

THE CONTENT OF EFL AT THE SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL IN CUBA

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One of the areas which needs a critical look, as a result of curricular change in the Cuban secondary school, is the category of content. By *content* is meant "that portion of systematized culture which is brought into the educational process." (C. Alvarez, 1999:36) Particularly at this level the content of the subjects in the curriculum should not only cover knowledge but also skills, attitudes, norms and values.

Change at this level calls for broader aims on the basis of less specialized information and a more globalized curriculum with these priorities:

- Communicative competence in Spanish, as well as the development of study skills;
- Competence in mathematics, and the development of logical and critical thinking;
- Basic knowledge of the history of Cuba and of world history;
- Basic knowledge of the world, broadly speaking;
- Development and reinforcement of the values of the Cuban society;
- Basic communicative competence in English; and
- Skills in the use of informatics.

These priorities reflect the needs of the Cuban society as much as the needs of a globalized world.

So a question comes up for teachers and specialists of all subjects when it comes to the secondary school level: **what should be the content of my subject at this level now?**

In the case of EFL nobody in the profession in Cuba has clearly outlined an answer to this question. As a result, one may find teachers of English claiming that their contribution to the aims of Spanish lies in the teaching of grammatical metalanguage, or that they have a contribution to make to the aims of History if the

translate into English some of the writings of some of our most outstanding historical figures and bring them into the English class, and so forth.

In this article I am trying to define what the category of content should cover in EFL at the secondary school level in Cuba and thus what contribution we can make to the learning needs of this level,

What should be the content of EFL at the secondary school level in Cuba?

The answer that I have for this question off the top of my head is *communicative competence in English*. But I am arguing that this term needs to be expanded and redefined. By communicative competence I mean with Canale and Swain (1980) the capacity to produce coherent texts and to process the meanings of language in real time; but being competent is not only knowing how to do something, it is knowing how to do things on the basis of attitudes, values and beliefs which are socioculturally bound (M. Ruíz, 1999:13). That is why I agree with Binon and Claes (1995), quoted by I. Enriquez and E. Garbey (2000), in the sense that communicative competence should include a fifth area sociocultural competence, which is the capacity to understand the values behind the forms of the language, and a minimum of knowledge of the culture of the interlocutors in a communicative act.

EFL at the secondary school level should also deal with study skills such as:

- Using different reference sources,
- Using a variety of formats to record information,
- Learning from mistakes,
- Monitoring and self-evaluating learning,
- Working in groups,
- Learning English outside the classroom,
- Keeping a learning diary.

(Adapted from M. Ruíz, 1999; M. Ruíz, 2000; T. Hutchinson, 1995; and Whitney, 1994)

And EFL may bring into its teaching materials, thematic content from other areas of the curriculum, basically with an instrumental purpose (to help the students develop fluency in English, following Brumfit, 1984). For example, N. Whitney

(1994), writing for EFL in the context of the Spanish educational Reform, includes these thematic contents in a section which he calls *English across the curriculum*: mathematics, geography, the environment cross-cultural studies (festivals and traditions), natural history (rainforests); biology (the muscles in your body), science (substances) and technology (the history of sound recording), health education (diet and fitness), media studies (favorite films), and interdisciplinary studies (the story of chocolate). In my experience I have found that content from other areas of the curriculum may be embedded as part of free practice activities, in projects, or in reading materials, not only as a special section within a unit of teaching material.

Now we can start answering more specific questions.

What is the contribution of EFL to the aims of Spanish in the Cuban secondary school?

Here I am arguing that communicative skills and strategies are transferable from L1 into L2 and viceversa. For this reason, EFL and Spanish teachers should come to an agreement with respect to the approaches that they want to use for the teaching of listening, reading and writing. I believe that both subjects should be using a top-down process task-based approach for the teaching of these skills.

Especially there is a great need for all subjects at this level to emphasize the process (A. Labarrere, 1989), since students have a tendency to do things without thinking, or without planning ahead.

I am claiming as well that a number of positive attitudes connected to the use of languages are transferable from L1 into L2 and viceversa, such as sensitivity to sociolinguistic factors, listening attentively, cooperating with your interlocutor, respecting other people's opinions, etc. In my opinion, all of the above are definitely more important contributions of EFL to the aims of Spanish than teaching grammatical metalanguage.

What is our contribution to the aims of History?

A sociocultural component incorporated into EFL at the Cuban secondary school level lends itself to the coverage of topics and activities connected to Cuban

history and culture, and world history and culture. On this matter I am claiming that a multicultural perspective be embraced (N. Gregori, 2001), which “promotes and defends the native culture in its plurality (sic) and gives access to the world heritage and to contemporary artistic creation” (A. Prieto, 2000; in S. Cruz, 2000).

How can we add to the aims of Mathematics?

Although we may bring into EFL content from Mathematics as a means to practice the language meaningfully (this would be *English across the curriculum*), our main contribution in this area should be the development of logical thinking, and the ability to process texts, especially texts dealing with mathematical problems.

How can we contribute to other areas of the curriculum?

- By teaching the students study skills.
- By including into the materials thematic content from other areas of the curriculum aimed at expanding the students’ basic knowledge of the world and reinforcing their values.
- By using new technologies of information and communication.

Conclusion

The content of EFL at the secondary school level in Cuba needs revision. It should not be regarded just as knowledge and skills (i.e. a narrow view of communicative competence), but should also be concerned with values, attitudes and norms. In other words, the content of EFL at this level should be less strictly specialized and instead become more globalized.

The content of EFL may become more globalized by:

- Dealing with a sociocultural component as part of communicative competence, which, as I have elaborated above, has a contribution to make to the aims of History as a priority.
- Teaching Spanish and English following similar methodological approaches.

- Covering study skills, connected to learning how to learn foreign languages and learning in general.
- Bringing into the teaching materials content from other areas of the curriculum, which needs to be learned through the medium of English, with the aim of adding to the students' basic knowledge of the world and of reinforcing and developing their values.
- Providing for the development of logical and critical thinking skills.
- Providing for training in English assisted by computers, thus reinforcing the students' skills in the use of informatics.

In this way we may expect to help overcome the culture of fragments which has prevailed hitherto in most subjects in secondary school (English included), and we may begin to teach this foreign language in an educationally rich framework, in accordance to the learning needs of this school level.

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