

## Discussion

The AEEFLC was launched in 2007 and was devoted to all the modalities of adult education in Chile; however, HSDPCs differed from the rest of AE programs; they had to adopt the regular modality where students had in-class teaching four hours a day, five days a week. By contrast, flexible and leveling modality did not have full time schedule and they were under the regulations of a different Education Act, these two modalities were structured under the 211/2009 Education Act (*Guía ayuda MINEDUC*, 2012). On the other hand, the Chilean AE EFLC promoted teacher's

autonomy offering teachers the opportunity to adapt the English language program to their students' needs and context.

The current AEEFLC mainly considered topics related to work life. This characteristic needs to be changed, because students showed a variety of interests and their expectations were not immediately related to work life, yet, topics should arouse students' interests. On top of that, topics should be presented to students in its proper cultural context; however, topics should also introduce the characteristics of the culture of English-speaking countries a little at a time and where appropriate. The idea of using a variety of topics is to develop cross-cultural openness, tolerance and understanding.

Regarding to the issue that the AEEFLC enhanced reading comprehension skills and students' expectations were to develop oral communicative competence in the foreign language, it is essential to rethink the objectives of the AE EFLC. Dörnyei (2013) stated that the overall purpose of language learning is to prepare learners for meaningful communication and this preparation should include controlled practice activities to promote automatization of second language (L2) skills.

Finally, based on findings, teachers did not follow AE EFLC and students would not change the teachers' adaptation. This means that English language teachers have followed the right path in the process of making decisions about their students' needs. To make informed decisions, English language teachers should be updating their knowledge constantly. It would be useful that AE English language teachers share their experiences. English language teachers from a particular district should meet once a year for two or three days to interchange knowledge and experiences.

Three major conclusion can be drawn from this study. First, the AE EFLC did not address the evening high school diploma learner's expectations. As stated before the AE EFLC mainly focuses on work life topics while students' interests were broader; they recognized the importance of the English language and the majority of the students claimed that they needed it for higher education. On the other hand, the analysis of the AE EFL showed that the program enhanced reading comprehension skills, however, students expected to develop oral communicative competence in the English language; 28 out of 44 students considered they needed conversational English for their post-completion agendas.

Second, the EFL teachers adapted the AE EFL curriculum according to the students' needs. The teachers' questionnaire showed that both adapted the English language program regarding to the students' interests and the available material resources. These adaptations were successfully evaluated by the students, 32 out of 44 students would not modify the English language program at their HSDPCs.

Third, the EFL teachers suggested modifications to improve the AE EFL curriculum. They stated that the AE English language program should prepare students for higher education and should enhance the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Teacher 1 included activities that, according to her point of view, should be useful for preparing students for higher education, however, she did not mention the criteria for choosing the activities suitable for the aim mentioned before. Teacher 2 clearly stated that she used a textbook that enhanced the four skills. On the other hand, it is worth noting that there was not a report on the competence of these students in the English language, therefore the evaluation of these adaptations were only the perceptions of

the students. Notwithstanding, and as previously mentioned and regardless the limitations of the study; it is worth pointing out that this adaptations were successfully evaluated by the students; thus teachers encouraged their students to have a positive attitude towards the English language, which is essential to learn a foreign language: “most members of the language teaching profession realize that their students’ learning potential increases when attitudes are positive and motivation runs high” (Elyildirim & Ashton-Hay, 2006, p.2).

While the results of this study cannot be generalized, this study also offered room to revise the AEEFLC as data collected showed.

This study set out to determine if the centralized EFL curriculum addressed the evening high school diploma learner’s expectations. The evidence of this research suggested that the A EFLC spirit intended to address students’ needs and expectations. Whether HSDPCs students continue higher education or incorporate into the workforce, they needed to develop communicative competence in English because English has established its position as the global lingua franca (Kormos, 2013; Matear, 2008). But whether students were able or not to improve their English performance was far beyond the scope of this study and further research needs to be conducted on this.

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