

DOCUMENTS AND DOMAINS: ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT) IN PORTUGAL

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Resumo: A aprendizagem precoce do Inglês na rede de escolas públicas em Portugal tem sido objeto de amplo debate, não se tendo esgotado com a introdução do ensino do Inglês na matriz curricular do 1º Ciclo, em 2015, e que veio desenvolver a consciência intercultural de um maior número de crianças. Os novos programas e documentos orientadores emanados do Ministério da Educação, onde se redefiniram objetivos e domínios de aprendizagem, vêm sendo sendo discutidos e alterados desde a instituição supranacional do Quadro Comum Europeu de Referência, em 2001, com cada vez mais alusões ao domínio intercultural na aprendizagem do Inglês. Igualmente, toda a literatura académica, por autores como Byram (2006; 2009) e Guilherme *et al.* (2006), apontam para a centralidade da competência intercultural na aprendizagem da cidadania e na construção curricular desde os primeiros anos de escolaridade. Este artigo procura analisar em que medida estas intenções e visões do “Domínio Intercultural” foram incorporadas nos documentos curriculares de referência e, por sua vez, estarão a estruturar a experiência de aprendizagem da língua Inglesa pelas crianças Portuguesas.

Palavras-Chave: Educação Intercultural; Ensino da língua Inglesa; Cidadania; Design Curricular; Portugal.

Abstract: The early learning of English in the state school network in Portugal has been the subject of a wide debate, which has not been exhausted by the introduction of English teaching as a curricular subject in the 1st cycle, in 2015, and which has helped to develop the intercultural awareness of a greater number of children. The new programmes and guideline documents emanating from the Ministry of Education, where objectives and areas of learning have been redefined, have been discussed and changed since the supranational imposition of the Common European Framework of Reference in 2001, with increasing allusions to the intercultural domain in learning

English. Likewise, all the academic literature, from authors such as Byram (2006; 2009) and Guilherme . (2006), points to the centrality of intercultural competence in the learning of citizenship and curriculum construction since the first years of schooling. This article seeks to analyze the extent to which these intentions and visions of the “Intercultural Domain” have been incorporated into the reference curriculum documents and, in turn, will be structuring the experience of learning the English language by Portuguese children.

Keywords: Intercultural Education; the teaching of English; Citizenship; Curriculum design; Portugal.

1 – Introduction

This paper aims to discuss some of the main issues related to the introduction of an explicitly intercultural approach to the provision of ELT for younger learners in mainstream education in Portugal. Intercultural competence can no longer be neglected:

In order to survive today’s complex world, people need to understand different cultures. Understanding different cultures helps adjust to unfamiliar environments in which they meet, work and live with other people who have different cultures. Adjustment and positive attitudes toward different cultures prompt people to take active roles in the diverse society. Therefore, acquisition of intercultural competence, which is the capacity to change one’s knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours so as to be open and flexible to other cultures, has become a critical issue for individuals to survive in the globalized society of the 21st century (Davis 2005: 3).

The main focus here will be on curricula design and documentation and the subsequent updates of the last few decades, along with issues like the role of foreign language education, the formulation of the Portuguese notion of ‘identity’, the general resistance to change in the educational mind-set, and even some national socio-cultural traits that have had an effect the implementation of an intercultural approach for younger learners in the Portuguese state schools.

2 – Historical Background

Since joining the European Union in 1986, Portugal has become more integrated into Europe, both formally and figuratively. In spite of its peripheral geographical position and after almost five decades of cultural isolation and elitist educational provision during the *Estado Novo* dictatorial rule, the relatively young Portuguese democratic society has followed in the footsteps of most European societies in becoming increasingly multicultural. Society is gradually evolving away from ethnic homogeneity and a mono-ethnic culture, based upon one single

linguistic expression, the Portuguese language, which was the single standard language of education for many generations. Portugal used to be characterized by a strong migratory flow outward, but recent years have seen an inward flow as well. Nowadays, we can reasonably argue that, even in such a linguistically cohesive country as Portugal, which might be perceived as being ‘unified’ and/or ‘homogeneous’, there are, in fact, “multiple intersecting variations” (Council of Europe 2009b: 5) within a culturally plural social space.

These variations are clearly perceptible in the multicultural environments around the main urban areas, especially Lisbon, but it is also implicit in the diversity of representations, expectations and values that children from various family backgrounds take to school every day. Much of this diversity is founded on young people being interconnected and online, at a global level, beyond the bounds of any educational establishment. Therefore, in this educational context, due attention should be paid to intercultural education in all types of schools.

However, currently in Portugal, it is fair to say ‘intercultural education’ has not really been high on the agenda of most policy makers and agents; this situation can be explained by a range of historical, social and political factors. Perhaps most salient, with respect to teachers, would be their daily struggle to work in overcrowded classrooms, with ELT coursebooks with much dubious ‘cultural content’ (Hurst 2014b) and with overloaded curricula denying them the opportunity to invest in an intercultural approach to foreign language provision even when local school population profiles would ‘demand’ it. Although some efforts have been made to introduce this type of approach, the intercultural dimension in Portuguese ELT classrooms still is less in evidence than in many other European countries. As Coyle *et al.* state with respect to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) so we can also refer to the importance of our learners as resources in relation to Intercultural Education, thus: “It must be recognised that individual learners bring with them rich linguistic and cultural resources that can change a classroom from a place which promotes mainstream monolingualism, to a dynamic intercultural and multilingual potential” (Coyle, Hood & Marsh 2010: 158).

As a matter of fact, Portugal has maintained international contacts throughout its history going back to the time of the Discoveries in the 15th century: “Intercultural dialogue has therefore been a crucial trait of Portuguese culture for many years, but it has been assumed explicitly as a public policy only when the integration of different communities (the ‘peripheral danger’) has been felt as a security-oriented priority (the ‘core syndrome’)” (Guilherme, Pureza, Silva & Santos 2006: 213).

At the present time, although this diversity is not evenly felt all around the country, Portugal is slowly but irreversibly shifting towards a mosaic of different cultures. Some voices may state that the anticipated multicultural landscape can bring about the weakening of national identity(ies) and could lead to a series of cultural clashes, eventually leading to social unrest and different forms of social exclusion. But a calmer and more informed attitude towards the social changes

ahead should be encouraged - an attitude ultimately aiming at a peaceful and fruitful coexistence of different cultures within the same territory. That attitude can be achieved through intercultural education, if we wish, as we should, to enhance the role of education in shaping social development in Portugal.

3 – Educational Background

The Comprehensive Law of the Educational System of 1986 (*Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo Português*), which is generally accepted as having laid down the principles for the current school system in Portugal, stressed ‘loyalty to the historical Portuguese matrix’, and it was very nation state-centred. We need to understand that interculturality is not simply about displaying the cultural representations of another country, whose language we are teaching. Rather,

Interculturality refers to the capacity to experience and analyse cultural otherness, and to use this experience to reflect on matters that are usually taken for granted within one’s own culture and environment. (...) Interculturality, finally, involves evaluating one’s own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding. Interculturality thus enables people to act as mediators among people of different cultures, to explain and interpret different perspectives. Interculturality does not involve identifying with another cultural group or adopting the cultural practices of the other group (Byram 2009: 6).

Yet still the centrality of what is perceived to be a unique Portuguese identity is present in all the documentation produced in the following years and we can only find traces of interculturality in education in 2002, in the Decree Law 30, which states that students should be familiar with “the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention of the Rights of the Child, as a matrix of values and statement of principles of humanity”. Subsequent laws have gradually brought the concepts of identity and citizenship more to the fore in national curricular documents. Within the regular changes of policy-orientations from the Ministry of Education and the consequent structural changes and revoking of the laws previously passed, there has been an increasing allusion to citizenship education and interculturality in the last two decades.

Through research in local foreign language guidelines and curricula we can analyse to what extent these concepts have for a long time been represented by more than intentions and vague ideas and actually been put into place, similarly to what has been happening in other countries (Baker 2015). Education for citizenship or civic education is a relatively new concept in Portuguese schools perhaps related to the fact that we are a relatively young democracy. While references to citizenship abound in the guidelines and curricula, especially with reference to elementary education, they have usually been seen as transverse to all subjects, present in the formulation of general and also specific goals of the

different areas of knowledge, and thus not needing to be treated as a topic in itself.

The subject 'Civic Education', included in the national curriculum between 1991 and 2012, aimed at the development of the learners' citizenship competences and was to be taught at the level of basic education, from the fifth to the ninth grades (generally between the ages of 10 and 14). But the syllabus focused more on national identity, local and national institutions and individual rights and responsibilities in society. The intercultural perspective was usually absent from these classes. The classes of Moral and Catholic Religious Education (ERMC) would be another good opportunity for tackling the topics of diversity, the understanding of the Other or respect for minorities' values and beliefs. They could provide space and time for students to "engage in situations of dialogue, cooperation and confrontation of opinions", as well as "to take personal positions *vis-à-vis* different religious faiths, and to commit to universal solidarity." (Guilherme *et al.* 2006: 228). However, as well as being embedded in the Catholic faith, this is an optional subject, whose attendance is not felt to be relevant or even desirable by many parents.

Today another step along the "zigzagging path of citizenship education in Portugal" (ENEC 2017:5) has been taken, with the (re-)introduction of the subject 'Citizenship and Development' into the national curriculum between the 5th and the 9th grades. Its provision is still dependent on each school's educational project and resources, but the claim by the team put together to implement and coordinate the national strategy of citizenship education that interculturality should be regarded as a core topic to be handled at every teaching level, both basic and secondary (ENEC 2017), sounds very positive. This is a new opportunity to deliver a much more inclusive understanding of global citizenship which was missing in the national curricula. The interest in teaching intercultural awareness may be explained partly by the pressing need, as Hennebry states, "to re-engage young people in social and political processes that cross cultural or linguistic borders" and to "engage in positive and effective cross-cultural dialogue" (2013:144).

4 – Towards Intercultural Citizenship Education

There is room for optimism since several Portuguese educationalists have instigated research and put in place projects in the field¹. In addition, there are many examples to learn from – examples from other countries which have had their frontiers open to migrants for many years and have been dealing with this question for quite a long time – although these will always have to be harmonized with our own socio-educational context. Furthermore, The European Union has been designing and developing initiatives to promote Intercultural Education for some time now and produced projects, literature and guidelines on the importance of intercultural education and foreign language provision. The leading academic in the field, Michael Byram, considers Europe to stand out from other entities, nations and institutions where national identity and national language are closely

¹ For example, ICOPROMO (2004-2007) promoting intercultural competences for professional mobility and the INTERACT project (2005-2007) related to intercultural active citizenship education.

connected: “Uniquely, in the case of the European Union we can see nation-states gradually giving up their power and adopting a more international, or at least European, perspective” (Byram 2006: 110). If Portugal has had for many years that strong national identity, supported by its monolingualism, having become a member of the European Union it may be gradually moving away from its ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) and adopting a shared set of beliefs and values that will provide fertile ground for the growth of an intercultural approach in foreign language education.

Researchers in Intercultural Education have been advocating this approach based upon the awareness that “[t]he threats to social cohesion which increased multiculturalism brings have to be counter-acted by education for intercultural dialogue which depends on intercultural competence. Compulsory education is thus required to respond to this situation by developing learners’ intercultural competence.” (Byram 2009: 3) The same author goes on to point out the most effective means for achieving this goal would be “through language education which introduces learners to other cultures external or internal to their own society.” As stated in one of the Council of Europe’s documents compiled in *Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education* (2009a: 5): “Each context also requires a different entry into plurilingual and intercultural education: some contexts are more suitable for direct entry into plurilingualism via the language of schooling; for others, it may be more appropriate to introduce it via foreign languages.”

In Portugal, the approach would be the latter, because the language of schooling is for the majority of our learners their native, first language, Portuguese. On the other hand, learning a (or more than one) foreign language enables students to be exposed to different culture nuances which contrast or connect to those conveyed by their first language. It also helps them to find paths for incorporating knowledge and skills, to develop cognitively and to interpret the world around them based on varied perspectives (Hennebry 2013). Indeed, foreign language teachers are in a unique position to facilitate this:

As gatekeepers to the cultures of subjects, teachers act as mediators, inter alia by making the language of the discipline accessible to learners. Teachers of foreign and second languages are more aware of this role than other teachers because it is explicitly part of their training and the definition of their subject: to introduce learners to the cultures of other groups who speak the language in question (Byram 2009: 7).

Here then is the most appropriate context for an effective introduction of Intercultural Education in Portugal – the provision of foreign languages education. Learning a foreign language, especially from an early age, may be the propellant for the development of intercultural education in schools. Speaking a foreign language will help learners understand and identify with another culture(s), and with a variety of cultural groupings (generational, professional, etc.), thus

developing their intercultural competence (Baker 2015).

We are confident that the Portuguese policy makers, as well as curriculum designers, school managers, teachers, teacher trainers and all the other agents involved in education, understand the importance of intercultural education. While international literature, principles and guidelines may be non-binding, they serve as an orientation for national legislation and documentation, since they reflect a common commitment by the member states of the European Union. The most relevant example here is the widespread adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) since its launch in 2001 in much of foreign language education documentation produced in Portugal. In practical terms, an intercultural dimension, cross-curricular as it should be, can be best situated in foreign language classrooms, where learners face a different language, the notion of diversity and different culture representations, even if they are, in many cases, simplistic and stereotypical (Hurst 2014b).

5 – Analysis of the ELT curricular documents

The introduction of the English language provision in the mainstream curriculum of the 3rd and 4th grades (ages 8-10) in September 2015 provided a valuable opportunity to adopt the intercultural approach mentioned above. This being the case, we decided to analyse the recently published curricular documents in relation to younger learners of English language (listed in the ‘References’ section below) with a specific focus on the ‘Intercultural domain’ described therein. Our ‘document analysis’ approach involves a close examination and qualitative interpretation of the data in evidence (Frey 2018). The purpose is to determine the degree to which ‘interculturality’ is truly part of the curricular construct currently governing ELT provision for young learners of English in Portugal.

Another recent measure that has directly impacted our local ELT provision is the creation of a document called ‘*Metas Curriculares de Inglês*’ (Curricular Goals for English) and its implementation between 2013 and 2015. It attempts to set the learning objectives for the primary and middle levels of schooling and to articulate them with the proficiency levels described in the CEFRL. The document consists of a list-like presentation of language functions and competences divided into six ‘Domains’ (Lexis and Grammar, Listening, Reading, Spoken Interaction, Spoken Production and Intercultural Domain). Although we disagree with the purely communicative, utilitarian nature of this list (*utilitarian* versus *educational* purposes of language teaching, to use Byram’s terminology, 2010), it is worth highlighting the inclusion of an ‘Intercultural Domain’ as a positive step towards Intercultural Education in Portugal.

However, our careful analysis of its items clearly suggests that Portuguese curriculum designers have yet to delineate a truly intercultural dimension. Examining the Intercultural Domain in the *Metas Curriculares*, we immediately read ‘Knowing Myself and the Other’ as a title for the first topic, both for the third and the fourth years. But some language teachers may see it as the usual opening

through which to introduce the usual topics, especially after having read the sub-topics presented for the 4th year (family, pets/animals, clothes, for the 3rd year, and world festivities and celebrations) and miss the point. A confusion has arisen here between teaching 'cultural content' and adopting an intercultural approach. Intercultural competence may become erroneously subsumed into the former, wasting a good opportunity of addressing the interculturality, as advocated by the domain title.

In our opinion, the tokenist and usually stereotyped approach to culture evident in the curricular documents could be said to result from a variety of factors: the poor formulation of the national curriculum goals, the old-fashioned teacher-centred pedagogies still in practice, the overwhelming concern with short-term student achievement and school standards, the lack of in-service opportunities to upgrade (and update) teacher knowledge and the constant pressure to reduce costs related to material and human resources. For many ELT teachers the prevalent concern is still the 'restricted' communicative competence, leaving no room for the intercultural competence and awareness. As Baker pertinently notes: "This provides teachers and learners with a very impoverished picture of what successful communication entails, ignoring many of the insights intercultural communication and sociolinguistic studies have achieved, especially as regards the importance of context, variety, adaptation and change in language and communication." (2015: 132).

By way of contrast, language teachers who are sensitive to the intercultural dimension in their language classes may read between the lines and see the potential for learning about other cultures and promoting the understanding of and dialogue with 'the Other', the other culture being from elsewhere in the world or the girl or boy sitting at the next table. It has been widely argued that the intercultural competence should have a more central place in language teaching nowadays (Byram 2010, Furstenberg 2010, Henneby 2013). To achieve the intercultural goals, teachers need the 'support' of the ELT coursebooks available on the Portuguese market. It is debatable whether these educational resources do, in fact, provide this support (Baker 2015). This means teachers should take a deep breath and be prepared to create their own materials, which is very time-consuming and one more drain on the already overburdened Portuguese teachers. It is today widely acknowledged that Intercultural Education happens through 'the hidden curriculum' more than through the formal one, so teachers need to pay special attention to the texts and especially to the images within these ELT coursebooks and the meanings they create in our increasingly visually framed learners' world (Hurst 2014a).

If we analyse the support material produced by the Portuguese Ministry of Education (*Caderno de Apoio para as Metas Curriculares do 1º Ciclo*), we can confirm the impression that a real intercultural approach in teaching English to primary learners continues to be missing in the official curricular orientations for early foreign language teaching. Even though it is stated in the introduction that different reference domains, including the intercultural domain, are all intertwined in the

activities suggested, our examination of these resources gives us the opposite idea. Conforming to an essentialist view of culture, the opportunities for developing the intercultural competence offered by this material are scarce and they are only implicit. Again, it is up to the teacher to recognise the potential for establishing an intercultural dynamic in their foreign language class. As expressed by the teachers involved in the Irish project, *Intercultural Education in the Primary school* (NCCA 2005: 37), “By seeing the opportunities that exist in our lessons for an intercultural perspective, we can easily make our lessons intercultural... The opportunities for an intercultural perspective are always in our lessons but can be easily missed if we don’t look for them.” The current Portuguese primary curriculum has explicitly incorporated ideas such as “the need to become flexible within the diversity of cultures” and “cultural exchange”, along with numerous references to mutual help, solidarity, dialogue and respect for other cultures. But have these ideas had an impact on school practice? And how can they stop being just ideas and good intentions?

It is unquestionable that learning today involves more than the mere transmission of knowledge, aiming at creating competences, attitudes and values that empower learners. We should place language (communication) at the centre of education so as to give learners access to diverse culture(s) and allow the creation of plurilingual communities. It is essential to increase intercultural awareness of how cultural structures and values are diverse, dynamic and fluid (Baker 2015) and how they are impacted by relations of power. Also, education has its role in combating the marginalization of minority cultures and/or communities which may be under threat. Through Intercultural Education we create the necessary understanding, respect and dialogue to develop a sustainable way of living together: if we encourage the understanding and critical thinking about global, regional and local issues and about the interconnectedness and interdependency of different countries and populations; if we promote the sense of belonging to a common humanity and teach empathy; and if we learn how to act responsibly at local, national and global levels for a more peaceful and sustainable world (Hurst 2018).

The preambles for the Intercultural Domain, mentioned above, which ‘introduce’ the ‘*Metas Curriculares*’ consist of rather contradictory statements claiming that this domain should extend beyond the ‘isolated and obligatory’ topics to include topics of the learners’ interest; but, in the very next sentence, they delimit the choice of topics to those which refer to English as a global language and the learners’ consciousness of the own identities and the identity of the Other. Indeed, the 7th grade document lists topics almost identical to the old, national programme, related to learners having to ‘recognize’, ‘localize’ and ‘identify’ the difference between Great Britain and the UK (How many British people could explain this?!?), important cities in the USA and the UK. The only new element is the suggestion that learners should identify some EU countries as well. This is NOT intercultural education. The suggestions for the 8th grade add nothing new. The 9th grade (item 13) includes a references to intercultural communication,

mobility programmes for young people and transformations in ways of being and life; it seems only in the 9th grade is there any real attempt to move away from the previously published guidelines, which can now be considered to be based on outdated notions rooted in cultural content being an inconvenient add-on in the foreign language learning process.

In line with the annual UNESCO Report (2015), any approach to intercultural educational should incorporate three basic concepts: the cognitive (to acquire knowledge, understanding and critical thinking about global, national, regional and local issues and the interconnectedness and interdependency of different countries and populations); the socio-economic (to have a sense of belonging to a common humanity, sharing values and responsibilities, empathy, solidarity and respect for differences and diversity) and the behavioural (to act effectively and responsibly at local, national and global levels for a more peaceful and sustainable world). But to what extent does the most recent (2018) Portuguese curricular document '*Aprendizagens Essenciais*' (Essential Learning Goals), which also outlines objectives under the Intercultural Domain in ELT, take these core concepts into account?

The preamble to the document is divided into four main paragraphs; reference is made to 'global citizenship', 'respect for the Other', 'responsibility and cooperation between individuals and peoples' among others. However, there is one major (fatal?) flaw in the text when it refers to something called 'Anglo-Saxon culture' as something that should be respected, along with the cultures of the world. The document assumes that learners have an interest in or see relevance in the teaching of 'target language' culture, an attitude for which there is no empirical evidence (Jabeen & Shah 2011). In any case, no such thing as an 'Anglo-Saxon culture' exists nor has ever existed. Even if we discount the historical denotation (which refers to the biologically diverse, non-homogeneous heptarchy that made up England until 1066) and accept the term's more general denotation referring to English speaking communities, the concept of some kind of culture common to these communities is undefinable and thus, indefensible. Culture is not something that can be defined as a unitary or monolithic concept, rather cultures depend on dynamic interaction within and between social groups, with shared and differentiated traits. Employing such outdated notions in this type of document is reckless.

Another feature of the 'Essential Learning Goals' which also falls short of the desired attention to Intercultural Education in Portuguese schools is the fact that, despite interpersonal skills (*Relacionamento Interpessoal*) being a key area of competency for the promotion of Intercultural Education within the 21st century school leaving students' profile 2017 document (*Perfil do Aluno à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória*) we realize that it is only timidly referred to. In the framework for the operationalization of the essential learning goals, including examples of actions and strategies to be developed in classrooms for accomplishing these goals, the reference to interpersonal skills is only explicitly made in the domains 'Intercultural Competence' and 'Strategic Competence'. It remains absent from

domains like 'Thematic/ Situational Areas' and 'Communicative Competence'. It only appears with stronger emphasis in the domain 'Strategic Competence' (dealing with metacognition, group interaction and social skills), but there is only one reference in 'Intercultural Domain'. Does this not suggest that during much classroom oral interaction and other speaking activities which abound in a foreign language classroom the development of this key personal skill may continue to be overlooked? And this characteristic is also present in guiding documents for the following grades. The fundamental question remains: Are the teaching methodologies suggested by these guiding documents explicitly promoting a true intercultural education?

On a more positive note, these new guidelines widen the range of thinking skills to be developed, such as comparing/contrasting, understanding and explaining, problem-solving, analysing, discussing or giving examples; however, this is only explicitly stated in relation to the 9th grade. The two earlier school years refer almost exclusively to lower order thinking skills like 'identifying', 'describing' and 'recognizing'. They also allude directly to cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, tolerance and 'the Other' in the introductory preamble, but, in practice, fall back on an old-fashioned topic-based approach when going into further detail and providing further suggestions about classroom work. Furthermore, while they suggest activities such as 'giving opinions about transformations in ways of being and living' (9th grade) or factors which may hinder intercultural communication (9th grade), there are virtually no indicators of the promotion of intercultural awareness in the earlier years. This 2018 reformulation of Intercultural Domain learning objectives introduced several years after the '*Metas Curriculares*' (2015) represents only a small step towards the effective implementation of an intercultural approach to ELT in Portuguese schools. The authors of future curricular documents need to dispose of the obsolete ideas evidenced here, re-define what 'cultural content' consists of (Hurst 2014b) and finally eliminate the centrality of an idealised, simplistic, nationalistic 'BANA' (Britain, Australasia, North America) culture from their understanding of the ELT world (Holliday 2016).

A very important aspect to think about, indeed perhaps the most relevant of all, is the kind of classroom interaction that best promotes the awareness of the Other, the "understanding of the normality of diversity" (NCCA 2005: 37) and the open dialogue between diverse learners, who may belong to different ethnic or social groups or not. As has been noted as recently as 2017 (in the annual report of the National Council for Education/*Conselho Nacional de Educação*), the most frequently encountered classroom in Portugal is still teacher-centred, with some moments of pair-work, but still offering few opportunities for peer interaction, confrontation of opinions and genuine collaborative work. Even with the communicative approach to foreign language teaching being considered the norm in ELT classrooms, many teachers still feel more comfortable delivering pre-digested knowledge to learners and closely controlling their pupils' work in the classroom rather than facilitating the construction of knowledge by the learners

themselves and subsequently monitoring this process. This is particularly true, and even understandable, in most state schools, where teachers are frequently in charge of a group of up to thirty students, in a room that may not be big enough, with all the consequent unrest and behaviour problems that often occur.

Byram states that "Education for citizenship leads to engagement and action, and education for intercultural citizenship should equally involve learners in engagement and action, at an international level as well as at a local, regional or national level." (2006: 127). Byram is referring here to actual action in the social world, but, by analogy, we can extend his appeal to include teaching methodologies that promote thought and action in the ELT classroom through peer communication, role plays, drama, problem-solving and conflict resolution activities. Furthermore, direct contact between students from different countries, through school exchange programmes and the participation in international projects and encounters, should also be considered. We should welcome the local flexibility and agency enabled by an intercultural approach in ELT teaching/learning (Baker 2015), more compatible with 21st century learning skills.

6 – Conclusions

Following the good examples of other countries as well as projects already undertaken in Portugal and observing the latest reformulation of the national guidelines, ELT practitioners should make their concerns about intercultural education explicit to those who are responsible for the design of policy and the subsequent educational practice in schools. More evidence-based, classroom-focussed ways of implementation should be found to extract real change from the official documentation and turn it into effective practice in Portuguese state schools. Local English teachers should provide in-class opportunities for "exploring local cultures; exploring language learning materials; exploring the media and arts both online and through more 'traditional' mediums; making use of cultural informants; and engaging in intercultural communication both face to face and electronically" (Baker 2015: 131).

All in all, given the lack of assistance provided by the curricular documents, the greatest responsibility in implementing a real intercultural approach in ELT in Portugal falls on the teacher. It is unavoidably related to her/his personal values and beliefs, her/his attitude towards the teaching-learning process and her/his ideas about the role of education in society. For that reason, teachers should always maintain an inquiring attitude and adopt an intercultural attitude themselves. However, teachers are often obliged to work with teaching materials that present the target culture as somehow exotic and exciting which stress differences, not commonalities, and reinforce stereotypes to the extent that xenophobic attitudes that may exist in the classroom are not confronted (Starkey 2007). Furthermore, many ELT professionals were trained before the intercultural approach really gained prominence, so programmes of "[t]eacher education may need to equip teachers with the skills and strategies for the development of cultural awareness

among their learners.” (Hennebry 2013: 148)

Realistic innovation in the sphere of Intercultural Education is needed and must be welcomed. As early as in primary education, all children should start to be confronted with the idea of diversity because, as policy and curricular developments in Ireland have shown, “Intercultural education takes time and it is an ongoing process” (NCCA 2005: 23). The development of intercultural competence and awareness can be a long process that will cross all the stages of education (Byrnes 2010). Throughout their educational path learners should be given opportunities to discover the commonalities of our shared humanity and recognize the political, economic, social and cultural interdependencies and interconnectedness of today’s world. By means of adequate ELT programmes (and materials, activities, etc.) learners will be allowed to think, feel and act in an intercultural manner.

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