

BEYOND THE BASICS WITHOUT THE BASICS

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ABSTRACT

This presentation focuses on the entry level preparations of university graduates in Modern Languages and Literature for the initial year of the «bienio» (5th-year English Didactics in the University of Lisbon's «Ramo Educacional») leading to secondary school teacher certification. Current curriculum in the «Licenciatura» is examined in relation to: 1) specific curriculum requirement in the first year of the «bienio», 2) specific curriculum requirements of the proposed secondary school curricular reform («Programa de Ingles», Secundario LE1, DGEBS 1992), and 3) existing courses in the «Licenciatura» leading to the successful teaching of English as a foreign language at the secondary school level. Through an analysis of the factors mentioned above, the entry level preparation of prospective secondary school teachers is discussed in light of what proposed curricular reforms may demand of classroom teachers in terms of new, non-traditional (or at least different) approaches to current ideas about learning and teaching, course content, methodology, procedures and desired learning outcomes. A case is made for the inclusion of a 4th-year course: «Introduction to English Didactics» as an integral part of the «Licenciatura» for candidates desiring to enter the «bienio».

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present a viable option for the successful preparation of secondary school teachers at university, and consequently, the implementation of curricular reform as proposed by the authors of the «Programa de Ingles» 1992 (Secundario LE1, DGEBS 1992). The reform for Portuguese foreign language education stems from progressive educational thinking designed in part to affect social, political, and economic patterns of life (similar reforms are already under way in Greece and Spain, see Dendrinos, 1992, and Hartnack, 1992). The effects of the reform on the individual, the classroom environment and cross-cultural interaction imply more than mere methodological or procedural reforms. The reform encompasses ideological and political changes concerning the potential role and purpose of language education in society.

At the University of Lisbon, part of the job of preparing future secondary school teachers for the new curriculum was given over to 5th-year English didactics, in which I teach. We were

given advanced information about the design, topic contents and linguistic features of the proposed changes. A colleague even arranged for a presentation by two members of the design team, both of whom gave added insight into the ideas behind the proposed curriculum. And yet, after all that, I was confused. The somewhat idealistic curricular reform for secondary school English language teaching, in contrast to the often grim realities teachers are faced with, seemed at odds. So, I looked into the literature to try to resolve my confusion; and now, I am pleased to state that I am bewildered. Why pleased? I have found, according to the literature, that being in a state of confusion is a good thing! Let me try to explain, and hopefully at the end of this paper you will be as confused as I am.

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

The GUIA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA (1990) lists the course requirements for the undergraduate degree in Modern Languages and Literature. It covers a range of Literary, Cultural, Language and Linguistic studies for two language options (for our purposes, English plus another language) through the third year. In the fourth year, students have two options open to them. Aside from three required courses:

Literary Theory; History of the English Language;
and, Contemporary Literature (of the «other» language)

they may choose two «elective» courses in English, and two in the «other language». Generally, the two elective courses for English are:

English Literature III; North-American Literature & Culture II;
English Culture II; English Linguistics II; and, English Language IV

Successful completion of the above requirements make up the «Licenciatura». A look at the individual programs for these courses in 1994-95 (Faculty of Letters, 1994) reveals that only one course in the «Licenciatura», first-year Introduction to Linguistics, mentions any syllabus item seemingly related to teaching and learning a foreign language under the heading «Aprendizagem de uma lingua estrangeira». The extent to which the topic is geared toward teacher development is not discernible from the course description. In any event, this is the basic knowledge-base that a University of Lisbon graduate will bring to his/her post-graduate studies, teaching career, or what-have-you.

With the «Licenciatura» students may enroll in masters programs, post-graduate certificate courses such as Translation, or the two-year Teacher Certification Program, otherwise known as the «Bienio» in the «Ramo Educacional».

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE «BIENIO» CURRICULUM

The GUIA (1990) mentions the «Ramo Educacional» as the «via profissionalismo». Note the lack of a pre-professional course leading to this «professional route» in the «Licenciatura» — a point we will come back to in a moment. The entry requirement is successful completion of the «Licenciatura» in the language grouping studied with overall grade average being the deci-

ding factor if or when enrollment is limited. The First-Year of the «Bienio» (commonly known as the «Fifth-Year») consists of the following courses:

- Curriculum Development and Organization
- Introduction to Educational Sciences
- Educational Psychology
- English Didactics
- «Other Language» Didactics.

The Second-Year (commonly known as the «Sixth-Year») consists of:

- The Seminar: Didactics and Program Contents
- «Estagio»: Practice Teaching (linked with the Seminar)
- Organization of the Educational System and School Administration

These courses constitute the teacher development program at the University of Lisbon leading to secondary school certification.

THE TRADITIONAL CURRICULUM, PROGRESSIVE CURRICULAR REFORM AND BEYOND THE BASICS WITHOUT THE BASICS

The main features of «Traditional» curricula and the main features of «Progressive» curricula are outlined in Appendices 1 and 2. Within the «traditional» curriculum, training a teacher is fairly straightforward. The teacher candidates need a certain level of knowledge and the teacher trainer is really only required to impart effective techniques for the efficient dissemination of that knowledge to pupils. Consideration of moral, social and cultural values; political and ideological positions; and interpersonal relations within the classroom, not to mention the world beyond the classroom, are of little or no interest in the traditional curriculum because learning the language is seen as an end in itself. The «progressive» approach on the other hand puts primary emphasis on cultural themes, secondary focus on learning how to learn and even less focus on «units of language». The overall goal of «progressive» curricula (such as task-based learning and process-oriented syllabi) is to stimulate new thought and perception rather than simply taking-in and exchanging existing ideas about the world. Students are seen as individuals who have capacities for intellectual, emotional, and social interaction which are seen to develop through the process of experiencing language by doing. Knowledge is not external to learners but it emerges from them with the end result being the enabling of students to learn how to learn on their own (Dendrinis, 1992).

Given the ideology behind the new curriculum and its imminent implementation, how should teacher education/development programs proceed? Clearly, if the proposed ideology behind the new curriculum is to be honored, then a great deal of re-thinking about how and why we educate teachers the way we do needs to be done. If we approach this curricular reform from a «traditionalists» position (which could very easily happen in my opinion) the contradictions are obvious, and the reform, in its strong form, would no doubt fail. How can that scenario be avoided? In my search for answers I came across some interesting solutions including one of my own which led me to the idea of «Beyond the Basics Without the Basics».

For me, the «basics» of the new curriculum for both pre-service and in-service teacher development are not so much new classroom techniques and procedures but the underlying

theoretical rationale represented by the topics in Appendix 2. The understanding of these ideas is the «basics» one must have in order to carry out this new curriculum. The belief in the action these topics represent is the first step in thinking about language education reform. I feel teachers-to-be must become aware of and ultimately experience these notions before they/we will have the intrinsic motivation to move away from a «traditional» approach to education toward a «progressive» one. In other words, to implement a progressive curriculum without raising the awareness of those who will teach it, as well as those who are supposed to learn from it, is going beyond the basics without the basics.

Teachers working from a «progressive» approach in the United States and Europe seem to have come to do so over the past ten to fifteen years through a gradual process of creative thinking about their teaching and as a result, they have arrived at certain realizations. Realizations, for them, that suggest non-traditional approaches are more fulfilling from the students' point of view as well as from that of the teachers'. However, ten years makes for rather long course at university for a teacher development program. Using time-saving «traditional» transmission techniques to explain the new curriculum is in direct opposition to the ideology the reform is meant to engender. How then to teach the reform? One of the main sources for the new curriculum, Legutke and Thomas (1991), suggest that pre-service teachers should not be «trained» but should be allowed to experience «progressive» approaches as a means of raising teacher awareness:

«...teachers presently engaged in process-oriented teaching are themselves breaking new ground and learning by doing. Generalized models of learning do not exist and, we stress,...should not. This is an area of difficulty for pre-service education in particular, which would need to take into account the criteria and selection of tasks for learning and the facilitation of the learning process...»

(LEGUTKE & THOMAS, 1990 p. 266)

White, 1988 points out that a process syllabus eliminates the need for a core textbook. Therefore, the teacher's resources must be greatly extended in order to quickly find materials which are adequate, relevant and do-able. So there is not much to hold on to: lesson plan recipes do not exist (and should not); learning outcomes are not pre-determined; grammar sequences are out the window. Developing a pre-service course using an experiential framework (such as Legutke & Thomas suggest) which can convincingly introduce student teachers to the ideology of a «progressive» approach and prepare them for the rigors of classroom management in the 80 hours allotted English didactics, is, putting it mildly, unreasonable.

Most students who have completed the «Licenciatura» have been exposed to «Traditional» ideology. If it is true that our experiences as students influences our views of teaching (and it seems to be the case — Edlehoff, 1989), then teacher development programs would benefit from courses or a course in the «Licenciatura» taught from an experiential learning approach. In other words, the approach to learning how to teach should mirror the process of learning suggested by the curricular reform. The following sequence has been suggested (Breen, et.al, 1989): 1) training as transmission leading to: 2) training as problem- solving; leading to: 3) training as classroom decision-making and investigation:

«...the role of teacher education is now not to deliver sacred principles to a grateful profession but to facilitate change by helping teachers to become self-directing and researchers of their own work.»

(BREEN, et.al 1989)

This is exactly what the curricular reform is asking of secondary school students. We have a new curriculum, we have a two-year teacher development program mandated to honor the new

curriculum, we have a «Licenciatura». What we lack at the University of Lisbon is a course where potential candidates for the «Bienio» can experience for themselves the approach they will be asked to teach (stages 2 and 3 in Breen's sequence). Filling that gap with an optional Fourth-year course «Introduction to Curricular Reform» or (some such title) is my own solution to Beyond the Basics Without the Basics. Many proposals have been made for improving teacher education. Some involve raising admission standards or creating entry tests and so on, but these «derive from the same logic that inspires the notion that we could have better prisons if we had better prisoners» (Evertson et al p.2.). Rather, a pre-professional course in the fourth-year of the «Licenciatura» would give future teachers the background necessary to make sense of the teaching experience they will encounter in the «Bienio». Such a course would develop a reflective process-oriented view rather than reinforce a transmission-based one which they have probably been pre-programmed to accept. In such a course, students would be asked to deal with the problems of implementing curriculum reform and related classroom procedures, materials development, task sequencing and in turn develop viable solutions while at the same time raising their awareness of the principles of «progressive» approaches to language learning and teaching.

To see if the student body had any interest in this idea, I asked third, fourth and fifth students whether or not they would take (would have taken) a fourth-year option course in English as an introduction to language teaching (Appendix 3). One hundred and two responded to the questionnaire sent out in June, 1995 by means of their respective English teachers (many thanks, Dave, Joaquim, John, and Tania). Seventy-seven percent of those indicating they wanted to enter the «Bienio» said they would take such a course as an option in the fourth-year. Interestingly enough, when asked if they had had any courses in the «Licenciatura» dealing specifically with learning how to teach a foreign language, the response for all third, fourth and fifth-year students was a resounding NO of 100%.

CONCLUSION

For curricular reform to be successfully implemented in the manner in which it is intended, in-service teachers and pre-service teachers must understand the nature of the curriculum reform they have been asked to enact. And to do that they must experience the approach to learning the reform entails for themselves. Only when this happens will teachers have the basics they need for going beyond the basics.

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Appendix 1

THE NATURE OF PROGRESSIVE CURRICULA

Students are actively involved in defining course content.

Language cannot be learned apart from its culture.

There is no pre-specified sequence for tasks or grammar.

Learning and evaluation do not have to be in discrete units.

Development of critical thinking is primary in education. ⁽¹⁾

Task-based: a series of activities and tasks of a realistic, communicative nature which involve learners in negotiative learning processes the outcomes of which may be different for different groups or individual learners. Aims: to promote experiential learning and learning how to learn. ⁽²⁾

PEDAGOGICAL GOAL OF PROGRESSIVE CURRICULA

To promote learning experiences and individual development within the social context of the classroom, where out-of-school social experiences are considered important, and to enable pupils to create wider networks or personal relationships. ⁽²⁾

ROLES OF PUPIL AND TEACHER IN PROGRESSIVE CURRICULA

Pupils as «subjects with voice» who are to negotiate meanings.

Teachers as facilitators of learning, as negotiator of subject — matter content and process, as responder to learners' needs and as encourager of learner responsibility. ⁽²⁾

FORM OF ASSESSMENT IN PROGRESSIVE CURRICULA

To assist learners to reflect upon their own learning processes and products, and to promote capacities for self-evaluation. ⁽²⁾

CRITIQUE

Negative Aspects: «The design lacks systematic materials, detailed goals, and prespecified objectives, thus requiring a large fund of resources as well as great flexibility and linguistic skill on the part of the teacher...The integration of language learning and cultural investigation requires careful treatment so that one supports, rather overwhelms, the other.» p. 128. ⁽¹⁾

Positive Aspects: Problem-posing/task-based education is process-oriented. The aims are to develop critical thinking and the ability to synthesize. It takes a social posture toward learning and centers on culture. Language learning emerges from negotiated topics which creates a real need to communicate in the target language. This feature forestalls motivational problems and places language learning within a cultural framework. Problem-posing/task-based approaches provide a purposefulness from the students' vantage point for language learning activities. ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Adapted from: Crawford-Lange, L. 1987. «Curricular Alternatives for Second-Language Learning». In: M. Long and J. Richards (eds.), 1987. *METHODOLOGY IN TESOL: A BOOK OF READINGS*. New York: Newbury House.

⁽²⁾ Rather freely adapted from: Dendrinos, B. 1992. *THE EFL TEXTBOOK AND IDEOLOGY*. Athens: N. C. Grivas Publications.

Appendix 2

THE NATURE OF TRADITIONAL CURRICULA

Defines course content for students.

Language can be taught apart from its culture.

Pre-specifies objectives and their sequence.

Focuses on discrete item mastery and evaluation methods.

Acquisition of knowledge is the primary aim of education. ⁽¹⁾

Content-driven: the content is derived from an analysis of the linguistic system divided into its constituent parts. Aims: to transmit dominant values, attitudes and behaviors. ⁽²⁾

PEDAGOGICAL GOAL OF TRADITIONAL CURRICULA

To promote conscious understanding of rules behind surface phenomena, and to control their reapplication in new contexts. ⁽²⁾

ROLES OF PUPILS AND TEACHERS IN TRADITIONAL CURRICULA

Pupils as «objects with ears» to whom legitimate knowledge is transmitted. ⁽²⁾

Teacher as instructor, as model native speaker, as transmitter of predefined skills; in some cases, teacher as organizer and manager of learning experiences predetermined in advance. ⁽²⁾

FORM OF ASSESSMENT IN TRADITIONAL CURRICULA

To create rank-order of merit among high and low achievers. ⁽²⁾

CRITIQUE

Positive Aspects: A traditional curriculum is best suited for students with analytical learning styles. The segmented sequences of language may allow for rapid learning of certain structures/functions for specific purposes (such as reading an instruction manual or ordering a meal). The “rational” sequencing of language allows for quick materials development and relative ease in planning course syllabi. ⁽¹⁾

Negative Aspects: Traditional curricula are limited in their lack of opportunities for group and/or social use of language. They tend to ignore the socio-cultural aspects of language. Language learning is seen as an end in itself rather than as a means to further communication and understanding. ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Adapted from: Crawford-Lange, L. 1987. «Curricular Alternatives for Second-Language Learning». In: M. Long and J. Richards (eds.), 1987. *METHODOLOGY IN TESOL: A BOOK OF READINGS*. New York: Newbury House.

⁽²⁾ Rather freely adapted from: Dendrinos, B. 1992. *THE EFL TEXTBOOK AND IDEOLOGY*. Athens: N. C. Grivas Publications.

Appendix 3

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

3rd Year n=61

	no		yes	
1)	37	.61	24	.39
2)	53	.87	7	.13
3)	56	.92	5	.08
4)	61	1.0	0	.00
5)	48	.79	13	.21
6)	31	.51	25	.41
8)	4	.06	(1?)	.25 .41

4th Year n=35

1)	16	.46	19	.54
2)	26	.74	8	.26
3)	25	.71	10	.29
4)	35	1.0	0	.00
5)	20	.57	15	.43
6)	19	.54	(3?)	16 .46
8)	11	.31	24	.69

3rd & 4th Total n=96

1)	53	.55	43	.45
2)	79	.82	15	.16
3)	81	.84	15	.16
4)	96	1.0	0	.00
5)	68	.71	28	.29
6)	50	.55	(3?)	41 .45
8)	15	.23	(1?)	49 .77

(% by number of respondents)

5th-Year «Would have taken...» n=6

	No	Yes
2	.33	4 .66

3rd 4th & 5th-year total n=102

