On November 28-29, 2008, the Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa organized the First International Conference on Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Titled “TEFL: theory, practice and methodology”, the conference aimed at, in the context of continuous professional development, providing elementary and high school teachers with an opportunity to interact with various sectors of the educational field – from academia to policymakers, as well as contact with diverse perspectives and approaches to language teaching.

At the one end of the scope were theoretical approaches, from fairly predictable and unoriginal ones like Filipe Furtado’s “The English language: whence and whither” – despite the somewhat fascinating way it was presented –, to more innovative ones that dealt with the problem of English in a worldwide and globalized context, such as Martin Dewey’s “English as a Lingua Franca in the classroom” and Manuela Guilherme’s “‘Glocal Languages’: Globalisms, localisms and language education”. Anecdotally, these two presentations originated an interesting and refreshing fencing of arguments as to the difference or similarity between the concepts of “lingua franca” and “glocalism”, with the former defending it was a question of semantics and the latter advocating irreversible and clear conceptual differences.

At the other end of the scope were communications about more or less innovative on-the-field experiences, mostly related to the integration, from a very early age onwards, of new technologies in the learning process – ranging from the use of ePortfolios in elementary school and the Edu-LE’s Project to the use of interactive textbooks and Blogs and Moodle in high school and higher education, respectively.

In-between these were, *grosso modo*, three other “sets” of presentations: those related to case-studies and other specific studies (e.g. “Case study at ISCAP – Could English be taught professionally”, “Translation as an end-of-the-line tool for communication across cultures – Case-study”, or “Portuguese Learners’ Overproduction of the Definite Article: a cross-sectional study”); those focused on the cultural
component of language learning (“The Intercultural Dimension and the Teaching of English in Portugal”, “Modes of reading literary texts in a foreign language and interculturality, or “Intercultural English Competence for Citizenship”); and those that tried to cast insights into the future (“New pedagogical scenarios and teaching approaches – How to integrate innovation with the same old needs”) or “rehabilitate” the “old ways”, with countervailing arguments against the euphoria of today’s *Brave New World*, such as “Realbooks for context, consolidation and fun” and “Literary Literacy: Why read literary texts in the English Language classes?”.

Contrasting with the sets of communications that focused on the intercultural dimension and on reading literacy, and regardless of their unquestionable scientific and/or academic value, the pertinence of the first “set” of presentations seemed be somewhat questionable in a conference aimed at elementary and high school teachers, who tend to be more tuned to the practical and methodological aspects of English teaching.

As for the importance of the cultural dimension in language learning, the quotes by Agar selected by Sofia Araújo and Grace Moreira pretty much summed up the core issue: “languaculture”, i.e., the fact that understanding language requires much more than learning the grammar and the lexicon; that full-scale communication demands cultural proficiency – particularly in the multicultural and multilingual globalized world of today.

Amidst the communications on reading literacy, “Realbooks for context, consolidation and fun” was inspirational. Assuming a “back-to-the-real-thing” perspective, it reminded us of the importance of children’s contact with paper books in times that are evidencing an ever-growing propensity to “virtualize” the learning process.

Considering the very content of the conference, the communication skills of the presenters as well as the materials used in the presentations also deserve a critical eye – since the “do-what-I-do-not-what-I-say” principle should apply. Although to different degrees, most speakers revealed good communication skills, but the quality of some of the supporting materials – namely *PowerPoints* – proved once too often to be lacking, either because of the colors used (which made them difficult to read), or because of the excess of information each slide contained, conditioning presentations to an almost mere reading of their content – thus compromising their liveliness. Some speakers – few
– opted for the old-fashioned and potentially anti-communicative lecturing style and spent most of the time reading their notes, unwillingly inviting the audience to slumber away. Fortunately, only one of the presentation’s quality – Roberto Carvalho’s candid report of a simple experiment – was minimal: the speaker’s limitations as to its theoretical framework was blatant; his linguistic competence fell short; and the supporting materials contained basic English errors – suggesting an inadequate preparation of the communication.

Three presentations were of particular interest:

- Allyson Roberts’s “Blogs and Moodle – Pedagogical tools or post and run!”
- Carla Ferreira’s “Edu-LE: Teaching English as Foreign Language in Madeira”
- and Martin Dewey’s “English as a Lingua Franca in the classroom”.

The first two communications were somewhat complementary: both – the first at a higher and the second at an elementary education level – advocated the integration of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in the teaching and learning process, as a response to the new social constructivist theory and student-centric pedagogical practices that have emerged over the past three decades, pushed by the demands of a knowledge-based, global society and a “Net Generation” (Tapscott, 1998) that is media-literate, tech-savvy and uses digital media for almost everything.

The communication “Blogs and Moodle – Pedagogical tools or post and run!”, consisted of an explanation of what a Moodle platform is and of its use in a context of blended learning – or b-learning (which combines both face-to-face and online learning environments) –, providing practical examples on how to address learning needs and design learning tasks so as to deepen learning and avoid “post and run”. Citing Palloff and Pratt (2003), the presenter listed what learners needed: a sense of community; dialogue with others through meaningful co-operation; active learning; flexibility of pathways; activities that tap into their strengths and needs; activities individually leveled and timed; clear objectives and assessment; feedback; and space to reflect on processes and products of learning.

But to make real technology integration in classrooms happen, teachers must establish new classroom routines and procedures, and adopt a view of teaching and learning and their accompanying technologies as interdependent. What nonetheless
seemed to transpire from the presentation was a centenary architecture of schooling, with the traditional edifice shaping the ICT, rather than the use of ICT resulting from the redesign of the teaching and learning process.

To start with, the Moodle platform is an approach centered on individual faculty adoption and therefore typically structured to maintain the singularity of each teacher and subject taught – a fact that is inconsistent with a much-desired dissemination of good practices susceptible of achieving institution-wide impact.

Secondly, despite the subjacent constructivist theory of learning, the teacher still assumes, at all times, the role of the master – too often in a context alien to her, since many have yet to experience the platform in the position of learners.

Thirdly, recalling Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s (2002) concept of “Community of Practice” (CoP) as a group of “people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis”, the artificial, because externally imposed, creation of a community of learners is easily doomed to fail. And although it is supposed to foster interactions and relationships, based on mutual trust and respect, and encourage its members to share their ideas, expose their ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully, its framework makes the so-called “post and run” practically unavoidable.

Fourthly, the Moodle platform only has a chat capability; it doesn’t allow for a voice or video contact, susceptible of fostering a sense of togetherness.

Fifthly, its potential for really collaborative tasks, namely in the creation of a product, is much more limited than that of, for example, the Google Docs, which make it possible for all members of a group to access and on-site change a given document, presentation, or form.

Sixthly, any attempt at devising flexible pathways and individually leveled and timed activities necessarily stumbles on assessment requisites and schedules.

Finally, if fully used, the Moodle requires a tech-savvy faculty, not only because of the platform itself, but also of a series of applications and software that need be used; and it is so time-consuming that it may even put the teachers’ private lives in jeopardy.

Hence, the six-thousand-dollar question is how to move from teaching and learning with technology to transformation, to a concurrently broad and deep change, to a redefinition of processes practiced by the faculty at large, so as to make change become permanent.
Achieving meaningful transformations requires systemic initiatives, and therefore the on-the-field participation of policymakers. What DRE Madeira seems to be doing is precisely to provide strategic leadership on a systemic level to get teachers to increase the use of technology and adopt models for global educational collaboration, in statewide initiatives, by assuming their participation in projects as a part of their inservice professional development.

But EDU-LE’s goals range from institutional (e.g. “to develop pedagogical guidelines to teach an FL in both Preschool and 1st Cycle”) to instructional (e.g. “to encourage the use of a folder in FL teaching in Preschool”) and developmental (e.g. “to organize school visits and diverse workshops”). This mélange appears to be in itself a hindrance to any relevant efficacy of a mega-project that involves 130 schools from four different cycles – preschool, first, second and third. Additionally, it is not clear in what terms EDU-LE supports the publicized cross-curricular teaching, the same way it is not clear whether the multiple intelligences identified and measured via the use of the portfolio are in any way used to restructure or adjust the existing curriculum to maximize learning opportunities for the students.

The experiences presented seem to be little more than a smorgasbord of more or less interesting workshops (S.E.T.E., S.E.E., T.E.A.) and projects (E.T.C., P.E.L., eT.E.A.M., ePortfolios, 2nd P.E.E.K, Peek-a-boo) that teachers are free to try out or ignore. Rather than deriving from inward needs, i.e., emerging from students’ or teachers’ real needs, they seem to have sprung from outward pressures. Moreover, they raise some crucial questions: were there prior assessments of the contexts so as to determine what changes should be tapped as desirable? Were there properly qualified instructional designers involved in the projects? Is the teacher sponsored professional development ongoing and systematic? Is the adoption of technology leading to visible transformations of teaching practices in Madeira, thus contradicting findings like those of Kennewell, Tanner, Jones & Beauchamp (2007), who state that the introduction of e-learning to primary schools seems to have little effect on the way teachers teach? Is it increasing students’ self-direction and autonomy and bettering their outcomes?

Another key issue regards the implications of the fetishisation of e-learning pedagogy at the primary school level (Ross, 2000). Etherington (2008) defends that, at this level, e-learning pedagogy encourages physical isolation and spawns children’s homogenization and dehumanization and, according to a study conducted by Graham
and Banks (2000), children’s enthusiasm in using computers only increases if a teacher is actively interacting with them – which raises the question about children’s real interest in e-learning and whether, if given a choice, they wouldn’t rather connect with adults.

Paradoxically, although e-learning and the Web have become tantamount of the education for the 21st century, it seems that the impact the ICT actually have on students’ learning remains yet to be answered. The most commonly conclusion so far is that they have made no significant difference. It has also been found that either the evidence supporting their benefits remains inconclusive, or it has been impossible to isolate ICT as an independent variable. Furthermore, there are already those who advocate that they frame an “instructivist” pedagogical culture (Reeves, 2008), since the learner tends to be viewed as a passive recipient of instruction – now mediated by technology.

Unlike the former two communications, which dealt with the use of technology in the teaching and learning process, Martin Dewey’s “English as a Lingua Franca in the classroom” focused on conceptual and theoretical issues with direct implications in the teaching of English.

English as lingua franca (ELF) was conceptually defined as an additionally acquired language system that serves as a common means of communication for speakers of different first languages, and formally as an open set of forms and core features; a varying set of norms and practices; functionally unlimited; culturally efficient and a non-neutral tool of communication. These formal characteristics immediately demystify the tempting simplicity of the concept.

Phillipson (2008) agrees that English as lingua franca is anything but neutral, for it serves specific purposes in key societal domains: he describes it as a lingua economica, a lingua emotiva, a lingua academica, a lingua cultura or a lingua bellica, and, considering the underlying forces that lead to visions of and for English, suggests that, if the trend is towards a one-sided promotion of English rather than the guarantee of equality and symmetry in intercultural communication, then one should speak of a lingua frankensteinia rather than of a lingua franca.

Phillipson’s observations seem to acquire a particular relevance when it comes to determining patterns of innovation. Although Dewey specified apparently objective
criteria (communicatively effective, systematic in nature, indicative of emerging patterns, second language barriers), one cannot help wondering whether the process of identification is bias-free, e.g., whether specialists from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds would come to the same conclusions.

In his article “English as a lingua franca and globalization: an interconnected perspective” Dewey (2007) himself raises another issue: “Legitimizing features of ELF as variants in their own right is polemical because they cannot be tied down to a single source – they are hybrid and therefore prone to be regarded as sub-standard.” (p.349) – which suggests that ELF speakers may well be discriminated against.

Rajadurai (2007), on the other hand, states that in international communication there are modifications in “world Englishes” of a minor type in lexis, syntax, and discourse patterns, and more major ones in pronunciation; there is a substantial variation in the use of English within and across countries; but, especially in writing, there is a standardized product that ensures intelligibility.

All things considered, and since in his communication Dewey voiced some concerns about teaching ELF (the fear that learners may not be internationally intelligible; the fact that it disproportionately favors NS teachers, or the fact that teachers might be teaching a model they themselves do not speak, causing them to feel insecure), should an ELF perspective be adopted in the classroom, or should a standardized norm be followed – despite implicitly condoning the linguistic imperialism of the US and/or UK? When and how should the norm be enforced? And should the nature of the classes be taken into account – whether or not they are multicultural; whether the students are youngsters or adults…?

Taking into account the questions raised here, one final conclusion is to be drawn: the 1st International Conference on Teaching English as a Foreign Language did indeed constitute a space for teachers to have a critical assessment of current research and practice on the teaching of English.

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References


