

TIME FOR A CHANGE?

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

Over the years, hearing inklings from former students concerning the differences between what is taught at the Lisbon Faculty of Letters and «real» teaching in secondary school, we decided to go straight to the crux of the matter and ask recent graduates currently in their first years of teaching to reflect on their educational experience leading to a teaching certificate. This reflection was to be in light of their current teaching experience in Portuguese schools. In other words, we felt the need to find out just where our training programme hit the mark and where it could be improved, and there was no better way than by asking our former trainees to share their on-the-job experience with us.

Aside from the content, the paper itself presents a simple model for other teachers and trainers to use in order to investigate aspects of their own programmes. The basic idea, as mentioned above, is to get feedback from our 'clients' a year or so after they leave the training course. This implies keeping in touch with graduates who go into teaching as well as generating a clear 'this is not another survey, João' kind of environment. In our case all seven of us prepared the first version of this talk for an International House symposium in Lisbon in March '98, in which the graduates themselves presented their ideas. The present paper takes a closer look at what came up for discussion and attempts to organize the points and suggestions raised so that a clearer picture may be had of what trainees wanted and expected to get out of their two-year post-graduate training course.

First of all, we will be looking at the design and content of the two-year training course (commonly referred to as the *Biénio*) in order to place the current situations of the five graduates whose self-report data makes up the paper. Before going on to give a wide-angle survey of the common themes from the five individual papers, a brief description of the situations in which the five teachers find themselves will follow. Finally, their

suggestions for change in the *LMM Licenciatura*, the *Biénio* and schools themselves will be given.

Brief description of the FLUL 2-year post-graduate teacher training course

When receiving their training, our five young teachers would have had a first year (known as the «fifth year») composed of five subjects, of which three were common subjects shared by Modern Language and Literature no matter what their language combinations were. Up to the 1997-98 academic year, these three subjects, Curriculum Development, Theory of Education and Educational Psychology were allotted 2 hours a week each on an annual basis.* The other two subjects, based on Foreign Language and/or Portuguese Didactics were and will continue to be annual and receive the largest slice of the timetable - 4 hours a week each.

The approach to all subjects in the 1st year of the *Biénio* has always tended to be theoretical although, speaking for English Language Didactics, over the years intensive theoretical input has been dropped in favour of a largely practical approach based on peer-teaching (for want of «real» high-school students). A look at the programmes offered in the *Biénio* by various trainers (mostly university staff, due to previous Ministerial policy that obliged specially contracted school-teachers involved in FLUL training to return to their schools) shows that most subjects are given according to individual criteria. It is enough to compare programmes of the same subject given by two or three trainers to see that contents and materials differ greatly and, indeed, might have little or nothing to do with each other. English Language Didactics has attempted to streamline the theoretical part of its course to the bare essentials. It is also true that where Educational Psychology is concerned, the agreement between the FLUL and Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science has produced a more cohesive, although still heavily theoretical, course running along the latter Faculty's approach to teacher training. Up to now, there has been no subject dealing with the social, cultural and organizational aspects of learning in today's school.

Owing to the fact that most subjects have a marked theoretical bias and very few hours a week reserved for trainee-trainer interchange of ideas, the lecture type of lesson prevails and depends almost exclusively on the written text. Compulsory bibliographical reading is therefore heavy. Of late,

however, (too late for our five young teachers) there has been an attempt to introduce trainees to the advantages of using new technology at school and, in a very few cases, allowing them to observe classes - if not in the schools themselves, then at least on video.

The second year of the *Biénio* (called the «6th year») for those lucky enough to find a place in a school where school boards and local individual supervisors (*orientadores*) are willing to work in liason with FLUL coordinators, entails teaching two classes, one for each language, between the 7th and the 9th grades. So far, particularly with regard to some language combinations such as Portuguese and English, filling the number of vacancies at school has been strictly controlled, thus giving rise to an extremely competitive, individualistic spirit among trainees and demanding a minimum platform of high marks (based on the combined average of *licenciatura* and 5th year marks).

Once in a school, the trainee draws a salary for the 2 classes s/he teaches. The lessons given at school are supposed to be supervised at each step by the local supervisors who should also see that the trainees' introduction to school life is relatively smooth-going. Although training concentrates on the 3rd cycle, the trainees are also asked to plan and sometimes teach three or four lessons in each language at upper school level (10th to 12th grades). Contact with the FLUL is kept up through weekly seminars held by the university coordinators (fortnightly in each language) and ideally, are destined to link up theory and practice. Trainees are expected to get through reading material, carry out studies and hand in «projects» apart from giving their classes and doing work to be inspected by their own local supervisor. Some but not all coordinators observe trainees' lessons at school. Similar to what happens in the 5th year, the programmes followed by individual coordinators in the 6th year are very varied, depending on the coordinator's own view of foreign language learning at school and what sort of relationship has been forged with the local supervisors and the school itself. Meetings between the coordinators and school supervisors take place periodically and both try to agree on the mark awarded the trainee at the end of the course.

Feedback Source - The Teachers

We invited 5 former trainees who had studied English Language Didactics with us in the 5th year (the first year of the teacher training course).

They all graduated from the *Biénio* with good marks (15 and over) and have been teaching for either one or two years in the Greater Lisbon Metropolitan Area. This means schools located in the outlying dormitory suburbs of mostly working class areas like Barreiros and Corroios on the southern side of the River, and Amadora and Odivelas to the north of Lisbon.

All teachers stressed the fact that there were many social and economic problems in these environments which reflected upon their students' response to the FL class and behaviour to a greater or lesser degree.

The 5 teachers had full timetables; some of them had up to 8 different classes ranging from the 7th to the 11th grade, and in two cases, teachers had 200 and 250 students apiece, while the other 3 averaged around 150 students each.

Our invitation was readily accepted and generated quite a lot of interesting discussion. After considering a number of general issues, each of them decided to write about a topic of particular relevance to their experience. The topics covered fields as different as: Cultural studies, The School and Community, Classroom Management, Discipline and Motivation Strategies. What follows is a summary of the points raised in each of their individual reports.

Specific Problems raised by the teachers

A depressingly large number of problems were raised which seemed to cover every possible angle of school and Faculty life. Despite the confines imposed by each of the topics, the problems nevertheless seemed to flow from specific into more general issues and in many cases, were repeated in the different reports although in different guises. It was therefore possible to see that the teachers were really raising two main issues into which a number of different questions fitted fairly neatly.

The art of survival at school - a form of cultural shock

All the teachers experienced a form of cultural shock upon going into schools for the first time and teaching their 2 classes under the sporadic attention of their supervisors during the 6th year of the *Biénio*. However, the intensity of their shock was heightened when they had qualified as teachers and were left alone with numerous classes of different grades for the

first time. They had to adapt from a rarefied diet of **high culture** in the foreign language given over the 4 years of their *Licenciatura* degree course, as well as the 2nd year *Biénio*, to the demands of a lower, more realistic approach to culture demanded by the their pupils, the school curricula and the community. The British version of Standard Language and the annals of British and US Literature and Culture they had come into contact with at the Faculty were now forced to take a back seat, particularly in the 3rd cycle, although they gained new significance in the upper school as from the 10th grade.

Moreover, the **theorising of the *Biénio*** mostly failed to give them practical advice about how to cope with daily reality in and out of the classroom at school. The theoretical subjects failed to indicate to new teachers, how they were supposed to deal with their heavy administrative duties, for example; or how they were supposed to distinguish between the teaching curricula of the foreign language as a first or second option.

The little peer teaching opportunities given in their 5th year (and not in all language didactics classes) was not enough to show them how to deal with **large, mixed ability classes** where desks were often screwed into the floor and adequate classroom conditions and support materials were almost non-existent. The fact that, more often than not, trainees had little or no chance to go into the schools themselves to observe more experienced teachers' lessons and perhaps give a couple of trial lessons themselves before the 2nd and final year of the *Biénio*, compounded their confusion and inability to deal with certain classroom situations on various occasions.

In as much as access to **new technology** was lacking both at the Faculty during their *Licenciatura* courses and in the *Biénio*, despite the fact that the new school programmes encourage multimedia studies, so the tyranny of the text book was perpetuated. It is only with great difficulty and courage that young teachers are able to deal with their school text books objectively and selectively when they see that their classes are unable to keep up or when they become disinterested in the book.

Another aspect of cultural shock that seemed be prevalent among most of the former trainees, was not knowing how to cope with the **school's particular administrative and bureaucratic procedures**. Neither were they able to cope with the never-ending stream of new dictates and laws issuing from the Ministry of Education. Suddenly, these new teachers who had scarcely begun their own careers were asked to take stands on yet another change in legislation affecting their own, their students' and their

schools' futures. Just to name a few of these new measures, there are the new rules deciding on teacher promotion, on how to deal with students' misbehaviour and on real school autonomy.

In other words, the **change in status** from being students themselves and having to cross the line to become teachers was a difficult transition to make - even after having completed a two-year training period. Not only did they have to think about and prepare all the steps leading to successful classroom activity but they also had to deal with all the incumbent school activity, too. This meant having to make a decision about how much effort (and sacrifice) they were willing to make to become efficient, dedicated teachers. In some cases, especially for those with more than 200 students, there was no choice if they wanted to keep on teaching. For the first time, young teachers also had to cope almost alone with students who had learning problems. This meant dealing with students and their families who came from deprived or troubled backgrounds. It also meant facing up to students who were unruly, disruptive and disinterested not only in foreign language learning, but also in school life itself.

This last aspect of cultural shock - the undisciplined, disinterested student - was the most serious problem the new teachers had to face and to a greater or lesser extent, was mentioned in all reports.

The problem of motivation

Lack of discipline as a result of disinterest in what was going on in the language class was viewed as a real dilemma particularly as new teachers felt they had not been given the full picture of what to expect when they were doing their training course. Again, the *Biénio's* failure to allow trainees to attend real classes in a real school was pin-pointed as one of the main causes.

Teachers were quite right to insist that motivation in its various forms was the answer to many problems both inside and outside the classroom. Central to motivation came the idea of **autonomy**. Not only the students' autonomy but also the teachers' in the way they were able to solve their own problems. Fundamental to the concept of autonomy is the ability to provide learners (whoever they may be) with the tools to make them aware of their learning processes. This generally is achieved through providing them with information and conditions that will help them to elaborate their own strategies leading to decision-making about what they want to learn and how they want to go about it.

One of the points made about providing information, was about finding ways into the **realm of culture from a student perspective**; this meant presenting culture that would somehow make sense to students in the first instance. Once this was established, it was argued, other avenues leading to other (higher) levels of culture could be pursued. The *Licenciatura*, it was alleged, had never really faced the everyday culture of the mundane world so that the gap between what school children related to and what the syllabus wanted them to do was abysmal. But although the newly qualified teachers recognised that the *Biénio* sought teach them how to bridge this gap to a greater or lesser extent, the emphasis was still on high culture.

In the same way, there was a great difference between classroom **management theories** and peer-teaching practice in small, ideal groups of teacher-trainees and the need to manage large classes of real students in a school when doing task completion and problem solving exercises. While agreeing with the ideology underlying new arrangements of the classroom space because they are seen to be motivating, the teachers found they were hard put to carry out such ideas in practice. As motivating as group work may be, it either fails to work because of deficient classroom conditions or risks disciplinary problems because of the teacher's inexperience and the students' initial inability to accept responsibility and get on with the job, thus becoming more autonomous.

One of the major difficulties in motivating students, the teachers found, was due to **large classes of mixed ability** where it was almost impossible to encourage differentiated learning. They had no problem in agreeing with the theoretical premises of the new programmes which are founded on concepts of process learning. This means that ideally, each learner has to acquire knowledge in his/her own idiosyncratic way, developing his/her own learning strategies and become responsible for his/her intellectual progress. Nevertheless, they felt that the *Biénio* failed to offer trainees the means needed to enhance individualistic process learning, perhaps because there are no particular formulae to start off with and real-life opportunities to experiment with such measures in a real class do not exist.

The lack of ability to deal with **individual students' learning styles** and interests when teachers took over their own classes was deemed responsible for a fall in the level of motivation of groups of students in a class or of the entire class itself. Young teachers simply did not have the time or the expertise to diagnose each student's learning rhythms and processes aiming at optimum in-take/out-put. Instead, they either appealed to

what they themselves judged to be a standard pattern of learning style, or what seemed to indicate the existence of a general monolithic pattern of learning style. This meant that students with overtly idiosyncratic ways of learning that failed to conform to the usual school-trained norms of conceptualisation, or students with learning problems, or students who were completely disinterested in what was happening in the classroom did not receive special attention or individual remedial work.

Linked to **differentiated learning** was the notion each school-student had of the foreign language and its usefulness. While all the teachers in the study felt that the **new programmes** had some very worthwhile ideas and targets, they also thought that it was unworkable because it was too vast. Given the real situations at school with large numbers of mixed-ability classes and a general lack of motivation on the part of the students, it was difficult to follow the syllabus very closely. Gaps in the students' knowledge, sometimes growing increasingly wider every year, made it so that teachers either had to go back all the time and cover basic material yet again or press on regardless. This obviously meant the risk of losing what little they had of the students' interest and motivation: the more able students might be dismayed to find themselves repeating sections of the syllabus and less able students could be discouraged at what they thought was an overly fast pace.

While teachers wanted a better link up between **the school text book** and the language tasks prescribed in it and the nature of the children's interests, it was also thought in some cases that the whole approach teachers had to foreign language teaching at school tended to be somewhat **traditional and based on routine procedures** - contrary to the policy laid down in the new programmes. Students fell easily into this routine as well. They were asked to study for the sake of study and it was no wonder motivation often reached a depressingly low ebb. The teachers in the study were pleased that their training course had opened up new avenues of approaches to language learning but at the same time they were aware of the fact that they still had to pull students out of their lethargy and try to excite a more positive response to these new learning and teaching methods. Although the five young teachers felt confident about their ability to escape the tyranny of the textbook, they felt frustrated that many students were also caught up in routines and reacted childishly to some of the new materials and procedures being offered them. New types of text, forms of classroom management (group work) and autonomous project work were met with incredulity and open invitations to misbehave.

The one new approach that seemed to have gained the unanimous approval of both students and newly-qualified teachers alike was, unfortunately, hard to put into practice. The teachers complained that **new technology**, the current buzz word in education, had been ignored during both their *Licenciatura* courses and the *Biénio*. With many schools now on the Internet and many of the younger teachers in possession of their own PCs, they felt they would have profited greatly from guidance on how to use the multimedia for their lessons rather than find out themselves by trial and error. It was also felt that new technology provided a major rallying point for students and cut down on disinterest while encouraging autonomy and responsibility in learning. Nevertheless, the teachers also complained that depending on the schools, the Computer Room - like the Library - existed on paper, and the blackboard, chalk, book and occasional video were the only resources available to them. It should be pointed out that new technology is not enough in itself. It should be accessible, workable and available to both teachers and their students.

With the school's recently acquired «autonomous status», the same confusion and lack of knowing how to invest in this new-found independence has become apparent. Young teachers complained that, like the world of new technology, **the community** and all it has to offer may be an excellent way of motivating students and involving them in greater responsibility for their own learning, but is, as yet, an unknown quantity. Teachers do not know how to go about taking advantage of the link up to the community in order to make their teaching more meaningful and the foreign language more user-friendly. The *Biénio*, they suggested, could have run workshops where outside specialists could have been brought in to inform, suggest and offer cooperation. It is generally felt that a closer link with the community would definitely lead to improved motivation and therefore less unruliness in class.

The over-riding concern of the 5 newly qualified teachers, therefore, was centred on learning **ways to capture students' interest** thereby improving their motivation and their chance of success at school. All the topics they chose to write about pulled towards this pivot and all agreed that not only the *Biénio* but also the Faculty and the school had failed in many ways to appreciate its importance. Aware that there are no ready formulae available to solve the general disinterest prevalent in schools today, the teachers nevertheless felt that if a real teaching environment had been made available in the *Biénio* with trainees' being allowed to make their own

observations of lessons and conduct their own closely supervised micro-teaching sessions in the school itself, many of their questions would have been answered more easily.

Summing up ideas

Three kinds of change seem to be implied here: changes in the undergraduate degree, changes in the *Biénio* and changes in the schools themselves.

1. Changes in *LLM Licenciatura*:

At undergraduate level, a wider range of optional subjects which would include studying such things as:

- current types of English(es) using authentic texts and new technology;
- the interdisciplinary link up of language - the uses of English in particular in new technology as well as in other school subjects (e.g. geography, economics, science);
- low and high culture expressed through the language;
- an optional introductory course to TEFL in the 4th year for students wishing to enter a teaching career (including language awareness study for future teachers).

2. Changes in the *Biénio* curricula and organisation:

These changes would be designed to meet the demands of current situations at school and would necessarily mean:

- practical micro and macro-teaching sessions in real classes with real students during the 5th year as well as observation of classes at school already included in some but not all classes);
- experienced teachers from secondary schools invited to give workshops in the 5th year *Biénio*;
- if not in the 5th year, then at least in the 6th year of the *Biénio*, the administrative routines and practices affecting a teacher's life and the teacher-student-school-community network of relationships needs to be examined and explained.
- better focus on immediate needs of trainees (i.e. answering to a practi-

cal nature) rather than theory for medium and long term use - hopefully this does not mean replacing theory for prescriptive «how to do it» lesson planning;

- better focus on how to take advantage of the new technology available at schools today (a *Biénio* resource centre would be useful here).

3. Changes in the schools themselves

These changes could be made through:

- questioning educational outlooks, and examining the reasons why students are asked to learn a FL;
- setting realistic learning goals in a well-adjusted feasible syllabus;
- organisational procedures leading to better classroom motivation, adequate classroom management and promoting responsibility in learning while reducing the risk of poor discipline;
- information to new teachers about how to deal with their duties inside and outside the classroom;
- regular recycling courses keeping teachers abreast of new approaches, methods and techniques in FL teaching;
- more stability in the life of the school and the teaching profession whereby the new laws and directives handed down by the Ministry of Education are feasible/workable and lie within the schools' resources - i.e. do not disrupt the smooth running of schools (e.g. new laws about discipline, organisational autonomy, new school programmes, etc.);
- streamlining the paperwork (including reading up about official policy directives) the new teacher has to deal with during the school year as the volume is so great that is often poorly done or neglected;
- the more efficient involvement of the community in school and university affairs as education and the training of future citizens involves everyone, not only teachers and students.

Conclusion

What our former trainees have said about the programme and their professional experience in schools gives us a start in understanding what we need to address in the immediate and long term future in the *Licenciatura*, the *Biénio* and local schools and communities. Our graduates' reflections

are sometimes rather dark and gloomy but the suggestions for improvement they make are, however, not only bright and reasonably cheery but also imminently 'do-able' given the will and power to implement them. In brief, the own one-sentence statements summarizing their papers say it all:

- "Cultural studies should include, not exclude."
- In terms of school and community, "Being a successful teacher isn't only being able to plan and give lessons; it is also being able to relate to the community and survive the red tape."
- As for Classroom management, "The *Biénio* is too far removed from reality: trainees should get «hands on» experience in real schools."
- Regarding discipline, "The *Biénio* should also utilise trainers who have Portuguese secondary school experience."
- And for motivation, "Changing the order of activities can naturally motivate students and make them accomplish tasks successfully; i.e., reach the main goals of the lesson."

Addressing these issues in our courses through «band-aid» solutions would only last a short time, if at all. Of course, further study is absolutely necessary. Broader, longer-term surveys including a wider sample would shed new light on what is right with our programme and what is terminally wrong with it... However, it would seem evident from the comments of our five former 'clients' that real change is needed. We would do well to remember that progress can only come about through deep-seated changes in the way we see the role of education, teaching, learning and what happens in-between. A first step is finding out what the problems are.

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Silva, Patrícia Oliveira da, «Class Management».

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The system is to be changed as from 1998-99, when they will be delivered in 3-hour slots in semesters.

