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# **ORBIS: A COMPETENCY-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR ENGLISH STUDIES AT UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL “MARTA ABREU” DE LAS VILLAS**

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# ABSTRACT

Orbis, which means “world” in Latin, is the name of the United Nations Model of Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas that seeks to engage university students in discussions about major issues on the international agenda. Every year, this university along with the Cuban Association of the United Nations, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the University Student Federation convene a new edition of Orbis with the purpose of raising a topic of high international complexity. Orbis in itself is a potential competency-based approach, which qualifies students to develop fluency, accuracy, specific vocabulary and confidence to express themselves within a professional context. Likewise, this event challenges students to make decisions, resolve conflicts and find creative solutions in simulated situations. This proposal seeks to empower Orbis so that it accounts as a professional education laboratory where English language students develop professional skills, like public address and management, and the lab where curricular courses come alive and help to sort out professional issues. Through a mixed-methods approach involving document analysis, faculty interviews, and student surveys, the study designs and validates a pedagogical model that systematically incorporates Orbis simulations into the academic program. The findings demonstrate that this integration not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also equips students with the professional readiness required for global careers in diplomacy, tourism, and international relations, thereby setting a benchmark for competency-based language education in Cuba.

**Keywords:** *Orbis, competency-based education, Model United Nations, professional skills, higher education, Cuba*

# RESUMEN

Orbis, que significa “mundo” en latín, es el nombre del Modelo de las Naciones Unidas de la Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas, que busca involucrar a estudiantes universitarios en debates sobre temas importantes de la agenda internacional. Cada año, esta universidad, junto con la Asociación Cubana de las Naciones Unidas, la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y la Federación Estudiantil Universitaria, convoca una nueva edición de Orbis con el propósito de abordar un tema de alta complejidad internacional. Orbis constituye, en sí mismo, un enfoque basado en competencias que capacita a los estudiantes para desarrollar fluidez, precisión, vocabulario específico y confianza para expresarse en un contexto profesional. Asimismo, este evento desafía a los estudiantes a tomar decisiones, resolver conflictos y encontrar soluciones creativas en situaciones simuladas. Esta propuesta busca potenciar Orbis para que funcione como un laboratorio de formación profesional donde los estudiantes de inglés desarrollen habilidades profesionales, como la oratoria y la gestión, y donde los cursos curriculares cobren vida y ayuden a resolver problemas profesionales. Mediante un enfoque de métodos mixtos que incluye análisis de documentos, entrevistas al profesorado y encuestas a estudiantes, el estudio diseña y valida un modelo pedagógico que incorpora sistemáticamente simulaciones Orbis en el programa académico. Los resultados demuestran que esta integración no solo mejora la competencia lingüística, sino que también capacita a los estudiantes para carreras internacionales en diplomacia, turismo y relaciones internacionales, estableciendo así un referente para la enseñanza de idiomas basada en competencias en Cuba.

**Palabras Clave:** *Orbis, enseñanza basada en competencias, Modelo de las Naciones Unidas, competencias profesionales, educación superior, Cuba.*

# INTRODUCTION

From reading Candia Osorio (2025) these authors learned about the challenge of higher education these days in preparing students to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected international environment. This globalized context requires not only the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but also the development of practical skills that enable future professionals to operate effectively in a multicultural and dynamic setting. In this sense, Model United Nations (MUN) programs emerge as an innovative pedagogical tool that goes beyond the transmission of theoretical knowledge by offering students an immersive experience in diplomacy and international relations.

Orbis, which means “world” in Latin, is the name of the MUN at Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas (UCLV). It seeks to engage university students into discussions about major issues on the international agenda. It is a students’ event in every aspect, organization, facilitation, management and participation. Students assume the role of delegates from UN nation members, representing their countries’ stances and interests. Additionally, it is logically supported by the students’ own alma mater, UCLV.

Cuban universities, like those in Pinar del Río, Havana, Isla de la Juventud, Matanzas, and Santiago de Cuba, as well as the Higher Institute of International Relations (ISRI), also hold similar models. However, Villa Clara’s model has the peculiarity of being the first to include a press team within its configuration.

Since its creation in 2011, Orbis has aided the professional growth of several generations of students. The massive number of participants in this type of event not only poses a challenge for the organizing committee, but also represents a source of pride for our university (Rodríguez, 2024). To this day, according to one of its founding members and promoter, “Orbis continues to be a space to raise our voices, to debate

national and international policies, to think and reflect on what is happening in the world” (Burgos, 2023).

Every year, UCLV alongside with the Cuban Association of the United Nations (ACNU), the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the University Student Federation (FEU) convene a new edition of Orbis with the purpose of raising a topic of high international complexity. Then, the topic is modelled through work in commissions, which include the General Assembly, the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council, and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC, which is conducted entirely in English).

The present Cuban English Language Degree Course with Second Foreign Language (ELDCSL) curriculum (Curriculum E) highlights that professional focus will predominantly center on the tourism sector, international events, or diplomatic affairs. Associated to this demand, recent studies, like that of Dilaram (2025) has indicated that, “in diplomacy, language becomes a bridge that connects countries with different histories, ideologies, and cultures. The effectiveness of diplomatic dialogue largely depends on the ability to use language precisely, respectfully, and strategically.”

From its beginning at UCLV, 25 participants come from ELDCSL every year. Based on the co-authoring students’ experience and self-observation, their fellow students face several challenges when preparing adequately. Above all, and driving this proposal, there is a gap where all the profiled professional competencies are not fully developed and practiced. There are not enough opportunities or conventions centers in the central region to practice business or diplomatic competencies, to name some.

According to Anuyahong and Songakul (2024), Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) has garnered substantial attention in the field of language education due to its integrative approach, which seeks to simultaneously develop language

proficiency and subject matter knowledge. Also adding that it “emerged in response to the limitations of traditional language teaching methods that often focus on decontextualized language practice” (Anuyahong and Songakul, 2024).

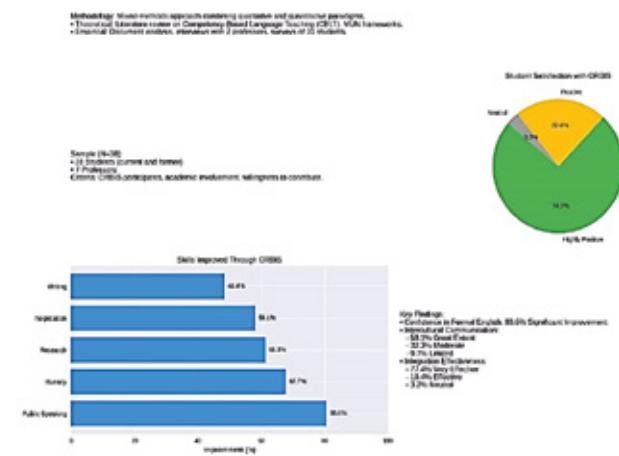
With the purpose of looking at Orbis from an academic perspective and attempting to benefit the UCLV English Studies in successfully training their future professionals, these authors reviewed some previous papers published on the matter. One of them (Toni, 2017) approached the MUNs as a pedagogical contribution for Argentinian university students majoring in History. A second study, from Santiago de Cuba Universidad de Ciencias Médicas (Dorado & Fontanals, 2024), studied the singularity of these models to the overall training of their professionals.

To UCLV English Studies, Orbis presents as a potential competency-based approach, which has been defined as a system of instruction, assessment, grading and reporting on learning, based on the learners' demonstration of both the knowledge and skills they are expected to acquire (Niehoff, 2020).

Connecting the potential in Orbis to the referred curriculum, not only enhances linguistic proficiency, but also trains students with the professional readiness required for global careers in diplomacy, tourism, and international relations, thereby setting a benchmark for competency-based language education in Cuba. This would be the main purpose driving this paper.

# DEVELOPMENT

The study was conducted at UCLV within ELDCSL. The sample selection followed an intentional criterion to ensure relevance to the research objectives, focusing on participants with direct experience in Orbis.



In synthesizing these findings, it becomes evident that Orbis addresses critical curricular gaps by fostering competencies aligned with global standards. To maximize its impact, a hybrid pedagogical model is recommended. For example, embedding ECOSOC-style debates into language courses could simultaneously reinforce linguistic precision and diplomatic communication. Concurrently, preparatory workshops on formal vocabulary and document drafting would bolster written skills, addressing the current imbalance.

## Orbis as a Model United Nations

Let us start by stating what Toni (2017) pointed out about MUNs, that they are to be considered highly significant simulation games in terms of pedagogy, becoming this way both an educational and cultural event at the highest level, thus promoting the academic growth and training of all

participants, generating the development of skills such as public speaking, rhetoric, negotiation, peaceful conflict resolution, document drafting, consensus building, crisis management agreements, and cooperation, which are very useful for the personal and professional lives of those who have participated.

According to Barroso (2025), the methodology of these models originated at Harvard University in 1953, involving high school and university students. Now, they are held in more than 90 countries and in all languages. It was also applied in Cuba and in 1996, with the collaboration of Cuernavaca campus, and Norma Flores, the professor in charge of the model at that institution then, the Havana United Nations Model (HAVMUN) was founded. Closely linked with the Cuban Higher Institute of International Relations (ISRI), HAVMUN became then, a yearly event, solidifying its structure with support from the Cuban Association of the United Nations (ACNU) and the University Student Federation (FEU).

Starting in 2005, HAVMUN invited Cuban university students to participate. They planted the seed that would eventually lead to the creation of new models all over the nation. Today, there are around 6 Cuban MUNs: AGORA MUN, HAVMUN, ONUPINAR, PUENTES, ONUCARIBE, and Orbis. These models keep convening every year ever since. Thousands of students have participated, and many are already professionals. When interviewed, they acknowledged the positive impact, the preparation and skills acquired through these models had on their present professional performances in foreign affairs and related spheres.

In the opinion of the authors, one of the main advantages of MUNs is that they allow students to develop skills like public speaking, research, negotiation, and teamwork. They also provide opportunities to familiarize with the dynamics and functioning of the UN, as well as to delve into topics of global interest. These simulations also serve as a platform to express opinions and viewpoints on issues of international

relevance, contributing to their development as critically engaged global citizens.

All through the MUNs, students take on roles as country representatives or political actors, collaborate and negotiate with other delegates to reach agreements or resolve conflicts. This strengthens their ability to lead, make decisions, and work effectively in a multicultural environment. These events promote civic awareness and social commitment by addressing issues relevant to global society. As students gain a deeper understanding of world challenges and the importance of finding effective solutions, they feel inspired to be agents of change and seek ways to contribute to the well-being of their communities and the world in general. Moreover, MUN events offer the possibility to establish connections and build professional networks with students from other international universities, opening doors to further growth opportunities such as internships, scholarships, or academic and cultural exchange programs (Dorado & Fontanals, 2024).

Before moving any further, it is necessary to list the objectives of the Cuban MUNs, as defined by its rules of procedure and organizational aspects, for a better understanding of its stated potential as a framework to the English Language Studies at UCLV:

- a) To promote the study, primarily among young university students, of the United Nations system and International Law, as well as the principle of respect for the independence and sovereign equality of all states, through the MUN.
- b) To create spaces for discussion and analysis on the most impactful international topics.
- c) To reflect the work of the UN organs and commissions, and the political negotiation dynamics established within each of them.
- d) To re-evaluate the functioning logic of the United Nations for the 21st century and its need for change.

e) To uphold and defend the reality and political stance of our country on the most pressing issues of the current international dynamics. To promote the study and assimilation among young university students of the values and attitudes that should characterize international diplomacy, particularly revolutionary Cuban diplomacy.

According to ACNU, the structure of the models is very simple. They consist of an organizing committee made up of students, making them protagonists in all aspects. Both the Cuban FEU and the Youth Commission of ACNU work together in organizing the events. The Youth Commission always advises and supports the organizing committees. The selection of topics for debate goes through a process that begins with the proposal made by the Organizing Committee and is reviewed by ACNU, whose criteria and contributions are taken into account to reach the final decision. Likewise, an ACNU official always participates in the models, advising on the debates and evaluating the results of the event.

As stated in the delegate manual within the rules of procedure and organizational aspects, the main bodies of the United Nations are the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the UN Secretariat. All established under the UN Charter when the Organization was founded in 1945.

## Orbis within the English Language Studies at UCLV

Based on the authors' considerations, as Orbis participants themselves, UCLV provides its students with unique opportunities for growth and development. As a matter of fact, ECOSOC, operating primarily in English as its official language, offers a valuable platform to acquire and refine essential skills and competencies to their academic and professional

development. Essentially, this experience complements their theoretical and practical training by providing a simulated environment for international negotiation and diplomacy.

Turning to the specifics, the authors consider that, the students' participation in ECOSOC activities significantly enhances their English language proficiency. Beyond that, engaging in debates and negotiations in English provides students with practical experience in articulating ideas clearly, persuasively, and confidently.

The authors ponder the way delivering speeches in English helps students build confidence and proficiency in public speaking, a skill that is essential for both academic and professional success. For instance, students learn to structure arguments logically, deliver presentations effectively, and handle questions from the audience with poise.

Furthermore, it has equally been observed how translation and interpretation skills are also honed through ECOSOC. Although English is the official language, the potential use of other languages requires translation into English. Consequently, they develop a valuable skill set applicable in various international contexts.

In terms of analytical abilities, ECOSOC contributes to the development of critical reading and comprehension skills. Engaging with complex texts, resolutions, and reports enhances their ability to analyze, interpret, and synthesize information in the target language. That is to say, students learn to think critically about the information they encounter and to form well-reasoned opinions.

Equally important to the English Language students' development is the writing skills: drafting resolutions, positioning papers, and other formal documents refines their academic and professional writing skills. Clarity, coherence, and adherence to formal conventions are all emphasized. Thus, students learn to communicate their ideas

effectively in written form, a crucial skill in diplomatic settings.

Importantly, ECOSOC participation promotes intercultural competence. By interacting with delegates from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, students develop the ability to communicate effectively and respectfully. They learn to navigate cultural differences, adapt their communication style, and build rapport with individuals from various backgrounds.

Finally, the immersive nature of ECOSOC, helps students build confidence in language use. Indeed, this is perhaps one of the most valuable outcomes of ECOSOC participation, which encourages students to use their English skills in high-pressure and professional environments.

## Competency-based learning

Rooted in the principle that language learning is most effective when grounded in context and intertwined with the acquisition of subject matter knowledge, CBLT has evolved from immersion programs into various instructional models.

CBLT emerged in response to the limitations of traditional language teaching methods that often focus on decontextualized language practice. It draws on theories of language acquisition that emphasize the importance of meaningful communication and contextualized learning. Two primary educational theories underpin CBLT: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

Just recently, Anuyahong and Songakul (2024) published that CBLT also aligns with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which highlights the role of social interaction and the use of language as a cognitive tool in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Their research indicates that CBLT can significantly enhance various aspects of language proficiency in TEFL contexts.

## Implementing a

## competency-based model

The cornerstone of course design within this framework lies in a rigorous initial assessment of the real-world tasks learners will be expected to execute in their specific contexts. The linguistic demands associated with these professional duties are then scrutinized, and the competencies requisite for proficient task completion are identified. These competencies then form the precise bedrock upon which the curriculum is constructed.

Rather than focusing on abstract grammatical concepts or general vocabulary, the CBLT approach directs the focus towards functional language and practical application. This means training learners to handle the specific challenges they will encounter in real-life situations, boosting their confidence and ability to function within their chosen fields.

In this particular case, it means much more than a simple academic exercise. It appears before the English Studies as a tool that implements what was just described as a competency-based Orbis approach for English language learning. Orbis in itself, stands as a comprehensive competency-based model, which qualifies students to develop fluency, accuracy, specific vocabulary and confidence to express themselves within a professional context. Therefore, it needs to be observed and used as the powerful instrument it means, to enhance the UCLV English Studies.

## The proposal

The integration of Orbis as a competency-based framework into the UCLV English Degree, needs a structured approach that aligns theoretical instruction with experiential learning. Drawing from the principles of CBLT and the pedagogical strengths of MUN simulations, the proposal emphasizes four core features designed to bridge curricular gaps and enhance professional readiness. Below, there is an elaboration of these features, supported by practical teaching suggestions tailored to

the UCLV context.

### 1. Competency-driven simulations in ECOSOC

Central to the proposal is the strategic use of Orbis ECOSOC simulations as a platform for immersive language practice. These simulations, conducted entirely in English, replicate real-world diplomatic scenarios, requiring students to draft resolutions, negotiate multilateral agreements, and deliver persuasive speeches. For instance, during a session on sustainable development goals, students might assume roles as delegates from diverse nations, debating policy solutions while adhering to formal diplomatic protocols. This approach operationalizes CBLT principles by prioritizing observable behaviors—such as crisis management, consensus-building, and intercultural communication—over rote memorization.

To enhance both linguistic proficiency and professional competencies, two interconnected teaching strategies are proposed. Firstly, task-based role-playing can be implemented by assigning students country-specific roles in ECOSOC debates. This requires them to research geopolitical contexts, draft position papers, and articulate policies in English—a methodology that aligns with Richards' (2005) advocacy for contextualizing language use within real-world professional scenarios. Following this, structured peer feedback sessions should be integrated post-simulations to refine negotiation strategies and linguistic precision. For instance, students could evaluate peers' adherence to formal register or the clarity of their arguments during debates. Moreover, this interactive process fosters collaborative learning, enabling students to identify strengths and areas for improvement. By combining immersive role-playing with reflective peer evaluations, the framework ensures that theoretical knowledge is dynamically applied, critiqued, and refined, thereby bridging the gap between classroom instruction and real-world diplomatic demands.

### 2. Emphasis on professional writing and public speaking

The focus of Orbis on drafting resolutions and delivering speeches directly addresses a key gap identified in student surveys: the need to strengthen formal writing and public speaking skills. By requiring students to produce UN-style documents—such as policy briefs or press releases—the framework reinforces clarity, coherence, and adherence to diplomatic conventions. To operationalize this, workshops on diplomatic writing can be introduced, emphasizing argument structure, formal lexicon (e.g., “whereas,” “hereby”), and citation of international legal frameworks, supported by templates and exemplars from past Orbis events. Furthermore, mock press conferences can simulate high-pressure media interactions, where students defend their delegation's stance in English, fostering improvisation and confidence.

### 3. Resource development and faculty training

To address logistical challenges such as time constraints and resource limitations, the proposal prioritizes capacity-building initiatives, including the creation of a digital repository featuring case studies, procedural manuals, and recorded debates from past Orbis editions to standardize preparation. Additionally, faculty training workshops would equip instructors with strategies to align simulations with CBLT outcomes. For practical implementation, open-access digital toolkits—such as video tutorials on parliamentary procedure or glossaries of diplomatic terms—can support self-paced learning, while faculty-student co-creation ensures cultural relevance and academic rigor. For instance, collaborative design of simulation scenarios could focus on Cuba's role in multilateral organizations, integrating national diplomatic values into debates. By combining institutional resource development with participatory design, the framework fosters sustainability and contextualized learning, empowering both educators and students to navigate global challenges effectively.

By synthesizing the experiential strengths of Orbis with those of CBLT methodologies, this proposal redefines language education at UCLV as a dynamic interplay of theory and practice. The outlined features—simulations, modular integration, skill-specific training, and resource development—collectively address the program's identified gaps while fostering globally competent professionals. As Toni (2017) emphasizes, such frameworks transform students from passive learners into proactive agents of change, equipping them to navigate the complexities of international engagement with linguistic precision and strategic acumen. Through sustained collaboration between faculty, students, and institutional stakeholders, Orbis can evolve from an extracurricular activity into a cornerstone of UCLV's English Studies program, setting a benchmark for competency-based language education in Cuba.

The proposal was validated by five (5) specialists—experienced professors from the English Language Department at UCLV with expertise in curriculum design and competency-based education—and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with all aspects of the proposal receiving high ratings (average scores of 4.5–4.9/5). Specifically, the specialists unanimously rated the proposal's correspondence with student needs (4.8/5) and social relevance (4.9/5) as exceptional, noting its direct alignment with the program's goal to develop globally competitive graduates for diplomacy, tourism, and international relations. Moreover, the applicability of tasks (4.6/5) and methodology (4.7/5) were praised for their practicality, particularly the integration of ECOSOC simulations as capstone projects in core courses like Advanced Speaking and Intercultural Communication. Additionally, the proposal's potential to motivate English learning (4.8/5) and raise awareness of professional competencies (4.8/5) was highlighted as transformative, since it shifts focus from theoretical knowledge to real-world application. While flexibility (4.5/5) and originality (4.6/5) were also commended,

specialists suggested minor enhancements, such as expanding the digital repository to include more Latin American case studies and formalizing faculty training workshops to ensure seamless implementation. Overall, the specialists endorsed the framework as “innovative and urgently needed” to bridge curricular gaps, emphasizing that its structured yet adaptable design positions Orbis as a benchmark for competency-based language education in Cuba.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the integration of Orbis, the Model United Nations (MUN) initiative at Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas (UCLV), as a competency-based framework for the English Language Degree Course with a Second Foreign Language. The study was driven by the need to bridge the gap between theoretical instruction and real-world professional demands, particularly in fields such as diplomacy, tourism, and international relations—core employment sectors for graduates identified in Curriculum E.

The diagnostic phase revealed significant gaps in the current curriculum. While Curriculum E emphasizes linguistic proficiency, translation, and intercultural mediation, it lacks structured opportunities for students to apply these skills in authentic, high-stakes scenarios. For instance, competencies such as diplomatic negotiation, crisis management, and persuasive communication—essential for global professional environments—are underrepresented in coursework and assessments. This misalignment was further corroborated by faculty interviews, where professors unanimously acknowledged that traditional methods fall short in preparing students for dynamic, multicultural workplaces. Consequently, Orbis emerges not merely as an extracurricular activity but as a vital complementary framework that addresses these curricular deficiencies.

In conclusion, this research confirms that

Orbis is far more than a simulation exercise; it is a dynamic, competency-based framework that transforms theoretical knowledge into professional readiness. By fostering skills in public speaking, critical thinking, and cross-cultural collaboration, Orbis equips students to navigate the complexities of globalized workplaces while upholding the values of Cuban diplomacy. Future steps should focus on institutional partnerships, faculty training workshops, and longitudinal studies to measure the long-term impact of this integration. As the data illustrates, Orbis is not just an academic tool—it is a rehearsal for global leadership.

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