

Characterization of sociocultural competence in the discipline Comprehensive Practice of English Language

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ABSTRACT

The sociocultural competence is one of the requirements of the professional model of the Foreign Language Career. The objective of this article is to characterize this competence in the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language at the University of Las Tunas. For this purpose, research methods were used, among which the historical-logical and analysis-synthesis methods stand out. In the work, the need to articulate the contents of the communicative and pedagogical-professional dimensions to favor the integrating character of the initial training process is foreseen. It also gave the opportunity to establish possible ways to achieve the referred integration.

Keywords: Socio-cultural competence; Professional model; Foreign Languages; Integral Practical Discipline of English Language.

Introduction

Sociocultural competence, the subject of this research, is one of the requirements of the professional model of the Foreign Language Career (English as a Second Language),

for the achievement of communicative competence, as a goal of language teaching in Cuba and the world; an issue that denotes its social importance.

The objective of this article is to characterize the sociocultural competence with a professional character in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language of the Foreign Languages Career (English as a Second Language) at the University of Las Tunas. For this purpose, different research methods were used, among which the historical-logical and analysis-synthesis methods stand out. This study took into account a diversity of theoretical criteria from the research carried out by Hymes (2001), who refers to core aspects of this category, among which are customs, behavioral norms that contribute to the development of communicative competence in a foreign language. In this study, the evolution of the theoretical postulates of sociocultural competence as part of communicative competence was observed. However, the limitation of this study is that it does not address sociocultural competence with a professional approach.

Authors such as Velázquez, Nieves and Parra (2018), Tejeda (2021), Arteaga (2021) conducted studies in which in one way or another they favored the development of sociocultural competence. In the first two cases they worked on communicative competence to reinforce the quality in communication and autonomy of students in the career being studied. In the case of Arteaga (2021) he refers to cultural studies as philosophical foundations from the work of Martí.

De la Paz (2010) and De la Paz (2012) contributes to science a model of sociocultural competence in which he offers a definition of it by limiting it to a psychological configuration that has to do with customs, cultural habits, religious, etc. He states that his model has a pedagogical-professional character, but it is limited to enunciating the development of responsibility as a professional value in the career.

Gómez, Borrero and Velázquez (2019) and Ferrales, Tejeda and Arteaga (2021) are authors who have addressed the sociocultural theme in the career under study. The first work is aimed at the search for the foundations of this competence and the second one conducts a research that in a certain way contributes to the sociocultural training for this career but focusing only on the use of art as a teaching medium and content in the discipline Integral Practice of English Language.

On the other hand, there are studies related to foreign language learning for didactic purposes such as Pérez (2008) and Borrero (2018) who seek a balance between the

language and professional dimensions, but did not objectively refer to sociocultural competence.

It is summarized from this first approach to the theory related to the topic, that the values of these works lie in the recognition of the importance of sociocultural competence for which research is conducted that mostly have a practical character. In the case of the last mentioned authors, they manage to establish theoretical links between language and the profession, without paying special attention to the sociocultural aspects as the essence of the proposed models.

The study of the theoretical background of sociocultural competence leads to the conclusion that there is a limited treatment of the contents of sociocultural competence with a professional character from the Integral Practical Discipline of the English Language. As a result of the analysis carried out, an insufficient development of the sociocultural competence of foreign language students (English as a Second Language) in the discipline being studied was determined as a problem, which limits their professional performance.

Development

In the Foreign Languages (English as a Second Language) career, the teaching-learning process of the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language is developed as part of the initial training of these students. In this sense, the present research emphasizes the sociocultural competence with a professional character, an issue that is in accordance with the requirements of the Plan of Study E of this career. The historical study presented here will make it possible to understand the evolution of this process.

Hymes (2001, p. 1) posits that sociocultural competence is "the ability to understand norms of behavior from the point of view of members of a culture, and to act in ways that can be understood by those members and in which those norms are expected to be understood."

From the didactic point of view, the definition of didactic competence of Rivadeneira (2017, p.12) is assumed, who recognizes it as "...the skills that the teacher uses to develop the class (...) that is, the study of learning processes, it is the way of transferring the contents to the students...".

In order to characterize the sociocultural competence with professional character in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Comprehensive Practice of English Language, indicators were established based on the sociocultural competence category of Hymes (2001) and didactic competence of Rivadeneira (2017). These indicators served as the basis for determining stages.

The characterization begins with the analysis of the first of the stages established for this study where curricula A and B are taken into account.

Instruments were applied to verify the behavior of these indicators from 1977, the year in which Study Plan A began for the reference career until 2021. The following is the result of this inquiry and of the theoretical study carried out so far.

With regard to the teaching of foreign languages, the massive preparation of Russian language teachers began at the "Máximo Gorki" Institute and from 1964 it was extended to English teachers, also including the "Enrique José Varona", "Frank País" and "Félix Varela" Pedagogical Institutes, respectively. The "Pablo Lafargue" Higher Pedagogical Institute was also created in 1977 for the preparation of teachers for secondary and higher secondary education in the country, according to the Ministry of Higher Education (MES, 2016).

The decision to initiate the periodization in 1977 was given in the fact that at this time a milestone was marked in the teaching-learning of the English language in the degree in education of the English specialty from the improvement that was indicated to organize this career from the regular day course and direct it to the preparation for the different educations.

With respect to the understanding of the norms of behavior of the communities of English-speaking countries in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language, in Study Plan A it had its manifestations in the identification of customs and celebrations, essentially from the United States of America and England.

These events were incorporated into the teaching activities developed in the Integral Practice of English Language classes without giving them the connotation of sociocultural competence as such. In this period, attention was given to skills with emphasis on linguistic aspects, according to the Ministry of Education (MINED, 2005).

Although in this period, worldwide, the introduction of the first precepts of communicative teaching began, which is why MES (2016) states that this plan was

characterized by the development of linguistic and communicative skills, in Cuba the learning of English was still traditional.

Something similar happened in Study Plan B. This plan could not solve the inadequacies pointed out to the previous plan. Therefore, the marked traditionalist character was maintained with little emphasis on sociocultural aspects in the teaching-learning process.

Derived from the analysis of the indicator referring to the activation of the norms of behavior of the communities of English-speaking countries in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language in the students, it can be established from the interviews with professors and graduates of the different study plans that there was correspondence between the first indicator of comprehension and this one of performance.

Therefore, in study plans A and B, the actions of the students, taking into account the behavioral norms of English-speaking countries, were practically null, and the teaching-learning process of the Integral Practice of the English Language did not favor this process.

Al considerar al indicador que tiene que ver con la relación de los aspectos didácticos en el desarrollo de la competencia sociocultural de los estudiantes como parte de sus habilidades para desarrollar la clase se pudo observar que desde 1977 con el plan de estudio A hasta principios de los 90 cuando concluye el plan de estudio B no se observaron evidencias teórico-prácticas de la presencia de estos contenidos.

Another of these reasons was marked by the fact that these curricula were not conceived from an integrative perspective of sociocultural aspects and of the profession. In the analysis carried out by MES (2016), this lack is corroborated from the professional with emphasis on didactics for the development of skills for the English class when the existence of limitations in the professional order is raised.

The second stage of the study focuses on curriculum C and its modifications. Starting from the analysis of the indicator understanding of the behavioral norms of the communities of English-speaking countries in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Comprehensive Practice of the English Language, it is pertinent to note that the curriculum C was founded for the first time on the conception of the communicative approach in which the communicative competence takes place, a linguistic-methodological precept marked in MES (2016). This fact constitutes the main milestone

that determines the beginning of this stage. Here, in this period, the contents of other subjects began to be consciously articulated.

Among these subjects is History of the Culture of English-Speaking Peoples, which constituted the reference, par excellence, of the sociocultural aspects for the direction of the teaching-learning process of the discipline Comprehensive Practice of the English Language.

In this sense, it was possible to confirm through the consultation of oral sources, teachers who worked with this study plan and graduates of the same that an understanding of the sociocultural aspects of the English-speaking countries was achieved, but with a limited organization in the process. Even so, this was a perceptible change from the previous stage.

Also, communicative competence was considered for the first time in the course, which now included sociocultural aspects at its core. Thus it was found that sociocultural competence was not intentionally treated in the discipline.

At this stage, the tuning fork was widened and other cultures were taken into account in addition to American and English. Also these sociocultural aspects of this competence were enriching other dimensions such as linguistics, sociolinguistics and communication in general. For the determination of these aspects, consultations to oral sources, Tejada (2016), and MINED (2005) were considered.

In curriculum C, a positive increase began to be observed in the activation of the behavioral norms of the communities of English-speaking countries through the teaching-learning process of this discipline in foreign language students. This was favored through the use of communicative situations that included these contents. Despite this there was no awareness of the intervention of sociocultural competence for the development of communicative competence.

At this stage, even though in the indicators understanding of the norms of English-speaking countries, expressed in the teaching-learning process of the Integral Practice of the English Language and the activation of the norms of behavior of English-speaking countries, an upward mobility was observed, this was not the case with the relationship of the didactic aspects in the development of sociocultural competence in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language.

If we start from the criterion expressed by MES (2016) and Tejada (2016) who refer to the introduction of the development of professional skills, the indicator related to the profession did not remain totally static with respect to the previous period. However,

such skills were not directly linked to sociocultural competence. These professional skills were considered for the first time as content of this discipline, Tejada (2016).

In the stage that included curricula D and E, the implementation of the communicative approach and its different current trends was enriched. In recent years, the Common European Framework of Reference was also introduced as an evaluation model. Another important aspect was the integrating character of these curricula from the communicative and professional point of view, which, together with the evolution of the communicative approach and the appearance of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, constitutes the milestone that marks the beginning of this stage.

This fact favored the development of sociocultural competence in the Integrated Practice of the English Language class in order to achieve effective communication, but these attempts were still not entirely effective. That is why difficulties persisted in the area of understanding the norms that express the culture of English-speaking countries and at the same time limitations were observed in linguistic aspects such as vocabulary. Since the implementation of curriculum D until 2021, a renewal process was observed, expressed by MES (2016). It was deepened, from a theoretical point of view, in the studies of communicative competence, which benefited sociocultural competence as one of the dimensions of communicative competence. This in turn benefited the understanding of the norms of English-speaking countries, expressed in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language with emphasis on sociocultural competence.

In tune with the above and considering the pedagogical experience of the authors of this article and the arguments of MES (2016), the information analyzed here was corroborated. In this sense, the fact that in Curriculum D aspects of the Culture of English-Speaking Peoples were included for the first time as part of the sociocultural competence from the general objectives of the program of the discipline is highlighted. However, it had as a limitation that it did not include them as contents of that discipline in an intentional way.

Syllabus E considered, for the first time, sociocultural competence as content of the discipline Comprehensive Practice of the English Language. However, no explicit relationship between the components of the target-content didactics was observed in this sense.

The consideration of sociocultural competence as content of the discipline Comprehensive Practice of the English Language constituted an important link for the students' understanding of the norms of behavior and customs of English-speaking countries in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Comprehensive Practice of the English Language. Even so, the progress achieved at this stage was not sufficient for the development of socio-cultural competence with a professional character.

With respect to the indicator activation of the norms of behavior of English-speaking countries by foreign language students in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Comprehensive Practice of the English Language also benefited. A directly proportional relationship was observed between the advances noted in the indicator understanding of the norms of English-speaking countries, expressed in the teaching-learning process of the Integral Practice of the English Language and in the development of the theory of the communicative approach. This relationship enhanced the treatment of sociocultural competence.

Foreign language students demonstrated a more active appropriation of these norms and customs, from the incorporation of elements of the culture of English-speaking peoples in the contents of the stage, an issue that was confirmed in MES (2016). At this stage, foreign language students showed a level of sociocultural competence that allowed them to perfect communicative competence.

In curricula D and E, professional skills were strengthened with emphasis on the direction of the teaching-learning process from the integrative approach that prevails in this period, an aspect directly related to the third indicator of this study. Consequently, the Integral Practice of the English Language discipline assumed the changes made in these plans.

However, for all the advances stated so far, there is no evidence on the treatment of sociocultural competence in the discipline Comprehensive Practice of the English Language with a didactic character, information obtained from MES (2016), consultation of oral sources and the pedagogical experience of the authors of this article.

Conclusions

In line with the analysis carried out, the following regularities by stages are synthesized as conclusions.

During the analysis of the first stage, it was determined that there is a limited understanding of the norms of English-speaking countries, expressed in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language. The above is in agreement with a reproductive expression of the behavioral norms of English-speaking countries, mainly those related to the United States and England, in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Comprehensive Practice of the English Language. Similarly, no documentary evidence and/or oral sources were found of the existence of an articulation between the didactic aspects of the teaching-learning process of the Integral Practice of the English Language and the emerging sociocultural competence.

As a result of the study of the second stage, a slightly ascending evolution of the comprehension of the norms of English-speaking countries was determined. This statement is evident from a reproductive-applicative expression of the behavioral norms of English-speaking countries in exercises characterized by the Communicative Approach of the time. However, there is a slight change with respect to the aspect of the profession that is expressed in the appearance of the treatment of professional skills although disarticulated from the sociocultural.

After the analysis of curricula D and E, the regularities of this stage were delimited as the upward evolution of the understanding of the norms of behavior of the communities of English-speaking countries in the teaching-learning process of the discipline Integral Practice of the English Language. In the same way, an applicative expression with shades of creativity of the behavioral norms of the English-speaking countries was appreciated in exercises characterized by the Communicative Approach and its different current tendencies. Likewise, an integrative characterization of the stage with limited evidence of sociocultural competence with a professional character was valued.