**An Overview of English Language Education in Cuba: Achievements**

**and Challenges**

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**Background**

English language education has a tradition in Cuba since the 19th century. However, it has acquired a very relevant role at present as sociocultural tool to tool to communicate and interact with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

For more than fifty years, the Cuban education has been ranked among the best in

Latin America and the world, for by providing free access to education to all and the

high standards of education provided to its citizen

The present educational achievements in Cuba are rooted first of all in the Literacy

Campaign that eradicated illiteracy and became the path to cultural enhancement by

ensuring free, good quality universal education from pre-school to the post-secondary

level. This situation led to the second important educational revolution in the 70’s, when

an increasing number of adolescents starting secondary studies required more teachers

and school facilities; therefore, an extensive teacher training program was created, known as Manuel Ascunce Domenech Pedagogical Brigade, named after a young teacher whowas massacred by bandits during the Literacy Campaign in 1961. His words before dying *Yo soy el maestro* (I´m the teacher) have become a paradigm phrase for Cuban teachers.

The year 2000 marked a turning point in education in Cuba by incorporating ICT to

support teaching and learning and the communicative orientation to ELT started to be

implemented in basic education nationwide.

The aim of the paper is to give an overview of English Language Education (ELE) in

Cuba to face the challenges of the 21ST century**.**

Communication among people is essential in today´s globalized world, and so is the learning of foreign languages, particularly English, which whether we like it or not is in the center of globalization. The goal for teaching ELE in Cuba has been enriched by emphasizing its contribution to the cultural development of the people by helping them to develop communication skills, rooted and grounded in the national and regional culture. So as to enable them to communicate about their personal, social and professional activities.

Cuban education has a rich educational experience, whose standing pillars have been, Felix Valera, Jose de la Luz y Caballero, Jose Marti, Enrique José Varona, among many others. So the conceptual framework underlying education in Cuba have been fundamentally based on the Cuban pedagogical legacy, the Marxist Leninist philosophy, sociology, psychology and pedagogy, that are summarized as follows:

* Language education should be guided by a humanistic approach, which places the comprehensive formation of the student´s personality in the center of the process, and not only the development of communication skills
* Language should be taught and learned as a sociocultural means of communication.
* Learning process is seen as a process of "meaning-making" in socially, culturally and historically situated contexts.
* The methods and procedures used should enhance interaction, cooperation and collaboration among all participants in the teaching learning process.
* The society and the culture in which the man lives contribute to the formation of the personality and in turn he/she also contributes to social improvements and transformations.
* The centrality of culture and intercultural communication in language education.
* ELE should foster respect for mother tongue and national identity and linguistic diversity.
* It’s important to consider learners’ differences, to enhance learning strategies and styles, as well as autonomous learners
* The present significance of technology as a source of access to different resources to enhance language education and culture.

The constant search to offer opportunities for universal access to educational and cultural programs mass media has played an important role. This has been the case of the television program *Universidad para Todos* (University for all).

The Cuban concept of building responsible citizenship is closely linked to the continuing enhancement and expansion of the population´s cultural horizons as a means of both personal and societal growth (Corona, D. 2005). *Universidad para Todos* has been a program created by the Revolution to promote massive access to different courses so as to achieve such goal.

It started as a daily program on October, 2, 2000. For 15 years and through more than 40 courses, it has contributed to the empowerment of people from all ages and social backgrounds. The range of courses has been wide, including Narrative Techniques, Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, Italian, German, History, Geography, Arts (music, theater, ballet, movies), Chess and different areas of science and technology.

These televised lessons have been delivered by the most outstanding professors and specialists. The courses have equipped the people with the necessary contents and skills to participate actively in the global context, not to be just consumers and receivers of information but also providers and producers of the socio-economic achievement built in revolutionary Cuba.

**Defining the need of teaching and learning materials**

 Audiovisual, audio, printed or ICT product to provide the practice and systematization of the ELT content to foster the conscious and active role of learner, in an instructional and educational learning environment, in accordance with the communicative and problem solving approaches.

Why local materials?

* To cater for Cubans´ learning and educational needs.
* Learning materials must be available to every Cuban learner free of charge and financial resources to access international publications are very limited.
* Benefitting from the friendly and solidariuos contribution

Following some principles for writing materials Enriquez O´Farrill, I (2012) related to the correspondence between the syllabus content and the materials content.

* The integration of linguistic and communicative content (linguistic-communicative), as well as educational and cultural content (educative-cultural).
* Communicability.
* Cognitive/affective relationship drawn from developmental learning theory, based on Vigotsky’s historical/cultural approach.
* Correspondence between the tasks /activities and the different stages of the learning process.
* The consideration of the material as an aid that enhances learning and personal growth.
* The consideration of the active and conscious character of the system of tasks/activities in language learning.

**Training professionals in higher education**

Designing curriculum considers the students and what types of curricula are best for their needs. This can be a difficult achievement since students in most institutions come from a range of cultural and economic backgrounds. Teaching methods may be different depending on the student body, as some methods are more appropriate for certain types of students than others. The curriculum for undergraduate studies comprises four components:

* *The academic component* for the learning of the contents through core and optional subject matters.
* *The practical component*, related to the development of professional skills.
* *The research component* to develop research skills to be used in the solution of problems.
* *The university extension component* to promote students´ involvement in cultural, community and sports activities to contribute to their comprehensive formation as human beings and citizens.

At present teacher and language education take place in the Faculties of Education of the universities and in the University of Pedagogical Sciences in Havana*,* from which students graduate with a Bachelor's degree in Education. These institutions also lead continuous development programs for teachers working in different levels, as well as graduate programs.

The recent efforts in language education have been focused on the need for a systemic approach to curriculum renewal for the teaching of English in Cuban universities that would embrace syllabus reform, teacher training and CPD, formative and summative assessment, and the development of materials and resources.

To face the demands of the 21st century a number of challenges need to be tackled so as achieve the goal of educating more competent professionals to think and act locally and globally. Therefore, it is essential to:

* Enhance culture and develop intercultural awareness.
* Develop communication skills in at least one foreign language.
* Be reflective practitioners.
* To be technologically competent.

Communication among people is essential in today´s globalized world, and so is the learning of foreign languages, particularly English, which whether we like it or not is in the center of globalization.

The goal for teaching English in Cuba has been redefined emphasizing its contribution to the cultural development of the people by helping them to develop communication skills, rooted and grounded in the national and regional culture. So as to enable them to communicate about their personal, social and professional activities while respecting others with a different language and cultural backgrounds.

The cultural preparation of the students should cover the contents related to world achievements, with emphasis on those from the countries whose language they study, aimed at training learners not to be a `near-like’ native speaker but a competent intercultural speaker.

**Preparing professionals for international collaboration. A case study in education**

The Cuban system of education has become a regional reference of good professional practice and services. Consequently, it has had a great impact in some countries.

The Cuban contribution to set up literacy programs is constantly requested by those interested in undertaking literacy strategies. The Awards received by UNESCO in 2002 and 2005 speak by themselves of their quality. At present Cuba has approximately 2 582 educators collaborating in 21 countries and about 1 005 487 people have graduated.

 

Yes, I can ( *Yo si puedo*) is an internationally recognized mass literacy campaign developed in Cuba in 2000 and has been successfully adopted to many and diverse idiosyncrasies and languages such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Mexico, Sevilla, Colombia, Perú, Brasil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Granada, Argentina, Etiopía, Congo, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, Angola, Ecuador, Yemen del Sur, Tanzania. It has also been adapted for aboriginal communities in New Zealand (Greenlight Learning for Life),Canada (Arrowmight) and most recently in Australia.

It is a unique method of teaching literacy through via audio-visual lessons. It promotes a flexible process which can be inserted in different socio-cultural, linguistic and economic contexts. According to The Bolivian diplomat Lorgio Vaca, delegate on the executive council of UNESCO in Paris, April, 2008 the program places value on the traditional knowledge of adults and helps them learn in a liberating way, using modern communication equipment.

The method has an innovative alphanumeric concept, characterized by the association of numbers and letters. This means the learners first associate each letter of the alphabet with a specific numeral. The rationale for this is that many non-literate people do in fact have basic numeracy and will therefore learn their letters more easily by this associative procedure. In other aspects it follows the traditional procedure that is based on learning the letters of the alphabet, followed by words, followed by sentences.

Its central feature is a set of sixty-five one hour lessons on DVD/video, which the students watch under the supervision of local facilitators. Each lesson shows on screen a class of non-literate learners (played by actors) being taught by an experienced teacher. Under supervision, the local facilitators are able to help their students follow the DVD teacher’s instructions and, using printed manuals and workbooks, complete oral and written exercises being modelled on the screen.

The content is selected after a thorough process of research to give the program the flavor of the community for which it is intended, so that the illiterate could identify himself with the learning situations presented in the video-lessons and texts. Educative messages, life skills and cultural content are presented in video-lessons and manuals.

The illiterate, as learner, is the center of the program, but he/she does is not isolation in the teaching space because heterogeneous learning groups are created. The video teacher and the facilitator promote collaboration and reflective dialogue among participants, which also stimulate responsibility for one’s own learning as well as for the others. The basic concept is of the teaching process is associating as moving from "the idea to the word, from the word to the phoneme, from the phoneme to the new word, from the new words to new ideas and those new ideas transform students’
thoughts, words and actions."

According to its author Leonela Relys (2008), the method and the program have been entitled *Yo, si puedo* (Yes, I can do it) because this title is short and generates hope and optimism. Besides, it contributes to foster people’s self-esteem, enhances their self-confidence and their willingness and possibility to learn to read and write. She added that it is intended to personalize the process so that each person feels that it is for him/her.

**Conclusions**

The social, economic and cultural development of a country relies on the education provided to its people. Educators are in the center of such provision since they have been equipped with the tools to instruct and educate.

The advances of the 21st century is opening new possibilities for effective teaching but it is also placing great demands and challenges on educators to make the best use of what is available. So teacher and language education are facing an unprecedented challenge that has far-reaching implications in the formation of the 21st man by training culturally professional teachers who will enable diverse student populations to cope with the challenges of their time.

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