Edu-LE: English teaching in Madeira (students from 3 to 12 years old)

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Abstract
Teaching a Foreign Language in the 1st Cycle (6 to 10) is a fact in Madeira for thirteen years now. All 1st Cycle students have one hour of English in the curricular time and two hours of English as an Extra-curricular activity. Pre-School students (3 to 5) also have English, though optional, for an hour or two half-hour periods. Edu-LE, the project in charge, promotes in-service teacher training, and develops and assesses the Portfolio’s methodology in 1st and 2nd Cycles, articulating methodologies amongst Cycles. Edu-LE's teachers work in teams through computer technology (web2.0 tools) and e-portfolios. In addition, this project sponsors several subprojects.

Keywords
portfolio, innovative initiatives, early foreign language teaching

Introduction
Teaching a Foreign Language in the 1st Cycle (6 to 10 years old) is nowadays a fact in the mainland. However, in the Autonomous Region of Madeira (RAM – Região Autónoma da Madeira) it has been a reality for some time now, so we thought that it would be important to share what has been happening. The teaching/learning process of a Foreign Language in the 1st cycle, namely English, has a common background with the creation of E.T.I.’s (Escolas a Tempo Inteiro - full time schools) in RAM. The ETI’s were born circa thirteen years ago as a means to provide less resourceful children with the access to different areas and activities, such as Arts, Music and Drama, Sports, ICT, and obviously, to a foreign language, promoting above all equality to everyone in education. Through time, these extracurricular activities have been adapted to each new school reality and context, in an attempt to reach each school’s specific needs and social context. However, some areas have been a constant in Madeiran schools, specifically English.
Such reality was perceived by the Regional Board of Education and Culture of Madeira (SREC – Secretaria Regional de Educação e Cultura). This led to the creation of a team in 2002, the Pedagogical Intervention Project to the learning and teaching of foreign languages – 1st Cycle, which was under D.R.E.’s (Direcção Regional de Educação) responsibility.

The project in question aimed to support those teachers teaching a Foreign Language in the 1st Cycle. These teachers owned different academic backgrounds and needed a specific input as well as to create a common working guideline among RAM’s schools (it is important to stress out that not all Madeiran schools were part of the project due to the fact that not all were full time schools).

We need now to remind you that until this moment we have been talking about teaching English in the 1st Cycle in all school years, but only as an Extracurricular Area. That is, it is a students’ choice, neither compulsory nor present in all of the Madeiran 1st Cycle schools, once not all schools worked full time. This situation implied a growing heterogeneity by the time students reached the 2nd Cycle (10 to 12 years old).

The team’s role was a determining factor for the actual success of the teaching and learning process of English as a Foreign Language in Madeira, once it sought to resolve some handicaps in terms of teachers’ initial training. At the same time the team defined action rules and methodologies, in an attempt to assemble the existing diversity in regional schools. As a result, in 2005 it was settled by DRE’s official document (Despacho n.º 108/2005) that all 1st Cycle schools should start to provide one hour of English as a Foreign Language to all students of all school years (1st to 4th grade). Furthermore, full time schools (ETI’s) should also provide their students with one to two hours of English as an Extracurricular activity, according to each school’s supply capacity (at the present time, 97% of the Madeiran 1st Cycle schools are full time schools). The same document refers that English in Preschool (3 to 5) should be maintained optional, taught once a week, for an hour, two half-hour periods or a 45 minutes moment.

The official document brought, at the same time, changes to the team’s structure, with the addition of a kindergarten teacher. At this time the project changes its name to Projecto Edu-LE (Educar – Línguas Estrangeiras).

Simultaneously, the Madeiran 1st Cycle English teacher’s profile was defined: preferably he/she should be a 1st Cycle teacher with a major in Portuguese and English.

At the present time the Edu-LE’s team includes a team coordinator and four assessors: two supporting the teaching in 1st Cycle (one of them mainly working in the articulation of teaching English through ICT and other ICT projects), one supporting the teaching in Preschool and another one developing the portfolio’s methodology in 2nd Cycle English teaching and pedagogically linking 1st and 2nd Cycle. Edu-LE’s universe is of nearly one hundred and forty 1st Cycle teachers (one hundred and thirty public and private 1st Cycle schools with nearly one hundred and six of those schools including the teaching of an FL in Preschool as well), twenty-three Preschool teachers (twenty Preschools public and private), twenty-seven 2nd Cycle teachers (over forty classes and thirteen schools) and also two 3rd Cycle teachers with four 3rd Cycle classes (7th grade).

Edu-LE’s main purposes are to guide and assess the approaches of teaching an FL in Preschool; to guide, assess and evaluate an FL in 1st Cycle; to develop pedagogical guidelines to teach an FL in both Pre-school and 1st Cycle; to promote in-service teacher training; to encourage the use of a folder in FL teaching in Preschool; to develop and assess the Portfolio’s methodology in both 1st and 2nd Cycles and to articulate methodologies amongst 1st and 2nd Cycles, creating already a link to 3rd Cycle as well. In-service continuous teacher training; school visits and diverse workshops are Edu-LE’s methodology of mediation and on the field of action.

Edu-LE’s guidelines are to promote meaningful, diverse, active, socializing and integrated learning as recommended in the Portuguese Preschool Guidelines and the 1st Cycle Curriculum; to develop linguistic, cultural, social, intercultural, affective and psycho-pedagogical dimensions; to support cross-curricular teaching; to increase pedagogical differentiation; to apply portfolio’s methodology (1st, 2nd and 3rd Cycle) and to uphold motivating and pedagogical activities capable of potentiating the development of different Intelligences2.

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1 FL in this context will refer only to Foreign Language - English

2 Multiple Intelligences theory by Howard Gardner.
In order to put all of these guidelines and purposes into action, teachers develop didactic and diverse activities adequate to their school’s own context and content (FL), supported by pedagogical and various strategies like: singing, dancing, drama, games, stories, writing, reading, retelling, arts and crafts, etc. Everything is orchestrated through the adequacy of provided guidelines with “Minimum English Contents for 1st Cycle” (RAM’s own document), the use of Portfolio’s methodology and assessed in their end of school year ERA’s (English Report in Action).

One of the things which better characterizes the teaching/learning of English as an FL in 1st Cycle in Madeira is the use of a Portfolio as the teacher and student’s main assessment tool. Edu-LE’s Portfolio was initially divided into 3 sections: Biography (where the student should see a reflection of his/her life, preferences and personal growth); Linguistic Passport (it gathers information on the student’s knowledge of the language, self-assessment grids and other documents related to the students’ learning goals) and Dossier (a collection of works gathered by the student, according to the student’s personal choices and/or a student’s selection of meaningful elements of the student’s own learning process). Nowadays, teachers can also consider including a 4th section: Notebook (where students, mainly 3rd and 4th graders can create routines and gather information perceived throughout the classes). This Portfolio’s characteristics take into consideration the Documentation, Process and Showcase Portfolios as well as the ELP (European Language Portfolio). It pursues the development of metacognitive processes and implements the European Framework Reference for Languages guidelines. Edu-LE’s Portfolio is considered the main assessment tool (in 1st Cycle) and a diagnosis instrument: it develops management, research and record techniques; promotes self-assessment techniques; reflects the student’s linguistic and learning process and differentiates teaching methodologies.

Because the schools community is also of the most importance, Edu-LE’s team visits schools (knowing one’s place of work is a good mirror of one’s strengths and weaknesses), meets with teachers, head-teachers, talks with students, participates in school activities (celebrations, exhibits, etc.) and, when necessary, gathers with parents.

In order to promote all these methodologies and a cooperative and collaborative approach amongst all Edu-LE’s teachers, this project sponsors some sub-projects: S.E.T.E.; S.E.E.; T.E.A., eT.E.A.M and E.T.C.. Other projects such as: P.E.L.; ePortfolio, Peek-a-Boo and 2nd P.E.E.K. had also its genesis with Edu-LE. These projects intend to develop the study and improvement of the teaching and learning of English as an FL in Madeira, promoting the success of our students and a better preparation of all our teachers.

**Edu-LE’s subprojects**

**S.E.T.E. workshops** (Sharing Experiences to Teach English) – these workshops are developed by a group of six Edu-LE’s teachers, which have a reduction of five hours in their schedule, in order to organise ideas, strategies and activities that they have already put into action. Once organised, they prepare a workshop to share these ideas with other colleagues. The SETE workshops are quite practical and intend to promote cooperation and collaboration amongst teachers by developing activities/strategies to teach an FL in Preschool; specific dynamics and didactics of an FL in 1st Cycle and an FL as cross-curricular and across the curriculum element for the student’s holistic growth.

**S.E.E. workshops** (Sharing European Experiences) – these workshops are promoted with Edu-LE’s help, by Edu-LE teachers that have participated in European Courses and that can in these workshops share some of their experiences and learning.

**T.E.A. workshops** (Teachers Exchanging Approaches) - these workshops are promoted with Edu-LE’s help, by Edu-LE teachers that have a Masters or post-graduation course in FL-related areas and wish to share their achievements with other colleagues.

**eT.E.A.M.** (electronic-Teaching English As Magic) – groups of Edu-LE’s teachers (2 to 5 teachers) from different private or public schools and, sometimes, different regions sharing experiences, strategies, materials and promoting the exchange of materials and messages amongst their students. All these experiences are reflected in the eTEAM blog. All groups have blogs where they can share their experiences and challenge other colleagues to join them or experience their strategies.

**E.T.C.** (English Teachers Community) – an online community of all Edu-LE’s teachers teaching in 1st Cycle in RAM. The community promotes the creation of a common identity and a true sense of belonging and sharing of information and strategies/activities.

Other Edu-LE’s subprojects:

**P.E.L.** (Portefólio Europeu de Línguas or EPL) – three Madeiran teachers in three different schools are participating in this national project of implementing a common working tool in 1st Cycle;
ePortfolio – an experience to develop an electronic-portfolio in 1st Cycle schools with eleven Edu-LE’s English teachers (eleven 4th grade classes), a 2nd Cycle English teacher and a 6th grade English class – creating a cooperative and collaborative community of teachers and students. This subproject is a result of Edu-LE’s wish to put Madeira’s Education ahead of the latest methodologies. Thereby, the project has been implementing the portfolio methodology in the different cycles of the compulsory education. Acquired throughout the many years of the Project’s experience, this knowledge resulted in varied worldwide attempts to spread and generalise the use of many tools which are based on WEB 2.0, and on the assumption that, by 2010, every European citizen should own an e-portfolio (the Lisbon Strategy forecasts that, in the short term, European citizens will need to develop their own e-portfolio as a working/professional tool). The Portuguese Government created a Technological Plan, with the intent of providing all citizens with ICT technology. One of its programs, “Ligar Portugal”, intends to reach the “generalization of the senior student’s electronic individual dossier (portfolio). In this document the student will record all his/her more relevant works, proof of relevant practice which were acquired in different domains (artistic, scientific, technological, sportive, among others), and will show the effective use of ICT in the different school subjects”.

In this context, it became necessary to create a team of teachers that would be able to implement this methodology in their teaching practice, after receiving input that would allow them and their pupils to use tools of creation and maintenance of ePortfolios’. The main aims of this project are to develop reflexive competencies, increase students and teachers digital literacy, and promote student’s identity creating at the same time timeless artifacts of student’s achievements;

Peek-a-Boo – an experience with Preschool teachers (3 to 5 years old) teaching English to their groups of children. This experience started this school year with twenty-three Preschool teachers (twenty-three groups of children) in seventeen Preschools (private and public) in different regions of Madeira and Porto Santo. The experience is based on promoting the Preschool teachers language skills and adjusting methodologies and strategies of specific teaching of an FL to a very particular audience. We believe that this experience will allow a better knowledge of Preschool children and their reaction to learning a new language, which will be fundamental when preparing 1st and 2nd Cycle teachers to teach with these levels. An online community for the teachers in this experience was also created, promoting cooperation and teamwork amongst the participants.

2nd P.E.E.K. – Started in 2006/2007, the 2nd P.E.E.K. Project’s - Second Portfolio Experience on English Knowledge – main goal is to assess the relevance of the introduction of portfolio methodology in English classes in the 2nd Cycle. During the first year of the experience, Edu-LE Project gathered a group of ten teachers from different schools of the Region. This group had the making and implementation of the portfolio document on their hands, written entirely in English. This document would be used as a working basis in the English classroom. More than that, the 2nd P.E.E.K. English Portfolio is an assessment portfolio in the English language learning. This phase of the process lasted all school year, since the making of such a document implied constant revision, a product of the students’ feedback. The 2nd P.E.E.K. English Portfolio is divided into four sections:

1) My Language Biography is the part of the English Portfolio where students can write about themselves – personal data on the student and his/her preferences, how they keep in touch with the English language, and their previous language knowledge.

2) My Language Passport provides an overview of the student’s knowledge of a language. Here the student can record his learning achievements, using the can-do statements grid. Each group of descriptors is divided into degrees of knowledge, the language proficiency levels (from A1 to B1), according to the CEFR.

3) My Dossier is an important part of the English Portfolio for the learners, as it is a personal collection of their work. In this section learners include meaningful works that show their experiences and achievements in language learning.

Throughout the two-year period (2006-2008) the project organized reflection meetings with the involved teachers. In these meetings, apart from discussing the experience’s follow-up in the field, there was a concern with debating themes related to Edu-LE’s theory substantiation and English teaching pedagogical practice.

The Portfolio Methodology started by being applied to the project teachers’ 5th grade classes. At the beginning of the experience’s second year it was decided to keep the same classes until the end of the 6th grade. This measure intended to assess the students’ results at the end of the Cycle.
After gathering all the data from the assessment of the project, the Edu-LE team reached to some conclusions: portfolio methodology was indeed a successful tool in the learning of a foreign language in the 2nd Cycle. Both students and teachers found this methodology very useful and interesting to work with, and an important aid in learning a foreign language. Several meetings on the portfolio methodology led to suggestions to change the portfolio that ended up in an improved version of the 2nd P.E.E.K. Portfolio (one of the most important changes was the inclusion of a new section - My Notebook. This section contains the records of what is done in class, such as the students’ notes, tests, worksheets, homework, etc.).

This new version will be tested with new 5th, 6th and 8th grade classes around Madeira and Porto Santo. The project’s group was extended to thirteen schools, twenty-nine teachers and nearly forty classes. The intent is to approve a portfolio model that will be used in English Teaching in 2nd and 3rd Cycles in RAM. This project also created an online community in order to better reach each and every single teacher/school own idiosyncrasies promoting teacher cooperation and collaboration.

The Edu-LE Project hopes to, if the necessary conditions are there, to broaden the experience to all 2nd Cycle throughout the following years, as well as to ask the validation for RAM’s own portfolio. We hope to have been able to illustrate what Edu-LE is and what teaching/learning an FL in Pre-school and 1st Cycle means in Madeira. Edu-LE’s project and its team are fully aware that there is still a long way to go. So many things still to assess, to understand, to develop and to promote towards the success of FL teaching in RAM. However, we believe that the strength, knowledge, commitment, motivation and professionalism of our teachers is half way to success. We hope, soon, to be able to share some more of our experiences with you and learn from experiences that others may want to share with us because as an African saying so accurately puts it “If you want to go quickly, go alone... but if you want to go far, go together.”

Bibliographical References