English language education management at the University of Pinar Del Río Language Centre

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ABSTRACT: *Implementing a policy to enhance continuous training for professionals in the Cuban educational system has prompted a diagnostic assessment of the university model and, more specifically, the English language education program. One of the proposed solutions to graduate competent professionals in this language is to improve the English training process in higher education. A management study was conducted to accomplish this goal. This study focuses on the Language Centre of Pinar del Rio University. It aims to present the key aspects of the English training process management that have led to its improvement. The research employed theoretical methods such as historical-logical, analysis-synthesis, modelling, and empirical methods such as document analysis, observation, and group interviews. The study involved 135 students starting the policy, 21 English teachers from the language centre, and 20 from non-English subjects. The findings highlight the essential aspects of management that have contributed to improving English language education at the university.*

1. Introduction

Higher education in Cuba is undergoing significant changes to expand students' and professionals' continuous training process. One of these changes is the policy to improve the English training process in university students, which establishes English language proficiency as a requirement to exit higher education at an intermediate level equivalent to B1, following the structure by levels recognised for Cuban Higher Education (MES, 2019) and stated by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CE, 2018).

One distinctive element of this policy for language education in the country is the creation of language centres. These centres have the mission of addressing the strategy to improve the English training process at the institution through specialised academic services in foreign languages for teaching, research, and extension, as well as providing methodological advice to non-English staff regarding language training, assessment and certification to improve the comprehensive training of students and the social relevance of the university (Gutiérrez, 2020).

The Language Centre of Pinar del Río University was created in 2016, emerging from the former language department, and has significantly impacted how its processes and organisational culture are managed. This event and the impact of English language certification as a graduation requirement have resulted in uncertainty that has adversely influenced its members and the university community. In this sense, the management experience of the author of this work and her intuition about the problem were useful since, in the initial exploratory study, it was possible to confirm the absence of language centres' experiences in the country and, therefore, the existing theoretical-methodological gap for their management.

Thus, the need to study process management at the Language Centre of Pinar del Río University led to finding quick solutions for the required changes. Therefore, this study was guided by the following research questions:

What theoretical references support the process management in language centres in higher education institutions?

How can language education management at the Language Centre of Pinar del Río University be improved to contribute to the comprehensive

training of students and the social relevance of the university?

This paper aims to discuss the main elements that characterise the process management in the Language Centre of the University of Pinar del Río to build a positive organisational culture and achieve progress in the student's English language education.

2. Literature review

For more information on the topic under discussion, a literature review was directed to find how language centres are managed worldwide to improve the language education process. In the analyses, several proposals were found to be very useful for this work from a theoretical point of view that is explained; however, they do not refer to how to conduct this management in the Cuban context that, in the author's opinion, need theoretical positioning.

2.1. English language education and language centres

The literature found that in the second half of the 20th century, the importance of English as an international language intensified due to student enrolment in higher education and the demand to develop communicative competence in this and other languages. That reason and academic and professional mobility imposed new challenges on higher education that profoundly changed the way modern languages were organised in such institutions (Ruane, 2003). That is why one of the responses to these new demands was the creation and development of language centres around the world, which has grown gradually in the first quarter of the 21st century, as the value of language teaching in higher education has been increasing as well (Critchley, 2015; Ruane, 2003). Consequently, the strategic role of language centres has been recognised in international forums as they have the greatest impact on the development of effective internationalisation strategies in this educational sector that actively contributed to the implementation of key aspects of the Bologna Process by providing linguistic and intercultural tools for effective mobility (Critchley, 2015; Ruane, 2003).

This scenario highlights the importance of language centres whose strategic role has focused primarily on the internationalisation of higher education institutions to edify universal values in professionals that implies the development of communicative competencies in foreign languages to access knowledge available anywhere in the world and disseminate it. Therefore, the social function of this unit and its development perspectives for universities is core for the competence in international academic communication. As Meyer (1997) stated, it must be part of the desired future of the institution. Ruane (2003) believes that communicative competence should be seen as a strategic component in the institution regulated by recognised language policies, establishing the need to deepen into the mother tongue and promote the knowledge of foreign languages.

A definition of language centres was stated by Gutiérrez (2020) as an academic and management unit which is in charge of implementing the English language development policy in universities through specialised academic services in foreign languages for teaching, research and extension, with a high level-of responsibility for methodological advice to university staff in language training, evaluation and certification, to improve the comprehensive training of students and the social relevance of the university. She also claims that founding language centres in the country provides an opportunity to align its university institutions with how language training is managed globally and, therefore, an expression of an internationalised higher education. To support process management, it there is essential to work towards a change in organisational culture which entails:

The identification of leadership potentials that would link individual aspirations and values with the interests of the centre;

The recognition of those parts of the previous history and culture that could be used as building elements for the new organisational culture:

The analyses and implementation of the objectives, values and purposes of the new organisational unit to enhance teachers' learning in aspects related to administration

and management, as well as communication and information as sources of feedback and socialisation;

The education of teachers and support workers in the mission of language centres to meet the language training needs of the academic and non-academic community.

Other management aspects, such as communication, teamwork, and commitment of the top management and academic staff, are critical success factors for language education management in higher education.

2.2. Reforms in the English language education in Cuban Higher Education

The reforms taking place in Cuban higher education are the result of the continuous improvement process in which it is involved, which has also led to substantial changes in the direction of the comprehensive training process of professionals. In this context, English language proficiency becomes a strategic objective of this training, particularly in light of the needs and projections of the country's development (MES, 2019). For the study, it was relevant to review the moments in which English language education has passed in the country (Gutiérrez, 2020). In short, it can be said that:

Between 1960 and 1982, English language study was directed towards the development of reading comprehension skills broadly rather than teaching professionally oriented reading.

Between 1983 and 1990, coinciding with the implementation of Curriculum B, there was a shift to applying a methodology in universities to ensure reading literacy development for academic and professional purposes.

In 1990, the English Language Director Programme (ELP) was widely implemented based on pilots, which began in the academic year 1985-1986. This programme recognised English as both a discipline and an instrument of study and work and provided guidelines for the joint work of English teachers and teachers of other disciplines. However, the programme was not applied flexibly and creatively in the universities, so it did not have the expected results.

In 2003, following the design of curriculum D, a group of experts from all over the country worked on the development of an English language teaching methodology and text creation, aiming at promoting independent language study, so that class time could be devoted to developing oral communication skills, which at that time was a priority.

From 2000 to the present day, a moment that Gutiérrez (2020) adds because it is framed in the process of improving the continuous training system of Cuban professionals and reflects the highest expression of universalisation of Cuban higher education. Curriculum E began implementing four academic years for university studies, and English was established as an exit requirement.

Cuban education has had the clear objective and sustained aspiration of achieving a university graduate capable of demonstrating communicative competence in English, and for that reason, different strategies have been planned; however, the development levels of reading comprehension skills for academic and professional purposes have not been reached yet, nor the integration of the four skills that have subsequently been pursued productive and conscious communication in a professional context. This aspect was also unclear in the literature consulted. However, it was useful in filling the theoretical gaps in managing language centres in Cuba and conceiving the regulations now established in the abovementioned policy.

2.3. English language education management process

In the literature review related to the English language education management process, it was revealed that it is related to knowledge management which is a concept developed from issues related to management in the 80s and 90s, highlighting the *total quality management*, *continuous innovation* and *organisation* revealing that knowledge management is necessary to enhance four basic concepts of administration: continuous improvement, quality guarantee, process innovation and organisational learning. Villasana et al. (2021) found various definitions targeting the one that considers

knowledge management as an organisational asset and claims that it is a managerial method or a developing discipline that seeks to use the generated knowledge in a structured and systematic way to achieve goals and optimise decision-making.

Sablón et al. (2019), in their work on management information and decision-making in educational organisations, state that information and organisational knowledge in the context of education are vital for decision-making, as they consider that decision-making allows information to be transformed into knowledge, and both have a vital role to play in educational, organisational management. As can be seen, educational institutions are knowledge-based organisations that generate, process and manage information to transform it into knowledge supported by informatisation in which English is the most widely used language in science and technology.

Gutiérrez-Picón, J. (2020), in his work on Knowledge Management Needs in English Language Teaching, states that knowledge management in English language learning is an open, cyclical, dynamic and innovative system for the development of the university curriculum in general and of the curriculum units under the communicative approach in particular. According to Gutiérrez (2020), language education is a holistic, open and professional process, with a combination of approaches for teaching basic language skills that students need to be proficient for situations they face in life. Other concepts related to management were consulted, such as planning, organisation, implementation and control.

Planning is setting goals to achieve certain outcomes and identifying the actions needed, when and how they can be achieved, and who will be responsible for their achievement (Guzmán, 2017). The organisation is the planning process, the work is divided, and the achievement of results is coordinated with a common purpose, combining skills, technical possibilities, experiences, resources, and materialising in a set of systems and subsystems. Implementation is the concretion of the previous functions that require the motivation, innovation and creativity of the organisation's members to implement the tasks and actions with participation, involvement and leadership (Galarza, 2007) cited by Guzmán (2017). Control monitors activities and results compares them with objectives, and implements corrective actions (Guzmán, 2017).

3. Methodology

Per the objective of the work, the following theoretical methods were used: a. the historical-logical method to identify the background, specifics and developments in the management of the English language training process in international and national contexts; b. analysis and synthesis enable the study of those elements constituting the process and its relationship with management to discover new relationships and characteristics; c. modelling led to finding and searching for the new relations and qualities of the English language training process. Empirical methods such as group interviews and documentary analysis were used to determine the course's work dynamics and verify the problem's state. Descriptive statistics were used to process the information resulting from the questionnaires applied, based on descriptive statistics procedures, processing and tabulating the information obtained.

Research Setting and Participants: The study was conducted at the University of Pinar del Río with 135 students studying for four years to obtain a college degree. They were called to participate and volunteered. Their English proficiency was determined as A2 level based on CEFR. The ages ranged from 18 to 20, and they were in their first year of study and starting in the implementation of the abovementioned policy at that time. Twenty-one teachers from the language centre participated in the study ranging from 4 to 25 years of experience teaching a foreign language. They have teaching and scientific categories: 7 are PhD with an extensive experience in leading processes at the university, 10 are masters, and the rest are in-service teachers. 20 Non-English subject teachers participated in providing their views on the English language training process management and their role in following up with

learners in this process.

Document analysis: Extensive consulting of national and international publications available on internet sites, scientific articles, and doctoral theses related to the study allowed us to find relevant information for the research. Other documents related to the strategic projection of the Language Centre, teaching documents and Resolution 165/19 that regulates the improvement of the English language training process for students in Cuban higher education were accessed to find how language education is managed.

Participant observation: the study applied participant observation to the meetings of the language centre for managerial staff, which included language subjects, language centres abroad, and national meetings of language centre directors, to provide an insight into the dynamics of the organisation's work.

Group interview: the study applied a questionnaire designed to broaden its range, then piloted to check if it was clear enough to respondents. 13 students were involved in the piloting. The data collected from the questionnaire were analysed based on descriptive statistics procedures.

4. Results and discussion

An extensive consulting of national and international publications on internet sites, scientific articles, and doctoral theses related to the study allowed us to find relevant information for the research. Other documents related to the strategic projection of the Language Centre, those on the organisational structure of higher education teaching and those on the policy allowed identifying the problem of the study. Resolution 165/19 regulates improving the English language training process for university students in Cuba and acknowledges the need to set up language centres but does not state how to manage them.

The results of the group interview showed that teachers of the Language Centre and non-English staff agree that *"several difficulties are limiting the fulfilment of the Language Centre's mission to improve English language education process*

and listed those related to the lack of knowledge they have on how to manage the English teaching effectively". They also referred to *"the lack of integration between the Language Centre and the rest of the academic levels of the institution which is essential to influence together in the fulfilment of the student's graduation requirement"*, which indicates that they are not fully aware of the role they have in improving the English language training process, and that is why it has impacted inadequately on the comprehensive professional training. In this particular topic, only 18.8% of respondents confirmed *"they are aware of the Language Centre's learning activities because they have participated in the student science days, skills competitions, attended language courses or because their language teachers have trained them as student assistants"*. All the students confirmed that *"they do not know how the language education is monitored and controlled by the study degree staff"*, so we infer it is due to insufficiencies in institutional communication.

Another reflection was directed towards implementing the Language Curricular Strategy that is part of the activities the degree course must carry out for the comprehensive training of its students to enhance cross-disciplinarily. It revealed limitations related to the language skills of their non-English subjects' teachers for conducting tasks in English to encourage students to feel the need to study the language through the specialities. The students for themselves quoted that *"they do not feel that English is important in their professional training, so they do not make much effort to deepen their language skills"*.

The above-explained aspects were relevant for introducing improvements in the management of the English training process that started by creating the Language Centre with the mission to address the policy to improve English training in university students while providing an opportunity to align Cuban universities according to the way language training is managed worldwide, therefore an expression of internationalised higher education. Subsequently, changes were made in the mindset of its members to build a new organisational culture that would enable the

fulfilment of the centre's work objectives and mission. This result was possible through training workshops on administration, management and leadership that led the language staff to identify with the new organisation, its mission and values while at the same time influencing the degree courses staff to generate the needed changes.

In this new organisational culture awareness process, other elements were visualised, such as the place of the university's teaching, research and extension processes. This time they constituted the scenarios where the language training process took place. At the same time, the research on how to manage language centres revealed, among other things, the fundamental processes of language centres: *language teaching, evaluation and certification*, that was necessary to describe in order to manage them efficiently.

The description of these processes was developed by Gutiérrez (2020), who stated that the English language teaching process "*is a holistic, systemic and professional process, in which instructional, educational and developmental functions take place, allowing, at the same time the acquisition and production of knowledge, and the search for new knowledge*". She also stated that "*other related processes occur as research, innovation and creation, which harmoniously articulated to express their relevance at this level of education*". "*Research allows a permanent self-improvement and academic-professional updating in the contents of the specialty published in English to provide solutions to problems of the profession, while university extension contributes to raising the cultural level of the community within and outside the university by satisfying the need to develop linguistic knowledge, thus contributing to their comprehensive education and strengthening the university-society relationship*".

Evaluation is closely related to the English language education process, which seeks to improve training. It can be conducted through self-evaluation and co-evaluation in order to have systematic feedback and to eliminate deficiencies in their development; it aims to test the English language proficiency level achieved by users continuously and to verify the effectiveness of the training process through validity, reliability and feasibility (CEFRL, 2018). Moreover, English language certification aims to recognise the language user's level of proficiency developed during the training process, it is closely linked to assessment and training, and the aim is to validate the professional's level of linguistic proficiency specified in common frameworks of reference for languages and, as Martínez (2015) proposed, "*it goes through the stages by of application, acceptance and assessment as an evidence of completing the Cuban university graduation requirement and the effectiveness of the training and evaluation processes in certain periods*".

Other aspects were revealed through studying English language education management at the University of Pinar del Río. It is related to the training paths the students can choose for their language studies: intensive, extensive and autonomous, as shown in Table 1, which are tailored to their learning needs, starting from a placement test to know their language level.

Those students who want to attend the courses that the Language Centre offers are organised according to the linguistic level that the placement test revealed. The levels move from basic (equivalent to a Basic User A1 and A2) to intermediate (equivalent to an Independent

Table 1. How the English language education process is fixed

Training paths	Description
Intensive training	General-purpose and specific-purpose courses and other academic services offered at the university outside the teaching process plan
Extensive training	English Curriculum Strategy, in the degree courses, as part of the academic, work-research and student extension training
Autonomous training	Academic services provided by the university and other available forms for independent study

Table 2. Approaches of the English language education process

Approaches	Description
Humanistic	Centred on the national and universal values of identity and culture for the student's comprehensive education
Procedural communication	Modelling contexts and communicative situations based on real-life and professional problems to be faced
Problem-solving	It focuses on critical thinking development and is based on the relationship between language and professional problems and its impact on them, as well as on the functions and tasks of the professional through theoretical and practical knowledge management in English

User B1 and B2) and advanced (equivalent to a Proficient User C1 and C2). The minimum level established as a graduation requirement in Cuban higher education is A2 (basic) and B1 (intermediate), as stated in the CEFRL (2018).

Another aspect that teachers participating in the study agreed with was the approaches to the English language training process established by the MES (2019), illustrated in Table 2. The humanistic approach focuses on the significance of studying a foreign language for students' comprehensive education as it happens in everyday life. Procedural communication allows learning the language based on real situations that allow generating ideas, organising them, setting objectives, contextualising them, and reviewing them constantly to make systematic improvements. The problem-solving approach determines whether the teaching-learning process is effective or not to make appropriate changes.

The process of English language education management shows qualities that identify and characterise it, such as flexibility, innovation, and diversification, as shown in Table 3. The integration of these three qualities has allowed the students to decide the path to better fit their

language education needs to get higher and better results in acquiring language skills. Gutiérrez (2020) coincides with the description of each quality that MES (2019) suggests in the policy framework because it has led the teachers and students to understand better the English language education process to its continuous improvement and "*it has reduced the existing gaps between the need to change students' attitude towards language learning and the actual results they show today*".

The roles of those involved in the management of the English language education process are defined by Gutiérrez (2019) and the MES (2019) with their respective function. Gutiérrez (2020) states that "*a function is to perform a certain activity to get certain outcomes. It incorporates all the resources and capabilities required for the proper performance of that activity*". Table 4 presents the roles in the English language education process management and their functions that have brought relevant results in the process of language education management.

This study examines the characteristics of the management process at the Language Centre of Pinar del Río University to build a

Table 3. Qualities of the English language education process

Qualities	Description
Flexible	The English language education management depends on the student's needs, when and how they need to learn it. They can decide to enrol in courses at different times at their institution or outside, according to their motivations and interests.
Innovative	The English language education management can be adjusted in objectives, content, methods and forms of assessments, and in time funds based on the results of diagnostic and placement tests. It must be creative and based on the research and action-research results in the specific context.
Diversify	The English language education management courses are taught in terms of periods, modalities and levels based on the student's learning experiences and language training needs.

Table 4. Roles in the management of the English language training process

Involved	Functions
Language Centre	Plans, organise, implements and controls curricular and extracurricular activities so that students have options for their comprehensive education. Manages human, material and computer resources, among others, to ensure students' English language training. Methodological advisor to the degree course in implementing the policy for improving English language training. Calls for placement and certification exams. Offers English language level courses and other specialised academic services.
University teaching staff	Systematically guides students and teachers on the policy for improving English language training and their responsibility. It demands an interdisciplinary approach to vocational language training from disciplines and subjects. Manages the Language Curricular Strategy from the teaching, research and extension process that provides comprehensive professional training. Systematically communicates to the Language Centre the pathway students select to manage language training.
Students	Diagnoses English language training needs through standardised placement tests. Enrol in the courses offered by the Language Centre according to the level of English identified. Self-manages English language training through the centre's specialised academic services or other non-formal learning environments. Request access to assessment and certification from the Language Centre when they are ready. Obtains graduation requirement certification through the proficiency examination.

positive organisational culture and progress in the student´s English language education. It also seeks solutions to generate changes in the students´ and teachers´ behaviour towards learning a foreign language to get better results and finally gets the graduation requirement. Findings revealed some essential elements of the management, such as organisational culture, values, beliefs, the mission, among others, that constitute critical factors for success in English teaching at the university and the effectiveness of the process. The research results confirmed that language teaching needs constant study for continuous improvement. One of the best ways is through the managerial process and its phases of planning, organisation, implementation and control.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study aimed to explore the process management of the Language Centre at Pinar del Río University and its impact on students' English language education. The research found that theoretical foundations support process

management in language centres. Integrating qualities, approaches, learning paths, and well-defined roles for teaching staff and students contribute to building a positive organisational culture and achieving progress in English language education. The study's results propose recommendations for other language centres in the country, such as diagnosing learning needs and enhancing teamwork, communication, and commitment to achieving better results in the management process.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of effective process management in language centres to ensure students' comprehensive training and the university's social relevance. This research has contributed to the existing literature on process management in language centres in higher education institutions in Cuba. It provides practical implications for improving language education in other language centres nationwide. Further research can explore the transferability of these recommendations to other educational contexts and their effectiveness in improving language education outcomes.

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