

ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT THROUGH THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY

PERFECCIONAMIENTO DE LA CALIDAD DE LA ENSEÑANZA, EL APRENDIZAJE Y LA EVALUACIÓN A TRAVÉS DE LA POLÍTICA DEL IDIOMA INGLÉS

Santiago Jorge Rivera Pérez (sjrivera@mes.gob.cu Ministerio de Educación Superior, Cuba - PhD)

Melissa Rivera Forteza (m.forteza05@gmail.com Universidad de Ciencias Médicas de Pinar del Río, Cuba, student)

Lisandra Rivera Forteza (lisandrariveraforte@gmail.com Universidad de la Habana FLEX, Cuba, student)

ABSTRACT

As part of the national ELT policy launched in 2016, exit exams reveal students are currently graduating from the universities with an A2 level of English language proficiency, which is a much lower level of language proficiency than they actually need. The Cuban Ministry of Higher Education struggles to ensure effective policy implementation in all higher education institutions for all learners to become proficient as independent users of the English language. This presentation is intended to provide an overview of the national language education policy and discuss some of the paradoxes and challenges associated with systemic change and strategic planning.

Central to the English language education policy underway is the understanding of English language teaching and learning as both a political and an educational issue and the collaborative effort of policy makers, authorities, teaching staffs, and teachers to work together and implement effective strategies in the new directions. A similar collaborative effort of all participants is required at present for the preliminary evaluation of the policy implementation and its transition to the new stage in the process of development. Thus, we should mobilize manpower and encourage actions to pursue both short – term and long – term goals for the undergraduate programs that can have the most effective impact on students' learning outcomes in terms of proficiency levels.

RESUMEN

Como parte de la política nacional de la enseñanza del inglés lanzada en 2016, los exámenes de egreso revelan que los estudiantes se están graduando actualmente de las universidades con un nivel A2 de dominio del idioma inglés, que es un nivel de dominio del idioma mucho más bajo de lo que realmente necesitan. El Ministerio de Educación Superior de Cuba se esfuerza por garantizar la implementación efectiva de la política en todas las instituciones de educación superior para que todos los estudiantes se conviertan en usuarios competentes del idioma. Esta presentación tiene como objetivo proporcionar una descripción general de la política nacional de educación de

idiomas y valorar algunas de las paradojas y desafíos asociados con el cambio sistémico y la planificación estratégica de la política.

Es fundamental para la política del idioma inglés en curso la comprensión de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del idioma inglés como una cuestión política y educativa, así como del esfuerzo colaborativo de los diseñadores de la política, las autoridades, el personal docente y los profesores para trabajar juntos e implementar estrategias efectivas en las nuevas direcciones. En la actualidad, se requiere un esfuerzo de colaboración similar de todos los participantes para la evaluación preliminar de la implementación de la política y su transición a la nueva etapa en el proceso de su desarrollo. Por lo tanto, debemos movilizar la fuerza profesoral y alentar acciones para perseguir metas tanto a corto como a largo plazo para los programas de pregrado que puedan tener el impacto más efectivo en los resultados de aprendizaje de los estudiantes en términos de niveles de competencia.

KEYWORDS: política, perfeccionamiento, educación en inglés, niveles de competencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: política, perfeccionamiento, educación en inglés, niveles de competencia.

INTRODUCTION

THE CONTEXT OF CUBA AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Cuba has to interact in a globalized world, where there is more interdependence and where the only way to develop ourselves is to interact with others in a world where the English language becomes a challenge as a common language in which most nations communicate.

Hence, the relevance of English is clear to the Cuban government and so the national higher education system takes on a great deal of responsibility to provide our learners with the opportunity not only to learn the language, but also to communicate and learn through the language.

The higher education system is then fostering high quality English ELT and making it available for all learners, so as to gradually draw the benefits this education might bring about in boosting socio - economic and cultural growth and driving national and international development.

As the English language education is a tool and a key for development, the Cuban national higher education system is acknowledging the importance of generating and implementing a public policy that supports the English language education of learners.

Thus, the higher education system approaches English education as a strategic goal and as an avenue to foster comprehensive training of all learners and facilitate our citizens' engagement in a world increasingly globalized, that's why a new policy that may accelerate the pace of English language learning, is currently underway.

Consequently, higher education tackles the challenges associated with the provision of high – quality ELL under a national language education policy based on baseline analysis that enables policymakers to plan ELT programs strategically for all higher education institutions across the country in order to achieve higher levels of language proficiency among university learners.

THE NEW POLICY AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The new English language education policy for higher education is called: *Regulaciones para el perfeccionamiento del proceso de formación en idioma inglés de los estudiantes de la educación superior cubana* (Resolución Ministerial No. 165/19 Ministerio de educación Superior, Cuba) and it focuses on innovations, aiming to produce systemic change in ELT and ELL, so as to enhance the quality of ELT and ELL in Cuban higher education institutions.

Cuba is among the countries from Latin America that has recently produced a systemic change in ELT and ELL and continues to do so. Hence, English language education has gone through profound systemic changes to address significant challenges associated with the provision of high – quality ELT.

Currently there is a national ELT policy recently launched (2016) where a number of changes, ranging from designing English courses according to international standards, setting up English proficiency as a graduation requirement, or administering placement and proficiency tests, among others, are being implemented all across higher education institutions.

CURRENT SITUATION

On the one hand, most of the baseline studies and assessments carried out as diagnostic and placement tests to university students seem to indicate that the levels of students' language proficiency when entering higher education institutions ranges from Below A1 and A1 proficiency levels, although further research in that direction is required.

On the other hand, exit exams to university students seem to indicate students are currently graduating from the universities with an A2 level of English language proficiency, which is a much lower level of language proficiency than they actually need. Higher levels of proficiency are to be met by most learners.

The challenge of the low levels of English language proficiency by students faced by policy makers, university authorities, staffs, teachers and students remains. The impacts of such low levels of English language proficiency of university students can be summarized as follows:

- Firstly, university students are graduating from their undergraduate programs still unprepared, which means, being unable to communicate independently in the

language and being unable to use the language to manage their comprehensive education more efficiently.

- Secondly, graduates from universities are unable to use English to cope with the demands of postgraduate education where studies require a detailed study of English language sources for research.

OBJECTIVE

This presentation is intended to provide an overview of the national language education policy and discuss some of the paradoxes and challenges associated with systemic change and strategic planning.

DEVELOPMENT

Upon current practices, policymakers have identified the issues of the language education policy within the particular national context and have decided upon the language education policy, which, as a whole, aims at the following policy goals:

- To upgrade English language teaching, learning and assessment to produce higher levels of language proficiency.
- To integrate English language teaching, learning and assessment into all university processes to make them more dynamic and effective.

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY FRAMEWORK

The national English language education framework comprises five components:

- National English language education policy: To design national policy.
- Strategic planning of teacher training, policy implementation and impact assessment: To plan teacher training, policy implementation and impact assessment strategically.
- Teacher training on the CEFR, CLT and assessment. To train teachers.
- Policy implementation at the national level all across higher education institutions. To implement national English language education policy.
- Impact assessment, policy outcomes and feedback. To assess impacts and outcomes.

THE NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY

The national English language education policy: defines legal foundations and sets up standards, points out policy statements and components (planteamientos o líneas de la política) and outlines policy guidelines (incluye todas las indicaciones metodológicas).

Legal foundations and standards:

Legal foundations:

The English language education policy in Cuba is firstly classified according to two dimensions: Legal foundations and standards.

The legal foundations signal the importance Cuba attaches to English language education and the obligation government authorities have in terms of providing the necessary resources for the provision of high - quality education.

According to the dimension of legal foundations, English language education in Cuba is part of the national higher education policy (one of the national policies resolutioned by the Minister of Higher Education) and so it is given utmost importance across all higher education institutions.

Education authorities design a strategy and provide resources for ELT national policy implementation. Therefore, ELT in higher education institutions is compulsory through the curriculum and English language proficiency at B1 level is set up as a graduation requirement.

These legal foundations remark:

- The Cuban Ministry of Higher Education sets up the national English language education policy as part of the comprehensive training of all university students and so it ensures effective policy implementation in all higher education institutions.
- The English language education policy becomes a top priority and a strategic goal for all undergraduate programs. Higher education institutions should, therefore, ensure the training of all learners for them to become proficient as independent users of the English language.
- The national English language education policy proclaims a goal of communicative competence at B1 level of proficiency (equivalent to the CEFR) for all learners within the curriculum and as a graduation requirement.

Standards:

According to standards, the Cuban English language education policy sets up standards (levels and specifications) and objectives for learning which explicitly and formally identify what students should know and be able to do with the language as well as the sequence in which content must be taught (See national curriculum).

The national English language education policy specifies our own national standards from international benchmarks in terms of the scales for the levels of A1, A2, B1 and B2 as well as in terms of the specifications of objectives, contents, methods, procedures for each of the levels (for both teaching and assessment) (See proposal of research on assessment).

Policy statements:

- All university students should meet the English language education requirement at B1 proficiency level to be able to successfully graduate from undergraduate programs.
- English language education is an integral part of the curriculum and so training takes place through both intensive and extensive courses all the way up within undergraduate programs.

- The English language education policy focuses on the learners as language users and fosters their self – management, autonomy and cognitive independence.
- English language education incorporates content – based instruction, English as a medium of instruction and the use of the communicative ability within the curriculum.
- Courses are taught flexibly out of the regular schedules and are free to choose by the learners.
- Assessment is conducted through standardized exams within national regular calls to accredit and certify learners' proficiency levels.
- Language centers manage both training and assessment, training through courses, workshops, and counselling, and assessment through diagnostic, placement and proficiency exit exams.
- Higher education authorities, staffs and teachers take on the responsibility for policy design, implementation and assessment at each university to ensure all learners' English language education proficiency.

Policy components:

The national language education policy framework consists of the following components, which have been changed and updated by policymakers in order to achieve higher levels of language proficiency among learners. Thus, policymakers have made their policy choices within these components that can have the most effective impact on the students' learning outcomes.

Curriculum:

Curriculum is crucial to success of the language education policy. Consequently, we have developed a realistic and achievable curriculum where curricular goals are clear, attainable, and measurable (in accordance with teaching conditions and learners' background knowledge). Contents are systematic and spiral – like and so they lead to a gradual pace of learning and progress.

• **The goals of the curriculum:** The goals of the English curriculum and the language programs have been conceived in the following terms:

- To understand the values of the English language in general and use it to reinforce and expand their interpersonal and professional relationships, thus deepening international understanding.
- To develop students' ability to understand and express themselves in the English language both orally and in writing at B1 level of proficiency on topics of personal and professional interest.
- To foster students' positive attitude towards communicating in the English language through self – management, autonomy and cognitive independence.
- To heighten their motivation and interest in the English language as a source of culture and as an instrument of knowledge management and professional development.

Teachers and training:

In Cuba, higher education sets up the qualifications and requirements to regulate teacher education and training, and so national standards for English teachers' education that apply to all English teacher education programs (majors) are the norm. In addition, national universities have developed teachers' profiles at the university level and designed a system of teaching categories all teachers should go through.

Higher education institutions apply assessments and evaluations to teachers. We apply some institutional mechanisms to regularly assess teachers' performance, and in addition, we have been applying Teacher's Knowledge Tests (TKT) competence exams to assess components of ELT, requiring teachers to certify their competence through international assessments aligned to standards (300 teachers).

Under the new English language education policy, teachers have been trained as part of a national training program differentiated for leaders, trainers, mentors, teachers, test developers and students and who have taken on the responsibility of cascading training down to teaching staffs in the universities.

As a general rule, these trainings have updated and developed teachers' skills and competences and improved their performance in the classroom to a large extent. So, this has also added up to teachers' motivations and overall training to work hard enhancing their students' proficiency levels.

Learners and learning:

In Cuba, higher education institutions have set up standards as proficiency goals as well as standards as measurement (specifications and instruments) to assess if the goals have been attained. While standards of proficiency describe what students should know or be able to do, measurements allow us to evaluate whether these standards have been met and to what extent they have been accomplished.

Cuba sets expectations as high as most Latin American countries where students graduating from higher education must attain a minimum of B1 level of English language proficiency. Though setting high academic expectations is important, this is not equivalent to having examination systems or resorting to national or international assessments to determine whether expectations match reality.

We in Cuba don't set up as high academic expectations as compared to others, but in contrast to others we are working hard to resort a national assessment to determine whether our students actually meet the expectations. Here we don't apply international exams to measure and evaluate students' proficiency, but we have been rather adapting free samples of international exams (free samples of IELTS international exams) to our national context of higher education.

Assessment:

The significance of assessment in our national higher education system is rapidly increasing and within the English language education policy it has been completely

changed and updated in tune with international trends, inspired by the demands for accountability as well as the demands for rapid growth in global mobility for education and employment.

On a macro level, the higher education system in Cuba has attempted to place assessment in the foreground as we plan for quality in education and for a more mobile, linguistically proficient and skilled labour force in which English Language proficiency is one of the key indicators of success in gaining access to education and better employment. On a micro level, English language assessment has given rise to growing interest in higher education to ensure competences in professional development and training in all areas of knowledge.

So, professionalizing English language assessment is a new direction within the English language policy where we conceive, plan for and conduct language assessment procedures, design, administer, interpret, utilize, and report language assessment data for different purposes (mostly for certification) and explore the implications of English language assessment for professional development, training and education.

For us, assessment is thus an integral part of teaching and learning, so as part of our curriculum we have updated assessment, setting up diagnostic, placement and proficiency exams. These tests assess all four language skills and students need to take exit exams to be accredited for their language proficiency and be able to graduate from their programs.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

The national English language education policy is definitely relevant and appropriate for the context of higher education. As a profound educational change, it is a systemic, strategic and long process with long – term as well as short – term goals which call for the active participation of stakeholders, policymakers, linguists, researchers, teachers and learners to look ahead strategically, implement it and find solutions to the core challenges.

In the strategic planning, most challenges being discussed above, need long – term strategic actions within a ten – year national plan that is likely to produce an impact on the entire process of implementation across the country. This plan consists of a vision, baseline analysis, strategic actions, implementation, and impact assessment as components.

- **Vision:** The new English language education policy will shape an effective teaching – learning process, leading up to the implementation of the policy in all undergraduate programs towards the attainment of the English language proficiency of low intermediate proficiency (equivalent to B1 on the CEFR scale) by all university learners.
- **Baseline analysis:** There will be regular yearly baseline analysis at the national level, providing evidence of the effectiveness of the English language education policy both in

terms of teachers' performance as well as in terms of learners' outcomes as inputs for improvements and policy change.

- **Strategic actions:** We will develop strategic actions focusing on the needs and challenges of the national English language education policy such as those associated with curriculum development, teacher training and professional development, research into English language teaching and assessment towards the goals of the policy.
- **Implementation:** We will implement a step – by – step strategy both at the national and institutional levels based on sound project management principles towards the goals of the policy and carry out ongoing project evaluations to assure their effectiveness successfully.
- **Impact assessment:** We will carry out comprehensive policy implementation impacts at the end of each of the two five – year cycles through evaluations of the impacts on the process of English language education as well as on the higher education institutions.

CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Higher education has identified that the ideal target to aim for in terms of English language proficiency outcomes is for the tertiary education level to have students graduate from undergraduate programs with a minimum of low intermediate level (equivalent to B1 on the CEFR scale) and then attain a high intermediate level (equivalent to B2 on the CEFR scale) in their postgraduate education.

With this target in mind, policy makers, authorities, teaching staffs, and teachers must be sensitive and supportive and make decisions, work collaboratively and implement effective strategies in the new directions. Thus, they should mobilize manpower and encourage actions to pursue both short – term and long – term goals for the undergraduate programs that can have the most effective impact on students' learning outcomes in terms of proficiency levels.

English language teaching is likely to be part of the overall curriculum whose development is crucial to the success of language education. Thus, it should be intrinsically integrated into the overall curriculum and managed systematically by the teaching staffs from the majors as well as the English staff in a gradual transition from start to finish. Working together, we can assure high quality of English language education in our universities.

One of the challenges is teacher performance. As part of their education, English language teachers are expected to attain high levels of English language proficiency (B2 or C1) and be able to use communicative language teaching and other contemporary approaches to teaching creatively, going beyond traditional teaching. Teachers of English need to make use of innovative methods, techniques and materials in their teaching and they should, therefore, be given systematic training on communicative methodology and contemporary approaches to teaching.

In addition, subject – matter teachers are expected to integrate English into their teaching and in so doing, deliver at least part of their teaching in the foreign language.

However, the low levels of English proficiency among subject – matter teachers leads them to poorly integrate the language into their syllabus and lessons. To compensate, they should also be given systematic training on their communicative skills in English as well as on how they can make the best possible use of English to cope with the needs of their learners.

English language teaching is conceived under a face - to - face model through direct student – teacher regular class interactions so the number of class hours is definitely important to reach the target and fulfill the goals. Class hours and class size have a direct impact on attaining the levels of language proficiency. So, on average, learners should have at least two lessons per week (two hours each) on a regular basis up to 256 hours in all to reach the B1 level of English language proficiency in all four skills as it has been set up.

Examinations through suitable assessment instruments is a further challenge and should be rigorously designed and applied at a national level and learners should take them to demonstrate their levels of English. Examinations should cover all four communicative skills and teachers should train learners on the dynamics of the examinations and focus on strategies, techniques, and materials that encourage success in the examinations. The washback effect is expected to activate learners' responsibility and encourage them to work hard on the targets the assessments are supposed to measure.

Exposure to the English language within the university majors and the immediate social context is also a challenge. Students should then feel English is relevant to their education as teachers work in collaboration with each other and emphasize on the use of English as a medium of instruction. In addition, universities should work together with media and civil society to foster the exposure of the learners to suitable English input.

CONCLUSION

Our social and political context mandates not only the English language education policy, but also the language learning goals, and even the teaching approaches and strategies to be followed within the overall higher education system and in each of the universities across the system.

Central to the English language education policy underway is the understanding of English language teaching and learning as both a political and an educational issue since language teaching and learning are inextrinsically tied up to language policy.

Just as policy design and implementation demand the negotiation among stakeholders, policymakers, linguists, teaching staffs, teachers, researchers and students, a similar collaborative effort is required at present for the preliminary evaluation of the policy implementation and its success. Consequently, we are all currently undertaking a national assessment of the first cycle (four – year implementation assessment) to further redesign the next cycles of the process of enhancement.

REFERENCES

- English Public Policies in Latin America: Looking for Innovation and Systemic Improvement in Quality English Language Teaching. British Council. CIDE. 2018.
- Resolución Ministerial No. 165 /19 Ministerio de Educación Superior, Cuba. 2019.