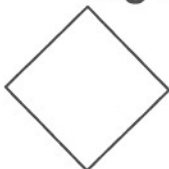


An interdisciplinary approach to teaching in Portuguese Higher Education



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This article sets out to examine course design and methodological approaches for teaching in the context of Portuguese Higher Education. The paper takes as its starting point a small-scale ethnographic action-research study which examined the sociocultural contexts of both English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms and Portuguese 'content' classrooms in a Portuguese private university. The investigation was originally carried out in order to inform the ESP course design and teaching methodology which was in practice at that time. Although the study did indeed throw light on the ESP teaching practice, it also, almost inadvertently, raised questions concerning university teaching methodology in general.

First of all, it would seem appropriate to describe the background to this small-scale study. I am a British teacher who has taught ESP for over eight years in Portuguese Higher Education and who has co-coordinated and designed a wide variety of courses, including English for Journalism, Economics, International Relations, Communication Sciences, Business Management, Tourism, Construction Engineering, Architecture and Computer Studies at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. ESP is a subject area which completely lacks any curriculum planning or policy decisions at ministerial level in Portugal (e.g. what does *Inglês II* for Business Studies or Marketing mean in Evora, Coimbra or Lisbon? what criteria, course objectives, language levels or specialised teaching qualifications are required to run these courses?). There are, therefore, no recognised guidelines as to course design or teaching methodology. In response to this uncertainty and lack of clarity, I, with my colleague (B. Trayner), have been developing a methodological approach which is intended to be not only relevant to the immediate, academic needs of the Portuguese undergraduate, but also to their future, international professional needs. Taking

these fundamental requirements into consideration has, in fact, direct implications on course design. It means that a methodological approach to ESP must, at the very least, be designed to be **interdisciplinary** (English for...) and **cognitively and contextually appropriate** both to the present reality of the students (in Portuguese Higher Education) and to the particular requirements of their future professions (in the international professional context).

With an interdisciplinary, cognitively and contextually appropriate outlook on the role of ESP in Portuguese Higher Education, it becomes practically impossible to consider the wholesale adoption of any *global coursebook*, published and marketed from Britain or the USA, as the basis of university level course design in a European context. In other words 'General English approaches + technical vocabulary' = 'Business English' (or '*Inglês Empresarial*') is a formula which is hardly sensitive either to the culture in which it is taught or to the students' present and future needs. Not only is the use of such a coursebook coming under question nowadays (Tomlinson 1998; Thornbury 1998), but so also is the automatic assumption that the teaching methodologies originating from Britain, North America and Australasia (BANA) are uncritically and universally applicable to all teaching / learning contexts (Holliday 1994:12). In particular, Holliday calls attention to the need for carrying out ethnographic action-research in order to design culturally sensitive courses with appropriate methodologies (p.12). Furthermore, from the perspective of the cognitive value of current tendencies to produce coursebook teaching materials which predominantly emphasise grammatical forms, Grady (cited in Thornbury 1998:19) points out that they represent "all types of issues and all types of discourse as not requiring much thought or action beyond the decision as to the appropriate grammatical structure". In this way, "grammar effectively sanitises and trivialises learning" (Thornbury 1998:19) and, once again, fails to prepare undergraduates for the communicative and the cognitive needs not only of Higher Education, but also of the international workplace. This methodological debate seriously challenges the automatic, uncritical adoption of any 'global' coursebook or BANA -oriented methodologies and raises, at the very least, two issues:

1. the need for a serious consideration of the kind of thinking required in Higher Education and the consequent evaluation of the course design and teaching methodologies in order to verify if such thinking is, in fact, explicitly encouraged,
2. the importance of knowing what communication types and processes are actually necessary in order to function effectively as a Portuguese professional in the international business world.

In this article I will only examine the first question, leaving the second for another issue of the journal.

In the small-scale action research investigation which I carried out two years ago, I chose to focus on "the problems of intellectual adjustment to a new intellectual culture" (Ballard 1996:150) of the students of both ESP and Portuguese 'content' classes in the private university where I was teaching. My first reason for choosing to examine both the English and Portuguese "cultures of learning" was to consider the cross-cultural influences on the "taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach and learn" (Cortazzi and Jin 1996:169) within the context of Portuguese Higher Education. Another reason for my choice was that this "problem" of adjustment to a new intellectual culture was common to both the English and the Portuguese classroom cultures. Lastly, in the spirit of action-research, I hoped to evaluate how effectively the methodological approach we were developing at that time was meeting the needs of the Portuguese undergraduates in this particular respect.

Data collection took the form of the observation and filming of four, one-hour, 'theoretical-practical' classes (two ESP classes: English for Communication Sciences and English for International Relations; and two Portuguese 'content' classes: Communication Law and International Economics). I carried out semi-structured interviews with the teachers of both the English and the Portuguese classes, as well as two groups of students (one from the Communication Sciences course and the other from the International relations course) who had attended one English and one Portuguese class from their respective courses. I also collected data from questionnaires (a total of 42 respondents) from the students who had attended the classes. For the purposes of this paper I will summarise only those findings which are of direct relevance to the action-research and the consequent insights for teaching methodologies, omitting the more detailed description concerning the sociocultural influences at socio-political and educational levels. To that end, I will now describe in more detail the methodological approach which I wished to evaluate in the terms of adaptation to a new intellectual culture.

The target project framework

The educative approach of this ESP course design centres on the students carrying out one semestral, *target project* (in the sense of practical relevance to

present and future needs), which forms the *framework* for context, tasks, linguistic form, lexis, meaning and evaluation throughout the term. This 'target project framework' (TPF) is set in the context of the subject area and simulates the kind of **communication practice** required in the target professional community (e.g. report writing / giving a presentation) for a **specific purpose** and **international audience** (e.g. designing an international marketing strategy for the university / representing the economic interests of a country at Expo 98 to potential investors / managing progress reports on a foreign client's ten million escudo investment), using relevant **communication** and **information management skills** (e.g. searching for, evaluating selecting and summarising information from authentic texts from CNN or Internet; transforming data into relevant information; providing a clear rationale for creative ideas or recommendations). Although there are often strong elements of simulation within TPF design, the environment is not necessarily simulated (e.g. the TPF for Journalism involved writing articles for the student magazine based on real interviews with the BBC and Financial Times correspondents in Portugal).

Work throughout the semester is then broken down into *component tasks* which practise the linguistic, analytic, communicative and organisational skills needed to carry out the project and to effectively communicate the students' meaning. This methodology is clearly influenced by a task-based approach where a task is seen as "a goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meanings, not producing specific language forms" (Willis, 1996:36). However, in this ESP model, the task-based learning framework has been extended beyond, but still including, individual task-based activities or lessons to consider the 'specific outcome' as the accumulation of a full term's integrated project work. Therefore, the final project (e.g. report/ presentation/ interview) provides the overall goal for the learning process, the main focus of evaluation and, at the same time, the demonstration of the cumulative expression of the student's individual meaning and sheltered professional identity. In this way, the approach allows for the purposeful and consistent linking of process with product. This methodological approach fits a social constructivist perspective in which knowledge is "essentially constructed by individuals rather than transmitted from one person to another, but which recognises that such constructions always occur within specific contexts, mainly as a result of social interactions" (Williams & Burden 1997:46) and in which the students "perceive the value of the task for themselves and their development" beyond the confines of the classroom (Williams & Burden 1997:204).

Keeping in mind that the TPF approach is designed to be a flexible structure, it is intended to allow the students considerable control (and responsibility!) over their contributions. This sense of ownership, and the practical opportunity to use skills acquired in other subjects (such as, statistical analysis, application of marketing concepts, managing shares or designing questionnaires/surveys) all combine to motivate the individual, creative expression of the students' emerging professional identity on one hand, and to provide an interdisciplinary, professionally relevant learning environment, on the other.

ESP in the Portuguese University context

But there are unavoidable pedagogical implications in the implementation of this approach. The focus of ESP teaching in a university context is different from that of secondary schools or private institutes. According to Ballard, in secondary school teaching in Western societies, we can expect a principally "reproductive" approach in which the teacher "selects and transmits information (...) and the pupils try, through memorisation and imitation, to reproduce what they were taught" (Ballard 1996:152). On the other hand, in an "analytical" approach typical of university education, the teachers try to "guide and challenge the students to develop their own ideas and opinions" (p.152). In the case of secondary language classes, there is a focus on "linguistic accuracy, for correctness in the reproduction and manipulation of language", whereas in university ESP classes, students have "to move beyond a focus on language in its own right to using language as a tool and medium for thinking" (Ballard 1996:148). Therefore, the students are expected to move from a reproductive approach towards applying "independent and analytical styles of thinking" (Ballard 1996:152). Or, in the words of the *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo: 48/86*, they must "develop the capacity for innovation and critical analysis". These cognitive skills, generally expected of students in European universities are traditionally represented by discourse practices associated with "essay-text literacy values, whether in speech or writing (...) that are part of an armoury of concepts conventions and practices" (Street, cited in Gee 1986:180). Adjustment to university culture, therefore, requires mastery of essay text literacy and its various sub-skills, such as "asking questions, discussing various points of view, writing discursive prose and (...) giving 'what' and 'reason' explanations" (Gee 1986:188, italics in the original). As essay-text literacy and its sub-skills are representative of the kind of critical thinking required in university, it is time

now to turn to the results of the study to examine the perspectives of both students and teachers regarding these discourse practices.

Student and Teacher perspectives on discourse practices for critical thinking

The results of the questionnaires concerning the students' expectations of the Portuguese content courses showed that they had simply expected to be given the '*essentials*' and to be able to understand the subject. The students' expectations for the English class stressed '*improvement*' (in general English terms) and hardly made any mention of English in relation with the course.

Significantly, **none** of the students mentioned the need to develop an analytical style of thinking as either objective or expectation for either English or Portuguese classes. On the other hand, Portuguese and English teachers all stressed one of their **primary** course objectives to be:

"mental flexibility"; *"..to think critically"* (Dr. Silva)¹

"mental elasticity" (Dr. Laura)

"being able to critically analyse information given to you"(Peter)

"it's the purpose of a university to teach that kind of thinking" (Mary)

When the teachers were asked what were the students' main difficulties in their courses, all mention problems related to thinking critically, and by implication, following the essay-text conventions of university culture, in particular, discussing points of view, giving explanations or writing discursively.

"They never catch the main idea" and have difficulties in *"discussing their ideas"* (Dr. Laura)

"They want to have everything written out for them from beginning to end" ...and...

"They don't want to think for themselves." (Dr. Silva)

They have difficulties in *"expressing their opinions"* (Mary) and

in *"justifying their opinions"* (Peter)

Both Portuguese and English teachers expressly indicated the difficulties students have in writing the required essays for evaluation, particularly as regards organisation of logical argument. Dr. Silva said that the students *"get lost easily... the idea is there. It just has no head or feet."*

¹ All the names have been changed.

Certainly, the students' school experience of subjects taught in their own language merits some thought. In the words of one of the interviewed students when asked about the exam questions in Dr. Silva's class:

"I have difficulty understanding what they want. Him and others. We arrived here accustomed to secondary school, Face-value questions. You knew straight away what they wanted...definitions and stuff. Here they oblige us to think. (...) If I understood what they wanted, then I would know how to reply".

Now let us look at the classroom interactions to see what opportunities they are given to acquire those skills associated with essay-text literacy. It is worth emphasising at this point that the acquisition of a literacy practice is generally agreed to be a socialising process embedded in particular cultural contexts and that "what is at issue in the use of language is different ways of knowing, different ways of making sense of the world of human experience, that is different social epistemologies" (Gee 1986:182' citing Scollon & Scollon and Heath). Gee goes on to summarise the generally held view that "individuals who have not been socialised into the discourse practices that constitute mainstream, school-based literacy must eventually be socialised into them if they are to acquire them. The component skills of this form of literacy must be practised and one cannot practise a social skill one has not been exposed to or to engage in a social practice one has not been socialised into" (1986:189)

Classroom interactions as socialising processes in the university 'culture of learning'

In terms of the broad discourse structure of the lessons, both the Portuguese classes followed the "basically monologue" pattern of English-speaking university lectures, with an 'interaction phase' (Flowerdew 1994:16) which took place close to the end of the class and which was characterised by strong teacher control with teacher-student interactions only. The English classes did not follow the university lecture pattern, but consisted of a variety of activities typical of BANA private language school patterns: reading; lexical exercises or short writing and speaking tasks. Interaction was not an exclusively teacher-student domain, but allowed for some short speaking activities in pairs or groups.

However, when we look at the actual interactions in the classroom, we find that the opportunities for expression of opinion are comparably low in both classes. Whereas the Portuguese classes often used rhetorical questions, a few

'information questions' requiring factual answers and once asked for the students' opinions, the English teachers used rhetorical questions only once, asked frequent 'information questions' eliciting linguistic and factual information and a very small number of 'opinion questions'. Although the English lessons were characterised by a relatively high number of questions, extremely few questions actually encouraged any expression of opinion. Ballard highlights the use of questions as typifying the "different purposes of speaking" (Ballard 1996:158) between the language classroom and "Western" university discourse. In the language classroom the teacher is likely to pose most of the questions, which are predominantly "clarification of fact" and "game playing", where the emphasis is on the linguistic form of the reply rather than the content. "In few cases will the question be real, in the sense that they are raising matters of substantive content and genuine interest. And in fewer cases will they be probing questions which raise issues, develop ideas and extend the intellectual boundaries of the discourse" (Ballard 1996:158). Such questions were indeed few and far between in the case of both the lectures and the ESP classroom.

The following graph indicating teacher initiated interaction with the students illustrates both the contrast in question types and the lack of explicit encouragement to express opinions or develop ideas.

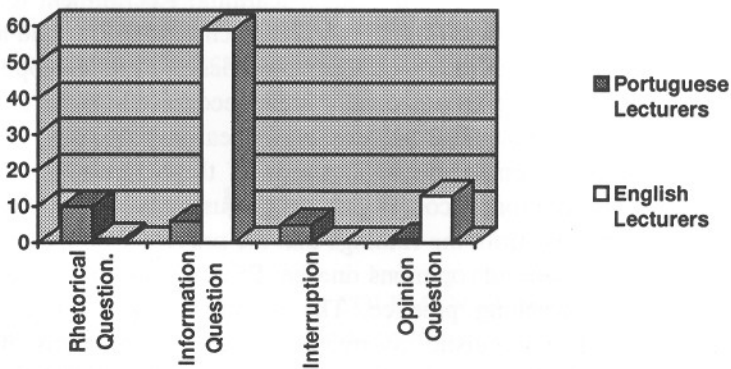


Fig. 1. Teacher initiated interactions

Conclusions

Taking into consideration the results of this small-scale investigation, we can examine the implications, not only for ESP methodology, but also, albeit indirectly, for the teaching methodology of other university subjects. Although these findings are in themselves insufficient evidence to be able to draw any firm conclusions, I believe it would still be valid to suggest that they do indicate a pressing need for future studies into the methodological approaches of Higher Education teaching in general. And if such studies were carried out and showed that students, for whatever sociocultural, educational and historical reasons, do experience difficulties in adapting to the requirements of the university culture of learning, then it may not be enough to merely fret at lowering standards; it may be necessary to consider new methodological approaches in Higher Education. Furthermore, if lecturers, through lack of clear communication in curriculum design or teaching, are also shown to fail to make the criteria of their courses understood by the students, then it may be indicative of a need for inservice pedagogical training in universities. In fact, it may be possible that it is time to pay heed to the OECD Guideline Document for Higher Education Policies on Autonomy and Quality (January 1997) which asserts that teaching is "the single most important function of the tertiary institution and the chief, but not the only means of fostering human learning. Recruitment to an academic career (...) is typically based on research and scholarship (...) and academics are not usually taught anything about curriculum design and development. There is a clear need, now beginning to be widely recognised, to focus more on the enhancement of teaching and new designs for learning" (p. 46).

Let me now turn to the implications of the action-research on the TPF methodological approach concerning the adjustment to the new intellectual culture. It was clear from the findings that the provision of opportunities for the students' expression of opinions in the ESP classroom was by no means integrated into teaching practice. The questions asked were predominantly eliciting factual or linguistic information rather than opinions. It would seem that ESP teaching, however much it may encourage pair or group activities, will be of only limited relevance to the students if it fails to offer course-coherent, professionally and academically relevant opportunities to develop their skills in essay-text literacy by forming, expressing and supporting their opinions. Although the former activities may indeed even be "meaningful", they fall short of being "purposeful" (Williams and Burden 1997: 150). In fact, Ballard, on analysis of the difficulties experienced in training teachers for teaching English for Academic Purposes identified the teachers' resistance to change from the

reproductive to the analytical style of teaching as the most problematic aspect of training. Indeed, she places this change as central to preparing the students on these courses and insists that “one of the most effective ways to change student behaviour is to provide an explicit model of the behaviour”. She goes on to conclude that “if students are to be prepared for an analytic (...) approach to studies, then they must be exposed to this approach through the *teaching* and *assessment styles* of their English language programmes (Ballard 1996:165; my italics).

In practical terms, this interpretation of the results of the action research led to a thorough re-evaluation of the teaching styles and interactions in the classroom. It could no longer be assumed that speaking practice in groups or pairs *per se* was a sufficiently useful contribution to ESP learning. There is, rather, a need to align the communication work to the course objectives in such a way as to provide course-coherent opportunities for expressing and justifying opinions, which implies a conscious move from reproductive to analytical teaching styles. The study has also influenced the framework design itself in that clear criteria, which explicitly contain a critical analysis component, are now provided for both the writing and oral work. Lastly, also reflecting Ballard’s emphasis on assessment styles, part of the process approach to writing and oral work now includes regular peer-evaluation activities in order to encourage an objective understanding of how their work is evaluated.


(See the Appendix for an outline of the TPF for English for International Relations, including the modifications for peer evaluation).

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**APPENDIX: AN EXAMPLE OUTLINE FOR AN
INTERDISCIPLINARY TARGET PROJECT FRAMEWORK**
(one academic semester: ap. 4 months)

COURSE	ENGLISH FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
TARGET PROJECT	<i>You have been asked by the embassy of a country (of your choice) to write a report and give a presentation for Expo 98 which will encourage investment in your country.</i>
PROFESSIONAL OBJECTIVES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective representation of country's economic interests • Clear presentation of argument • Demonstration of benefits to future investors in country
AUDIENCE	International audience of potential investors
STUDENT ROLE	The representative of a country's economic interests
COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logical Persuasion / Recommendation • Representation
GENRE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation and Report: argument and recommendation
ORGANISATIONAL FOCUS (information management)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search for information and critically evaluation of information • Select relevant information • Transform information into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Outline of benefits of investment ⇒ Recommendations for future investment
COGNITIVE SPACE (information transformation)	<p><i>Critical use of texts and resources to transform into own meaning, representing employer's interests.</i></p> <p>Employer's (embassy) interests  Information management of texts and facts</p> <p>Student's argument (supported by relevant facts): representing employer's interests to potential investors</p>

COMPONENT TASK WORK	
<p>POSSIBLE SPECIFIC LANGUAGE WORK</p> <p>(related to project)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific lexis related to economic issues • Specific Word Partnerships (e.g. <i>economic recovery</i>) • Language of Statistics (e.g. rise / fall / soar / plummet) • Current, Past and Predicted economic situations: overview of tenses • Recommendations and Suggestions • Conditionals (I & II) (e.g. <i>If you invest here, you will...</i>) • Summarisation, citation and quotation • Presentation Genre: language and organisation • Report Genre: language and organisation
<p>POSSIBLE COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES</p> <p>and related</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find out and represent partner's views • Make recommendations (for career choices / for new students / for Ministry of Education or Foreign Affairs) • Mini-debates (represent views you don't necessarily support) • Mini-presentations (on economic predictions / selling unlikely products convincingly) • Presentation skills (eye contact; body language; pausing; rhythm; rhetorical questions etc.)
<p>COGNITIVE STRATEGIES</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities based on explicit criteria of project evaluation (e.g. peer evaluation) • Peer feedback activities (for both report and presentation practice) • Autonomous learning strategies and activities • Create professionally relevant language Portfolio • Information management (e.g. search for, selecting, summarising information.; transforming data and facts into relevant information; text organisation; express and support an argument) • Critical analysis of texts (e.g. difference between knowledge <u>transfer</u> and knowledge <u>transformation</u>; Web Page evaluation; comparing BBC, DW and CNN news coverage)