

Original Paper

Cuba: TEFL off the Grid

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to share the author's points of view concerning the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language in Cuba. The author does not claim to speak on behalf of the Cuban EFL teaching community, and the views expressed in this paper are the result of his personal practice only, and not necessarily those of the Cuban educational institutions. The writer wishes to thank all those who have contributed to his professional formation- whose list would be too long. The author remarks that all shortcomings, errors, and inaccuracies found in this paper are his fault only.

Keywords

EFL in cuba, cuban learners of english

1. Introduction

I began to learn English in my Senior High School years. It was 1987 and I was a 16-year-old-11th-grade student. I was drawn to this beautiful language completely by chance. The school I was in was kind of special, for advanced pupils, so to speak. The thing is you needed to maintain at least 85 points of total average in all the subjects you were taking in order to avoid getting expelled. I was quite an unremarkable student who wasted his English Language class time drawing and dozing off. Due to this reckless behavior my marks in English at the end of the first term of that course were very low: 83 points out of 100, if my mind serves me right. And, even though my total average was well over 85, my then teacher of English decided not to let it slide, so she called me all sorts of names in front of the whole class. It was, I have to admit, downright embarrassing, but it was that shameful moment that drew me to put my nose to the grindstone and burn the midnight oil. I wanted to get back at her for what she had said about me: I was not a bum, and I wanted to prove it. I was a man with a mission: I approached the most advanced students in my school; some of them were very popular because they knew some English, and so I got all sorts of advice and got to work. I spent most of my time during the next few remaining months of that course at

the school library where I, with great effort at first, a bit easier later on, devoured every book in English that I could get my hands on. Around that time I got my first letter in English. It was from a Dutch girl who, God only knows how, had learned my address. Translating that first letter took me about a whole week working with a small green Bantam bilingual dictionary. I was so proud of myself and got so happy with every new word that I learned! And that feeling hasn't changed yet. That's how it all started for me, and I suspect thousands have similar stories, but it surely changed my life forever.

I don't see that emotion in young people anymore. Maybe that is one of the many reasons why the level of English of Cuban students is so low these days. There's no motivation to learn just for the sake of learning, for the pleasure it gives someone to be able to harness a foreign language, and rein it in or let it gallop freely. For many, they are taking "Anguish", not "English".

When I refer to Cuban students or learners in this paper I mean the regular person falling through the cracks of the general educational system, primary, secondary or tertiary level students, even thousands of university grads who can't communicate in English fluently despite the many years of English lessons they have supposedly taken at school. By no means am I referring to the thousands of English Language university graduates, or even students, who receive outstanding instruction in our universities, nor those who, even though English was not their major in college, use it with ease, even mastery, in many cases.

2. Playing it by Ear

While doing my time at the compulsory military service in 1992 my superiors found out that I was pretty good at English, so they started giving me some missions, such as, translating communication devices operation manuals, interpreting for lost tourists, the works. Anyways, someone had the brilliant idea that I could start teaching English to some officers. When I explained that it was one thing to speak a foreign language with some level of proficiency, but quite a different story to teach others how to use that language, the officer in case said with the typical conviction of most Cubans: "Don't worry about it! I'll give you two weeks to get ready!" I didn't know where to start, so I ran to the nearest public library and scoured through its catalogue until I came up with a handful of titles that seemed appropriate to my needs. Out of that first encounter with foreign language teaching methodology I remember but one name: Rosa Antich, and I still like to think of her as the mother of EFLT in Cuba, and I'm convinced that anyone who has taken on this challenging career path in my country is indeed very much indebted to her.

So, that's how it all started for me: I was given a stereo, a bunch of textbooks and workbooks from the American course "Spectrum", along with its audio tapes, and a classroom full of students, all of them older than me, and military officers to top it all off. Go figure!

After Rosa Antich and her books I continued reading other authors such as Mary Finnochiaro, F. G. French, Steven H. Mc Donough, Don Byrne, Ann Arbor, and Blaine Ray, then Jack C. Richards, and Vigotsky. In recent years I came across the British Council website, and essential must-reads such as the American magazine English Teaching Forum. So, since 1992 for over 30 years, I have been studying, teaching, translating, and interpreting English, mostly on my very own terms, off the grid, hence the title.

I should remark that even though my university degree reads Bachelor in Socio Cultural Studies (2012), I got a language school certificate in spoken English (1992), managed to get myself certified as a foreign language instructor professor at the University of Matanzas (2015), received British Council training (2018), finished a couple of postgraduate courses about the Common European Framework of Reference, and started a diploma course in translation studies (2019-2020). Nevertheless, most of what I've learned I owe it to my insatiable curiosity to read any kind of books written in English. In that respect I have read and translated written or audiovisual materials from a great variety of fields, such as the military, aviation, communications, construction, medicine or religion, to name just a few. But teaching has always been my passion. Along this path through the years, I've had all types of students, from doctors and engineers, to elementary school children. My students' ages have ranged from 9 year olds, (there was an amusing 4-year-old girl once, but she came to class only for a day or two, since her mother didn't feel comfortable with the age gap between her and the other pupils who were 10 and 11 respectively, and neither did I) to 52 and 54, two loving mothers who were struggling to learn some English before joining their children in Miami.

3. So, What Keeps Cuban Students from Learning English?

When I've asked some of them: How come you didn't learn English at school, during nine or more years in the general educational system? They have given me all sorts of answers. For example, there was a youngster I taught at college who swore he had never received any English lessons before, although I cannot vouch for it to be true. Haven't you ever had a good English language teacher? I've asked others. Sometimes the answer has been "yes", other times it has been "no". Many students complain that the presence of good English lessons in their school years has been, at best, intermittent, that is, not consistent through the three different educational levels.

We have all noticed (I'm a father of four kids myself), that there have been constant problems every course finding teachers of English for many schools. It has happened, at least in part, because the teachers' pay was very low when you compared it to the amounts of money people with knowledge of foreign languages could rake in other sectors of the economy, such as tourism. But at least on that regard, things seem to be about to change because, on the one hand, with Covid-19 tourism has fallen into disgrace-hopefully only temporarily, while on the other hand, the government has wisely increased the salary of teachers and professors across the board. The immediate reaction has been that many teachers of yesteryear have returned to the classrooms they had once left and have been received with open arms. So, provided they don't leave again in search of greener pastures, there should be a priceless improvement in our schools, and I believe this to be a good omen because our students will, in the long run, benefit from the knowledge these professionals have accumulated through the years, even if they have been working in other fields.

4. The Funny Meme

Memes are an amazing, sometimes amusing, other times annoying, invention of the internet era. I clearly remember one day when a former student of mine showed me a meme intended to make fun of English learning in my country. I think it read something along these lines: “We Cubans study personal information from Elementary School all the way into University” And it is true. But the reason why this happens is because more than 80 % of Senior High School graduates enter university ranking “Bellow A1” in their freshman year placement tests. Yes, it’s embarrassing, as it should be not only for teachers or the educational system—either of which I believe to have been the object of the intended joke, but also for the students themselves. Didn’t the ones who joked about this issue understand that first and foremost it has been their failure to master a recurrent school subject, like English? Instead of making fun about it, they should be asking themselves: What am I doing wrong? How can I resolve this matter, this pending subject?

As a self-taught student who learned English alone, by himself, in an autodidactic manner, I know it’s doable, if we just stopped blaming others for our own lack of determination and grit. Of course, elementary school children, possibly Junior High School teenagers as well, will benefit more from the presence of a teacher in their classrooms, but Senior High School students, freshmen, sophomores, seniors, undergrads in general, doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc, should have developed enough resources to tackle a task such as this one. This is incredible, but I’ve met teenage students who have learned to program using Java, or C++, but can’t spell their names correctly in English.

Many other factors are important, too. Teachers are important, and there are English language teachers in Cuba. Adequate materials are important too, and they do exist and are in use in many of our schools, for instance, the Face 2 face series. Also, the economic situation of students plays a role (can their parents afford a Smartphone, or a laptop?). We could add their parents’ cultural or educational level, their parents’ mastery of a foreign language, and so on. All of these factors are very important, all of these, and then some. But I firmly believe that first and foremost it should be the students’ responsibility to take matters into their own hands, and learn English once and for all.

As for the educational system, many gaps abound. There should be only one policy guiding students and teachers through their primary, secondary, and tertiary education. The Common European Framework of Reference should be implemented at all levels, that one or some other system that would bring uniformity into programs and goals. This is, in my opinion, difficult to achieve when there are two different ministries, directing different English language programs, using different books, and trying to achieve different goals. Let me show you what I mean: I’ve had an 11th grader asking for my help to do her homework about the aquifer resources in our country, or a 9th grader with an assignment ordering him to write a piece of news about people caught in an accident, then, a few years later, I’ve seen these same pupils struggling with personal information questions at the university.

There are solutions. For example, if we used the same course in all the educational levels, say, the Face2face series, along with the Council of Europe guidelines, we’d have the same path ahead of us, and

we'd get there in time. There are experts in our country who could implement this idea. Just for argument's sake: 10th graders could begin with the Starter book (A1), 11th graders with Elementary (A2), 12th graders, busy as they are with university access exams, could just brush up on these two levels. Then at university, students would be tested on B1 descriptors, those passing the test could start the Pre-intermediate level. The ones who failed would have to take A1-A2 again. After Pre-intermediate, the students would still have Intermediate, Upper-intermediate, and Advanced courses to complete. Would the situation of English learners in Cuba be the same after all of this is done? I don't think so. Of course, not all students go on to university, so our experts would have to come up with a coherent strategy to introduce the same program in other educational modalities, such as technical colleges, and the like.

5. Back to Reality

Now, let's be realistic here. It will never be easy learning English in Cuba because English is a foreign language here, but not in the same way as it is in other countries, say, in Latin America, for instance, where there is a factor that moves its citizens to study English. There are many American businesses or schools, so, many people have the goal of studying English so that they can work for American companies, or study in American schools, or in schools or in companies from other countries. In Cuba there are no American schools, companies or businesses, and few from any other English-speaking nations for that matter. So, I don't think this factor is a motivating agent for Cuban learners.

Of course, there's the migration issue. Most Cubans who migrate try to reach the United States mostly in hopes of joining their family or friends who are allegedly doing better than in Cuba, economically speaking at least, because the overwhelming majority of Cuban migrants leave their country because of economic reasons. So, planning to move abroad to an English-speaking country in order to find better paying jobs should be reason enough to compel Cubans to learn English, right? Well, it isn't. For some reason, Cuban potential migrants in general don't care much about it, probably because they plan to end up in Miami where they've seen many of their friends or relatives get by with very little English skills.

There's the case of tourism, a booming sector in our economy, where speaking foreign languages is a must. Yes, many young people start to learn English with the objective of landing a good job in one of the big hotels in the various touristic resorts in the country. The thing is after they've learned enough to get admitted and grasp the basics of their trade's jargon, they sort of fall off the wagon, so to speak. Let me try and exemplify here, a Canadian tourist could ask a Cuban barman for a drink, to explain how to fix it, and to talk about its ingredients. Yes, the barman would be able to say all that in English, but he would probably have a harder time explaining more complex issues about, say, Cuban culture or history. Yes, even in sectors where English is very important people lack in-depth knowledge of English.

Before I wrap it up, there's something else that bothers me. In Cuba, I feel, English is considered by the powers that be, a subject of minor importance. Let me tread carefully here because I don't want to step on anyone's toes, but probably this misconception was born back in the days when even listening to songs in English was frowned upon by many who erroneously hated this language because it was the language of

the enemy, back when the instruction of Russian was forced upon us in our schools. Be it as it may, something in some people's subconscious seems to make them feel that English is less important than the rest of the subjects in the curriculum. So, even if the head of an English Language Department or a University Language Centre knows full well that it would take a student somewhere from 350 to 400 hours to reach B1 level, and even if they are fully aware of all the resources they have at hand to reach that goal, they have to make do with time constraints, and abridge their programs to fit the insufficient teaching hours allotted to English in the schools schedules. What's more, there are quite a few other countries in the world where you have to prove at least a basic command of English before you even attempt to enter university. That doesn't apply here either. Senior High School graduates have to pass Spanish, Mathematics, or History exams, for example, but not English. In the words of a student of mine who is in the 11th grade at the same special school I attended over 30 years ago: "To me, English has more practical value nowadays than most other subjects, and yet..."

6. Conclusions

The level of English in my country is pretty low, at least from where I'm standing. There seems to be a lack of intrinsic motivation everywhere you look, and the majority of the students taking English are doing so pushed or even forced by their parents or the educational institutions. You tell them about the role this foreign language plays in the world today and they don't seem to listen, or even care, for that matter. We need more intrinsically-motivated pupils who will fill their leisure hours with language related activities that contribute to creating an immersion-like environment which favours English language acquisition: They should change their phone language settings to English, play interactive games- the likes of Sims, watch series or films in English- even daring to do so with the subtitles off, learn English songs, take language courses in their free time, chat with their friends in English, and enthusiastically play active roles in their English lessons at school... But, in spite of the present situation, there is hope things will improve in the future: many former teachers have returned to the schools, there's a growing tendency for parents to hire private tutors to help their children cope with the challenge it implies to master a foreign language, and there are more resources now to learn English than ever before, thanks to the internet. And, last but not least, our students' educational level is quite high, and they are nothing short of brilliant...if they would just get their noses a little bit out of Facebook, Instagram or Tik Tok, and spend some more time on Duolingo and thousands of other websites or apps designed to help learners of English improve, things would, eventually, get better in the future.