



# The Emergence of Globalization and English Language Education in Cuba

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## Abstract

*The economy of Cuba is rapidly evolving with direct implications for English language acquisition. As 2017 approaches, Cuba is no longer an isolated island with inaccessible boundaries. Its citizens are making valuable contributions to developing nations in health care, business and intercultural communications. Cuba's economy got a jolt in 2014 when U.S. Cuban ties were restored and the U.S. Embassy in Havana reopened [1]. The emergence of globalization brings valuable transformation to all aspects of Cuban life including opportunities to teach and learn English. Investment in human capital with a well-educated workforce is a valuable asset. A reasonable English language fluent population will be needed to respond to increased tourism, trade and development activities involving English speaking travelers, merchants and investors.*

*This research utilizes a multipronged approach to address the significant impact of English language acquisition in Cuba focusing on by whom, to whom, and for whom. Education is rapidly evolving and mastery of English has the potential to stimulate Cuba's economic direction and reshape Cuban life with opportunities to bridge divides and engage in significant and sustainable development.*

*Keywords: English acquisition, globalization, economics, entrepreneurship*

## 1. Introduction

English language learning continues to be at the forefront of energizing economic trends in Cuba and permeates the discourse of academic discussions. There is a multiplicity of opportunities as English learners in Cuba tackle emerging complex and diverse needs of this evolving, rapidly developing nation. The literacy rate is an impressive 99.8% according to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* [2], and it is ripe for incorporating English language learning that will strengthen entrepreneurship and inspire a thriving transcultural workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the research conducted, contemporary language education in Cuba is explored as it applies to the rapidly evolving economic and intercultural communications, widening the circle of opportunity for Cubans. Exploring the implications of this research is particularly relevant to my experiences as an educator emphasizing diversity and multicultural education. The opportunity to visit Cuba and participate in educational activities, interview Cuban educators and students, and share findings with colleagues will allow us to cross geographical and cultural frontiers.

Interviews were conducted on site in the Cuban cities of Havana, Cienfuegos, Trinidad, and Remedios to gain knowledge regarding the Cuban education system and opportunities to learn English. Cuba's focus on improving commerce, migration and international diplomacy has resulted in the need to restructure the role of English in Cuba's national curriculum. By delving into the questions of: By whom? To whom? and For whom? relating to English language instruction, the picture becomes clearer regarding the opportunities and direction for English language learning in Cuba for the future.

## 2. By whom?

It is interesting to note that the teaching of English in Cuban classrooms at the elementary school level is a relatively new concept. While English at the secondary level is more common, it is certainly not offered throughout the country. According to the Cuban Director of Secondary Education, Zoe de la Red Iturria, "We are rolling out new techniques to evolve our learning of the English language" [3]. She asserts that, "As an international language, English has always had a place in our curriculum." [4]. Because English has not been widely taught in Cuba, the number of public educators prepared to teach English is limited.

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Since the U.S. Embassy opened in Havana in 2014, the primary objective of the Public Affairs Office at the embassy is to provide services and products for English language teachers. International schools, many of whom follow a British curriculum, also exist in Cuba and employ well qualified educators who offer a cross cultural curriculum with content area courses in English. This includes a highly respected International Baccalaureate program and diploma. In addition to English educational opportunities, there is also a French school in Havana offering coursework in a variety of subject areas which are taught in French.

Private English tutors are increasing and Cubans are converting the bedrooms in their houses to classrooms [5]. However, there is little oversight regarding the qualifications of these private tutors or their actual command of the English language. Additionally, private language schools have opened and often charge high prices that are not affordable for most Cubans. It has been noted that high prices do not guarantee good quality and, after a short period of time, some students become discouraged or lack funding and drop out [6].

The most intriguing aspect of the “By whom?” question focuses on the informal or “back door” English language learning avenues and formats. Music lyrics are at the top of the list. Cubans joke that the American tourists who are able to visit Cuba (and must qualify for a visa under specific guidelines) are most interested in taking photos of vintage American cars, drinking mojitos, and singing the song “Guantanamera”. Yet it is the American and British music and lyrics that are utilized as tools for English language learning. In addition to music and song lyrics for language learning, tourism provides tremendous economic benefits for Cuba and Cuban citizens are capitalizing on the opportunity to interact in English whenever possible. For those who live in Havana and the larger cities, English is widely spoken by visitors to Cuba and locals can converse and acquire English through an informal system literally spreading the word to each other as they add words and phrases through interaction. During a visit to the neighborhoods of Old Havana and Trinidad, young Cuban children delighted in conversing with basic English phrases and counting in English. Their parents encouraged them and demonstrated pride and approval in their accomplishments [7]. Throughout Cuba, people were friendly and enthusiastic about communicating in English or Spanish. They were interested in learning about the lives of visitors and the purpose for making a trip to Cuba.

### **3. To whom?**

On a formal level, English is available for expatriates who are temporarily or permanently residing in Cuba and enroll their children in private schools. Private school educations are also available for Cuban citizens who have the resources to pay the tuition, but for the most part, are too expensive for the average citizen. Language schools and private tutor clientele is limited to a very slim sector of society due to the high cost. In the private sector, employees of mixed Cuban international export companies are provided with English language instruction. For example, electronic engineers are expected to be able to read instruction manuals and academic journals. There is certainly considerable emphasis on learning English and an increasing number of Cubans are doing so. If not, they are trying to make sure that their children are becoming fluent in English [8].

English courses have not been readily available at the elementary and secondary levels in the public schools. It is my understanding that this is changing and secondary students will be expected to pass English proficiency exams to graduate. At Havana University, English is offered and students who are interested in pursuing careers in the rapidly growing tourism industry are required to pass rigorous coursework and exams to demonstrate English language proficiency [9].

As mentioned above, numerous Cubans are attempting to teach themselves English without enrolling in formal classes. Examples of language learning activities include computer games, music videos, and songs. The internet is still extremely limited in Cuba. It is necessary to purchase an access card and locate a specific internet area such as a hotel lobby where it may or may not work, very slowly at best. The internet is unfortunately not a widely accessible tool for English language learning activities and lessons at this juncture.

### **4. For whom?**

Cuba allocates 13 percent of its budget for education and takes pride in the educational accomplishments of its citizens and vision for education. There are 47 universities with an enrollment of 400,00. Many of these universities offer English courses. The times are changing and, according to an interview in *the*



*Havana Times*, "It's ironic, really. In the 70s and 80s, listening to a Beatles song or any music in English was enough to lose your job. Now you can lose your job for not speaking English. It is considered by both state and private businesses as a necessary skill" [10]

The priority and importance of learning English is definitely increasing in significance. Recent reports indicate that the Cuban government is making proficiency in English a requirement for all secondary and university students [11]. This was not observed throughout Cuba and further studies are appropriate and recommended. The key question is that if secondary school educators in Cuba did not receive English instructions in the past, then how are there sufficient qualified educators with proficiency in English to be able to serve all of the secondary students in Cuba? At the same time, resources are limited for English language students. Cuba Libre located in Havana is one of the few, if not the only, English language bookstore in Cuba.

## 5. Conclusion

Cuba has been praised for its outstanding education system and cited by the World Bank as the best education system in Latin America [12]. It is also recognized for success in health, tourism, and business. It is clearly evident that English language learning is the wave of the future and increasing numbers of Cuban citizens will become fluent in English as Cuba opens its doors to the rest of the world. In order to demonstrate an outstanding commitment to this endeavor and meet the needs of the Cuban people, it is crucial to prepare qualified educators to teach English in Cuba. The relationship between economic success including business and tourism coupled with English language acquisition continues to be at the forefront of discussions focusing on the evolving Cuba. Rapid changes are evident and English language learning is a pivotal factor in Cuba's globalization and transformation.

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