As línguas estrangeiras no ensino superior:
balanço, estratégias e desafios futuros

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LEARNING TEACHING: RESEARCH AND REPORTING IN THE POST-GRADUATE LANGUAGE TEACHING PRACTICUM AT THE FACULTY OF LETTERS, THE UNIVERSITY OF PORTO, PORTUGAL.

ABSTRACT:

The Bologna Declaration (1999) and the subsequent re-structuring of post-graduate teacher education programmes at the Faculty of Letters, the University of Porto (FLUP) (ongoing since 2008) has provided opportunities to re-assess both the content and the teaching procedures of these Masters courses (here referring especially to the English Language Teaching variant). One key element that has been extensively revised has been our approach to the way the student teachers' learning in the second year practicum is both experienced and reported. This paper will present and discuss both the theoretical background and practical implications of the recently revised approach adopted at FLUP, from a personal, individual standpoint. Special emphasis will be given to multi-disciplinary teaching staff meetings which have led to the elaboration of a statement of policy which is valid across all seven 'teaching a foreign language' variants of our teacher education Masters courses.

Keywords: Foreign Language Teacher Education, Action Research, Local practices, Curriculum Development

1 INTRODUCTION

The educational context to this paper is constituted by the seven post-Bologna Declaration Masters courses in Teacher Education offered by FLUP. These courses reflect the new-style, re-organised curricula developed within the Bologna Process and have mostly been in operation since the academic year of 2008/2009. While in Portugal, many aspects of the Bologna Process itself remain debatable in their intention and impact (Baptista et al, 2008;

Veiga & Amaral, 2009), the main focus here will be on teaching-learning contexts within the Masters in the Teaching of English and another Foreign Language in the Third Cycle of Basic Education (lower and upper secondary) course, offered by FLUP (referred to locally as MEIBS). This is a two year Masters course during which, broadly speaking, in their first year the student teachers are based at FLUP, receiving various types of 'input' related to teacher education and, in their second year, the student teachers are largely school-based taking part in their teaching practice placements (the 'practicum').

Broadly speaking, the aims of the practicum of the FLUP post-graduate teacher education courses are:

> 1) to develop the scientific and pedagogical-didactic skills of students as teachers;
> 2) to establish, in a coherent way, a link between theory and practice, developing the student teachers' capacity for critical integration of scientific knowledge, general educational training, subject specific didactics and teaching practice;
> 3) to develop capacities and attitudes leading to reflective, problematizing, critical and constantly improving professional performance;
> 4) to reflectively analyse experiences implemented at each placement school;
> 5) to carry out an action research project that can be applied in the subject area of teaching. (translated from Domingues Almeida et al, 2016, p. 2)

In 2015, partly in response to comments that arose from external evaluation processes (known locally as A3ES: The Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education, see: http://www.a3es.pt/pt), it was decided to launch a wide scale review of the content and approach being offered/followed by the various different foreign language FLUP teacher education practitioners in their different curricular units for the Masters courses. I also view it as a response to a local appeal for greater interaction among the various branches of modern languages "didactics" at curricular, professional, research and policy levels (Alarcão, 2008), to recognise and embrace a pluri-disciplinary approach that echoes the macro-objective of language teaching: the reinforcement of inter-comprehension among communities, based on shared social values. As a result, many meetings were held with the presence of lecturers from English Language Teaching (ELT) as well as French, Spanish, German and Portuguese as a foreign and first language. Both literally and figuratively, these meetings implied the development of a shared professional language in a cross-cultural context which is "a prerequisite for developing a knowledge base on which to build teacher education practices in different settings and countries" (Korthagen et al. 2006, p. 1022).

2 PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION AT FLUP

It is widely accepted, although on the basis of little research, that pre-service teacher education will be determinant in producing the kind of

high quality teachers any education system demands (Harris & Sass, 2011); teachers who need to be qualified both in theoretical principles and in classroom practices; teachers who are able to adapt in the face of new information/knowledge they receive in their first year at FLUP and new information/knowledge they experience in their second year in school. I see the role of FLUP in this context as even more decisive, given the importance of the student teachers' first steps in the pre-service teacher training they receive. As stated by Loughran and Russel (1997, p. 68-69):

> Pre-service teacher education programs are the first place of contact between beginning teachers and their prospective profession. If they are to value the pedagogical knowledge that is continually being developed, refined and articulated within their profession, if they are to understand the complex nature of teaching and learning, and if they are to be 'teachers' and not 'tellers', trainers' or 'programmers', then this first contact through pre-service programs is crucial.

The initial focus of this special interest group, which consisted of José Domingues de Almeida, Maria Ellison, Marta Pazos Anido, Mónica Barros Lorenzo, Nicolas Hurst, Paulo Santos, Pilar Nicolás, Simone Tomé and Sónia Valente Rodrigues, was the second year element of the Masters known as the "IPP" (Introduction to Pedagogical Practices) which is an over-arching curricular unit worth 48 of the total of 60 ECTS allocated for the second year. The IPP, put in simple terms, covers the practicum from the point of view of the teaching practice, the faculty follow-up seminars and the writing and defence of the student teachers" final report. The central aim of these multiple, multi-lingual meetings was to harmonise the FLUP approach to the IPP. The final report produced by student teachers represents a crucial element in their evaluation and as such merits special attention.

3 DEVELOPING THE POLICY DOCUMENT

The main purpose of these meetings was to produce a policy document which would provide a framework for all the modern languages teacher education lecturers to make use of the policy document, which came to be about 30 pages long (in Portuguese), contains agreed, general orientations on the principles, objectives and methodology behind the FLUP approach to the production of the student teachers' final report, and, at the same time, establishes the foundation of the final report to be a classroom-based, action research project. The document characterises the structure and presentation style of the report to be adopted across all the modern languages. In addition, there are suggested guidelines about the timing and procedures for the development and writing-up of the action research projects as well as indications concerning the role(s) to be assumed by FLUP lecturers in respect of this process.

The 'negotiation' of the content of this document about the final report allowed for an unprecedented exchange of ideas, practices and references among lecturers resulting in a more academically solid, co-ordinated approach within FLUP to the IPP process as a whole. A clear example of the results of this negotiation is the agreed-to definition of the fundamental intention of these Masters: to produce teachers who are, in the contemporary sense, "reflective practitioners" (Burns, 2009). This concept has been extensively discussed in the literature since the 1980s and 1990s (Schon, 1983; Wallace, 1991) but, in many cases, the concept was not fully implemented either through lack of understanding or a lack of will. In addition to these concerns further considerations are also important:

> Reflective practice is important as it deepens what we – as teachers – think teaching is, and stimulates awareness of our 'real' conception of teaching. Reflective practice challenges our emotionally settled impostorship that we may develop on different occasions. What we do is often driven by the exigencies of the moment and we do not always have the opportunity to act the way which serves the learning situation best. (Zalipour, 2015, p. 13)

From my point of view, this basic intention implies the provision of certain kinds of academic conditions. The student teachers need to be given time and space in which they consider their own values and beliefs about foreign languages and foreign language teaching. These novice practitioners need to be given time and space to examine what they do in the classroom in a structured and supported, longitudinal context. They need to be given time and space to make explicit the reasons behind their own classroom actions. These features characterise the student teachers' learning teaching process as an ongoing, continual dialogue with their school mentors and their faculty supervisors who seek to provide formative guidance (this constitutes their 'outer world' support and recognition). The process is also characterized by being aimed at directing the student teachers' classroom decisions to be more informed by an evidential, data-driven approach (this constitutes their 'inner world' consciousness).

4 THE CLASSROOM-BASED ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

As mentioned above, the student teachers have to conduct a classroom-based, action research project, which ultimately becomes the flesh and bones of their 50 page (minimum) final report. The student teachers explore and evaluate their experiences in the classroom in order to define a research area; this process being prompted, guided and structured through dialogue with their school mentors and faculty supervisors. This small scale research project is seen as the 'motor' of their teacher development, where their practice is made explicit through reflection and writing, as has been

described in the relevant literature; the idea is to have "teacher initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning, and to bring about change in classroom practices" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 12). The re-conceptualization of the predominant paradigm for defining teachers has shifted dramatically from the point of being seen as 'technicians' to now being professionally defined as 'teacher-researchers' with purposive classroom based research being the main instrument to enable self-examination:

> Reflective inquiry shapes the profession of teaching by giving teacher-researchers the opportunity to contribute to educational reform and to grow professionally. Reflective inquiry makes teacher-researchers engage in reflection as a means of development and adaptation by carefully studying their own professional practice. Through careful examination, teacher-researchers become more reflective, critical and analytical of their own teaching. (Cirocki et al., 2014, p. 27).

The adoption of the classroom-based action research project as the core of the final report of the practicum presented our student teachers with several challenges. Some of these difficulties have already been described in different educational contexts, for example in Sri Lanka (Cirocki et al. 2014) or even on short, intensive courses designed for student teachers in the UK (Anderson, 2016) but some were also specific to the local context here described. For example, some student teachers (and lecturers) had a certain amount of difficulty in leaving behind the concept of a 'thesis' and embracing the notion of a 'final report' which while maintaining the standards associated with Masters level academic writing is not the same kind of text as a 'thesis'. One major hurdle that also has to be overcome is the difficulty many student teachers experience in trying to identify and define their area of research through guided observations and then specifying their 'research question', a difficulty which is exasperated by the fact that this process occurs at the very start of their practicum (this process should be completed in the first two to three months). However, the key here is that the classroom-based, action research project 'model' obliges the student teachers to examine and respond to learner needs; they have to abandon the notion that they can research a topic that is chosen on the basis of their interests (Brandt, 2006). In addition, many of our student teachers, coming from a previous learning background in the Humanities, are not fully versed in the need to include a quantitative perspective to their final report (to help explain observed relationships) and need a lot of guidance as to data collection instruments and ways to process and present such data. However, evidence-informed practice is an absolutely crucial feature of a reflective approach (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012). The difficulties identified here, mainly

associated with the early stages of the development of their final report, are hugely compounded, in the later stages of the practicum, by the fact that the student teachers are 'swamped' with all kinds of other commitments related to their practicum and tend to put the writing-up of the report 'on the backburner'. Learning teaching places demands on the student teachers that are continuous, competing and conflicting. Indeed, it is not unusual to witness a waning of the collaborative spirit among the pairs or triads of student teachers placed at an individual school towards the later stages of their practicum (Brandt, 2006).

5 INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT DURING THE PRACTICUM.

In relation to the ELT variant of the Masters courses, the student teachers attend a 3-hour seminar every other week at FLUP, the basic aim of which is to help the them reflect on the experiences in their placement schools by accomplishing a limited range of written tasks and taking part in regular, guided feedback sessions during the seminars. With respect to developing the final report, the student teachers are given some input on the nature and purpose of classroom observation and provided with a set of observation tasks which they are expected to carry out in October and November. These tasks enable them to gather basic data on specific aspects of classroom practices, largely through observing their mentors' classes. Their impressions, ideas and experiences need to be 'captured' and transformed into data. In November, seminar activities initiate discussion and identification of potential areas of research interest and encourage additional data gathering (using a variety of tools) so as to be able to justify a choice of where/how to intervene in the teaching-learning process of the classes they have been allocated in their placement schools. Seminar time is also devoted to discussion with their peers and faculty supervisors on defining research questions, data gathering instruments (especially questionnaires), research strategies, timings and so on. A 'zero cycle' of the action research project is usually executed in late November or early December when the student teachers can explore and experiment classroom solutions based on their initial observations. The 'first cycle' is usually programmed for January/February and the 'second cycle' for March/April. It should also be noted that the difficulty mentioned above that student teachers have in scheduling the writing-up of their final report is further compounded by the demands of this sequence.

In general, our student teachers are taking teacher education Masters courses which involve them in teaching two languages (in various combinations). As such, there is an in-built need for harmonization of their practicum experience to avoid potential confusion and conflict in terms of the different expectations and demands attributed to them. However,

harmonization does not necessarily mean uniformity; even when procedures are agreed there will always be differences in their execution. The FLUP teacher educator meetings, which resulted in the IPP policy document under discussion here, benefitted from being not only 'internationally informed' in the sense that several of the lecturers involved are foreign nationals, coming from different educational cultures, but also 'locally situated' since many of these same lecturers have many years of experience in Portuguese higher education institutions and they were collaborating with local, Portuguese educated colleagues, also experienced in working in the field of teacher education. In addition, these meetings generated added academic value since they involve the collective exploration and articulation of FLUP teacher education procedures (teaching teaching) that extended the individual lecturers' knowledge base. As Loughran (2009, p. 199) reports:

> A pedagogy of teacher education requires understanding the problematic nature of teaching, how that influences teaching and learning about teaching, and how knowledge of such practice is developed from an evidential base. In short, a pedagogy of teacher education requires scholarship that is in line with the expectations of more established and traditional disciplines.

6 THE THEORY-PRACTICE DICHOTOMY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Central to the philosophy of this policy document was the recognition of the need to encourage positive 'backwash' in order to overcome the theory-practice dichotomy which is, in fact, inherent in the two-year structure of these Masters courses in which the first year deals with 'knowledge about' and the second year deals with 'knowledge how'. This dichotomy is also apparent in the work of the FLUP teacher educators, who have much in common with our Finnish counterparts: "These victims, or heroes, of academic intensification must experience daily the devil's bargain which means they are expected to look after the theoretical mission peculiar to university with the simultaneous pressure to deal with rather practical orientation in teacher practices" (Salmine & Santti, 2010: 11). Also recognised was the need to re-focus the general objectives of these courses: to help our student teachers to become both professional but also independent. Essentially, we want our student teachers to be able theorize their own practice. This kind of self-constructed theorising is likely to be more directly linked to their local educational situation than any book-based or lecturer input and be more significant, personally and professionally. It is part of the practice of creating their own knowledge, an attribute that can contribute to lifelong learning and ongoing professional development (Korthagen et al., 2006).

Describing the Portuguese higher education system before the Bologna Process, Trigo (2010, p. 3) states that "[o]ur teaching and learning system was truly a 'magister dixit' one, awarding the memory with the main role in the process, instead of stimulating students' creativity and their learning autonomy". The FLUP Masters revised approach involves a rejection of the traditional 'transmission mode' as a paradigm for learning teaching (which was also explicitly rejected by various Bologna Declaration documents); student teachers need to be supported in their construction of their own emergent teacher identity (Freeman, 2002). Naturally, such an approach also relies on various 'practical' conditions being met by the 'host' higher education institution (HEI): suitable organization of contact hours, adapted forms of assessment and most crucially, student/staff ratios (Veiga & Amaral, 2009). Teacher educators and student teachers both need to accept responsibility for professional learning to take place, in addition, peer-supported learning as part of general collaborative culture of teaching has to be facilitated. We should view student teachers as "users and creators of legitimate forms of knowledge who make decisions about how best to teach their L2 students within complex socially, culturally and historically situated contexts" (Johnson, 2006, p. 239). While the knowledge developed may not be 'new' to their teacher educators and the research context may be highly restricted (that class in that school), the process and the 'ownership' of it make that knowledge qualitatively significant. In this sense, we should consider learning teaching as a genuine academic endeavour where, here for example, research is carried out in order to respond to real problems in their practice, to help them learn in collaborative, meaningful ways through shared experiences, but without having to experience any kind of 'reality shock' which leaves them feeling anxious or frustrated.

7 REFLECTIONS ON THE FLUP PRACTICUM

Our teacher education Masters courses need to support the student teachers as they develop components such as practical knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge and personal theories of teaching as part of their student teacher cognition (Borg, 2006). The student teachers have to be challenged, as part of their reflective practice, to question their own assumptions about good teaching and about themselves, to think systematically and critically about their and their learners' experiences in the classroom, in order to continually improve (Zalipour, 2015). I believe the ELT variant focusses on resolving practical problems and concerns of student teachers situated in their actual classroom contexts (practically oriented). It relies on interaction and integration of insights from several academic disciplines (empirically based). In short, it is a "realistic approach" (Korthagen, 2011, p. 31-50). The

idea is to connect theory to practice in such a way that the everyday teaching executed by our student teachers can be identified as theory-guided action (Korthagen et al, 2006).

The final learning outcome of the practicum aims for a student teacher to become an "autonomous reflective practitioner capable of constant self-reflection leading to a continuous process of professional self-development" (Barduhn & Johnson, 2009, p. 61). We understand teaching to be a complex process (just as learning is) that requires a variety of skills, abilities and specialist types of knowledge and is about more than just the delivery of information (Loughran, 2009). This complexity can be made apparent to student teachers by establishing a culture of transformative, locally-contextualized reflective practice when they are learning teaching (during the practicum), making use of techniques such as structured observation tasks, discussions with peers of 'critical moments' and supervised feedback sessions, amongst others. Through this (ongoing) process of review and harmonization, my hope is that we will be able to respond to the challenges of providing a course which accounts for the diverse needs of our student teachers and a contemporary interpretation of English language teaching and language teacher education:

> [w]hat is now required of language teachers and language teacher educators is a greater understanding of the links between language and culture and between teaching methods and context, as well as a healthier respect for and awareness of the variations in English found in local and international contexts. (Hobbs, 2013, p. 164)

Acceptance of the complexities of both learning and teaching also lies at the heart of attempts to resist reducing education to a narrow, numbers-based, accountant-driven conceptualization which places little importance on how teaching is 'done' and more importance on how much it costs (Keltchtermans, 2007). I do not think that market logic and financial pressure should not be central to the provision of traditional public service values of Portugal (Cardoso et al, 2007) but that does not mean there should be any less of an emphasis on quality, effectiveness or efficiency. Such notions and 'false economies' need to be dynamically resisted by all stakeholders in the field of education. Today, the importance of foreign language learning to societies in general needs to recognised at a national, institutional level and clearly stated:

> Learning other languages enables children and young people to make connections with different people and their cultures and play a fuller part as global citizens. (…) It is important for the nation's prosperity that young people are attracted to learning a modern language and that they become confident users of a modern language, well equipped with the skills needed in the new Europe and in the global marketplace. (Education Scotland, 2014, p. 1)

8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Foreign language teacher education should be participatory (the student teachers, their school mentors and their lecturers/supervisors), democratic (building in elements of choice) and collaborative (among student teachers, university lecturers, school mentors), driven by action and interaction aimed at meeting the specified goals of the practicum (Winterbottom & Mazzocco, 2016). As foreign language teacher educators we need to prepare/enable our student teachers to provide their learners with relevant, coherent, enjoyable and successful classroom experiences across the full range of language skills in line with the orienting principles of the Common European Framework of Reference. We believe that the approach outlined here constitutes a valid attempt to meet those needs which combined with ongoing discussion/work at FLUP on best practice in relation to the evaluation of the student teachers' 'supervised classes' and their final reports.

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