

**Foreign Language Education in Portuguese
Higher Education Institutions: The State of
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Abstract | Over the last 15 to 20 years, changes in foreign language teaching policies in Portuguese higher education institutions (HEIs) have been subject to little discussion and less inter-institutional dialogue. Each institution has absorbed different European directives, and more specifically adapted its context in response to the Bologna Process, according to its own interpretation leading to widespread ‘distortion’ across foreign language teaching curricula. While demand for foreign language courses remains high in Portuguese HEIs there has been little formal research and scarce funding available for projects related to introducing innovative practices and materials. This paper provides a critical reading of the current state of play in this crucial sphere of higher education in Portugal.

Key words | Foreign language teaching, Portugal, higher education, recommendations

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1. Introduction

Since the turn of the century, Portugal has witnessed various institutional and curricular restructuring processes which have introduced profound changes into the Higher Education system; there is what amounts to a new legal framework for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) based on Decree-Law N° 62/2007 of 10 September and with regard to which degrees and diplomas are on offer in HEIs (Decree-Law N° 74/2006)¹ and the introduction of accreditation of professional qualifications (by INAFOP – The National Institute for Accreditation of Teacher Education) and the legislative review of teacher training degrees (Decree-Law N° 43/2007, which was replaced on May 14th, 2014 with Decree-Law N° 79/2014). In addition, there are now regular institutional and curriculum assessments (by CNAVES – The National Council for Higher Education Assessment) as well as by The Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (known locally as: A3ES), created by Decree-Law no. 369/2007 of 5th November, with the purpose of promoting and ensuring the quality of higher education. The assessment and accreditation regime to be developed by the Agency is defined in Decree-Law no. 38/2007 of 16th August.

These national reforms all have to be contemplated within the broad context of the whole Bologna Process which created a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and a framework of qualifications adopted in 2005 which defines learning outcomes and describes three cycles within HEIs making use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). A web-based survey of European HEIs revealed, however, that there is great latitude in the definition of what the student workload should be in relation to each ECTS; furthermore, this is true specifically for the ECTS attributed to English language teaching (ELT) in Portuguese HEIs. The whole process of adaptation to Bologna guidelines was conducted under intense political and time pressure which resulted in a good deal of ‘copy-paste’ from the old to the new (Trigo). In fact, uniformity in the application of the Bologna Process in Portuguese HEIs was always unlikely to be achieved given that some of the people charged with bringing it to fruition

actually held negative or sceptical attitudes towards it. It should also be acknowledged that this Bologna Process has also had its more 'philosophical' critics who point out that it has introduced a predominantly economic set of values into HEIs with its focus on cost-cutting and 'competitiveness' (Lorenz) or even as a threat to intellectual independence and creativity through its insistence on 'harmonization' or 'standardisation' (see Tomusk; or Hejj). Specifically, with respect to foreign language courses in HEIs, the creation by the Council of Europe (1989-1996) of a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has had profound consequences in defining curricula that co-exist with a change to a two semester format and the less widespread use of 'major' and 'minor' distinctions within courses. Ultimately, The Bologna Process represents an ongoing opportunity to revive and renew, "it is a new paradigm, culture and conception of teaching and learning, student and teacher, where competences and learning outcomes, allied to ECTS play an important role in all the modifications" (Baptista et al. n. pag.).

2. The Portuguese Higher Education Context

All these reforms have taken place in little more than a decade and all have influenced the curricula of foreign language based courses that are offered in Portuguese HEIs under the broad banner of 'Humanities'. Local students who graduated before 2001, when they return today to their university to undertake some kind of professional development course (*formação contínua*) or to take a post-graduate course find a totally different world. Portuguese HEIs now operate within European and global networks of interest and have opened their doors to literally thousands of mobility students from other countries as well as visiting scholars/staff and administrative personnel. For example, in 2015/2016, the Faculty of Letters, University of Porto (FLUP) received some 586 students resulting from international mobility 'in' schemes (almost 20% of total student population of this faculty) and the provision for the whole of the University of Porto envisages a total of 4,200 students. A further example worthy of mention, and not

without a controversial aspect to it, would be the use of the English language as the medium of instruction (EMI) for various subjects, on various courses at several HEIs within Portugal; here we can cite, for example, the case of the Lisbon School of Economics & Management (part of Lisbon University) where an entire first cycle/undergraduate course in Economics is delivered through the medium of English. As such, these changes have led to a 'quiet revolution', which has not been widely researched or reported on, in mentalities, practices, routines and even in the academic posture of those who are asked to carry out these reforms: HEI teaching staff.

3. The Common European Framework of Reference and Local Research

Today, we are certainly very different foreign language (FL) teachers than we were before 2001. FL teachers now have to take into account a much more broadly-based definition/philosophy of 'language teaching': issues related to the construction of identity, interpersonal structures and our relationship with 'The Other' (see Bizarro). In addition, teachers have had to take on ever-increasing responsibilities with regard to the definition and description of course content, teaching methodology and assessment procedures: every subject (curricular unit) should be defined and described online (in both Portuguese and English) and these 'files' then become the subject of periodic external reviews (through the A3ES procedures mentioned above). FL courses have undergone deeper changes compared to other courses because they were not only subject to accreditation changes and the compression of content and objectives, but were also forced to take on board a new model of curriculum development and description after 2001: the already referred to Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR). While appearing somewhat belatedly in the history of language teaching in the twentieth and twenty-first century, the CEFR aims to give credibility and clarity to the teaching of very particular foreign language competences and skills, even though its implementation has been achieved in a very disparate and somewhat disorganized way.

To date there has been little in-depth research conducted into or reporting on the 'state of play' in the organization and delivery of FL courses in Portuguese HEIs². Alongside the changes in law mentioned above, Portuguese HEIs have been granted increasing autonomy over the same time period. However, while such autonomy undoubtedly serves to increase administrative and pedagogical responsibility at the local-regional level, it also correlates to a lack of curricula consistency from institution to institution. Different European and national initiatives have been adjusted according to local institutional interpretations, sometimes to the extent of losing sight of the original directive. There remains a certain degree of confusion among Portuguese HEIs over how curricula should be constructed (design principles) and what kind of information needs to be included (content principles). There is not really any organised debate about FL education policy or any official body which takes responsibility for promoting discussion in Portugal (Pinto). This despite the fact there has been widespread theorising of these issues in the appropriate literature, to cite just one example: Biggs, J. and Tang, K. (2011) *Teaching for Quality Education*, a publication of fundamental importance, now in its fourth edition, dealing with exactly these issues in the context of HEIs.

Currently, the Portuguese Minister of Education is conducting a major review of the national curriculum for all subjects in Basic and Secondary Education. This includes the building of a core curriculum for all disciplines. Oddly enough, we did not have one until now and the general trend was always writing a long (and not rarely, too long) curriculum that was and is almost impossible to teach in a single academic year. This unique opportunity for all institutions where foreign languages are offered has not been understood by all policy makers and educators as perhaps the only chance we will have to build a stable and effective national curriculum for the first 12 years of education. If we manage to do so, if the core curricula to be designed for all foreign languages follow the standards made explicit in the CEFR, HEIs will have to readjust once more their curricula as well. If we also take into consideration the fact that the Portuguese government has recently introduced English as a compulsory subject in the

national curriculum for Primary Education (Years 3 and 4), Portuguese HEIs have here a great challenge for the next two decades since they will receive students with better skills in English and no longer will have to expect that all students admitted to do a first degree in English, for example, will start with a B2 level. A decade from now, all HEI courses with English as a major will have to start with C1 level; this proposed change will impact on FL delivery in terms of curriculum design and content and have a clear knock-on effect in the area of FL teacher education.

4. Portuguese Curricula and FL Teacher Education

The specificities of the Portuguese context of FL delivery in HEIs do indeed need to be given due consideration. For example, in the UK, HEIs have been experiencing a clear decline in demand for foreign language courses, which is not the case in Portugal or many other European countries. The UK government reacted by commissioning a special report: *The Worten Report* (2009) which sought to address the challenge faced by British HEIs in this respect. There are clear economic benefits to developing a competence in more than one language. The European norm nowadays is seen by many as: your mother tongue, plus English plus one further additional language. Europe itself is a multilingual space (more than 80% of primary school children in the EU were studying a foreign language in 2013, according to Eurostat) and Portugal has not been slow in recognising the need to expand FL instruction, for example, in the case of English to the first cycle of basic education in state schools (an action which will imply a complete overhaul of the FL curricula in the state school system). But economic interests should not override a recognition of the cultural, intellectual, societal and individual benefits that arise from greater understanding promoted through pluri-lingual education policies (Beacco & Byram). This perspective is also enshrined at the level of European policy by the European Commission and the Council of Europe through instruments such as The European Language Portfolio (launched in 2001) and at world level through multiple publications in support of intercultural education from UNESCO. Yet, despite all this

'background' very few HEIs in Europe actually explicitly state what their language policy is (Ritz). Some language policies can barely be described as 'partial', usually involving only additional use of English: employing top-down strategies (institutions encouraging their staff to become proficient enough to lecture in an FL, i.e. non-monolingual teachers) or bottom-up strategies making FL competence part of new job descriptions (Pinto).

The foreign languages constituted in the curricula of most Portuguese HEIs present little variation since the implementation of the Bologna process until now. English, French, German and Spanish usually dominate the choices made available to undergraduate students as 'core' curriculum choices. In most cases, these language options are framed within courses that follow the established model of *Languages, Literatures and Cultures* (with some variations in denomination). Other courses on offer with a strong FL presence may be described as *International Relations* or *European Studies* or in some cases, courses which lead to qualifications related to translation or interpretation, *Applied Language Studies*. Whatever the course, FL students are customarily grouped together for their FL instruction, a phenomenon that is administratively convenient but allows for little specification in curriculum design or content; for example, at FLUP, students from four different first degree courses take their FL subjects together. In other, more isolated cases, additional languages such as Catalan, Italian or Mandarin are offered but usually as a 'minor' in conjunction with one of the 'majors' mentioned above. At the same time the number of non-Humanities students of foreign languages has grown annually in other faculties; at the *Universidade Nova de Lisboa* (UNL), for example, the Faculty of Economics (now renamed Nova School of Business and Economics), requires mastery of English and Spanish in its 1st and 2nd cycle courses, or the Faculty of Medical Sciences, which, from 2011-12, has included a foreign language option in the 1st year of its Medicine course. While this kind of demand-supply is understandable in the context of European HEIs, it would also be worthwhile to also engage with other non-European languages, particularly as mobility programmes for (thousands of) students and teachers alike, such as

Erasmus Mundus or *Erasmus Plus* or *Mobile+2* have now also embraced a wider, global standpoint. Portugal should be in the front line of respecting ethnic and linguistic diversity, promoting social justice, by providing opportunities for accredited language development in as wide a range of languages as possible. Indeed, Portuguese HEIs have in recent years expanded the range of FL courses they offer as extra-curricular subjects, many operating as evening classes to external students and also members of the general public.

5. Language Centres and Portuguese HEIs

The existence of and consistent demand for extra-curricular FL courses, as described above, has prompted some Portuguese HEIs to formalise the provision of these courses through the formal constitution of 'Language Centres'. In 2006, for example, UNL created an institute of languages (ILNOVA), integrated in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, which quickly became a national reference, for the way it reinvented human resources management and the receptivity it has had among the general public, with hundreds of students from outside the University looking for one or more of its 25 offered languages. These autonomous Language Centres co-exist with modern languages Departments in a sometimes uneasy relationship; for example, teachers may be delivering similar courses under different physical and contractual conditions. In addition, as Worten pointed out there is a "need to challenge the 'false dichotomy' which exists between Language Centres (erroneously perceived as teaching only language skills) and academic departments (who define themselves as teaching language through content and culture)" (4). This recent expansion did not result from any concerted ministerial or national initiative but could rather be characterised as 'ad hoc'. However, in 2009, these (fourteen) centres came together in an inter-institutional association, The Association of Higher Education Language Centres in Portugal (ReCLes). The association is also a member of the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education (CercLesS). Some resistance still exists to the establishment of such centres in parallel with the traditional departmental

structures; for example, the University of Porto has no such 'Language Centre'. While the common goal is the delivery of FL course there is much that distinguishes the two entities; again, to cite just one example: the definition of learning objectives and the best means by which to achieve those objectives. However, there is much to be gained from a more harmonised relationship here, not least, working towards greater academic and non-academic recognition for the importance of FL teaching-learning. There may also be benefits with respect to confronting the 'power' of the STEMM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine and Mathematics) when it comes to funding proposals and research grants.

6. Being 'International' and 'Intercultural'

'Internationalization' has been a watchword in much of what has changed in Portuguese HEIs during the last 15 years. Aspects of academic life have changed as a result of various factors, such those already mentioned above: increasing numbers of mobility students and increasing use of English as the medium of instruction. Obviously, FL instruction should play a significant role in internationalization: no institution can hope for a favourable assessment unless it establishes dialogue with international partners, without international partnerships for research projects, without organizing international conferences and without large-scale academic output being published in international journals. FL instruction plays an evident role in the creation of circumstances under which there is an institutional openness to internationalization. Portuguese HEIs have a good record with respect to FL provision (at least 'on paper') but today's academic environment (and business and political environments) demand more than a multiple foreign language courses being made available to the student body; the emphasis in the 21st century has shifted to an intercultural approach. Here, the demand is for transcultural interaction: a multi-way flow of cultural meanings. In this context, learning a foreign language means adopting new socio-cultural roles in the construction of a new identity. Much has been written in relation to this issue within ELT, to cite just one major writer: Kramsch posits and discusses the

important notion of ‘thirdness’; a globalized learning space where FL learners come to terms with their previous and future identities:

Our students’ ability to ‘operate between languages’ will not be so much a matter of bringing their message across accurately and appropriately, but of creating affordances, i.e. ‘relationships of possibility’ (van Lier, 2004: 105) among and between symbolic systems, whether these are verbal, visual, filmic, electronic or gestural. These relations will be created if they learn to see themselves both through their own embodied history and subjectivity and through the history and subjectivity of others. (249)

In 2005, The Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) of the University of Southampton identified some 700 reasons, in alphabetical order, for learning a foreign language. Among these many, referenced and researched, reasons the standout notion is that that intercultural communicative competence developed through foreign language learning is vital for better understanding and cooperation with other countries and that communication barriers lead to missed opportunities. Ultimately a monolingual person is in a weaker psychological position, relying on others and needing to be accommodated (is disadvantaged and deprived) whereas a plurilingual individual is by definition willing and able to adopt varying relationships. By its nature, FL learning obliges members of communities to confront their own and others’ values, beliefs and attitudes; this is the key when considering how to ensure full participation in the democratic processes and the development of a sense of global citizenship. FL courses in Portuguese HEIs should be the locus for the growth of students as potential intercultural agents and contribute to the development of their skills in observation, analysis, interpretation and understanding, without implying the loss of cultural or ideological roots (Guilherme). In addition, FL provision in Portuguese HEIs needs to be explicit in its commitment to making clear to FL students that there are issues of power, domination and subordination related to language status that are of particular importance in relation to the teaching-learning of English (see, for example, Phillipson; or Canagarajah among many).

7. Methodologies and Approaches to FL Delivery

If surveyed, FL teachers at Portuguese HEIs would be likely to identify several changes to the way in which FL courses are delivered (methodology) in recent times. They would likely itemize two key aspects: the gradual domination of a more communicative approach and an emphasis on increasing learner autonomy. Neither concept is new. ‘The Communicative Approach’ dates back to 1979 with Morrow & Johnson or perhaps to 1980 with Breen & Candlin and has been debated extensively in the relevant literature (see recent articles by Waters or Ur). With regard to learner-centredness, we can cite here the early work of Oller and Richards (1973) or, slightly later, and more extensively by Nunan (1988). However, how much Portuguese HEIs have taken on the essential notion of putting the learner at the centre of the educational process through identifying their needs and how much these same HEIs have allowed/encouraged their students to exercise their own responsibility in learning is open to doubt. Veiga and Amaral in their survey of Bologna implementation in Portuguese HEIs report:

[T]he Bologna goal in the perspective of Portuguese higher education institutions was linked much more to the paradigm shift, rather than to the Bologna goals of promoting employability and mobility. The results suggested an optimistic perception about the paradigm shift from teaching to learning, although it remained to be seen if academics and students would confirm the perception voiced by the leadership of the surveyed schools. (61)

FL teachers (and curriculum designers) at Portuguese HEIs need to be clear about what a full implementation of a learner-centred approach implies: “Drawing on the constructivist notion that learners must make sense of new language and experiences in the context of their unique world view, teaching should create and sustain personally meaningful connections between language content and the lived experience and world of each learner” (White 323).

Learners need to be treated as individuals, a complete break from the traditional (17th century?) view of magisterial transmission of knowledge to the students as a single body is required. Teachers need to be responsive, flexible and adaptable in their options concerning methodologies, materials and learning activities (Tudor) and view the teaching-learning process as an ongoing negotiation that involves interaction, experimentation and a shared commitment by both parties to both sides of the equation.

8. Concluding Remarks

Our perception of the current state of affairs in FL provision in Portuguese HEIs remains grounded in the belief that our FL students need to develop their foreign language proficiency within the framework of an intercultural communicative approach (Byram, *Teaching and Assessing*, or Matos). Skills in this area are at the heart of the both personal and professional foreign language encounters and should be stressed. We also recognise that analysis and knowledge of the social, historical, institutional, literary and political background of communities representing the target languages is similarly essential, even at the level of everyday, 'mundane' encounters (Byram, *Cultural Studies*); indeed, it is here that we find the 'cultural content' that so fundamental in FL learning (Hurst). Indeed, HEIs should make more of being in a unique position, equipped with qualified staff with the necessary expertise to develop this kind of approach. Modern language departments are populated with 'experts' in cultural studies, literature, linguistics and so on; but, rarely is this expertise unified in the service of improving the FL proficiency of Portuguese HEI students. It is exactly within this context that Alarcão appeals for a multi-disciplinary approach that echoes the macro-objective of language teaching: the reinforcement of mutual understanding among different linguistic communities based on tolerance, inclusion and shared societal values. This is an appeal which finds an echo in this brief, co-authored survey of the 'state of play' in FL provision in Portuguese HEIs. Our local HEIs (as well as professional associations and other stakeholders) should work together to

formulate and disseminate a clear message about the strategic importance FL teaching-learning in Portuguese HEIs.

Notes

¹ Readers may also wish to consult the different diplomas related to foreign language teacher education issued more recently: Decree-Law No. 139/2012, of 5 July, Decree-Law No. 91/2013, of 10 July and the grid attached to Decree-Law No. 91 / 2013 of 10 July.

² With the exception of work undertaken at the University of Aveiro by Susana Almeida Pinto who has authored and/or co-authored several papers on foreign language education policy and provision in Portuguese HEIs.

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