

Teacher Self-Reports of Assessment Practices
and Top-down Coordination of Assessment
on English Language courses in Cuban Universities

Paul Anthony Marshall

松 山 大 学
言語文化研究 第40卷第2号 (抜刷)
2021年3月

Matsuyama University
Studies in Language and Literature
Vol. 40 No. 2 March 2021

Teacher Self-Reports of Assessment Practices and Top-down Coordination of Assessment on English Language courses in Cuban Universities

Paul Anthony Marshall

Abstract

This research report describes a small-scale qualitative online survey of 6 teachers from language programmes at a university in Cuba. It investigates classroom assessment practices, teacher autonomy and top-down coordination in these institutions. Although a very limited number of responses were received, results indicate that top-down coordination and teacher autonomy levels vary in terms of the choice of assessment criteria, tasks and grade distribution systems in Cuba. The medium levels of teacher autonomy identified may mean that the faculty has successfully managed to strike a balance between reliability, validity, consistency, continuity, practicality, teacher empowerment and job satisfaction.

Keywords : Teacher autonomy, assessment, self-reports, perceptions, Cuba, Havana, Habana, higher education, university, ESOL, reliability, validity.

Background

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean Sea at approximately 1,250 kms long and lies just 150 kms from the U. S. State of Florida (CIA Factbook, 2020). The population of just over 11 million citizens are around 60% Christian and have an eclectic mix of ethnic origins (ibid). The ethnic Amerindians who originally inhabited the islands were largely wiped out after European colonisation. White Europeans, mostly from Spain have made up a small part of the population since the

Spanish colonisation of Cuba by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Black Africans were brought to work in the sugar plantations as slaves and later as paid workers from the 16th to 20th centuries (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020a).

Cuba's history is one consisting of prolonged oppression by stronger and wealthier powers due to its value as a producer and exporter of sugar, coffee, and tobacco. While the nation officially gained independence from Spain after the Spanish-American war in 1902, it was not autonomous in reality due to the power and influence of the United States (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020b). For the next several decades, Cuba was ruled by a string of politicians who were corruptible and coercible by the U. S. This situation was brought to an abrupt halt by the revolution of 1959, during which Fidel and Raul Castro, and Che Guevara led a surprisingly small number of freedom fighters to victory against government forces; estimates range from three hundred to eight thousand, but the real number claimed by Fidel once he was in power is 3,000 (Macaulay, 1978).

According to some reports, Fidel and his band of revolutionaries did not have a pre-conceived Communist ideology, and one of the first steps taken when power was achieved was to reach out to the U. S. government. After being snubbed by the Eisenhower administration, Fidel was forced to turn to the Soviet Union and Communism to get the economy back on track (Safford, 1980). In any case, 1959 was the beginning of Cuba's rule by a Communist dictatorship which continues to the present day.

The intervening decades have been a struggle for normal Cubans, and many of them have fled the country over the years to seek a better standard of living. However, this is a robust country and a rich culture remains. Music is an essential part of daily life for all ages, and is one of Cuba's main cultural exports. Tourism is a key part of the economy, with large numbers of visitors from Canada, Latin America and Europe (Trading Economics, 2020). Currently, internet access is

widespread, limited private business is allowed, and Cuba appears to be in a period of cautious reform.

English Language Education in Cuba

After a period of growth in the popularity of English language education throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries (Martin, 2007), it has been said that ‘the English language has become a priority’ in the Cuban education system in recent years (Pardo, Calderón & Reyes, 2020 : 87). This has become all the more necessary due to the increase in internet access across the country to the majority of the population in 2015 ; it is now possible for Cubans to use the internet to do business abroad. While this positive attitude ought to be received welcomingly, the extent of the effectiveness of English language education in Cuba is not universally agreed upon. School students in Cuba now study English from the age of eight (Pardo, Calderón & Reyes, 2020 : 87), and the country is dependent on tourism for a growing proportion of the economy which of course makes the English language an increasingly valuable commodity.

Van Splunder and Pérez (2018) found that despite the fact that the government has adopted the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), those involved in higher education language learning contexts in Cuba are not familiar with it. In addition to this, the majority of English students overestimated their own language proficiency. However, the study also revealed that students and teachers perceive the English language in a positive light, and as valuable for their future professional success. This study perhaps exposes a disconnect between the policies implemented by the Cuban Ministry of Education and the actual practices and content of what is taking place in language classrooms across the nation. The ministry rolled out the Face2Face policy in 2018, which requires that all students,

including those not majoring in English, must achieve B1 level of proficiency on the CEFR in order to graduate. A B1 level of proficiency indicates that a student is an ‘independent user of English language’ (Fernández, Díaz & González (2019: 168). De la Cruz, Leó & Arévalo, (2020) suggest that while the recent introduction of the Face2Face syllabus at universities across the country is a welcome development with some very positive qualities, there are still ways that the quality of English language teaching in Cuban universities can be improved.

Literature Review

Top-Down Coordination and Teacher Autonomy

March (1991) perceives the autonomy and top-down coordination of staff as an essential epistemological decision in terms of organisational learning. He suggests that organisations, such as schools, universities and educational authorities, must decide between focusing their resources on either exploiting certainties or exploring new possibilities. Exploiting certainties is the safest choice and achieved most efficiently by top-down coordination. Exploring new possibilities is a riskier choice and requires delegating autonomy to employees. However, it can lead to experimentation and innovation which are desirable qualities in all fields and for all stakeholders as they lead to advancement and evolution. This is as true in the field of education as it is in others. Burgelman (2003) provides one example of the benefits of organisational management in a non-educational setting. A group at Intel that was allowed to work autonomously led to the development of the processor chip. At the time, the management’s resources were mainly allocated to a project unrelated to this invention which was of course a sea change for the future of the company. None of this would have taken place, if Intel had allowed only the exploitation of certainties. It was the exploration of new possibilities and allowing

employees to work autonomously that changed the world.

Teacher autonomy is an aspect of the more overarching concept of teacher empowerment (Klecker & Loadman, 1996 ; Short & Rinehart, 1992). During a nationwide organisational restructuring, Klecker & Loadman (1996) sought to identify the relationship between seven subdivisions of job satisfaction and six of teacher empowerment, one of which was teacher autonomy. Quantitative data was obtained from 10,544 classroom teachers using a 38-item Likert scale questionnaire. A connection was found that suggested higher levels of teacher empowerment encourages job satisfaction.

Maybe the strongest argument in the literature is that externally controlling what teachers do in the classroom denies them the professional esteem enjoyed by doctors and lawyers while allowing increased teacher autonomy signifies that teachers are respected as professionals (Ingersoll, 1994 ; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Moreover, autonomy has been identified as a ‘critical component’ (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006), the denial of which could cause an increase in the number of teachers quitting to seek alternative employment.

Language Assessment Systems and Policies

Lynch (2001 : 358) suggests that assessment has been used as a ‘synonym for testing, a synonym for evaluation, or has signalled a broader collection of measurement techniques’. Similarly, Shohamy (2001) was cited by McNamara & Shohamy (2008 : 89) as stating that ‘In most societies tests have been constructed as symbols of success, achievement and mobility, and reinforced by dominant social and educational institutions as major criteria of worth, quality and value’.

English language courses at universities sometimes use alternative assessment methods devised by individual teachers, assessment systems devised internally

within faculties and departments, and even external testing systems. Some form of quality control is required for any assessment system, in order to ensure qualities like reliability, validity, consistency and continuity. The simplest way to define *reliability* is ‘if the assessment were to be repeated, would the second result agree with the first?’ (Harlen, 2000 : 111). *Validity* is basically a measure of the extent to which a test measures what it is supposed to measure (Harlen, 2005 : 247), which can be strongly affected if, for instance, either direct or indirect testing methods are used. This study will consider *continuity* to be the maintenance of standards and method of testing between consecutive courses and *consistency* to be the maintenance of standards and method of testing between concurrent courses.

Attention to these qualities of assessment strongly affect the robustness of an assessment. In contexts where a unifying standard is required over assessments in several courses or classrooms, a certain amount of top-down coordination must be present in order to establish, maintain and monitor these factors of assessment. During the development of both government and institutional assessment policy, this ought to be an influential factor. Assessment systems which lack the essential qualities of assessment might lead to a lack of motivation among students and teachers and falling standards due to indirect testing methods, misalignment between assessment and curriculum, and negative washback.

Measuring Teacher Perceptions

Questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups are all possible methods for measuring perceptions. Google Forms (No date) has been used to measure university EFL teacher perceptions of assessment (Collins & Miller, 2018) and is a popular method of online questionnaire distribution in my current context for several reasons. Firstly, this research project necessitated the collection of data

from teachers at several universities in several geographical locations. Unlimited numbers of questionnaires may be distributed by Google Forms to multiple locations instantaneously by sending a link by email. The questionnaire designer may also choose from a multiple choice, comments boxes, Likert Scale responses and various other types of questions. It is an efficient method of both quantitative and qualitative data collection, which can then be easily collated, analysed, and interpreted.

Research Questions

How do teachers assess their students' English language productive skills on English Language courses at The University of Havana ?

To what extent is the assessment of English Language coordinated from the top-down at The University of Havana ?

Rationale

Initially, it was decided that the most pragmatic method of data collection would be internet-based due to the geographical dispersion of potential participants. The questionnaire, which was designed to be concise and convenient for respondents to complete, was designed and written using the Google Forms website. The questionnaire was one that I had used successfully in four previous research projects (Marshall, 2018a), (Marshall, 2018b), (Marshall, 2019), (Marshall, 2020), and it was therefore known that it would be reliable and insightful as an instrument for the current study.

The data collection was unfortunately troubled by logistical issues. After collecting an initial list of 24 email addresses of English teachers at Universidad de

la Habana, I sent out emails to them all as a group. The server in Cuba rejected the emails. Then I decided to send emails individually in case the group nature of the email had led the server to identify it as spam. Again, all of the emails were rejected. Next, I sent individual emails to all of the addresses with the Google Forms link removed in case that was causing them to be bounced back. This also had no effect. Finally, I contacted the Cuban Embassy in Tokyo for advice. This led to an extended conversation about my motivations and the purpose of my research, but Ramon Nuñez Riveron, the Counsellor of Education, Science and Technology, was extremely supportive and helpful. He contacted the university directly to check what the issue was, and provided me with a contact person there. I was then subsequently able to correspond with a representative who distributed my questionnaire to the teachers for me. Unfortunately, even after this success, I only received six completed questionnaires.

My contingency plan was to print questionnaires and distribute them in Cuba. However, both this, and my intention to conduct follow-up interviews with respondents were thwarted by the visa regulations. I was informed by the embassy that conducting any kind of research while travelling on a tourist visa might lead to my arrest by the authorities. There was not enough time to process an academic visa, which would have to have been applied for by the university in Cuba. As a result, the sample for this study is far more disappointing than I had hoped.

Participants and Data Collection

A preliminary quantitative survey was distributed to ESOL teachers at the University of Havana (Universidad de la Habana) in Cuba by email using a Google Forms link. The questions (see Appendix 1) probed aspects of assessment quality, such as procedures, criteria, measures taken to ensure validity, reliability, grading

systems, and how assessment grades are used.

The intended second phase of the research was to interview representatives of the outlying extremes regarding the answers to the questionnaires. For example, one ESOL teacher who answered that assessment quality in general is high would be interviewed, and one teacher who answered that assessment quality in general is low would be interviewed. The selection of individuals would be dependent solely on the results of the questionnaires, but as I have already stated, this stage of the research was not possible.

The survey was comprised of the following questions :

What is your current position ?
What kinds of tasks do you use to assess students' speaking ?
What kinds of tasks do you use to assess students' writing ?
Who decides what tasks are used to assess students ?
If specific criteria are used to assess students, who decides these ?
How are grades distributed in your classes ?

In order to collect rich and deep data from a small number of respondents, qualitative research methods were used. It was thought that the research questions could be better investigated in this manner. The data was then analysed using NVIVO software in order to compare and contrast responses and to identify any patterns which occur in the data.

Thematic chart analysis, such as is possible with NVIVO, is ideal for use with rich, qualitative data and can compare between participants (cases) and between questions (variables) (De Vaus, 2013), and identify patterns. Some researchers believe thematic chart data analysis should be categorised as a research method in its own right (Leininger, 1992 ; Thorne, 2000 ; King, 2004 ; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Regarding the first question about the respondents' current position, responses showed that three full-time teachers, one part-time teacher, one assistant professor and one trainer completed the survey.

Questions two and three were mostly related to the first research question, 'How do teachers assess their students' English language productive skills on English Language courses in Cuban universities?'

The second question, focused on speaking assessment methods, elicited a range of answers. Three of the respondents said that they use *group discussions*, four use *presentations*, three use *interviews*, one uses *reading dialogues*, and one uses *performances*.

The third question, about writing assessment methods, yielded some interesting responses. Five respondents said that they use *essays* to assess their students' writing. Three use *timed tests*, and one uses *audio of performances*.

Questions four, five, and six related to the second research question 'To what extent is the assessment of English Language coordinated from the top-down in Cuban universities?'

The fourth question asked respondents who decides assessment tasks in their universities. Two responses said that *a combination of the teacher and the faculty* decide. One said *teacher* only. One said *tutor and teacher*, one said *the main teacher of the subject*, and one said *the curricula or study plans that are approved in the university and are written by professors of the faculty*.

The fifth question, about whether specific assessment criteria are used and who decides these yielded the following responses. Five people said that *a combination of the teacher and the faculty* decide assessment criteria and one said *the main teacher of the subject*.

Finally, question six, which probed grade distribution systems, showed that four respondents *divide grades equally* (*equal number of As, Bs, Cs, etc.*). One said *from 2 to 5, this being the maximum*, and one said *they did not understand the question*.

Discussion & Conclusions

Some positive and some negative aspects of the English language assessment systems in Cuban universities can perhaps be inferred from the results of this data collection. This is partially based on the assumption that it may be possible to predict levels of top-down coordination and teacher autonomy due to the amount of agreement among participants' responses.

Some of the respondents in this study gave similar answers about assessment methods for spoken and written English, but some gave different ones. It is possible to deduce from this pattern in the results described above that there is not a total top-down coordination of English speaking or writing language assessment at a university-wide level. This may indicate that while the faculty could recommend their own internally coordinated assessment systems, some teachers still have the power to choose, and therefore students on different courses may be receiving different standards of English language education.

The responses about assessment criteria and grading suggest that most participants are working on courses that have coordinated systems. However, while it may be reassuring that criteria are used and that most teachers are grading in the same way, the divergent responses show that this is probably not coordinated at a university-wide level. The distribution of grades *Uniformly* (*equal numbers of As, Bs, Cs, etc.*) is also concerning because it means that teachers are assessing their students in a norm-referenced manner, in comparison with each other, and not to

any universal external standard. It is not possible for outsiders to judge the quality of a university's education without external accreditation or unchanging external standards such as those possible with the use of criterion-referenced tests such as IELTS.

The implications of these results are that assessment in this Cuban university may be low in either reliability, validity, consistency and continuity. It is likely that reliability, consistency, and continuity are low, but validity is high if a teacher is assessing students using direct testing measures, for instance, assessing their writing by giving them an essay-writing task. This is because although the test is directly testing what it purports to test, another teacher would probably judge the same essay to be of a different standard, and maybe use separate criteria.

Although teacher autonomy has numerous benefits that have been highlighted by research, excessive autonomy indicates a low level of top-down coordination. It would be advisable for a university that wishes to increase the standard of English language education in their institution, to coordinate assessment systems. This means that standards of teaching and learning can be monitored and maintained.

I want to make it absolutely clear that any criticism included in this paper is firstly theoretical and based on a very small sample of questionnaire responses, and secondly it is meant as a critique of assessment management systems and not an attack on educators of any kind.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Further similar studies with higher numbers of respondents which also go on to secure interviews with the outliers from the first set of questionnaire data collection ought to produce some interesting and rich data which would provide more insights into assessment practices and levels of teacher autonomy and top-down coordination.

This author has managed to replicate the same study in several different contexts, but lack of willingness to participate among sufficient numbers of respondents has hampered efforts to provide robust findings.

In addition to this, it would be ideal to replicate this study in other contexts, but I would firstly recommend that someone attempts to better execute the current study in the current context. The logistical issues I encountered mean that the robustness of the data collected is extremely limited. I would relish the opportunity to be invited to return to a university in Cuba with an academic visa in order to distribute paper-based questionnaires and conduct follow-up interviews. I feel that there is much more to be discovered about language education and assessment systems in this fascinating country.

This project was funded by the 2019 Matsuyama University special research fund.

References

- Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- CIA Factbook (2020). Retrieved from : <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cu.html> [Accessed December 6th, 2020]
- De la Cruz, T. M., Leó, A. V. D., & Arévalo, M. N. (2020). Motivation and Creativity for the Implementation of A New English Language Strategy. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 22 (3).
- De Vaus, D., & de Vaus, D. (2013). *Surveys in social research*. Routledge.
- Encyclopedia Britannica (2020a). Retrieved from : <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cuba> [Accessed December 6th, 2020].
- Encyclopedia Britannica (2020b). Retrieved from : <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cuban-Revolution/The-rise-of-Castro-and-the-outbreak-of-revolution> [Accessed December 6th, 2020].
- Fernández, I. G., Díaz, P. S. B., & González, A. A. (2019). Learning to learn English towards the development of speaking skills in Higher Education in Cuba. *Universidad y Sociedad*, 11 (2), 167-172.

- Harlen, W. (2000). *Teaching, learning and assessing science*. 5-12 (London, Paul Chapman).
- Harlen, W. (2005). Trusting teachers' judgement : research evidence of the reliability and validity of teachers' assessment used for summative purposes, *Research Papers in Education*, 20 : 3, 245-270.
- King, N. (2004). Using templates in the thematic analysis of text. In Cassell, C., Symon, G. (Eds.), *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research* (257-270). London, UK : Sage.
- Klecker, B. J., & Loadman, W. (1996). 'Exploring the relationship between teacher empowerment and teacher job satisfaction.' Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Association, Chicago, IL. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED400254).
- Leininger, M. (1992). Current issues, problems, and trends to advance qualitative paradigmatic research methods for the future. *Qualitative Health Research*, 2, 392-415.
- Macaulay, N. (1978). The Cuban Rebel Army : A Numerical Survey. *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 58 (2), 284-295.
- Marshall, P. A. (2018a). Teacher Autonomy and Assessment in Japanese University EFL Programs, *KOTESOL 2017 Conference Proceedings* (Korea Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), 109-118.
- Marshall, P. A. (2018b). Teacher Autonomy and Assessment in University ESOL Programmes in Japan and the U. K. (Presentation). *Poland International Congress of Educational Research, Krakow, Poland*.
- Marshall, P. A. (2019). Teacher Autonomy on English Communication courses in Japanese Universities. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 11 (2), 87-99.
- Marshall, P. A. (2020). Teacher Self-reports of Assessment Practices and Top-down Coordination on English Communication Courses in Georgian Universities, *Studies in Language and Culture*, 39 (1), 109-126.
- Martin, I. (2007). Some remarks on post-1990 English language teaching policy in Cuba. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41 (3), 551-557.
- Pardo, E. E., Calderón, M. E. F., & Reyes, Y. F. (2020). The importance of different typologies of exercises and indicators for assessing speaking in the English language students' linguistic formation in Cuba. (Original). Roca. *Revista científico-educacional de la provincia Granma*, 16, 86-97.
- Safford, J. J. (1980). The Nixon-Castro Meeting of 19 April 1959. *Diplomatic History*, 4 (4), 425-431.
- Shohamy, E. (2001). *The Power of Tests : A Critical Perspective on the Uses of Language Tests*. London : Pearson.
- Shohamy, E. (2003). 'Implications of Language Education Policies for Language Study in

- Schools and Universities'. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 87 (2), 278-286.
- Survey Monkey (No Date). Retrieved from : www.surveymonkey.com [Accessed December 6th, 2020]
- Thorne, S. (2000). Data analysis in qualitative research. *Evidence Based Nursing*, 3, 68-70.
- Trading Economics (2020). Retrieved from : <https://tradingeconomics.com/cuba/tourist-arrivals> [Accessed December 6th, 2020].
- Van Splunder, F., & Pérez, G. D. (2018). Attitudes towards English in Cuban Higher Education. Recent Developments and Challenges. In Fourth International Conference on Higher Education Advances.

Appendix 1:

Assessment Questionnaire and Responses (translated into English)

Questions	1. What is your current position?	2. What kinds of tasks do you use to assess students' speaking?	3. What kinds of tasks do you use to assess students' writing?	4. Who decides what tasks are used to assess students?	5. If specific criteria are used to assess students, who decides these?	6. How are grades distributed in your classes?
Respondent 1	Full-time teacher	Group discussions, presentations	Timed tests, essays	The curricula or study plans that are approved in the university and are written by professors of the faculty	A combination of teacher & faculty	Don't understand the question
Respondent 2	Trained	Performances	Audio of performances	Tutor & teacher	A combination of teacher & faculty	From 2 to 5, this being the maximum
Respondent 3	Assistant professor	Presentations	Essays	A combination of teacher & faculty	A combination of teacher & faculty	Uniformly (equal numbers of As, Bs, Cs, etc.)
Respondent 4	Full-time teacher	Interviews, group discussions, presentations	Essays	Teacher-main teacher of the subject	Teacher-main teacher of the subject	Uniformly (equal numbers of As, Bs, Cs, etc.)
Respondent 5	Part-time teacher	Interviews, reading dialogues, repetitions	Timed tests, essays	Teacher	A combination of teacher & faculty	Uniformly (equal numbers of As, Bs, Cs, etc.)
Respondent 6	Full-time teacher	Interviews, group discussions, presentations	Timed tests, essays	A combination of teacher & faculty	A combination of teacher & faculty	Uniformly (equal numbers of As, Bs, Cs, etc.)

Appendix 2:

Assessment Questionnaire and Responses (in original Spanish)

Questions	1. ¿Cuál es su posición actual?	2. ¿Qué tipo de tareas utiliza para evaluar el habla de los estudiantes?	3. ¿Qué tipo de tareas utiliza para evaluar la escritura de los estudiantes?	4. ¿Quién decide qué tareas se utilizan para evaluar a los estudiantes?	5. Si se utilizan criterios específicos para evaluar a los estudiantes, ¿quién decide estos?	6. ¿Cómo se distribuyen las calificaciones en sus clases?
Respondent 1	profesor a tiempo completo	discusiones grupales presentaciones	pruebas cronometradas ensayos	Los currículos o planes de estudio que se aprueban en la universidad y son redactados por profesores de la facultad	combinación de profesor y facultad	No comprendo la pregunta
Respondent 2	Adiestrado	Interpretaciones	Audios de interpretaciones	Tutor y profesor	combinación de profesor y facultad	De 2 a 5 siendo este el maximo
Respondent 3	profesor asistente	presentaciones	ensayos	combinación de profesor y facultad	combinación de profesor y facultad	uniformemente (números iguales de As, Bs, Cs, etc.)
Respondent 4	profesor a tiempo completo	entrevistas discusiones grupales presentaciones	ensayos	profesor-profesor principal de la asignatura	profesor-profesor principal de la asignatura	uniformemente (números iguales de As, Bs, Cs, etc.)
Respondent 5	Profesor a tiempo parcial	entrevistas, diálogos de lectura, Repeticiones	pruebas cronometradas ensayos	profesor	combinación de profesor y facultad	uniformemente (números iguales de As, Bs, Cs, etc.)
Respondent 6	profesor a tiempo completo	entrevistas discusiones grupales presentaciones	pruebas cronometradas ensayos	combinación de profesor y facultad	combinación de profesor y facultad	uniformemente (números iguales de As, Bs, Cs, etc.)