

TEACHING ENGLISH FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS: THE PORTUGUESE CASE

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Abstract

This text examines aspects of different Portuguese curricular plans for foreign language teacher education. Focusing on the subject of Didactics of English, the author argues for specific contents and processes to be developed in the discipline with the goal of contributing to the development of the student-teachers' awareness of the complexities and challenges of the profession of teachers of English as a foreign language, prior to their initial contact with real teaching practice at schools.

Introduction

The last twenty years have witnessed dramatic changes in the concept of teacher education in Portugal. The reasons for these changes can be traced to the influence of a myriad of factors related to several domains, such as economic and cultural development, the increased number of universities and polytechnic schools and the beginning and rapid increase of post-graduation courses in Education.

The profound cultural and economic changes in Portuguese society initiated with the democratic revolution (1974) - which widened mentalities towards new educational goals to the whole school system and, consequently, in teacher education -, and continued with the progressive approach to Europe, initiated in the 80's, have also helped to raise public awareness of the need for better education, and particularly education in English as a foreign language, as a means of raising the opportunities for better jobs.

In accordance with the trend indicated by studies developed in other countries (CEE, 1995), the knowledge of foreign languages in Portugal is associated with higher levels of economic and cultural status. Besides, it has also been demonstrated that the knowledge of foreign languages is positively related to better job salaries.

Whatever the level of the influence of these or other factors, the fact is that, although the teaching profession is not among the best paid jobs in Portugal, there are still many candidates for the language education degrees in our universities and polytechnic schools.

The language teaching curriculum

Until the creation of the modern universities, which started to provide different options from the ranges of courses offered by the more traditional universities, the curriculum for foreign language teaching focused mainly on the acquisition of knowledge of the target language and literature. The

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specific knowledge for the teaching profession was then acquired in a sort of post-graduation course which provided the teaching candidates with a package of knowledge on psychology and language teaching methodology, followed by a one year supervised in-service practice in the schools.

After the creation of a new curriculum, specifically designed for teachers of foreign languages at the modern universities, most of the classic universities have also reformulated their modern language courses. Nowadays, there are at least three possible ways of completing a degree in the teaching of foreign languages. One curricular model concentrates all the specific subject matters (language, culture, linguistics and literature) in the first three years of the course (Chart I).

Chart I. Teaching Teachers: Model A

First 3 years: Subject Matter Disciplines	Fourth year, some of the following disciplines:
Target languages Linguistics Literature Culture Theory of Literature	History of Education Philosophy of Education Psychology (human development, learning) Sociology School Administration Curriculum theory Curriculum development Educational Technology Didactics
One year of pre-service practice supervised by University teachers as well as school teachers	
At the University	At the School
Includes attending Seminars focusing on educational issues and specific subject matters	Responsibility for the teaching of one class on Portuguese language and another class on EFL

The fourth year is dedicated to the disciplines of psychology, sciences of education and specific didactics. The fifth year is dedicated to a pre-service supervised teaching practice, in basic and/or secondary schools.

Another possibility integrates the pedagogical preparation of students with the learning of specific subject matters during the first four years (Chart II). After these years of formal instruction, at the university, student-teachers complete a pre-service teaching practice in schools, supervised by their former university professors and by school supervisors. In both of these models (A and B), students are only granted their degree of “licenciatura” after having successfully completed their teaching practice.

Chart II. Teaching Teachers: Model B

During the first four years students will complete, simultaneously, disciplines in the specific subject matter as well as disciplines in Education	
Subject matter disciplines: Target languages Linguistics Literature Culture Theory of Literature	Possible disciplines in Education: History of Education Philosophy of Education Psychology (human development, learning) Sociology School Administration Curriculum theory Curriculum development Educational Technology Didactics
Fifth year Practice: Supervised by University teachers as well as school teachers	
At the University:	At the School:
Includes attending Seminars focusing on educational issues and specific subject matters	Responsibility for the teaching of one class on Portuguese language and another class on EFL

Although the curriculum design may vary between universities, today many Portuguese teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) have completed their degrees on the basis of Models A, or B.

Although these programs are seen as adequate considering the necessary knowledge and qualification for the teaching profession, the point is that, as many of the teachers who have completed these programs have pointed out to me, there

is a lack of contact with schools prior to the real teaching practice. In fact, during the years of formal instruction at the university, students do not have any contact with the school or with the teaching practice. The closest to the teaching experience, in some of the cases, is provided through participation in microteaching activities or teacher role simulations, in the classroom, at the university, within the learning activities in the disciplines of education or specific didactics.

Still another possible model requires the completion of four years of specific subject matters – including courses on the target languages, Portuguese, English, German or French, linguistics, literature and culture –, which grant the degree of “licenciatura” and scientifically qualify the candidates to apply for provisory teaching positions at schools (Chart III). Most of the traditional universities offer the possibility for their students to acquire their professional qualification in a post-graduation course, which includes one year of educational curriculum and one year of pre-service supervised school practice.

Fortunately, most of the teacher candidates for EFL teaching still come from the teacher education curricular models that include pre-service supervised practice. Although the year of practice may represent a risk for student-teachers, as well as for their students – as we have mentioned, it is the student-teacher’s first contact with a class, with a school, performing the role of a teacher – the point is that at least those student-teachers have explored a great deal of information concerning human development and learning, curriculum theory and development, theories and teaching methods and approaches. Besides, their pre-service practice is closely supervised by their former professors from the university where they completed their formal education and also by supervisors of the school where they are teaching. The same can not be said of those who start their teaching practice without having had the opportunity to deal with subjects related to education, and whose previous knowledge and beliefs about their profession are the result of particular and individual experiences, which would need to be analysed and reflected upon prior to the teaching practice.

Chart III. Teaching Teachers: Model C

University: Four years of specific subject matters, including:
Target languages, Linguistics, Literature, Culture, Theory of Literature.

2 ways for professionalization:

1) Post-graduation at the same university

One year of educational curriculum

One year of pre-service supervised practice in schools

2) Specific Training Program

After 3 years of teaching in schools

One year of formal instruction in Education

One year of supervised in-service school practice.

I have had the opportunity to work with many of those teachers on in-service programs, and their initial knowledge, attitude and values towards their profession are rather different from those who come straight from a teaching curriculum degree. Nevertheless, it is also fair to mention, once they start reading and reflecting upon the complex issues of learning and teaching a language, they usually identify solutions to problems presented to them very rapidly and easily. They are also more aware of the possible alternative strategies and activities for their classrooms. After all, they were compulsorily made to experience the situation before they were able to acquire the knowledge of the difficulties in our daily routine as teachers. For them, the regular knowledge - experience - reflection cycle has been somewhat inverted. First they experience, then three years later they acquire the knowledge and reflect upon it.

Previous knowledge and practice

My experience as an EFL supervisor for more than 15 years, together with the precious help from readings in the area of second language acquisition and EFL teaching, has forced me to reflect on the kind of knowledge and experience needed by student-teachers of EFL, before they are faced with the complex task of helping others learn English as a foreign language.

The underlying assumptions of this text are then closely related to the positions held by many of those who defend the need for a reflective approach in the teaching of EFL teachers. Just to quote some of them, I will remember here the important contributions of Shulman (1986) to the definition of the nature of the knowledge needed for teaching. The concepts of “subject-matter content knowledge”, “pedagogical content knowledge”, and “curricular knowledge”, as well as the constructs used as forms of representation of these kinds of knowledge for teaching, have had a significant impact on Portuguese educators and researchers’ ideas for the design and the development of teacher education courses and teacher education programs.

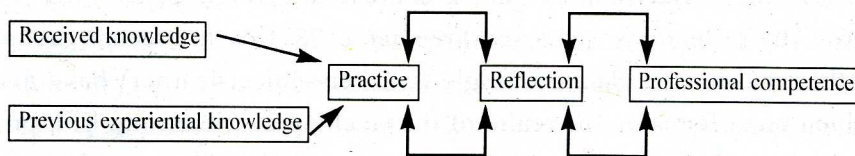
Freeman and Johnson (1998) have helped us analyse the emerging reconceptualization of that same knowledge-base of language teacher education programs. According to the authors, that knowledge-base should address several domains: “a) the nature of the teacher learner; b) the nature of schools and schooling; and c) the nature of language teaching, in which (...) the authors (...) include pedagogical thinking and activity, the subject-matter and the content, and language learning” (p. 406). The reflections of Larsen-Freeman (1987) on the reconstruction of the traditional didactic triangle (teacher-subject-learner) have also helped us to focus on the realm of the teaching and learning EFL process. More recently, the visions of Nunan (1997), Bailey and Nunan

(1996), Hedge and Whitney (1996), Richards and Lockhart (1995) and Wallace (1995) on the process of professional education of EFL teachers within a reflexive paradigm have also made us rethink our approaches and goals.

Wallace (1995), based on some of Schön's (1983) constructs, proposes that a teacher education course should be based on two kinds of knowledge development:

- a) **received knowledge** which aims at the acquisition of "the vocabulary of the subject and the matching concepts, research findings, theories and skills which are widely accepted as being part of the necessary intellectual content of the profession" (p.12); and
- b) **experiential knowledge** which aims at the development of "knowledge-in-action by practice of the profession"(p.15) and the consequent reflection on that same knowledge-in-action. According to the author, this knowledge-in-action may also be developed through the *observation* of practice, although, as the author also refers, "this 'knowledge-by-observation' is clearly of a different order from knowledge -in-action". (p.15)

In Wallace's (1995) model the professional competence of a teacher is, then, a corollary of the knowledge developed by this teacher during several moments of the process of individual growth while going through the reflective cycle of professional development.



Furthermore, the reflective model proposed by Wallace (1995) also takes into account the previous 'conceptual schemata' or 'mental constructs' of the student-teacher about the teaching profession. That is, like any other student, student-teachers bring to the learning situation a set of goals, values, attitudes and beliefs about the subject matter, about learning and about teaching, which will determine their relationship with the knowledge they are in the process of acquiring.

I share the opinion of those who hold that the professional knowledge of teachers should also be based on a range of theories and research information that will constitute the grounds for the growth of their ability to fully understand the content knowledge they have to teach. The teachers' knowledge built from these theories and research information will promote their ability to consciously reflect and justify their choices in the processes of planning, managing and evaluating a classroom learning situation. Besides, the more profound and complete the understanding of the subject matter content that one has to teach is, the easier it will be to consider alternative approaches to the teaching of that same content, to each and every student in the classroom.

However, for most of the student-teachers, the awareness of the need for this higher level of understanding of the content knowledge only arises after the first real contact with the real classroom practice. Therefore, I believe that student-teachers need to experience the challenge of classroom practice before they finish their professional teaching education.

This "received knowledge", in the words of Wallace (1995, p.14), or these "research-based theories and techniques", in the words of Schön (1983, p. 58), can not represent the whole knowledge teachers need for their ability to make professional choices in the process of teaching a foreign language in a real classroom, but it surely constitutes a secure basis for the building (or rebuilding) of their own mental constructs or

schemata, which will definitely influence the way teachers plan and develop their own language classrooms.

As in any other complex skilled profession, say medicine or law, students have to complete formal instruction at the university, then they have to go through a time of supervised practice before they are entitled to practice autonomously. Doctors are not allowed to treat patients without these previous qualifications; lawyers are not supposed to stand in the court room to defend their clients without that previous formal training. Why are teachers able to teach our children without formal professional education?

The answer to this question is not, however, a simple one. At least in Portugal, due to of the recent growth of the school population and because of the scarce number of qualified teachers, the system has had to accept a large number of teacher candidates without professional qualifications for the job. Today, the situation has positively changed in the urban areas, but in the country it is still common to find unqualified teachers in a wide range of disciplines.

What can we teach prospective teachers before pre-service practice?

I will focus here on the nature of the knowledge and experience that can be provided for student-teachers prior to their first contact with the teaching practice, in schools, which may contribute to their greater understanding of the content knowledge they are going to teach. Therefore, I will refer to the activities that can be planned in a discipline of specific didactics of the English language, in the university curriculum.

The syllabus of the discipline of Didactics of English in most of the Portuguese universities covers a wide range of subjects related to the practi-

ce of teaching a foreign language. Therefore, it is common to find topics related to theories of second language acquisition as well as teaching foreign language methods and approaches.

Besides following the same criteria, the contents of the discipline I will focus on here were organised according to the expressed needs and interests of the 77 students of the 4th year of the Portuguese and English undergraduate course, for which it was designed. The discipline covers a school year, and it is taught twice a week for 2,5 hours in a Portuguese state university. Based on a curriculum paradigm that sees teaching and learning as a process of negotiating, sharing and reconstructing knowledge, in which teacher and students are involved in a meaningful communication relationship, the goals settled for the discipline state that students will be able to:

- Extract relevant information from written documents on various subjects related to the discipline;
- Comment and synthesise different perspectives on a particular topic;
- Search for solutions to problems they deal with;
- Organise and participate in debates on specific subjects;
- Stand up for their own opinions;
- Analyse their feelings and emotions in negotiation situations;
- Express their feelings and emotions in problematic situations;
- Analyse their own decision making process;
- Participate in situations of self and co-evaluation;

During the learning process, students are also expected to demonstrate that they are be able to:

- Characterise different modes of thought in the theory of second language acquisition (SLA);

- Evaluate the formative role of the discipline;
- Synthesise the most important moments in the history of TEFL;
- Distinguish the characteristics of different proposals for the explanation of the language acquisition phenomenon;
- Characterise the language development process in adolescence;
- Recognise the contribution of foreign language knowledge and use in the process of the acquisition of other academic knowledge, as well as in the process of individual growth in several domains;
- Characterise the processes of reading and of writing in the EFL classroom;
- Analyse factors of influence in the process of decision making for the planning of tasks in an EFL classroom;
- Analyse and criticise the various roles of the teacher and of the learners in a situation of communicative interaction;
- Evaluate the educational implications of the use of different methodological approaches in the EFL classroom;
- Plan and organise learning situations that aim at the development of the foreign language and culture;
- Plan and organise learning situations that encourage the development of learners' self-monitoring and autonomy;
- Plan and organise learning situations in accordance with the students' school syllabus;
- Analyse and criticise learning situations in the EFL classroom;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of teaching;
- Demonstrate awareness of personal knowledge, beliefs and attitudes towards the process of learning EFL;
- Reflect on their own personal methodological choices;
- Evaluate their own ability to teach EFL.

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In order to achieve the above mentioned goals the following topics are explored during the course:

- The concept of didactics of English as a foreign language
- The reformulation of the traditional triangle “teacher-content-learner”
- The process of knowledge acquisition and construction
- The process of language acquisition and development
- Language development and use at adolescence
- Fundamental concepts and theories related to SLA
- Factors related to the process of late foreign language acquisition and development
- The evolution of EFL methods and approaches
- The process of EFL classroom management (focusing on the different teacher and students’ roles)
- The process of planning and organizing EFL task-based learning situations
- The management of resources and aids in EFL learning situations
- The process of evaluation and assessment in the EFL class

The methodology used to explore most of the topics listed in the content of this course does not include the traditional lecture by the teacher. In fact, the assumption is that students have to experience in order to be aware of their own processes of constructing knowledge. That being so, many of the learning situations are based on negotiation and on sharing information between the teacher and students, and before the end of each task students are involved in a process of individual and/or group analysis and reflection.

The content-knowledge that is explored in the subject of didactics of English has also been conceptualised according to the assumption that in the teaching of an EFL classroom,

there has been a shift from language to language in context, from the learner as an individual to the learner as a member of social groups, from language teaching and learning as a subject to an educational issue which has become increasingly politicised in the context of mobile multilingual and multi-ethnic societies, from the teacher as a source of classroom learning to a blurring of roles where both teacher and learner are objects of the acculturation and learning process (Candlin, 1991, p. xi).

Due to limitations of time and circumstances, I will only describe one of the initial tasks of the course, one that aims at the awareness of personal values and beliefs about EFL learning and teaching.

Teaching English foreign language teachers: A learning situation

“Task” 1: *I believe that a good teacher of English is someone who...*

The decisions underlying most of the choices of the activities developed within this task were the result of a reflective process. I took into consideration the profile of the learners and their knowledge of the factors influencing the complexity of learning and teaching. I also took into consideration recent proposals for the definition of the knowledge-base required for qualified professional language teaching. That is, Shulman's (1986) definition of all the domains included in the concept of 'pedagogical content knowledge' and Freeman and Johnson's (1998) already mentioned reconceptualization of the domains of that same knowledge for language teaching – knowledge about the nature of the teacher as learner; knowledge about the nature of schools and schooling; and knowledge about the nature of language teaching.

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I share Alarcão's (1991) view that the discipline of didactics constitutes an opportunity for the trainees to integrate, to analyse and to reconstruct the knowledge they have acquired in other areas of study. Trainees have to reconceptualise that previous knowledge and gain an appreciative understanding of their own object of study - the relationship between the students and the knowledge to be acquired, as well as the role of the teacher in that same relationship.

In the process of learning to become a teacher, and prior to the development of any kind of "received knowledge" (Wallace, 1995), students and teacher have to develop relationships as individuals who are attached to their prior experiences, their cultural background and their beliefs about what it is to learn and to teach. That is, the activity of learning to teach can not be detached from those involved in that same activity – the teacher and the learner. Furthermore, such activity can not be separated from the particular ecological context in which it takes place.

The following assumptions guided the planning of the task:

- The building of the mental representations and beliefs of the teachers begins long before their contact with the knowledge they will acquire in the process of formal teacher education (Ost, 1991).
- The beliefs, attitudes and values of student-teachers constitute the mental constructs in which they will base their future teaching practice (Ross, 1992).
- The changes that will occur in student-teachers' mental representation of their profession may constitute a threat to their identity and culture (Trigo-Santos, 1996).

- Qualified teachers begin their career with high expectations of success (Lortie, 1975).
- Expectations rather distinct from the reality that teachers will encounter in schools may provoke in them feelings of frustration and negative stress (Duke, 1984).
- Feelings of discontentment and frustration will, sooner or later, influence the professional practice of teachers (Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981).

The goals of the task were the following. Students were expected to:

- identify their own beliefs and attitudes towards teaching and learning;
- express the will to reformulate some of their own beliefs and expectations;
- reflect on their own professional knowledge;
- increase their ability to deal with challenges;
- increase their ability to make decisions.

Target Subjects: The task was designed to be carried out with a group of 77 students of a 4 year graduate teaching course on Portuguese and English at a state university, in Portugal.

The setting: The classroom.

Duration: 3 sessions of 2 hours.

Procedure:

Activity 1:

After the usual greetings, the teacher initiated a dialogue with the students, questioning them about what they considered to be “typical behaviours” of teachers. Then, the teacher asked the students’ opinion on the possible changes that have occurred on the roles teachers used to be expected to perform in the past.

In groups, students made a list of the most dramatic changes they thought have occurred in our classrooms today. Groups shared the information with the class.

Activity 2:

Students were asked to prepare themselves to write whatever memories they had of the classroom tasks and of their teachers, which have impressed them positively and negatively during their own academic history. They were asked not to sign the text. The only identification required was their gender and age. Before they started writing, the teacher asked them to remember the characteristics of the narrative text. The short text they were going to build would have to include main characters (student and teacher), the plot (the event/task they described), the emotions experienced in the particular situation (how the student felt), the possible reasons (why they think the teacher acted that way)... Students and teacher decided on the appropriate time to complete the task.

Activity 3:

Students were left alone in the classroom in order to be able to express themselves freely. After forty minutes, the teacher collected all the texts from the students in order to process them.

Readings were assigned on the subject of roles of teachers and learners in the EFL classroom.

One week latter

Activity 4:

The teacher asked the students to organise themselves in their regular groups and asked them to read attentively the texts she handed to them. The texts that were given to the students to read consisted of their own narratives, treated as anonymous texts. All the possible clues to identify the real authors were carefully erased. The texts were rewritten on a word processor, and all of them had the same format.

The students' task was to identify the kinds of roles performed by teachers and students in the narrative texts presented to them. Students were invited to share the work done with the whole class.

Activity 5:

The speaker of each group presented to the class a synthesis of the narrative they had worked with, characterising the roles of the teacher and the students in the situation (task) described.

Readings were assigned on the subject of teacher knowledge and classroom EFL management (language and cultural contexts).

Another week later

Activity 6:

Students discussed the nature of the roles of the teacher and learners identified in the tasks narrated and speculated on the possible reasons for teacher and student behaviour. When the behaviour of the teacher or the learners was considered inadequate, students were asked to propose different and more adequate ways of dealing with the situations described.

Activity 7:

Students were asked to complete the sentence "In my opinion, a good teacher of English is someone who..."

Activity 8:

Students shared their own opinions with the class.

Activity 9:

The teacher proposed the organisation of a "conversation" where a researcher in education would interview students, parents and teachers on the topic of teacher education and qualifications.

Volunteer students chose their own roles and decided on the profile of each of the characters whose role they were going to perform.

The audience was also invited to participate with questions to the guests in that "conversation".

Activity 10:

Students performed the interview. The class participated in the discussion that followed the interview.

Activity 11:

The teacher asked the students to write a small text in which they were invited to express their own views and feelings about the learning situations experienced in their classroom.

Students also answered a questionnaire about methodological suggestions concerning the next task to be worked out in class.

Closure of the task.

Post-Task reflection time

The texts my students wrote concerning their experiences and feelings during the activities of the task here described were of outmost importance for me as a person and as a teacher. My students' opinions about this task were highly positive. They told me that they discovered new perspectives for the analysis of the learning-teaching process. My students told me about their moments of insecurity as well as their feelings of success during the course of the activities carried out in class. They shared with me their expectations and fears. They told me they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on their past experience as students. Reflection had been a means of learning about themselves as students as well as prospective teachers. They also sent me messages of encouragement. They noticed my genuine interest in their growth as individuals and as prospective teachers. They also called my attention to the amount of readings required for some of the activities. They thought they didn't have enough time to do all the readings required for the task. However, they considered the reading materials assigned relevant for their own knowledge construction on subjects germane to their future profession of English language teachers.

Concluding remarks

Most of the learning situations developed in our classroom have followed a similar methodological pattern to the one referred to in this text. I have always believed that the pre-service qualification of the foreign language teachers, besides the necessary foreign language and culture knowledge and skills, must also include knowledge on key curriculum areas, such as knowledge and skills on planning, implementation and evaluation. Anyone who begins a professional career with professional knowledge and skills will always be more prepared to face the challenge of change and to creatively solve problems in the practice of that professional activity, than someone who has never had the opportunity to build that same knowledge and skills.

We may, for reasons of economy of budget or human resources, try to argue that teachers only need knowledge on the target subject matter they are supposed to teach and that, consequently, their professional knowledge will be obtained during the teaching practice in a rather short and specific teacher-training program. I agree that adults have the ability and the possibility to develop professional knowledge through reflection on their own practice, and from that reflection they can, in fact, build the knowledge they need for teaching. However, we also know that many of the teachers that have been subject to such ad-hoc models of training end up putting off the complex task of searching for the adequate information they need, as well as constantly postponing their presence in scientific meetings or symposiums for reasons of the amounts of work teachers are more and more expected to complete in schools and at home. Consequently, many of those teachers end up tied to their teaching routines, without noticing the need for change and the challenge of trying other teaching strategies.

For these reasons, I support teacher education programs that are integrated with the academic curriculum of those who have chosen to graduate on teaching courses. I recognise the important role of the universities that

undertake the teaching of teachers as a valuable, serious and prestigious task, and, therefore, invest in longer teacher education programs where the schools have a definite, relevant role as equal partners. I believe that soon most of the universities will also realise the importance of teacher education programs in which all the participants (professors, supervisors and student-teachers) are involved in a process of educating teachers with the quality that our students deserve.

Although much of the history of education has also been closely influenced by the laws and principles of economy and the market, my point is that the education of teachers is a matter of national concern, in which governments and universities should invest seriously. The process of educating highly qualified teachers and the provision of learning situations as well as human and material conditions, that lead to high levels of teacher effectiveness, may cost time and a large amount of financial resources. However, I am sure this is the kind of effort most parents and communities would be willing to support.

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**A formação dos professores de Inglês
como Língua Estrangeira: o caso português.**

Resumo

Este trabalho incide na análise de aspectos dos actuais planos curriculares da formação inicial de professores de línguas. A autora defende a exploração de alguns conteúdos e processos específicos a desenvolver na disciplina de Didáctica do Inglês, com a finalidade de contribuir para o aumento da consciência por parte dos alunos, futuros professores, da complexidade e desafios inerentes à profissão de professor de língua estrangeira.

**La formation des enseignants d'Anglais
comme langue étrangère: Le cas Portugais.**

Résumé

Ce travail porte sur l'analyse d'aspects des plans curriculaires de formation initiale de professeurs de langue. L'auteur défend l'exploitation de certains contenus et de processus spécifiques qui doivent être développés dans la discipline "Didactique de l'Anglais". L'objectif est d'accroître chez les élèves, futurs professeurs, leur conscience de la complexité et des défis inhérents à la fonction du professeur de langue étrangère.