A reflexive view on the contents for the teaching of English in Cuba (Review)
Una visión reflexiva acerca de los contenidos para la enseñanza del inglés en Cuba (Revision)

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a bibliographical revision carried out by the teaching staff of the discipline Didactics of Foreign Languages of the Foreign Languages major of the University of Granma. The revision includes the gathering of theoretical information needed to improve the quality of the choice of the system of contents to teach in the different educational levels. This information is required by the students of the major Foreign Languages to plan their graduate examination and to carry out their future career as teachers of English as a foreign language. To make its comprehension easier, it makes a theoretical analysis of the system of contents with the support of theoretical grounds of recognized acceptance and from the perspective of the Cuban pedagogy. The authors offer some guidelines that the students should consider when planning their graduate examinations.

Keywords: Contents; teaching; English; graduate examination

Resumen

El artículo presenta los resultados de la revisión bibliográfica realizada por el equipo de docentes de la disciplina Didáctica de las Lenguas Extranjeras de la carrera Lenguas Extranjeras de la Universidad de Granma. La revisión incluye la recolección de información teórica necesaria para perfeccionar la calidad de la determinación del sistema de contenidos a impartir en los diferentes niveles educacionales. Esta información es requerida por los estudiantes de la carrera Lenguas Extranjeras para planificar su ejercicio de culminación de estudios y para desempeñar su futura

carrera como profesores de inglés como idioma extranjero. Para facilitar su comprensión, este ofrece un análisis teórico del sistema de contenidos con el apoyo de fundamentos teóricos de reconocida aceptación y desde la perspectiva de la pedagogía cubana. Los autores ofrecen algunas orientaciones que deben ser consideradas por los estudiantes al planificar sus ejercicios de culminación de estudios.

Palabras clave: Contenidos; enseñanza; inglés; ejercicio de culminación de estudios

Introduction

Most of the Cuban universities embrace among their pedagogical majors that of the foreign languages. In many universities, the major includes the study of two foreign languages, English and French. In the University of Granma, the foreign language major includes the study of only one foreign language: English. Among the main modalities for graduation adopted by the mentioned major once the students reach their fourth year, the diploma paper and the graduate examination are included. As an alternative for their graduate examination, the students are supposed to present a methodological lesson through which they show both their acquired communicative competence in English and their professional competence.

To develop that methodological lesson, they are given instructions in cards, which include the tasks to carry out taking into consideration the educational level and grade in which they have developed their teaching practice. The cards comprise the commonest types of lessons taught at the Cuban educational levels, namely presentation, controlled practice, semi-controlled practice, free practice, reading, and writing lessons.

The students are randomly assigned one of the types of lessons from a specific unit of a grade. They are required to present a written and oral methodological analysis of the unit and the lesson assigned. The major staff designs guidelines for the students to accomplish the task. In order to make the presentation, the students should refer, among other aspects, to the system of didactic components of the unit and the lessons that make it up.

The authors of this article are members of the teaching staff of the discipline Didactics of Foreign Languages. They could corroborate the existence of a problem related to the students' limitations in the analysis of the system of contents as the primary component of the system of didactic components. The students show handicaps at the time of choosing the aspects that make up the system of contents. Therefore, the objective of the article is to offer those students some

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theoretical grounds to make a better analysis of such a system, so that they can acquire adequate ways of acting in their future professional career.

The work departs from an action research carried out by the teaching staff of the discipline Didactics of Foreign Languages. A theoretical study was the basis for the solution given to the problem under analysis. The theoretical methods of analysis-synthesis and induction-deduction were used to compile updated theoretical information on the teaching contents that Cuban teachers of English should teach at schools.

As a solution to the problem, the information treated in this article was included in the further preparation of the undergraduates of the courses 2023 and 2024. It was written in English to have the addressees get in contact with the English terms to use in their further profesional life.

Development

The authors of this work assume the system of didactic components proposed by the outstanding Cuban pedagogues Ana María González Soca, Silvia Recarey Hernández and Fátima Addine Fernández in their book Didáctica: teoría y práctica, namely objectives, contents, methods, teaching aids, evaluation, and teaching organizational forms (González et al., 2007). When asked about the contents they teach in their lessons, it is customary to listen to teachers of English referring to the communicative functions and the linguistic components these functions demand. This way, they match the concept of contents with that of linguistic knowledge.

Addine (1998) defines the contents as that part of culture and social experience that should be assimilated by the students and is dependent on the proposed objectives. This component responds to the questions: What should I teach? What should I learn?

González (2009) in his book La clase de lengua extranjera: teoría y práctica, presents the teaching contents of the foreign language lesson as made up of four systems which are closely related between each other. These systems are:

- The system of linguistic knowledge.

This system comprises some important elements that teachers should not disregard.

The first element is the *communicative functions* teachers are supposed to present in the units of the syllabus they teach. These are in harmony with the communicative objectives designed for each syllabus.

The second element is the linguistic components to attend in each communicative function presented. These include *pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.*

These linguistic components are usually offered in the syllabi of English of the different educational levels. Grammar and vocabulary are adjusted to the speech acts needed to perform a given communicative function.

From the linguistic components mentioned above, the most troublesome for the students to determine is pronunciation. One usual problem they show has to do with the aspects related to pronunciation. They usually limit this component to the attention to some troublesome sounds in words and phrases used to accomplish a given communicative function. The attention to vowel and consonant sounds is the aspect generally included in the syllabi of English in Cuba.

From the theoretical viewpoint, many specialists have approached pronunciation.

Having accurate pronunciation when communicating in a foreign language is fundamental in order to transmit the intended message with clarity and avoid misunderstandings. Some language instructors tend to ignore this micro skill because they prefer to focus on other areas of the language such as grammar or vocabulary. In the case of the English language, since it is not an official language in our country, both teachers and students are not in contact with native speakers of English on a daily basis when they interact with others. Hence, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students should be trained adequately to improve their pronunciation in English because they are not immersed in a context where they could easily pick the correct pronunciation. Indeed, it is imperative that university students who intend to become English teachers work on improving their pronunciation because they will be models for their future students. Sánchez et al. (2019)

Brown (s.f) states that rather than attempting only to build a learner's articulatory competence from the bottom-up approach, and simply as the mastery of a list of phonemes and allophones, a top-down approach is taken in which the most relevant features of pronunciation (stress, rhythm, and intonation) are given high priority. Instead of teaching only the role of articulation within words, or at best, phrases, we teach its role in a whole stream of discourse.

Wong (1987) reminds us that contemporary views of language hold that the sounds of language are less crucial for understanding than the way they are organized. The rhythm and intonation of English are two major organizing structures that native speakers rely on to process speech. Because of their major roles in communication, rhythm and intonation merit greater

priority in the teaching program than attention to individual sounds.

Our goal as teachers of English pronunciation should therefore be more realistically focused on clear, comprehensible pronunciation. At the beginning levels, we want learners to surpass that threshold beneath which pronunciation detracts from their ability to communicate. At the advanced levels, pronunciation goals can focus on elements that enhance communication: intonation features that go beyond basic patterns, voice quality, phonetic distinctions between registers, and other refinements that are far more important in the overall stream of clear communication than rolling the English /r/ or getting a vowel to perfectly imitate a "native speaker."

For Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983), pronunciation is considered to be made up of the following elements: individual sounds (or phonemes), liaison (or elision) between these sounds, and stress, intonation and rhythm (including pause) all of which are closely interrelated.

Acosta et al. (1997) affirm that changes have occurred in the teaching of pronunciation. The clearest evidence of these changes has been the shift in emphasis from the primacy of the teaching of segmental aspects (individual vowel and consonant sounds) to the importance of the teaching of suprasegmental aspects (stress, rhythm, and intonation) which are so closely linked to meaning in English. This change reflects the shift of emphasis given by the functional-notional approach, which has continued to grow over the last few years.

Tench (1990) suggests two fundamental principles in the general strategy of teaching pronunciation; on the one hand, pronunciation has to be isolated for practice of specific items and problems; on the other, pronunciation has to be integrated with the other aspects of language (grammar, vocabulary, style, function and discourse), and the language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

Newman (1992) adds that pronunciation can and should always be integrated into all aspects of language teaching and reinforced in all classes. As a conclusion, at the time of approaching pronunciation, the students should be aware of the individual vowel and consonant sounds, stress, rhythm, and intonation. This is backed up by the fact that pronunciation is phonemic, so a single change in one of those aspects may bring about a change in meaning.

Another important linguistic component to teach is vocabulary.

As for principles of teaching English vocabulary, an account for what vocabulary forms teachers need to teach and the principles of how they are taught is vital. It is certain to consider

the vocabulary aspects to teach, for it should be done in line with the objectives to reach and the students' needs.

To realize it, Nation (2001, cited by Hago Elmahdi & Mahyoub Hezam, 2020) proposed these aspects, namely spoken form, written form, parts of word, concept a word has and items it may associate, association of the word, grammar of the word, collocation of the word, register and frequency of the word.

Recent research indicates that teaching vocabulary may be problematic because many teachers are not confident about the best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times do not know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008, cited by Hago Elmahdi & Mahyoub Hezam, 2020).

Teaching words is a crucial aspect in learning a language as languages are based on words (Thornbury, 2002, cited by Hago Elmahdi & Mahyoub Hezam, 2020). It is almost impossible to learn a language without words; even communication between human beings is based on words. Both teachers and students agree that acquisition of the vocabulary is a central factor in teaching a language (Walters, 2004, cited by Hago Elmahdi & Mahyoub Hezam, 2020).

Teaching vocabulary is one of the most discussed parts of teaching English as a foreign language. When the teaching and learning process takes place, problems would appear to the teachers. They have problems of how to teach students in order to gain satisfying results. The teacher should prepare and find out the appropriate techniques, which will be implemented to the students. A good teacher should prepare himself or herself with various and up-to-date techniques. Teachers need to be able to master the material in order to be understood by students, and make them interested and happy in the teaching and learning process in the classroom (Hago Elmahdi & Mahyoub Hezam, 2020).

The teachers should be concerned that teaching vocabulary is something new and different from student's native language. They also have to take into account that teaching English for young learners is different from adults. The teachers have to know the characteristics of his\her learners. They moreover need to prepare good techniques and suitable material in order to gain the target of language teaching (Hago Elmahdi & Mahyoub Hezam, 2020).

The other important linguistic component is grammar.

Brown (s.f), a professor from San Francisco State University, in his book Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy states that in Communicative

Language Teaching classes now, the use of grammatical explanation and terminology must be approached with care. Teachers are sometimes so eager to display their hard-earned metalinguistic knowledge that they forget that the students are busy enough just getting the language itself that the added load of complex rules and terms is too much to bear. However, clearly, adults can benefit from a bit of explaining from time to time.

He also affirms that in the days when grammar was the major center of attention in language classes, vocabulary was also the focus of drills, exercises, and memorization efforts. Then, as grammar fell into some disfavor a few decades ago, vocabulary instruction tended to go with it. Currently, in our attention to communicative classrooms that are directed toward content, tasks, or interaction, we are once again giving vocabulary the attention it deserves. But this attention now comes from quite a different perspective: rather than viewing vocabulary items as a long and boring list of words, vocabulary is seen in its central role in contextualized, meaningful language (Brown, s.f).

The efficacy of an inductive or a deductive method to teach English grammar has been extensively discussed and compared by various authors throughout time. This comparison has been made by analyzing the impact of providing students with the rule or letting them identify the grammatical structure on their own. According to Shaffer (1989, cited by Salazar Miranda et al., 2018), in the inductive method, it is necessary for learners to codify their own learning and to articulate the target feature, whereas in the deductive method students are provided with the explicit rule.

According to Widodo (2006, cited by Salazar Miranda et al., 2018), the assumption that learning a language is related to knowing the rules is encouraged by the deductive method. However, the deductive method prevents that learners internalize the wrong rules. In the deductive method, the students are given the rules; therefore, there is no risk of coming to the wrong hypothesis about it, as it could occur in the inductive method.

Thornbury (1999, cited by Salazar Miranda et al., 2018) has stated three principles for the deductive presentation. First of all, the teacher begins the lesson by providing the rules. Afterwards, the teacher highlights the grammar structure in illustrative examples. Finally, learners practice the rule in exercises given by the teacher and produce their own examples at the end of the practice.

Erlam (2003, cited by Salazar Miranda et al., 2018) developed a study where she compared the effects of teaching with the

inductive and the deductive methods. She concluded that the learners who used the syntactical construction of the structure did worse than the learners who used the inductive method. With the inductive method, the learners improved much more the procedures of construction of the language that evaluated morphology. In the deductive method, the learners were given a list of grammatical rules, and then, they practiced the rules through exercises. This author found that through the deductive method, the learners obtained higher scores in the delayed post-test than the learners who received classes with the inductive method.

Throughout time, researchers in the field of foreign language education have studied the efficiency of the inductive and deductive methods for the teaching of grammar. Both methods have strengths and weaknesses that benefit or hinder the learning of grammar. Some authors such as Adi Ana & Ratminingsih (2012, cited by Salazar Miranda et al., 2018) and Widodo (2006, cited by Salazar Miranda et al., 2018) have suggested the implementation of both methods to maximize their strengths. The inductive method has been favored by some researchers because their studies have shown that when learners discover the rules by themselves, these are acquired more meaningfully. The inductive method promotes noticing, which is part of learning by discovery. However, the deductive method helps learners learn features of grammar that cannot be acquired inductively such as the irregular verbs in English. Therefore, the combination of both methods should be promoted for better grammar learning.

- The system of formation of habits and development of skills departing from the communicative functions.

This system cannot exist without the system of knowledge. Knowledge is the basis for the further formation of habits and development of skills while the skills represent the successful conscious mastery of the activity in close relation to the habits that also guarantee the mastery of the action, but in a more automatized way.

Leontiev (1975) asserts that the mechanism of a foreign language includes three types of habits:

- The habits already existing in the mother tongue, which with slight adaptations can be transferred to the foreign language. For example, some sounds like /f/ /s/; some types of word

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formation with Latin or Greek prefixes, the international vocabulary (words like *radio, cosmos*, and *television*). This type of habits reflects the phenomenon of transference of similar elements in both languages from one language into the other.

- The habits existing in the mother tongue and need to be corrected and changed into the foreign language. These are the most difficult   and in turn the ones that need more attention. They are the result of the interference of the mother tongue; for example, the pronunciation of some sounds like /r/ /l/; the spelling of some words that resemble in both languages, but have different letters like *inmediatamente* and *immediately*, the intonation and rhythmic patterns, grammatical structures very similar with slight differences.

- The new habits, which should be formed for elements that do not exist in the mother tongue as for example, for the articulation of new sounds like /æ/, /ʃ/, /ə/, /ʒ/, /ʧ/, /ʲ/, /ɵ/, and /ᶻ/, new grammatical structures, new vocabulary. This group of habits may be considered as a variant of the previous group since the students tend to substitute what is new in a language by something already known from their mother tongue. It may be thought that the repetition drills is the most effective way of fixing habits; nevertheless, experience has proved that habits formed this way are easily forgotten. They should be formed by using a form of real communication in the foreign language.

Naturally, when starting learning the foreign language, the students should assimilate the linguistic material and form the required habits, but teachers should bear in mind that the final goal of the activity they carry out is not the formation of habits, but the formation of communicative skills, which are formed under the basis of habits. A student has some skills when he is able to take advantage of his knowledge and operate with them to solve successfully theoretical and practical tasks. Therefore, a linguistic skill may be defined as the capacity to build and use correctly a given statement to express a given content (Antich de León, 1986).

The linguistic habits are considered as components of the linguistic communicative skills and constitute automatized linguistic operations of aspectual character (phonetic, lexical, and grammatical).

Skills are formed in a long-term period within the repetition of activities that require the communication on the part of the students. This is achieved; for example, by transferring the linguistic content of a learned situation in class into another situation slightly different: from the grocery to the library, from a train trip into a plane trip (Antich de León, 1986).

The linguistic skills are defined as the capacity to manage the verbal activity when solving communicative tasks. In close correspondence with the different aspects of the verbal activity, there are listening skills (understanding speech in its sound composition), speaking skills (expressing ideas orally), reading skills (understanding discourse in its graphic expression), and writing skills (transmitting ideas in written form) (González, 2009).

In the courses of the different educational levels, the four skills are included within the system of contents, except for the elementary level in which the emphasis is laid on the oral skills listening and speaking.

It is also discussable whether the learning strategies should be included as part of this system of contents. It has been sustained by many pedagogues that learning strategies like skills can be taught to the students.

One approach you can take to teaching strategies in the language classroom is the impromptu teacher-initiated advice. Learners can benefit greatly from your daily attention to the many little tricks of the trade that you can pass on to them (Wong & Nunan, 2011).

Think back to your own language learning experiences and note what it was that you now attribute your success (or failure!) to, and pass these insights on.

Did you use cards?

Did you practice a lot?

Did you see subtitled movies?

Read books?

Pin rules and words up on your wall?

When those appropriate moments present themselves in your class, seize the opportunity to teach your students how to learn. By doing so, you will increase their opportunities for strategic investment in their learning process.

- The system of relations with the surrounding world.

This system includes the system of values, interests, convictions, feelings, and attitudes to be achieved in close interrelation with the contents of the other subjects that the curriculum includes (interdisciplinary relations) and the rest of the components of the teaching contents that the curricular studies propose.

- The system of experiences of the creative activity.

It is a content of higher quality from the intellectual viewpoint; however, it demands the rest of the contents to be manifested in the cognitive activity closely interrelated to the affective motivational sphere. There are many aspects that show the way the students learn this type of content; for example, in problem solving, with the cognitive independence, with the development of a reflexive and divergent thought, and the creative imagination among others. It may also include the cross-curricular studies established for each educational level and the interdisciplinary relations of English with other subjects of the school curriculum.

The students´ harmonic acquisition of the types of contents listed above, will allow for the fulfillment of the four pillars proposed by the United Nations for Education, Science, and Culture Organization (UNESCO) to face the challenges of the XXI century.

To learn how to know.

To learn how to do.

To learn how to live along with others.

To learn how to be.

Summing up, in order to make a proper didactic analysis of the system of contents of the unit and the lessons that make it up, the following contents should be chosen:

- The system of linguistic knowledge.

This system includes the communicative functions and accordingly the linguistic components: pronunciation (including the attention to vowel and consonant sounds, intonation, rhythm, and stress), grammar, and vocabulary.

- The system of formation of habits and development of skills departing from the communicative functions.

This system includes all the habits needed to achieve proper pronunciation, and proper use of grammatical aspects and vocabulary in relation to the communicative functions presented. In addition, the attention to the four major skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) should be declared.

- The system of relations with the surrounding world.

This system includes the system of values, interests, convictions, feelings, and attitudes to be achieved departing from the learning of the English contents, the contents of the cross-curricular studies established for each educational level, and the interdisciplinary relations of English with other subjects of the school curriculum.

-      The system of experiences of the creative activity.

This system includes all the experiences the students share through their creative activity when dealing with the English contents, the contents of the cross-curricular studies established for each educational level, and the interdisciplinary relations of English with other subjects of the school curriculum.

Conclusions

The types of contents presented in the article are adjusted to the Cuban context under the basis of Cuban pedagogy. The contents to teach English in Cuban context should involve four main systems which are dialectically united: the system of linguistic knowledge, the system of formation of habits and skills, the system of relations with the surrounding world, and the system of experiences of the creative activity.

When determining the system of linguistic contents, the following aspects should be regarded: the communicative functions, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation which in turn include the articulation of sounds, intonation, stress, and rhythm. The aspects related in the article serve as didactic guidelines to the Cuban students of the Foreign Languages Major and in service teachers of English for the determination of the system of contents of the lessons they plan. The adequate choice of the system of contents as the primary didactic component is vital to guarantee the quality of the teaching learning process of English.

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