

Teaching English in Cuban Higher Education

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Educación y sociedad

Universidad de Ciego de Ávila, Cuba

ISSN: 1811-9034

Periodicity: Cuatrimestral

vol. 22, no. 1, 2024

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Received: 12 March 2022

Accepted: 05 April 2023

URL: <http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/762/7624845002/>

Abstract: In Cuban Higher Education, English language teaching plays an important role in the comprehensive training of future professionals, helping them acquit in the different sectors of the society. The major – Bachelor of Education, Foreign Languages, English – qualifies English language professionals to carry out the teaching-learning process of the English language in the different educational contexts, and for that, the subject Didactics of Foreign Languages is imparted. In this article, the authors aim to explore the dialectical relationship between the triad – English, didactics and higher education. During the exploratory phase, methods and techniques of the empirical level were used, such as document analysis, observation and interview. Deepening on the didactic aspects that the professor must take into account in the teaching of the English language, a contradiction was spotted – the English language policy based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is implemented in the training of professionals with a non-philologist profile while it is not in those with a philologist profile, i.e., English teachers-to-be.

Keywords: didactics of foreign languages, english, higher education.

Resumen: En la Educación superior cubana, la enseñanza del idioma inglés constituye un peldaño en la formación integral de los futuros profesionales, permitiéndoles desempeñarse en los diferentes sectores de la sociedad. La carrera Licenciatura en Educación, Lenguas Extranjeras, Inglés forma profesionales para que dirijan el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del idioma inglés en los diferentes niveles educativos y para ello reciben la asignatura Didáctica de las Lenguas Extranjeras. En este artículo, los autores tienen como objetivo explorar la relación dialéctica existente entre la tríada – el idioma inglés, la didáctica y la Educación superior. Durante la fase exploratoria se utilizaron métodos y técnicas del nivel empírico, como el análisis documental, la observación y la entrevista. En la profundización de los aspectos didácticos que el profesor debe tener en cuenta en la enseñanza del idioma inglés, se detectó la siguiente contradicción – la política del idioma inglés basado en el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas se implementa en la preparación de los profesionales universitarios con perfil no filológico, y no en la preparación de los de perfil filológico, es decir, los futuros profesores de inglés.

Palabras clave: didáctica de las Lenguas Extranjeras, educación superior, idioma inglés.

INTRODUCTION

Education in Cuba, more than an option, constitutes a right for every citizen; it is considered the main tool against ignorance, the path towards development, and at the same time, one of the most cherished assets for Cubans. It is structured in several levels: the first of these being non-formal education as a precedent to preschool education, and the last, not less important, being higher education and postgraduate education.

In higher education actions are taken to increase the quality of future professionals not only in their field of study but also in other areas such as foreign languages, with a greater emphasis on the teaching of the English language. This language is not conceived as just another subject but as a tool for the search of scientific and technical information in different fields. Furthermore, it is a requirement for the completion of studies in the Curriculum E, so that professionals develop listening and reading comprehension, spontaneous oral communication, and written production in topics related to their specialty (Rey, 2018).

Therefore, with the aim of improving the quality of preparation of future professionals in developing linguistic competence in the English language, scholars and researchers have pursued the improvement of its teaching and learning, among them are, Díaz et al. (2010), González (2015), Smith (2016), Beltrán (2017), Rey (2018), Fontes et al. (2020), Quintero et al. (2021), Pérez et al. (2023).

Despite being a topic that has been addressed repeatedly by the scientific community, there are still limitations in English language teaching in higher education, considering both philologist and non-philologist profiles. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the dialectical relationship between the triad – English, didactics and higher education.

DEVELOPMENT

The exploration was carried out at the University of Ciego de Ávila starting in the year 2022. In its development, the historical and sociocultural context in which English language teaching and learning are immersed was taken into account. A qualitative approach was employed in the search for information, using various methods and techniques. Firstly, observation was used, where the authors collected information based on a guide to assess the current state of English language teaching and learning for both philologists and non-philologists. The ideal state is reflected in policies and resolutions that regulate both the English language policy and the English language teaching-learning process; therefore, a document analysis was conducted.

Additionally, a group interview was carried out with 22 professors from the Department of Foreign Languages, and another different group interview with 12 professors from the Language Center. During both interviews, the level of linguistic competence achieved and the mastery of the new policies for teaching English in Cuban Higher Education were taken into consideration.

Exploration Results

The main results of the exploration conducted on the dialectical relationship between the English language, didactics, and higher education are presented below. The authors decide to start from the position occupied by higher education as the pinnacle of the educational system in Cuba, with a priority of providing comprehensive education to future professionals. This is supported by Article 1 of Resolution 47/2022, which states:

The training of higher-level professionals is the consciously developed process based on scientific foundations that takes place in higher education institutions to ensure the comprehensive preparation of university students. This preparation consists of a solid scientific, technical, humanistic education, as well as the development of high ideological, political, ethical, and

aesthetic values. The aim is to produce revolutionary, educated, competent, independent, and creative professionals who can successfully perform in various sectors of the economy and society in general (MES, 2022, pp. 2-3).

In order to achieve this aspiration of training professionals with a high level of competitiveness, the development of English language communicative competence is included. The communicative competence involves mastering the necessary skills for effective communication, which include listening, speaking, reading, and writing (García-Martínez et al., 2020).

English as a foreign language (EFL) holds the top position worldwide, as the use of a common language for international relations, exchanges, and commerce has become necessary, making it a *lingua franca*. Therefore, its knowledge and teaching in Cuba are highly essential. Over the past decades, and currently, its use has gained momentum in areas such as tourism, international relations, technological development, scientific and technological research, and commerce.

In 2013, the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) emphasized the importance of foreign languages, with a particular focus on English, a stance that has been subsequently reaffirmed in policies and resolutions.

The Ministry of Higher Education aims to improve the teaching process of English in Cuban universities, recognizing the need to reform this process in order to achieve a higher quality of English language proficiency among graduates. Consequently, this will have a greater impact on the socio-economic and cultural development of the country and its relations with other nations (MES, 2017, p. 5).

From this perspective, the rapid implementation of new approaches, methods, courses, and programs for teaching English with a communicative focus becomes imperative. This is essential for training future professionals in line with the scientific and technological development of the country and on an international level.

Internationally, the use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has gained significant popularity, particularly in this century. Its purpose is to establish a guideline for language teaching and learning, as evidenced in scientific articles by authors such as Moscoso (2019), Jackson (2020), and Pérez et al. (2023). According to the Council of Europe (2021), the CEFR is defined as a standard for measuring oral and written comprehension and expression in a language.

In 2015, the use of this primary reference system governing the level of linguistic competence achieved or to be achieved by university students was introduced into the Cuban national policy for higher education (Harsch et al., 2020).

The Council of Europe (2021) establishes the following levels: A (Basic User), B (Independent User), and C (Proficient User). Based on this model, six levels of language competence are determined: A1 (Beginner), A2 (Elementary), B1 (Intermediate), B2 (Upper Intermediate), C1 (Advanced), and C2 (Proficient). Each of these levels is associated with the skills to be developed in each language competency (listening, reading, writing, and speaking).

Generally, the framework is used to establish learning goals to be achieved by a group of students. It determines the linguistic ability required for specific activities, whether in employment that demands a certain language level or in university settings. Additionally, language tests are designed based on the framework, enabling the comparison of language qualifications across different countries or languages.

In the Cuban context, the B1 level is adopted as a graduation requirement for non-philologist professionals. To achieve this level of language competence in various skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), students have a variety of options (Van & Dávila, 2018). They can attend language courses offered by language centers established to develop students' communicative competencies in foreign languages, facilitating comprehension, oral expression, interaction, interpretation of texts or speeches, as well as cultural exchanges related to specific academic knowledge (MES, 2017). Other options specified in the English language policy include language schools and private courses as a means of self-directed learning.

The B1 level is the minimum requirement for university graduates. However, during a transitional period from 2015 to 2021, the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) allowed students to graduate with a lower level, A2 (Harsch et al., 2020). This timeframe provided universities with an opportunity to create the necessary conditions to adapt to the new policy. Nevertheless, in the current academic year 2023, the A2 level is still maintained.

To meet the demands of Cuban Higher Education in the present century, the linguistic, didactic, and methodological preparation of professors becomes crucial as they are responsible for the scientific guidance of knowledge acquisition and skill development in English language teaching and learning.

However, in a group interview with 12 professors from the Language Center at the University of Ciego de Ávila, a contradiction was identified. Although the CEFR is implemented in the development of language skills for non-philologist, the English professors responsible for this training, namely the Language Center professors, are not certified by the framework, nor was their linguistic and didactic training based on it.

The reality is not significantly different in the major Bachelor of Education, Foreign Languages, English, which serves as the main pathway for training education professionals in this language. This major prepares students for the pedagogical profession at various educational levels, as outlined in the curriculum.

The professional's work object in this major is the educational process in primary education, basic secondary education, higher secondary education (pre-university, technical and professional, adult and middle-level pedagogical training) and, for those who meet the requirements, higher education, as it represents the concrete expression of the educator's work in these different contexts of action, specifically in the teaching and learning process of foreign language(s) (MES, 2016, p. 4).

In the final part of the previous statement, it clarifies that there is the possibility of managing the teaching-learning process of English language in higher education. Although the professional model's objectives refer to B2 as the level of communicative competence, their training is not based on the CEFR (MES, 2016). In the group interview with 22 professors from the Department of Foreign Languages, a lack of understanding of the CEFR levels and descriptors, as well as their characteristics and uses, was evidenced. Below are some of the comments recorded in the interview:

"I'm not very familiar with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; I only know that it is a tool that is implemented more frequently in language centers in our country." (Professor A)

"To be honest, I don't know what the English language levels are according to the Common European Framework. If you could describe it to me, then I would be able to know which level I belong to." (Professor B)

"I have not taken a language proficiency exam based on that standard; however, I consider myself to have an advanced level in the English language." (Professor C)

"I consider myself to be at a B2 or C1 level because to achieve that, you need to have a good command of all four language skills without major difficulties, which means being able to communicate orally and in writing and understand what is heard or read. It would be ideal to take a certification exam as it offers the possibility and opportunity to work inside and outside the country, not only in teaching but also in other areas such as translation, interpreting, etc. As a language teacher, in our case, English, one should have or aspire to a C1 or C2 level." (Professor D)

"I believe I am at a C1 or C2 level, according to the CEFR and its descriptors. I consider that a language teacher who teaches in higher education should certify at a C1 or C2 level due to the responsibility they assume in managing the language teaching-learning process." (Professor E)

As part of the interview with both groups of professors, they are asked to self-assess based on the CEFR levels, and the descriptors are shared with them. The results are shown below in Figure 1.

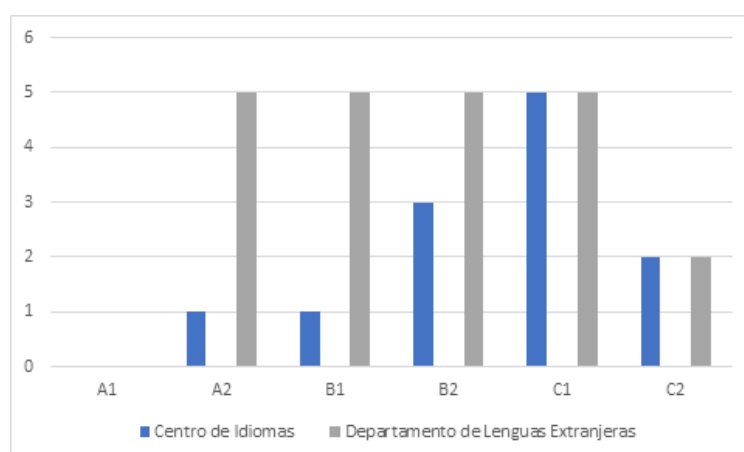


FIGURE 1

Figure 1

Results of professors' self-assessment according to the descriptors of the CEFR

Didactics of Foreign Languages in relation to higher education

In order to ensure the preparation of teachers and future graduates to manage the teaching-learning process of the English language, both in philologist and non-philologist majors, the subject Didactics of Foreign Languages must be taken into account. It provides a response to the need to find a balance that harmonizes the educators' teaching methods and their students' learning (Abreu et al., 2017). In this context, Didactics of Foreign Languages in the major Bachelor of Education, Foreign Languages, English constitutes the main comprehensive discipline as it coincides with its object of study, which is the management of the teaching-learning process of foreign languages in the various educational contexts (MES, 2016).

From this theoretical standpoint, the guiding role of this discipline in the major is undeniable, as it governs the didactic treatment of other disciplines in the major. Besides, it establishes the didactic guidelines for how to manage the teaching-learning process based on scientific foundations that contribute to the comprehensive training of future English language professionals, so that, from the cognitive, practical and evaluative activity, they can fulfill the social task of Cuban pedagogy.

Assuming the views of Abreu et al. (2017) regarding didactics, professors should ask themselves the following questions: Who should learn What? With whom? Where? How? and What for? (Wieckenberg, 2010). The answers can be outlined as follows:

- Who? > The target group.
- What? > The content.
- With whom? > With the teacher.
- Where? > The educational institution.
- How? > The methodology.
- What for? > The objectives.

These didactic questions lead to fundamental aspects in the teaching-learning process of the English language, which are described below:

- Who and where? > General characteristics of university students.
- What and what for? > Objectives of English language teaching in higher education.

- How? > The Communicative Approach. Motivation in teaching and learning the English language. Teaching and learning styles.
- With whom? > The student-teacher relationship inside and outside the classroom.

Understanding the characteristics of students is an ongoing and dynamic process that teachers cultivate through individual and group interactions. This fosters the effective management of the teaching-learning process, ensuring comprehensive training for the students. Moreover, it empowers professor to employ strategies that capture students' attention and skillfully navigate situations where behaviors deviate from the desired formative objectives. Possessing pedagogical tact, an indispensable quality of university professors, enables a profound comprehension of the unique traits and needs of each group of young learners.

On the other hand, the objectives for non-philologists in higher education are determined by the English language policy, as previously mentioned. As students prepare for certification at a specific level, whether A2 or B1, it becomes imperative to furnish them with descriptors for each communicative skill corresponding to the level. This will serve as a roadmap, directing them towards the desired outcome and delineating the specific knowledge and skills they need to acquire. Conversely, for philologists, the objectives are encompassed within the curriculum designed for their major, specifically they are outlined in the discipline Integrated English Practice.

In foreign language teaching, the terms "methods" and "approaches" are frequently used, which gives an eclectic character to this process. However, in English language teaching in Cuba, the communicative approach (Byrne, 1989) is adopted as the most suitable approach if the aim is to develop basic oral skills hierarchically through interaction, using the phonetic-phonological, lexical-semantic, morphosyntactic, and stylistic components of the English language. It is important to note that these components are not treated in isolation but rather integrated harmoniously, forming a cohesive amalgamation of form and content.

Motivation as a component of learning can lead to success or failure. Sustaining student motivation throughout the class allows the content to progress in a secure manner, enabling students to develop knowledge, skills, and values. Extrinsic motivation, such as praise and good results, fosters the development of intrinsic motivation, such as self-esteem, which is more enduring and effective. Both types of motivation are essential in English language teaching (Hernández & Cordero, 2021).

Within the diverse population of university students, there is a variety of learning rhythms and styles since everyone learns differently. It is necessary to understand how students learn so that professors can maximize the group's potential by devising teaching and learning strategies accordingly. Some students learn by simply listening, others need to write or copy, and some learn through a combination of both. Thus, it is possible to identify more than one learning style, which may vary over time.

The teaching styles adopted by the professor depend on their didactic preparation, creativity, experience in teaching the subject matter, and the didactic components of the process. The harmonious and coherent combination of teaching and learning styles turns the class into a stage for intellectual exchange. Varying the styles on both sides when the process is inefficient is an activity that falls within the professor's responsibility to achieve the objectives and avoid student demotivation.

The English language professor is an excellent educator. They lead the teaching-learning process in the classroom and other settings, so their skills in managing the process must prevail. They should be seen as leaders and have good interpersonal relationships with students, based on respect and under a favorable psycho-sociological climate to contribute to achieving the objectives.

In the university context, students assume a higher degree of responsibility and independence in their learning, autonomy, and self-management of knowledge, without overlooking the reciprocity with the professor's mode of action. The professor-student-group relationship inside and outside the classroom allows for individual and group learning supported by ethical, aesthetic, and moral principles.

The previously discussed aspects of didactics facilitate the connection between English and higher education, bringing English language teaching closer to the current Cuban university context. Hence,

didactics assumes an important role as a unifying element in this triad, which should be continuously improved and updated to better meet the aspirations and needs of modern students and society.

CONCLUSIONS

Various topics related to the study of the English language in Cuban higher education, its specificities, and the applied didactics in this field of knowledge, have made it possible to explore the dialectical relationship between higher education, English as a foreign language, and the Didactics of Foreign Languages. This exploration serves as a means to deepen theoretical and methodological aspects that are considered necessary to share with professors at this educational level.

The exploration of the addressed topics was based on group interviews conducted and the analysis of policies, resolutions, and literature with linguistic, methodological, and didactic content that underpin the relationship between didactics and English in the context of higher education. It was evident that the teaching of English in Cuba is not only a pillar of the development of society, but also a process of continuity and quality in which all higher education institutions are involved.

If the goal is to train professionals with a language proficiency level that allows for the development of communicative skills, the inclusion of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is the scientific pathway to achieve it. Therefore, it is necessary to provide linguo-didactic preparation for teachers following this language reference standard.

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