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# ELF Teaching in Portuguese Schools: The Not-so-good Old Days Are Back

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**Abstract**—With the aim of contributing to the comprehension of the changes that have recently been observed in Portuguese EFL school curriculum, this paper is a critical analysis of curricular factors that contribute to the challenges today's EFL teachers face in schools. The data analysed comprise the documents published by national educational authorities (EFL learning outcomes) as well as the teachers' examination test required to enter the EFL teaching profession. The educational principles underlying these documents, as well as the teaching practices they support and encourage, are compared to the principles and the methodological recommendations of previous, more progressive, Portuguese EFL syllabi. The methodological trends identified on the current EFL teaching panorama are also contrasted with the principles of the language teachers education programs taught at Portuguese universities.

**Index Terms**—pedagogical change, EFL teaching, Portuguese EFL syllabi

## I. INTRODUCTION

Portuguese state schools have come through a long process of change since the second half of the last century. Although the main trends of change have been usually associated with socio-demographic transformations resulting from the democratization of society and the schooling process, today, the strongest wave of change has a new source: it stems from a neo-liberal political agenda which seems to have been adopted by many European governments.

These days, while the Portuguese celebrate the fortieth anniversary of their 1974 social revolution, which among other significant changes democratized the public access to education, Portuguese schools face a new kind of change, marked by a switch to old views of curriculum and schooling. I would say it seems we are now living an old *déjà vu* version of the 'back to basics' educational movement.

The current change seems to ignore all the major principles of the more progressive and context based education proclaimed in the 90's Portuguese educational reform which only now was starting to reveal expected results: increased number of university graduates, decrease of basic schooling drop out rates, greater investment in foreign language basic education and in technological and artistic degrees, emphasis on professional teacher qualifications, a more reflexive teachers' attitude towards teaching practices and a greater emphasis on a student centred learning process.

In Portugal, it is The Ministry of Education who designs the national curriculum, for the 12 years of mandatory school education. The educational process is organized in 4 different cycles of studies: basic education comprises the first 3 cycles (1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grades) and secondary education includes 3 school years (10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades). Besides natural sciences, social sciences, technology, arts, physical education and first language subjects, students must also choose at least two foreign languages throughout their schooling process. English as a foreign language is offered to first cycle students. Besides English, students may then choose to learn one or two other foreign languages (French, Spanish or German) on the subsequent years of schooling.

Decisions on all aspects of the curriculum for the 12 years of basic and secondary education (nature and number of disciplinary subjects, content, teaching approaches and evaluation) have always been a prerogative of the national government. However, until recently, local schools were able to find some room for specific curriculum adjustments, at least during the first 9 years of schooling: the introduction of a curricular space for the development of projects, and the inclusion of subjects other than the canonical subjects (for example, drama and other arts project experiences, the spread of early English language learning, and a greater range of foreign languages choice). Today, we witness a severe drawback on the initiated path to a more progressive student centred education, which was, until recently, clearly identified in curriculum documents. For the last three years, educational decisions can be characterized as imposed from above and from outside (Dewey, 1938, p. 4), since most of the school curricula (goals, content, and evaluation procedures) are now exclusively decided by the national government. In Dewey's own words, this educational trend characterizes the traditional philosophy in education:

The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and from outside. It imposes adult standards, subject matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young.

They are beyond the reach of the experience the young learners already possess. Consequently, they must be imposed. (Dewey, 1938, p. 4)

As was the case in the basic and secondary education curricula, profound reforms were also implemented in Portuguese teachers' education programmes taught at Portuguese universities during the first decade of this century. As result of the awareness of the need to improve the knowledge and the pedagogical skills of teachers, and as a means of answering to the necessary continuous rise of instructional quality, teacher education programmes were redesigned in 2007 and a new paradigm of professional teacher training was implemented. As a consequence, course plans and syllabi were adapted to the demands of the newly adopted master's degree policy which became mandatory for professional teaching of all subjects at all levels of schooling (Decreto-Lei 43/2007, Decreto-Lei 79/2014).

From a traditional perspective that valued a teacher education paradigm based on crafts' imitation, and theory application, the teacher education programmes adopted during the last 8 years by Portuguese universities (e.g., University of Algarve, University of Minho, University of Aveiro) emphasized reflexive and collaborative ways of knowledge and competence construction. Beyond focusing on subject-matter content, these programmes currently consider other domains of the teachers' knowledge, inspired, for example, on the categories proposed by Shulman (1986, 1987): pedagogical content, general pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of curriculum and educational contexts and knowledge of educational purposes and values.

After almost a decade of practice in accordance with the principles of this curricular paradigm, the implemented changes in teacher education programmes were starting to operate a switch on the teachers' representations of their own teaching practice. Portuguese studies on teachers' representations and practices show that language teachers were becoming more aware of the need to adopt communicative approaches to language teaching and to implement collaborative work in schools as well as to adopt innovative ways of language teaching and learning (e.g., Araújo e Sá *et al.*, 2007; Vieira, 2009; Cabral, 2010). As a result from years of investment in supported research and more reflexive teacher oriented EFL education programmes, final reports written by master students at the end of their EFL teaching practicum indicate that, for example in the South of Portugal, EFL beginning teachers are now more aware of the advantages of a task-based language learning approach in EFL classrooms:

My experience in the EFL teaching practicum gives me evidence to support the claim that a task-based language learning (TBL) approach and a more cooperative learning context effectively promotes students' EFL learning. My students demonstrated they are now progressively more able to successfully communicate in quasi-authentic language activities designed in accordance with TBL principles (Pereira, 2014, p. 123).

The paradigm that supported my training and (my) teaching practice was the communicative approach, and the work method adopted was task-based teaching which, combined, created a more social and interactive classroom environment, thus aiding the development of the communicative competence and the holistic growth of the student, who became the focus of the learning process (Martins, 2004, p. VI).

At the present moment all these paradigm changes run the risk of being reversed by the governmental reform in the last three years and by the growing number of administrative tasks now required of teachers which make them focus on other dimensions besides the language teaching process. In fact, the complexity of the teaching profession has increased substantially with the growing burden of administrative work required by the new responsibilities associated with the new models of professional assessment, and with the higher number of mandatory reports teachers need to write. The government's decision to increase the number of students per class (as a means of reducing the need for new teacher contracts) and the cuts in the school budgets (which limit the acquisition of innovative classroom materials) are also factors that make today's teachers' professional life more difficult.

## II. A NEW WAVE OF 'BACK TO BASICS' IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING CURRICULUM IN PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS

Today's Portuguese educational policies show a clear 'back to basics' tendency, particularly evident in the language teaching syllabi. Instead of valuing the educational paradigm adopted by schools in the last decades which focused on the global growth of the individual student (where arts, sports, educational projects and more canonical subjects had similar weight in evaluation and where learning processes were as important as academic results), present curricula, and particularly first and foreign language curricula, emphasize the teaching of traditional subject-matter content as well as the students' results in final exams.

This focus on language subject matter content, on academic results, on classroom discipline, and on more authoritarian teacher roles seems to gain renewed relevance every time the education system is governed by right wing policies. Unfortunately, this education perspective has been recently defended in other countries as well. Besides being supported by the ideological convictions of the new education government team, the official foundation for these policies is usually said to come from World Bank publications (e.g., Hanushek & Woßmann, 2006; Vegas *et al.*, 2011) which recurrently stress the role of economic factors in education management, as well as from traditional educational philosophies that defend a greater centrality of the teacher in the learning process, with a consequent more passive role for students in the classroom.

In the case of the English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching curriculum, the key points in the official discourse, judging by the frequency of their occurrence in school documents and in published views of educational entities (Crato,

2006), focus on a renewed emphasis given to the teaching of language content, i.e. grammar, as well as on the corresponding greater relevance given to knowledge reproduction in final exams, versus meaning making in language production.

What the official discourse seems to ignore is that, as research has long demonstrated, students do not improve their foreign language competence by solving grammar exercises or by memorizing verb rules. Although focusing on grammar points as a means of improving students' accuracy as well as their target language fluency is certainly something that cannot be ignored by any EFL teacher (e.g. Long, 1991; Foto, 1994; Nassaji, 2000; Savignon, 2002), the point is that the grammar focus in foreign language classrooms only contributes to the improvement of the students' communicative competence if the language contents that they have to master function as a tool to facilitate their communicative purposes in the classroom activities and tasks (Long, 1991).

The EFL curriculum was profoundly changed in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to accommodate an intercultural communicative language teaching perspective which was supported by research results and theoretical approaches that clearly defended a student centred focus, as well as an emphasis on TBL approaches and students' autonomous learning (e.g., Nunan, 1987; Legutke & Thomas, 1991). This syllabi, designed for all the EFL teaching cycle (7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades), suggested a balanced focus on fluency and accuracy, on language and culture awareness, on process approaches to reading and writing, and on collaborative evaluation practices (Programas de Inglês, 1997, 2001-2003).

Based on a wider conception of language which emphasizes its social function and its instrumental role in the students' growing awareness of the relationship between the self and the other, the language definition underlying the EFL syllabi conception stressed the importance of communicative competence on the development of the students' language abilities, as well as of their attitudes and values. The EFL syllabi was structured in three dimensions: the pedagogical principles (which valued language acquisition and development, and the conception of the classroom as a context that promotes interaction and knowledge growth), the thematic framing of the processes (focusing on the 'I', the 'Other', and the 'We' dimensions of the learning process), and the specification of these same processes (stating process objectives for all the language skills—speaking, listening, reading and writing). Content in that syllabi not only included the English language system categories and rules, but also text interpretation and production, socio-cultural topics and cultural values. A highly relevant feature of the EFL syllabi was that language and culture were presented as inseparable teaching content, leading the teacher to plan learning sequences in which the students' contact with language materials focused on language as code and on language as social practice (Programas de Inglês, 1997, pp. 10-12).

As a means of contributing to a more collaborative working approach by the EFL teachers, the syllabi designed for the basic schooling years (7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grades), also included a question guide (Nunan, 1987) to be used by the teachers in pre-action reflection which called their attention to several dimensions of the lesson planning process in accordance with the TBL approach: "task relevance and complexity, amount of context provided prior to the task, processability of language of the task, amount of help available to the learner, degree of grammatical accuracy/contextual appropriacy and time available to the learner" (Programas de Inglês, 1997, pp. 143-144).

The 1997-2003 EFL syllabi have been recently relegated to a second place with the new Portuguese policies for EFL teaching and learning. The whole architecture of the EFL curriculum has been replaced by a simple list of learning outcomes (designated as *standards*) that the teachers have to use as guidance for EFL teaching (Cravo, *et al.*, 2013, 2015). The new learning outcomes are not even called objectives, since educational terminology has been publicly dismissed by the Minister of Education, who has personally classified it as mere romantic jargon (Crato, 2006). English language teachers, like most other language teachers, now have a single clear goal: teach students grammar content and prepare them for mastery in the final tests.

The *Caderno de Apoio* (Cravo, *et al.*, 2014), a support booklet which aims at helping teachers to plan lessons that will lead EFL students to the achieve the established standards, is organized in 5 sections, corresponding to the domains of reference of these standards: listening, reading, spoken production, spoken interaction and writing. The socio-cultural and the lexis and grammar domains are not dealt with in specific sections since they are thought to be underlying the work done by the students in the five sections dedicated to language skills. The terms that have long been established to refer to the process approaches on the 4 language skills (pre, while and post communicative activities) are substituted in the document by terms associated with PPP (presentation, practice and production) approaches – 'preparation', 'procedure' and 'follow up activity' – in the section dedicated to provide examples of classroom activities (Cravo, *et al.*, 2014, p. 5). An analysis of the samples provided for the planning of writing activities in EFL classes shows that the authors of the document decided to ignore the advantages of encouraging teachers to follow a process writing approach, and simply recommend the prevalence of writing as a product activity. This effort to banish established educational terminology from official documents is further evidence of the rebirth of the traditional educational philosophy in Portugal.

Prior to the new educational policy, EFL teachers were strongly advised to plan their language lessons accordingly to the TBL methodological approach, and the development of students' communicative competence in EFL was the stated main learning goal in official documents (Moreira, *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, the EFL teaching sequence plans usually listed the language competence and the process objectives students were expected to accomplish while

exploring the selected language and cultural items as well as described all classroom language activities and assessment procedures planned accordingly to the task. Moreover, EFL teachers were advised to culturally contextualize classroom activities, focusing in the students' learning process as much as in their learning products. Nowadays, EFL teaching sequences tend to privilege the learning outcomes and the language content activities with the aim of improving the students' level of accuracy. For example, when asked about the relevance of the TBL approach and the process writing activities (planning, revising, editing), as a means of improving the students' writing competence, school teachers usually answer they would rather focus on the products students write in class (or at home), because classroom process learning activities take too much time (Cabral, 2014).

What happens is that teachers are simply expected to teach lessons guided by the learning outcomes stated on the EFL *Metas de Aprendizagem* document (Cravo, *et al.*, 2013, 2015). Once the concept of competence-based learning is abandoned, teachers are now mainly expected to lead their students to accomplish the behavioural objectives stated on the *Metas de Aprendizagem* (Cravo, *et al.*, 2013, 2015).

A government resolution (Despacho n.º 5306/2012) states that the new learning outcomes are an objective and privileged tool to help the teachers' organization and planning of their teaching action, for they are thought to clearly state the essential knowledge and skills to be acquired by students throughout their schooling cycle. The aim explicitly stated is that these new learning outcomes facilitate internal and external evaluation of the Portuguese students' achievement.

Actually, standardized evaluation has become another relevant issue in Portuguese schools right now. Teachers are encouraged to focus mainly on preparing students for higher achievement in final exams, as a means of increasing national academic success rates. Most language teachers have given up the use of any other form of assessment besides language tests, since students' achievement in final exams is now considered the national most important educational task. It seems that Portuguese school practices are now closer to North American school practices since here and there, as Rovira (2015) argues in the Anazoa project.org web site, "teaching is now designed to help students score well on tests rather than help students develop basic math, reading, and writing skills".

This emphasis in the learning products has considerably challenged the prevalence of other views on the role of evaluation in the learning process. In the official documents released by Portuguese educational authorities there is not any mention of other functions of classroom evaluation besides testing language knowledge. Moreover, the recurrent use of the terms 'summative tests' and 'proficiency standards' is now a means of distracting the teachers' attention from other dimensions of students' assessment.

The emphasis on this terminology has already shown clear negative implications for the educational process of training EFL teachers, when the goal of teaching communicative language and culture is considered. For example, during their EFL school practicum, Portuguese teacher-trainees no longer have time to focus on the practice of the students' learning strategies, neither can they implement the use of portfolios or other kinds of process assessment procedures in the learning-teaching process, since these procedures take the time needed by for language accuracy activities that prepare students for final evaluation (Cabral, 2014). Final exams and rates of achievement are the new agenda labels in Portuguese schools.

### III. THE EFL TEACHERS' NATIONAL EXAMINATION TEST TELLS US WHERE WE ARE HEADING

The concern with the evaluation of learning products has also been exported to the field of the teachers' job applications. Since 2012, the Ministry of Education has implemented a policy that requires novice teachers to take a national examination test as further requirement to their application to teach in state schools. The test aims at the assessment of their professional and disciplinary knowledge.

The evaluation of the newly qualified teachers by national or regional educational authorities as a job entry requirement has been adopted by many countries in the world (OECD, 2014) and the evaluation of the knowledge of the teacher candidates has taken several forms throughout the times: from the requirement of an oral presentation or a long essay writing in the U.S.A., in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), to a standardised test in some European countries today (OECD, 2014, p. 511).

Portugal used to require teacher candidates to take a formal written exam in the past, however, until now, democratic governments after 1974 have dismissed this practice. After completing required university qualifications, which included four years of curricular attendance and another year of school practicum, candidates could directly apply for the national teaching job placement. The selection of the candidates for the teaching vacancies at schools was performed accordingly to a national rank that ordered applicants by their professional grades.

Following the trend adopted by 30% of the 35 OECD countries, the Portuguese education authorities have decided to change the procedures for teacher's recruitment, and all novice teacher candidates now have to take a standardized assessment test as part of the requirements for a teaching job (OECD, 2014). The test aims at the evaluation of the professional competences and skills for the teaching of the specific subject matters candidates are applying for. The Ministry of Education coordinates the placement of all teachers, and the teachers' results in the tests are used as a prerequisite and discriminatory evaluation criterion in the teachers' application to national teaching job vacancies. In the case of the Portuguese English language teachers' evaluation, the assessment test (PACC, May, 2015) includes 30 multiple-choice questions that candidates have to complete in the maximum time of 90 minutes.

Having in mind the recent changes implemented in the teachers education programmes by Portuguese universities, it was expected that the national exam which aims at the evaluation of the newly qualified teachers' competences and knowledge should comprise, among some other related topics: questions aiming at the assessment of the beginning teachers' abilities to solve pedagogical problems, i.e. their ability to manage language classes, questions aiming at the verification of their knowledge of the main pedagogical theories, language acquisition and learning, and the students as learners, questions aiming at the assessment of their knowledge of the educational contexts they will have to deal with as well as questions assessing their knowledge of the language and culture they will have to teach about.

Furthermore, if the aim was to follow the latest trends in teacher education, one would also expect the national exam to focus on the beginning teachers' computer abilities and their familiarity with the concept of blended learning, on their ability to use social networks as classroom learning tools, on their ability to use dynamic assessment and mediated learning (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004), on their ability to deal with students' needs, parents and other social agents' expectations, or their ability to deal with students' bullying behaviours and their knowledge of ecological or even 'bricolage' topics (Crotty, 2011).

An analysis of the goals of the Portuguese EFL teachers' test (PACC, May 2015) reveals that it aims at: the assessment of the teachers' knowledge of the English language syllabi, the professional context of EFL teaching, the teachers' social and cultural values and the teachers' awareness of the European linguistic and cultural diversity. The content of the 30 question items of the test was also examined in order to identify the knowledge and the teaching skills evaluated. All test questions were classified according to the teachers' knowledge base categories proposed by Shulman (1986) and then were further grouped by the knowledge specificity they require from the teacher candidates. Table I illustrates the characterization of each question item according to the categories of specific knowledge that is required in the Portuguese EFL teachers' exam.

TABLE 1.  
CHARACTERIZATION OF THE QUESTION ITEMS OF THE EFL TEACHERS' NATIONAL EXAM

Categories of Knowledge base	Specific Knowledge	N of items	Sample of question items
Content Knowledge	Target language system	8	What are the underlined parts of these utterances called? «Let's go to see Birdman tonight.» and «Why don't we go for a pizza afterwards?» (A) exponents (B) functions (C) notions (D) idioms
Pedagogical Content Knowledge	Linguistic Theory/ error analysis	1	You are analysing the six errors an 8th year learner has made in his written text and categorising them according to what caused them. Look at the underlined items and decide what the most likely cause for each is – a careless slip, a transfer error, or a developmental error. My cousin is 17 years old. He wants to <u>be doctor</u> and he studies a lot at school. He <u>don't plays</u> a lot with his friends. Last week he went to the <u>library</u> and he bought a book about bones. When he came home he <u>spoked</u> a lot to <u>his fathers</u> about it. He said that he wanted to go and study <u>medecine</u> in England but they said it was very expensive to study medicine there. What is the correct analysis of the 6 errors you have found? (A) 0 slips / 3 transfer/3 developmental (B) 1 slip / 2 transfer / 3 developmental (C) 1 slip / 3 transfer / 2 developmental (D) 2 slips / 2 transfer/2 developmental
	Methods & Approaches	1	This is what some students did in their class. Which approach is it an example of? In groups we had to plan a study visit to a museum. Afterwards we discussed what vocabulary we had needed to do this. (A) Lexical approach (B) Task-based learning (C) Situational approach (D) Presentation, practice and production
	Classroom technique	9	-From among the classroom techniques listed below which one best helps learners to develop their skills to understand the meaning of a recorded spoken text? (A) Use a text you know the learners will fully understand at the first listening. (B) Summarise the text orally for the learners before the first listening. (C) Tell the learners to read the tapescript at the same time as they listen. (D) Give them two simple <u>gist</u> questions to answer during the first listening.
General Pedagogical Knowledge	Evaluation: instruments and procedures	3	Which would be the most appropriate type of test to give your students at the very beginning of the 10th year to see what level their language performance is at? (A) an achievement test (B) an aptitude test (C) a progress test (D) a proficiency test
	Psychological Theories	2	You have a very bright student in your 11th year class who wants to go and study aeronautical engineering at an English university. He doesn't particularly like the English classes but knows he needs to take a special English exam to certify his level of English if he is to be accepted. He starts to work much harder in your classes when he learns this. This is an example of what kind of motivation? (A) extrinsic (B) intrinsic (C) academic (D) vocational
Curricular Knowledge	Curricular documents	4	Which descriptor corresponds to level A2 Writing of the «Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid», in the Common European Framework of Reference? (A) I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions. (B) I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences. (C) I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something. (D) I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.
	Resources & Materials	2	«Hot Potatoes» is (A) a tool for creating interactive activities on the Internet. (B) a programme to help you plan your lessons. (C) a mobile learning app. (D) a learning podcast to practise your English.

An analysis of the number of test questions related to the knowledge base categories proposed by Shulman (1986, 1987) shows that the highest number of question items aim at the evaluation of the teachers' pedagogical content

knowledge (13 questions) and the teachers' subject-matter content knowledge (8 questions). Six question items measure curricular knowledge and five question items measure general pedagogical knowledge. Although consisting of the larger group of test items, the questions related to the category of pedagogical content knowledge do not cover any of the complex dimensions of that particular category, namely, knowledge of "the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others" (Shulman, 1987, p. 9). Furthermore, the test does not include any questions on the teachers' knowledge of the learners' specific social, cognitive and emotional characteristics, on the educational contexts of EFL teaching, or on the knowledge of basic theories of education, or even on the teachers' awareness of the European linguistic and cultural diversity as explicit in its aims.

Instead of evaluating the beginning language teachers' knowledge and competences on most of those topics, an analysis of the content of the questions included in the test shows that the national exam of English language teachers' professional abilities only focuses on the simplest categories of the cognitive domain (Bloom, *et al.*, 1956): Recall of previous learned knowledge.

The 'Knowledge Recall' items require the beginning teachers to identify, label, recognize, select or classify presented data based on previously learned information. When we consider the knowledge subclasses of the cognitive domain required to answer the question items of the test, the major subclasses that emerge from the analysis are: knowledge of terminology, knowledge of conventions, knowledge of classifications and categories and knowledge of specific facts. Although the test aims at the evaluation of the knowledge and competences acquired by newly qualified teachers, only one question requires them to determine the appropriate action to take in a pedagogical situation (knowledge of methods and approaches). Table II shows the number of the test items in each of the Bloom's Knowledge subclasses of the cognitive domain.

TABLE II.  
NUMBER OF THE TEST ITEMS IN EACH OF THE BLOOM'S KNOWLEDGE SUBCLASSES

Knowledge subclasses of the cognitive domain	No. of test items	Example
Knowledge of terminology	7 items	What are the underlined parts of these utterances called? «Let's go to see Birdman tonight.» and «Why don't we go for a pizza afterwards?» (A) exponents (B) functions (C) notions (D) idioms
Knowledge of specific facts	5 items	The European Language Portfolio is a _____ tool that was designed to facilitate student mobility, raise intercultural awareness, encourage learner reflection and promote learner autonomy. (A) monolingual (B) bilingual (C) multilingual (D) extra-lingual
Knowledge of conventions	7 items	There are many different activities we can use to develop learners' speaking skills. Which of the following activities aim to develop spoken interaction rather than just spoken production? (A) role-plays (B) reading dialogues aloud (C) oral presentations (D) substitution drills
Knowledge of classifications and categories	7 items	Critical Thinking Skills are considered to be increasingly important to incorporate in the language classroom today. We hear much about Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS) and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Which of the following is considered to be one of the Lower Order Thinking Skills? (A) analysing (B) remembering (C) creating (D) evaluating
Knowledge of theories and structures	3 items	You use the following sentences taken from a concordancer and ask your students to analyse the examples to work out how the lexical items «since» and «for» are used. • She hasn't been back home since she got married. • He left in 2009 and since then has been working on his new book. • I've had no news of them since 1999. • She's been working on the Native American literature project for 8 years now. • For three months he survived on nothing but water and some fruits and small animals he managed to catch. • The university decided to extend the scholarship programme for a further 6-month period. This approach to grammar teaching is called _____. (A) linguistic (B) rule-driven (C) deductive (D) inductive
Knowledge of methodologies	1 item	This is what some students did in their class. Which approach is it an example of? In groups we had to plan a study visit to a museum. Afterwards we discussed what vocabulary we had needed to do this. (A) Lexical approach (B) Task-based learning (C) Situational approach (D) Presentation, practice and production

#### IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES

Research on education has long demonstrated that there are many factors that can potentially influence the teachers' work in the classroom and, consequently, affect the students' learning processes. Among these factors, class size is probably the one that has received greater attention by researchers (Arias, & Walker, 2004; Bedard & Kuhn, 2006; Dee & West, 2011; Fleming, *et al.*, 2002) as well as by educational institutions. For example, in 1983 and in 1995, the US National Council of Teachers of English (NTCE) issued resolutions on class size and student overload, stating that "NCTE recognize and support affiliates' efforts to influence the reduction of class size and student load" since these two factors were found to be detrimental of successful language learning. Again, in 2014, a resolution of the NTCE states that:



Overall, research shows that students in smaller classes perform better in all subjects and on all assessments when compared to their peers in larger classes. In smaller classes students tend to be as much as one to two months ahead in content knowledge, and they score higher on standardized assessments (NTC, 2014).

The 2014 NTCE resolution also identifies other negative educational implications of large numbers of students per class, namely on student engagement in classroom activities as well as on students' long-term success.

In Portugal, the Education Ministry tends to ignore the volume of research literature that recommends smaller language classes and issued a policy that allows school administrators to increase the number of students to a maximum of 30 per class in 2012. The justification for this decision was based on the need to reduce financial costs with state schools. In face of the economic crisis that profoundly affected the country's educational budget, this government decision was probably also supported on the OECD (2009, p.1) report on Education Indicators which mentions that "class size, together with students' instruction time, teachers' teaching time and teachers' salaries, is one of the key variables that policy makers can use to control spending on education". However, this decision did not consider other information included in the same OECD document, namely when it reports that "at the lower secondary level (in general programmes), the average class size in OECD countries is 24 students per class" and that in public schools of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Luxembourg and Switzerland this number drops to fewer than 20 (OECD, 2009, p. 372). Further, this government decision did not take into account the information included in the 2014 OECD report which mentions evidence indicating that smaller classes benefit students with disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Krueger, 2002; Piketty & Valdenaire, 2006) and is positively associated with more innovative teaching practices (Hattie, 2009).

Although availability of language material resources and number of students per class are considered among the most influential aspects when teaching quality is considered (e.g., Gonzalez Moncada, 2006; Kitao & Kitao, 1997; Dar, 2012), besides the increase in the number of students per class, Portuguese state school administrations have also seen a reduction of their available budget for the purchase of audio or video language materials for classroom use, recommending instead the extensive use of a single language textbook for each of the different EFL grade levels. These constraints on the purchase of material resources for the foreign language classrooms reduce the diversity of the language input available for teachers' use in the classroom and deprive students of the contact with different samples of authentic language and cultural practices.

The adoption of EFL coursebooks helps teachers in the planning of their EFL lessons by supplying texts, grammar presentations, exercises and ideas for class activities. The selection of the EFL coursebooks is done by the language teachers in each school. The coursebook is often chosen for reasons of attractiveness of its images, simplicity of the activities proposed and inclusion of a teachers' book that provides instructions on how to teach content. Nevertheless, its adoption by the group of teachers who teach the same grade level usually contributes to the occurrence of collaborative work and professional interaction focused on the topic of the language teaching process. However, there is not a coursebook that responds to the cultural needs of all groups of students or to the specific difficulties manifested by all students in the language learning process (Thi Cam Le, 2005). Therefore, unless the teachers are capable of supplying other language materials besides those included in the coursebooks, preferable authentic materials that cover the cultural items that are relevant to their own classes and respond to the learning needs of their specific students, what will happen is that English foreign language classes will simply be a time to read the texts and answer the comprehension questions included in the coursebook, a time to supply the writing answers to questions on topics chosen by the editors of the coursebook, a time to perform (usually repeat) the speaking interactions suggested by the coursebook which are dictated by communication needs and intentions that particular students may not share.

Portuguese EFL teachers seem to have language coursebooks in high regard. Evidence of the high relevance attributed to the use of the coursebook in the South of Portugal comes from the answers of 30 language teachers to a question that required the ordering of the importance attributed to curricular documents in the process of planning language-learning sequences. The question was posed to the participants in a series of 3 workshops dedicated to language teaching a few years ago and included the following answer possibilities besides the term 'coursebooks': ELF syllabus, language department instructions, learning outcomes, students' materials, audio resources, video resources, authentic documents. Twenty-five out of the thirty teachers inquired indicated the term 'coursebook' as their first choice (Cabral, 2007).

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Language teachers are used to paradigm change. In fact, one thing that is certain in our job is that change will always come again and again. Like Woodward (1996, p. 6) says, language teachers have seen "changes from grammar translation to the direct method, from concern with reading and writing to a focus on listening and speaking, from the use of language labs to the use of jigsaw texts, changes in approach, method and technique."

What the language teacher community is not used to is to change that brings back older views and conceptions of language learning and teaching. In the course of the language teachers education programmes, once we have managed to finally convince schoolteachers that the new paradigm presented to them is research supported, and once they have confirmed that it really works in terms of a better classroom climate, of higher students' motivation and willingness to learn, of students' greater communicative competence and in terms of a higher professional commitment by the teachers

it is difficult to find any theoretical or practical justification to negate evidence and just draw back to traditional language teaching approaches which seems to be what is presently required of them.

All the changes that result from the new Portuguese government policies on English language teaching and learning are in line with traditional methodological approaches: a praise for a disciplinary curriculum that overvalues learning products instead of an interdisciplinary curriculum based on learning processes, a greater focus on language content, that is, in grammar teaching, instead of focusing on language and culture, a narrower range of the teachers' freedom in planning classroom language topics and tasks and in choosing evaluation tools by turning their attention to achievement rates and school rankings, greater teacher responsibility in defining the students' learning goals and activities instead of encouraging students' collaborative work in the classroom as well as students' participation in moments of negotiation of topics to be covered and of task types to be completed, greater emphasis on discipline and on classroom management control, and higher relevance to exams, grades and achievement rates instead of encouraging teachers to centre their attention in the students' learning needs and experiences, their learning process and their global development as citizens and members of communities, who need to learn to value multilingualism and intercultural communication.

In a time when the dominance of accounting and administration threatens the value of an EFL learning and teaching process that has communicative language competence, cultural awareness and students' global language and cultural development as its main goals, EFL teachers have the right to resist turning back to old views of education and language teaching and learning.

We are convinced that, instead of embracing this traditional appeal in EFL teaching, many of us will struggle to maintain our teaching practice in line with the methodological principles that more than 50 years of research studies have demonstrated to be productive in terms of EFL teaching.

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