

## **Continuing professional development of English teachers in higher education in Cuba: the case of the University of Holguín**

### **La formación profesional continua de profesores de inglés en la educación superior en Cuba: el caso de la Universidad de Holguín**

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#### **Abstract**

The country's development prospects demand a professional capable of mastering the English language as a top priority. However, the study and learning of English is still a goal to be achieved in the comprehensive training of Cuban higher education professionals. Hence, important transformations have taken place on the part of the Ministry of Higher Education to reverse this fact. One of them is to assume a competency-based teaching approach in accordance with the postulates of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR), which promotes the integral formation of the student learning a foreign language. In order to comply with this directive, it is necessary for the teaching staff to be updated in order to achieve the desired goal. In these circumstances, the continuing professional development of English teachers is subject to changes that must correspond to the new conceptions. This article presents the characterization of the continuing professional development of English teachers at the University of Holguín. Different research methods were used in the process of writing the article, such as: surveys, interviews, observation, among others. This article contributes to the objectives of the 2030 agenda of the United Nations Organization for sustainable development, insofar as the results described contribute to ensure a quality technical, professional and higher education of English teachers at different levels of education, including university education.

**Key words:** continuing professional education, English language training.

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## Resumen

Las perspectivas del desarrollo del país demandan un profesional capaz de dominar el idioma inglés como una prioridad de primer orden. Sin embargo, el estudio y aprendizaje de este es todavía una meta por alcanzar en la formación integral de los profesionales de la educación superior cubana. De ahí que han ocurrido transformaciones importantes por parte del Ministerio de Educación Superior para revertir este hecho. Una de ellas es asumir un enfoque de enseñanza basado en competencias de acuerdo con los postulados del Marco Común Europeo para las lenguas (MCER) que promueve la formación integral del estudiante que aprende una lengua extranjera. Con el fin cumplir con esta directiva, es necesario que el claustro se actualice para alcanzar la meta deseada. En estas circunstancias, la formación profesional continua de los profesores de inglés está sujeta a cambios que se deben corresponder con las nuevas concepciones. Este artículo presenta la caracterización de la formación profesional continua de los profesores de inglés en la Universidad de Holguín. Se utilizaron diferentes métodos de investigación en el proceso de redacción del artículo, tales como: encuestas, entrevistas, observación. Este artículo tributa a los objetivos de la agenda 2030 de la Organización de Naciones Unidas para el desarrollo sostenible, en tanto los resultados descritos contribuyen a asegurar una formación técnica, profesional y superior de calidad del profesor de inglés en los diferentes niveles de educación, incluida la enseñanza universitaria.

**Palabras clave:** formación profesional continua, enseñanza de idioma inglés.

## Introduction

Communication in foreign languages is developing and expanding with the advancement of new technologies. Due to this, the teaching of English in Cuba is becoming more important every day. In order to achieve a better quality in the learning of foreign languages, Cuban higher education declares the need to implement core transformations in the development of the teaching-learning process of the English language, which requires an improvement in the preparation of the faculty.

On this basis, the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) prioritizes the study of the English language from two directions: as an instrument for training, self-improvement and academic-professional updating, and as a means of communication between professionals. This communicative-professional interaction highlights the need to enhance the communicative skills to be developed in the teaching-learning process of the English language, for the comprehensive training of contemporary professionals.

As of 2015, and in order to overcome the difficulties in the teaching-learning of English in the previous study plans and improve the quality of the process, the Ministry of Higher Education assumes a competency-based approach according to the postulates of the European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) that promotes the integral formation of the student who learns a foreign language. This approach leads to the need

to prepare the faculty to meet the desired goal. One of the most effective ways to achieve this purpose is the continuing professional training of practicing teachers.

Practicing teachers -although with extensive experience in the classroom-, in most cases present limitations in up-to-date knowledge on the most current trends in language teaching and its evaluation. There is a lack of understanding of what the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and other international standards can offer to bring English teaching and assessment to more standardized levels. Therefore, it is required that teachers develop professional competences for a better implementation of the new policy of teaching English at Cuban universities.

These reasons lead the Ministry of Higher Education to work on a new strategy focused on more extensive teacher training for the implementation and adaptation of the CEFR to the current Cuban context. For this, it has offered training courses in coordination with the British Consulate and the United States Embassy. In addition, it has facilitated access to online courses on English language teaching methodology for the betterment of language professionals. However, these improvement actions are still insufficient, do not guarantee effectiveness in continuing professional training.

### **Materials and methods**

For the development of this paper, 30 teachers from the three different departments of the University of Holguín were taken as the sample. The different research methods applied helped at achieving the main facts of the study. Among which are:

- The analysis and critique of sources that, applying the processes of induction-deduction, analysis-synthesis and logical-historical, allowed us to assess the contribution of the different sources to the investigation.
- The systemic-structural-functional one that favored the analysis of the research object for a better study of it.
- The hermeneutic for the understanding of the continuing professional training of teachers and its organizational system.

In addition, an analysis of normative documents was carried out, of the professional models of the graduates of the careers of Foreign Languages (English) and of English Language with a second foreign language, as well as the observations to classes, the revision of plans of classes, surveys and interviews with professors and directors of the departments, together with the author's experience as an English teacher for more than 15 years in Higher Education.

### **Results and discussion**

The application of the different research methods reveals insufficiencies in the self-assessment of practicing teachers. The most significant in this direction are:

- Insufficient preparation of the English teacher in the main aspects of the CEFR that limits the quality of the teaching learning process of this language.

- Limited identification of the continuous professional development needs and the most suitable ways to improve the professional competences

The above mention shows that there are still difficulties related to the preparation of English language professionals that limit the quality of the teaching-learning process of this foreign language and do not favor an adequate acquisition by the student of the target language.

The theoretical study carried out reveals that there are several authors in Cuba who regard continuous professional development in their research works. Barbón, Añorga y Granda (2014); Chelan (2015) refer to the continuing professional development of administrative personnel based on previous teaching conditions. Pérez, Pérez y González (2016); Valiente, Góngora, Torres and Otero (2013) address continuous professional development in the process of universalization of higher education that was carried out in that period. Daquinta Rico (2022) deals with the importance of developing programs on English language as a mean to improve teachers' professional development. Besides, Cruz (2003), Pino (2003) and Medina (2004) study the continuous professional development of the English teacher, separating it into the four main skills of the language; while Padrón and Mijares (2017) focus on the continuing professional development of the English teacher for a specific specialty. Páez Pérez (2005) conceives a pedagogical model of self-development by competences for Teachers of Foreign Languages. This last research becomes a key reference point in this study.

In the international arena, authors such as Guskey (1999), Imbernón (1989), Ferry (1991) work on continuous professional development as a necessity for all practicing teachers. Others such as Cárdenas, González and Álvarez (2010) refer to the professional development of English teachers seen through the Colombian English Framework Project and fundamentally to the certification of English teachers. Díaz-Maggioli (2017) and Farrell (2012), agree on the need to develop professionally due to the changes that occur in educational policies, to respond to what students are requiring and they must be constantly developing to offer quality teaching to their students.

For Fandiño- Parra (2017), professional development is a process of self-consciousness that allow teachers to transform in theoretical and analytical actors able to understand how and why they develop their teaching and are willing to communicate the findings and conclusions on his own benefit and for the community of teachers.

He also quoted that professional development is a process of self- discovery, updating and fulfillment in which teachers are considered active connoisseurs, responsible for the exposition of their point of view about the nature of their professional lives as critical agents able to act on the knowledge to transform their practice (Fandiño-Parra, 2017).

The best experiences in continuing professional training for English teachers are centered in Europe, where a group of investigations carried out by the Council of Europe have been developed. European Commission. Education and Training (2013),

Richardson and Díaz Maggioli (2017), Mmantsetsa, et al. (2018), Cambridge English Teaching (2018). All these publications - although framed only in the European context - refer to foreign language teachers and provide frameworks of references and paths of continuous professional development.

One of the essential ways for teacher training to face the challenges facing education in the new millennium is the continuous improvement of their practice when planning, executing and evaluating educational strategies in the teaching-learning process. With the development of continuous professional development, it is intended that teachers become agents of change, develop skills with which they enrich their strategies to solve problems and improve teaching practice.

Imbernón (1989), defines formation, linked to professional development, as: "...a continuous process that begins with the choice of a specific discipline (initial training in a trade or profession) and whose mastery (knowledge, skills, competencies) is gradually perfected (continuous or permanent training)" (p.389)

Although focused on the training of university professors, Sánchez (2001) points out that "...it must be considered as a continuous process, in evolution, systematically programmed, whose first link be an initial training, directed both to subjects who are being trained for teaching (...) and to practicing teachers" (p.43). Hence the need to pay attention to the continuing professional development of university professors to guarantee a quality teaching-learning process.

Research on continuing professional development by Guskey (1999); Guerriero (2017); Griffin, Francis and Robinson (2017) assert that the mere presentation, dissemination of guides or short and infrequent courses have little impact on the pedagogical practice. According to Mmantsetsa, et al. (2017), continuing professional training programs should focus on achieving an impact on learning outcomes.

Griffin (2014), referring to continuing professional development, considers that one of the most valuable resources that teachers need on their way to improve their pedagogy and competency-based teaching is a culture of professional learning that facilitates constant access to the participation of colleagues in collaborative teaching opportunities. In this sense, Levy (1999); Páez, Toledo and Márquez (2016); Montejo, Alberteris and Rodríguez (2020); Alonso Betancourt, Cruz Cabezas and Aguilar Hernández (2022) emphasize the need to develop competency-based models for university teachers in the way to improve their professional competencies.

In the case of Cuba, there is a postgraduate Higher Education system that combines the functioning of the factors that intervene in its development and is considered the highest level of the Higher Education system, whose purpose is to promote the permanent education of university graduates. In postgraduate education, training and development processes concur, not only teaching-learning, but also research and innovation, articulated in a teaching-educational proposal relevant to this level.

However, the continuing professional development of teaching staff in Cuban universities has had its ups and downs. The analysis of the characteristics of this process in terms of the main method used, manifests itself from the centralization to the decentralization of the actions, without sufficient precision for its concretion from the theoretical and methodological point of view in the territories.

The conception of the actions and programs of continuous professional training were characterized by being isolated, decontextualized, without a systemic character and far from individual and collective needs with intentions of integration not materialized in practice.

The process of planning and developing the continuous professional development of each teacher starts from the evaluation of their annual professional performance that shows their potential and needs. Based on the professional needs and the transformations that are generated in the teachings, the continuous professional development of each teacher is organized in different modalities, giving greater priority to self-improvement in the workplace (Hechavarria Creach, 2021).

In Cuba, English teachers have access to the same continuing professional training pathways and to carry out the same functions as the rest of the faculty at any of the teaching levels.

Specialists in the field of continuing professional training for English teachers, as well as the teachers themselves, have sought different ways to ensure their continuous development. One of them is to organize themselves in associations or another type of institution with the aim of promoting exchange and improvement among its members. Among the associations, one of the best known is the APC-ELI which brings together teachers of English as a foreign language and promotes self-improvement, scientific exchange, the publication of the best experiences and the production of teaching materials, among other functions.

Being a member of one of these organizations guarantees certain possibilities of improvement since, in some way, one has access to updated bibliography, exchanges with other professors and participation in workshops, specialized conferences, and other scientific events, which represent a way effective continuing professional development for teachers of English.

Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Higher Education in promoting continuous professional development activities in conjunction with various international organizations based in Cuba such as the British Council and the ETS (English Testing System), these actions have not yet achieved the necessary effectiveness to develop the professional competences of the English teacher.

In the course of the investigation, a characterization of the state of continuous professional training of English teachers was carried out. This analysis included principals, teachers and normative documents and was carried out on the basis of these indicators:

- Diagnosis of the state of competences
- Identification of continuing professional development needs
- Continuous professional development pathways

The instrument applied was a survey aimed at diagnosing the state of professional competences and continuous professional development of teachers at the three different departments of English at the University of Holguín. The results showed that there is no unanimity of criteria as there is a great variety as to what the professional competences of the English teacher are. When analyzing how they diagnose the state of professional competences, they refer to the quality of teaching and the academic achievements of students, although they include participation in postgraduate courses and events. They do not express themselves on the importance of self-evaluation by teachers. The identification of the continuing professional development needs are the result of the class controls and the interviews when discussing the evaluation of the period. Only two administrative faculty consider self-assessment and personal request as an identifier of continuing professional development needs. Considering the ways of continuous professional development, these are expressed in the professional improvement plan of the departments.

To summarize, the methodological and professional improvement plans of the departments do not conceive the continuous professional development of teachers in the form of a system and the treatment given to the CEFR requirements is insufficient. Therefore, they do not know the peculiarities of the English Teaching Competence Framework derived from the CEFR.

The diagnosis made allowed us to declare the following regularities:

- There is no defined criterion for the identification of the professional competences of the English teacher.
- Self-assessment is not considered as a way to measure the level of development of professional skills.
- The identification of continuing professional development needs is centered on the criteria of administrative faculty and the needs of the group. They are the result of class controls and interviews when discussing the evaluation of the period.
- Few teachers consider self-improvement as a way to improve their professional competences.
- The peculiarities of the CEFR-derived English Teaching Competence Framework are unknown.

## Conclusions

Continuing professional development constitutes a set of training processes that enable university graduates to acquire, expand and continuously improve the basic and specialized knowledge and skills required for a better performance of their responsibilities and functions, as well as for their cultural integral development, which allows to increase the effectiveness and quality of their work. Its objective is to guarantee the permanent training and systematic updating of university graduates, the improvement of the performance of their professional and academic activities, as well as the enrichment of their cultural heritage.

The regularities presented made it possible to specify the inconsistencies that must be resolved in the conception of continuous professional development plans of English teachers that are manifested in the non-incorporation of the assumptions of the English Teaching Competence Framework derived from the CEFR.

The characterization carried out allowed us to determine that there are insufficiencies in the conception of continuous professional development process that do not contribute to the development of professional competences of the English teacher.

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