

Chapter 8

Bilingualism in Cuba: Social and Economic Impact of English Among Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the impact of English in a context where it is not a predominant language. For decades, the post-revolutionary Cuban government has recognized the importance of English in the economic advancement of the country. Although other world languages, especially Russian, have been promoted in Cuba, English has remained the most popular second language for the Cuban population. How Cuban teachers of English became interested in learning English and factors that contributed to their high level of proficiency in English is examined, and the social and economic impact of this language in their lives is investigated. Obstacles teachers face and their recommendations for ways to enhance English language development in Cuba are presented. Factors that keep them in the teaching profession or could force them to leave are also revealed.

INTRODUCTION

Socio-political ideologies and national educational agendas are directly impacted by the immense power of global English (Ushioda, 2017). Globalization has forced many countries in the Global South to train their workforces to respond to the demands of businesses that use English to communicate. Many countries emphasize English language teaching to equip their citizens with the language skills necessary to understand and respond to the language's growing presence and importance in the global economy. By doing so, countries can ensure that their workforces are better able to communicate in English and can gain access to better employment opportunities in the global marketplace. Delgado Hellester (2013) reports that Mexican workers who are proficient in English earn 28% more than their monolingual co-workers. Guo and Sun (2014) present similar findings from China where college graduates with English proficiency have higher starting salaries and enjoy higher future earning potential. The growing pressures for English language learning calls for many more teachers around the world. Hence, many countries

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have mandated the teaching of English in their schools and universities (Crystal, 2003). In spite of much efforts to improve English language learning in many countries in Latin America, schooling systems are not fully capable of developing sufficient number of qualified teachers of English (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, 2014; Ministerio de Educación Ecuador, 2016).

Realizing that monolingualism is not a viable stance in a diverse and highly competitive global market, many nations have prioritized the development of multilingualism by creating opportunities for their workforces to learn different languages, in particular, English. Some countries emphasize the development of English language proficiency through investing a great amount of resources including inviting native speakers of English to fill the gap (e.g. China, Japan, South Korea). This response may seem feasible as a short-term solution, but is not pedagogically sound and not realistic for long-term language planning. Furthermore, it is not economically viable for many countries. In contrast, some countries have relied upon their own educational system to develop a teaching force that can respond to the growing demand of English language instruction (e.g., Cuba). Since Cuba has enjoyed much success in educating its population, including teachers of English, it is valuable to explore factors that have led to such accomplishment.

Cuba has experienced much success in providing quality education to its population since the 1959 revolution, including the development of bilingualism among school-aged children and university students (UNESCO, 2008). Many factors are associated with individuals' motivations to learn English as a second language and become bilingual. Among these factors are utility, social capital, economic advancement, and job security (Ushioda, 2017). These pragmatic reasons for learning English significantly impact one's reason to enhance their overall proficiency in this language. Furthermore, individuals who are motivated to learn, and eventually teach, a second language must have opportunities to acquire mastery in different domains of that language, including grammatical and pragmatics. Their perseverance plays an important role in becoming highly fluent bilinguals.

Although the literature on the teaching of English as a world language is extensive, the voices of bilingual teachers from the Global South are often missing. Investigations in the field of teaching world languages are not complete by solely looking at the reasons individuals decide to become bilingual. It is important to learn why they become teachers and to better appreciate the social and economic impact of this language on their lives. We must also learn about the obstacles they confront when teaching English as a world language.

Bilingual teachers are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between cultures and foster global understanding. They are able to provide students with a deeper understanding of the world and its many cultures, while also helping to develop their language skills. This can help to foster a sense of identity and belonging in students, as well as a greater appreciation for diversity. Bilingual teachers can also help to motivate students to learn and explore new cultures, as well as to develop their own sense of identity and global citizenship.

This chapter considers the impact of English in the context of Cuba where it is not a dominant language. I examine how a group of Cuban teachers of English became interested in learning English, factors that contributed to their high level of proficiency in English, and the social and economic impact of this language in their lives. I present the obstacles teachers face and their recommendations for ways to enhance English language development in Cuba. Factors that keep them in the teaching profession or could force them to leave are also presented. Learning about the preparation of teachers of English in Cuba, their motivation to teach this language, and pressures that negatively impact their teaching effectiveness can provide insightful lessons to bilingual teachers and teacher educators around the world.

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