

*La Nueva Estrategia de Inglés: una novedosa perspectiva para la  
Educación Superior Cubana*

*The New Strategy of English: a new perspective for the Cuban Higher  
Education*

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### Resumen

El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo evaluar la implementación de la Nueva Estrategia de Inglés en la Educación Superior Cubana, ejemplificada en el Centro de Idiomas, en la Universidad de Oriente. Esta perspectiva permite destacar la experiencia obtenida a partir de una dinámica novedosa en las lenguas extranjeras, centrada en nuevos retos para la Educación Superior cubana ya que el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje está más centrado en los estudiantes y en el logro de una interacción individual con mayores compromisos desde los descriptores del Marco Común de Referencia Europeo para las Lenguas. Se han tenido en cuenta concepciones teórico-metodológicas para la proyección exitosa de un proceso cuyas perspectivas se centran en los fundamentos del referido Marco Común como estándar de reconocimiento internacional con grandes impactos para aquellos profesionales con diplomas referenciados desde este modelo. El enfoque hermenéutico-dialéctico ha estado presente en toda la lógica investigativa y ha permitido transitar desde la observación, comprensión, explicación hasta la interpretación.

**Palabras clave:** Estrategia de Inglés, Marco Común de Referencia Europeo para las Lenguas, enfoque ARC, educación intercultural.

### Abstract

This work aims at assessing the implementation of the New Strategy of English in the Cuban Higher Education exemplified at the Languages Center in Universidad de Oriente. This permits to highlight the experiences got from a teaching dynamics in foreign languages which implies new challenges for the Cuban Higher Education since the teaching-learning process is more focused on the students and on the achievement of a more individual and implicated interaction from the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Theoretical and methodological conceptions have been taken into account for the successful projection of a process with visions which have its center on the foundations of the above mentioned reference, a standard with international recognition and great impact for those professionals who have diplomas referenced through this model. The hermeneutic and dialectic approach has been present to sustain the logic proposed from observation, comprehension, explanation and interpretation.

**Keywords:** Strategy of English, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, ARC Approach, Intercultural Education.

### Introduction

At present the Cuban Higher Education is facing new challenges, particularly, in the teaching-learning process of English which purpose is centered in training the students to exhibit higher standards of communicative competence.

This means that “graduates should demonstrate abilities to communicate themselves in English with certain degree of independence and fluency according to the demands of B1 level what means *independent user* under the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)” (El perfeccionamiento del idioma inglés en las universidades cubanas, 2013, p.2.).

On the other hand, “when all the students finish the fourth year of their studies they will have to do an oral and written exam related to what they are majoring in” (El perfeccionamiento del idioma inglés en las universidades cubanas, 2013, p.1).

This perspective does not only demand a deep theoretical and methodological study, but also forces the staff to organize, plan, perform, control and assess the teaching-learning process of English from the viewpoint of revitalizing and developing a new dynamics which is distant from the traditional one. This implies a detailed research to manage and implement a new training praxis with tight links with the most up-dated conceptions in the teaching-learning process of foreign languages.

Consequently, this work aims at assessing the implementation of the New Strategy of English in the Cuban Higher Education exemplified at the Languages Center in Universidad de Oriente. This permits to highlight the experiences got from a different teaching dynamics in foreign languages which is more focused on the students and on the achievement of a more individual and implicated interaction on their part.

### Development

To deepen on the teaching-learning process of English in the Cuban Higher Education implies, first of all, appealing to some changes undergone from the academic course 2005-06 in which the national series *At Your Pace* began to be implemented upon the new tendencies of semidistance learning. This fact implies to search in detail essential categories such as *semidistance learning*, *the communicative approach*, *the ARC approach and intercultural education*, among others.

This work is not based on *semidistance learning* conceived from the notions of time and space but under the conception of *a training context that takes into account the system of meaningful relations that favors the management of communicative, professional, interactive and personal resources by the students what makes them achieve a continuous linguistic development and communicative competence according to the new tendencies of the teaching-learning process of foreign languages.*

In this way this process is adjusted to an innovative communication perspective that implies *individual and collaborative learning* through activities and tasks of different levels of complexity to stimulate the active participation of the students in the classroom and out of it. So, the students develop their own *individuality* due to the active assimilation of the content in a social way, that is to say, in the process of *socialization*.

*Socialization* and *individualization* constitute, then, an integrated process in which *socialization* allows the students learn the content (knowledge, skills and values), and at the same time the objectivation of the content is just an individualized process of personal character in which every individual processes reality in a particular way, providing the results of his own recreation as a social active individual. The development of his *individuality* occurs due to the active assimilation of the social character, due to *socialization* (Meier, 1984).

Therefore, *cooperative/collaborative learning* is viewed as “learning that is carried out as a team, in small groups of two or more people, aimed at achieving specific learning goals” through the contribution of every member to attain significant learning. So, all members must be actively committed to working jointly to achieve the established objectives (Malik and Sánchez, 2009, p. 200).

An essential reference for this work is centered in the *Council of Europe* (2001), *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* as methodological guide that unifies criteria for the implementation of the teaching-learning process of foreign languages in the European context. This reference is a European standard used in many other parts of the world to evaluate the levels of comprehension, speaking and writing skills in a given language. Because of this it is highly recognized internationally and it has an impact meaning for professionals qualified by this standard.

The New Strategy of English in the Cuban Higher Education constitutes, then, the achievement of a training culture in foreign languages having in mind the implementation of didactic methods and procedures typical of a teaching-learning process that is based on linguistic levels and that has in its essence the characteristics of self-access to the information and self-learning from the application of linguistic, interactive, personal and professional resources that some years ago did not constitute a demand and what in the didactic of foreign languages require a detailed and deep research.

Taking into consideration the statements of the Cuban Higher Education Ministry, in its *appendix 1*, referred to the creation of Languages Centers, the Cuban universities would constitute Languages Centers from 2015-16 on as organizational, educational and administrative structure attached to Vice-rectoria Docente in every university with the objective of implementing the Strategy of Improvement of the Teaching of English within the structural and functional characteristics of the principle of autonomy in its functioning, the design and teaching of different training modalities, courses by linguistic levels (A1, A2, B1, B2) as well as specialized courses in English, and prospectively in other languages (French, German, Italian, Chinese, Arabic, Russian), depending on the needs and projections of the staff. In its *appendix 2*, referred to the organizational aspects from the academic course 2016-17, the *Discipline of English* is out of the curriculum and is conceived as a training requirement, so all the students have to fulfill with this training requirement (MES, 2015).

The conception and implementation of this new strategy has its foundations in the following essential *premises*:

1. The assumptions of new roles in the teaching-learning management of foreign languages.
2. The achievement of a training culture in foreign languages from the implementation of didactic methods and procedures that qualify a teaching-learning process by linguistic levels.

3. The professional and personal experience as well as the scientific and methodological preparation of the staff to carry out a process with characteristics that are far from the traditional way of teaching.
4. The systematic methodological work of the staff to identify the linguistic training needs in foreign languages according to the present trends and views of the CEFR.
5. The conviction of the staff concerning the prevailing need of implementing the descriptors of the CEFR in the teaching-learning process.

For implementing the strategy 3 essential stages were defined: *diagnostic*, *leveling* and *evaluation*, every stage with its *specific aims* and its corresponding *actions*:

- *Diagnostic stage*: began in November 2016 in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of selected majors from the Regular Undergraduate Course at Universidad de Oriente. Its *aim* was focused in diagnosing the linguistic levels of the students, their weaknesses, strengths, and linguistic needs for further *placement*.

Having in mind the importance of the effective implementation of this process the diagnostic test applied included: speaking, listening, reading and writing, under the conceptions of the descriptors of the CEFR.

That first diagnostic test was applied to 1653 students which represents 100%. Only 53 students passed the test what represents only 3%. Seven (7) students (0, 4%) had A1 level. Nine (9) students (0, 5%) passed according to the descriptors of A2. Seventeen (17) students (1%) have B1 level. Nine (9) students (0,5%) have B2 level. Nine (9) students (0,5%) have C1 level.

The exam evidenced insufficiencies in the students focused in:

1. Lack of communicative resources what influences unfavorably in the interaction in English as a Foreign Language.
  2. Limited use of communicative strategies what means a schematic and reproductive learning from traditionalist attitudes.
- Once the students were diagnosed they were grouped with the purpose of attaining higher linguistic levels.

Consequently, having in mind the results of the test the staff had to rethink the teaching-learning process concerning the implementation of the *communicative approach* from Face2Face, Touchstone, Interchange, and Four Corners, among others, so that the students can get B1+ level.

Hence, as the aim is to develop *communicative competence* in the students the activities and tasks implemented in the teaching-learning process of English from the new strategy have to promote *fluency* and *accuracy*. *Pair work*, *group work*, *role play* and *simulations* should achieve significant learning and the students ought to be conscious of the tasks to be developed in such a way that their comprehension of the content increase. The development of skills for team work and the evaluation of others' viewpoints, ideas and perspectives allow the debate and the questioning of concepts and judgments in such a way that the students develop *creation* and *production* levels and thus, learning by discovery. *Vocabulary*, *pronunciation*, *writing* and *authentic reading materials* are introduced step by step so that they take into account techniques and procedures typical of the *communicative teaching*.

So, the teaching-learning process is being implemented based on the conception of "appropriate linguistic activities that involve real communication, the conception of the classroom as a context with particular conditions that make the language a reality for specific communities of students in such a way that they can authentic cate those activities, understand and put in practice the semantic resources that are codified in a language" (Widdowson, 2006, p.13).

Therefore, the staff decided to implement the ARC Approach (Scrivener, Jim, 1994) in the teaching-learning process of English from the New Strategy:

- Authentic
- Restricted
- Clarification and focus
- Authentic Use – WHAT FOR...in which meaning, communication, fluency, real-life, and pleasure are the focus.

So, some of the activities implemented take into consideration conversations, radio, TV, narratives, discussions, role plays, short stories, leaflets, ads, stories, poems, among others.

- Restricted Use – FOR...in which form, practice, accuracy, testing, and display have the emphasis.

Thus, the activities are focused in discrete sounds, words, sentences, course book tasks, examples from course books, drills, language practice activities, elicited dialogues, jazz chants, poems, texts, among others.

- Clarification and focus– In which the teacher has the philosophy of: I tell you, I show you, I help you find out for yourself, you find out for yourself.

Consequently, some tools and techniques consist of rules, examples, reference information, diagrams and timelines, substitution tables, translation, questions about meaning and/or form, questions about use, problems and puzzles, error analysis, demonstrations, gestures, mime, pictures, flashcards, visual aids, repetition, realia, etc.

In short, clarification and focus deals with:

How can my students know what they are supposed to practice if they haven't been shown what to do?

How can my students do an exercise if they can't understand the grammar structures or vocabulary I want them to practice during the exercise?

#### **Restricted use deals with**

- How can my students openly communicate one another using newly taught English if they have not had the chance to practice the new structures beforehand?

#### **Authentic use is related to**

- Why should my students be interested in practicing English structures and being tested on a grammar point if they didn't know how such phrases, vocabulary, etc. could be used effectively in real-life situations in English speaking countries?

Implementing the New Strategy of English in the Cuban Higher Education from this perspective in this second stage which is focused in *leveling* the students reaches also *Intercultural Education* due to the fact that (Aguado and Del Olmo, 2009):

1. Intercultural Education is not just about cultural differences, but about all of our characteristics as individuals and as members of groups because all human beings have a lot in common but we are diverse.
2. Education is a process that lasts throughout life. It does not only happen in school, but in a variety of times and places; that is, all spaces and moments are learning opportunities.
3. Teachers and students are involved as active agents in the teaching-learning process.
4. We all have the obligation to contribute to make the teaching-learning process significant for the lives of the people involved in it.
5. Evaluation is part of the teaching-learning process as a whole, and teaching in particular should also be evaluated, not only the students.
6. The practice of Education depends on each context and there are no universal recipes because Education involves a process of daily, contextualized change.
7. The diversity of individuals, groups, skills, and viewpoints enriches education itself, cooperation, and professional collaboration because it allows to think up more varied and/or alternative solutions.

The staff carried out the following *didactic actions* in the development of this second stage:

- To place the students having in mind their linguistic level.
- To level the students for further evaluation.
- To insert problem solving methods, project work, independent work, pair work, group work, individual work as alternatives to strengthen the linguistic levels of the students as well as the linguistic competences that should be achieved by



them to reach self-management training in such a way that they can apply resources to reinforce communicative competence.

- To implement advising, workshops, clubs as diverse organizational forms that promote the teaching-learning process.
- To contribute with supporting materials which sustain the communicative skills and the descriptors from the CEFR.
- To define a work strategy that allows the strengthening of listening and speaking at specialized laboratories.
- *Evaluation stage*: aims at evaluating the communicative competence levels reached by the students and to determine exactly the level of effectiveness of the implemented actions as well as the achievement patterns got by the students.

Evaluation as the systematic gathering of information for purposes of decision making is a key moment in the strategy. It implements quantitative methods (through tests), and qualitative methods (through the systematic observation of the students' performance) for further value judgments.

So, this stage values the communicative competence reached by the students according to the descriptors of the CEFR.

Last April 20 and 21, 2018, a certification test was applied to 431 students from the Regular Undergraduate Course (RUC). Only 233 passed and 198 are still below A1. 30 students showed A1 level, and 51 got A2 level. Under the descriptor of B1 there are 27 students, B1 plus is the descriptor that 46 students reached, 44 students showed B2, 28 reached C1, and 7 got C2.

### **So a slight growing is achieved**

The Languages Center at Universidad de Oriente implements the improvement of *didactic actions* that include the development of scientific and methodological workshops, instructive and demonstrative classes, open classes, methodological meetings at the end of every semester of academic courses as internal actions for the training of the staff.

Other *didactic actions* to be developed by the staff in this third stage are:

- To create a legal instrument to support the conception and implementation of the New Strategy of English and which at the same time permits the definition and application the descriptors of the CEFR for granting the diplomas according to the competence levels of the users.
- To elaborate and adjust evaluation according to the descriptors of the CEFR recontextualized to our linguistic reality and professional demandings.

Implementing the three above mentioned stages have allowed the students and the staff:

- To get involved in a teaching-learning process with a new dynamics.
- To provide communication in a foreign language.
- To gain new experiences from English as a Foreign Language.
- To strengthen and include the new technologies of information and communication in the teaching-learning process of English as a Foreign Language.
- To promote reading and research on the basis of a foreign language.
- To qualify the staff with international standards of great impact.

All the perspective developed is according to the *mission* of the Languages Center:

To promote the learning of foreign languages to the university community and the population in general to favor their training as individuals with communicative competence what means higher professional opportunities nationally and internationally.

This view indicates the definition of *immediate projections* centered in:

- Strengthening links with institutions from the province through the diversification of its course offers and services in foreign languages to assist their demands in the field of translation and interpretation consistent with its commercialization.
- Teaching foreign languages to students and the university community and the population, in general, including different levels of communication not only in

Cuba but also abroad opening the offer to new training profiles and using different approaches and learning modalities.

- Reinforcing links with the academic community of foreign languages in the regional, national and international contexts through research projects and collaboration networks which impact is centered in the increasing of certified and qualified teachers, students, and users, in general.
- Establishing strategies that foster on-line and autonomous learning to contribute to the training on the basis of educative innovation as well as the flexibility of the syllabi by incorporating also the technology of the information and communication far from the traditional teaching.
- Promoting and diversifying academic mobility focusing on priority areas that guarantee meaningful impacts to the university and the territory.

These projections will guarantee that the Languages Center at Oriente University be a leading center on the teaching of foreign languages with high standards of competitiveness and high sense of social responsibility in the continuous research production in social and innovation projects with national and international recognition.

### **Conclusions**

The implementation of the New Strategy of English in the Cuban Higher Education has implied a strategic process of organization, planning, performance, control and evaluation of actions to satisfy the training needs of university students in English as a Foreign Language. Its application at the Languages Center at Universidad de Oriente has had positive preliminary results that favor the teaching-learning process as well as all the individuals involved.

It has been a real challenge for the staff and the students and new lines of work are being projected to diversify offers in different foreign languages. This means a real task for the center and its staff since the academic leadership in foreign languages will have to be strengthened.

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