

'...more primary than English'

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The title of my talk is adapted from a citation by Keith Sharpe (2001), who discusses the importance of primary methodologies when teaching French in English primary schools. This is one of the most important considerations when implementing any foreign language in primary education and it has huge methodological implications, naturally affecting the teaching force involved.

In the conference's opening plenary Jayne Moon very clearly described teachers as being key players in early language learning projects, and as my talk evolved over the weeks running up to the conference I began to think more and more about the teacher and less and less about the primary methodologies as such. A talk that I had thought would be about our primary context in Portugal became a talk about teachers in our primary context in Portugal.

1. Historical background to foreign language learning in Portugal

It is interesting that we should arrive at October 2005, and yet be completely unprepared for the language learning initiative the Socialist government has so enthusiastically taken on board. Sixteen years ago a foreign language was contemplated as being possible in Portuguese first cycle schools, through the *Decreto-Lei n° 286/89, de 29 de Agosto, 1989*, with a focus on oral work and fun activities. It took three years before guidelines, though brief, were available and they highlighted the fact that a foreign language should follow a *sensitisation* approach. That same year a conference was held in Fátima, and it would appear that the term 'precoce' was coined.

In 1996, Strecht-Ribeiro was responsible for opening the first Curso de Estudos Superiores Especializados (CESE) in foreign language teaching in the first cycle of Portuguese education, which ran at the Escola Superior de Educação (ESE) in Lisbon. Several ESEs around Portugal followed suit, preparing classroom teachers or generalists, to take on the role of language teachers. This was an important step towards preparing the ground for a potential implementation of foreign language teaching in Portuguese first cycle schools, a step which would allow such teaching to become appropriately integrated into the first cycle curriculum.

In 1998 Strecht-Ribeiro, published his masters thesis on the subject of 'ensino precoce', *"Línguas Estrangeiras no 1º ciclo. Razões, finalidades, estratégias"*. Though this is mainly an academic book, it was hugely useful and cited in anything and everything that was written about teaching English in the first cycle in Portugal! He used data from the first CESE run in Lisbon in much of the study it describes.

In the meanwhile diverse first cycle foreign language projects were being set up all over Portugal, and as the new century opened, the year 2000 brought a positive feeling, shared by many working with foreign languages. The European year of the language was looming ever closer and many projects were being contemplated to celebrate the linguistic diversity 2001 was hoping to promote.

In 2000 APPI launched its very own primary teaching interest group, "Núcleo de Ensino Precoce", APPInep. We were sure that as 2001 opened with the new educational reforms, that foreign languages would play a more active role in first cycle education.

When the educational reform was announced in January 2001, *the Decreto-Lei n° 6/2001 de 18 de Janeiro*, great disappointment was felt by many as it became steadily clearer that although a foreign language could be contemplated, it was only as an extra curricular subject. The Ministry also published the tome, "Currículo Nacional do Ensino Básico - *Competências Essenciais*", which included quite distinct guidelines relating to

foreign language teaching in the first cycle. Once again they emphasised a *sensitisation* programme, with an emphasis on oral work and fun activities.

We enjoyed the European year of the language and much energy was put into projects in this sector of education. ESE Leiria organised a conference with speakers from the UK and France joining a selection of Portuguese teacher trainers and practising teachers, many of the latter were generalist primary teachers who had recently completed CESEs all over Portugal.

Later APPI also ran an international conference in collaboration with IATEFL at ESE Lisboa. With energetic support from the publishers we were able to bring speakers from far and wide, a truly great first YL conference and one which held promise for a future of teaching English in the first cycle.

As September 2001 drew closer, the *Decreto-Lei* quietly undermined foreign language teaching in the first cycle. Many projects were rejected by local educational authorities and despite the activity of 2001, a steady decline ensued. Sadly this coincided with the closing of the CESEs. According to Palma (2005) there are a total of 144 teachers who took these CESEs and are prepared to teach either English or French in pre-schools or first cycle schools, all generalist classroom teachers with a language specialisation. And so it happened that over the next four years foreign language projects diminished, training, though available mainly through Prodep courses, was not attended and gradually petered out.

And so we found ourselves in November 2004, and Jorge Sampaio dissolved parliament. Political campaigns gained in momentum it became clear that English would finally be part of primary education, to the exclusion of all other foreign languages. And so unprepared! Unprepared on two fronts: for the approach the Ministry took to implement the project and unprepared to implement a project of such dimension.

2. A need for standardisation

The despatch published in July 2005 (Despacho nº 14 753/2005 (2ª Série)) highlights the Ministry's wish for English in the first cycle to be '*decentralised, flexible and consistent, providing for diversified results*'. How is it possible that something as important as educating our country's children to speak another language, be decentralised and that it should have diversified results? Where is the standardisation?

An attempt at providing standardisation in terms of approach and input was published in August 2005, in the form of the *Orientações Programáticas*, (Bento et al.). The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with APPI, put together a set of practical ideas to help teachers working in the Portuguese first cycle. These orientations have been given to teachers all over the country. But this publication is not a training manual, neither is it an official programme. It contains suggestions for proposed objectives for such a project, an outline of appropriate methodologies and ideas for content following a thematic approach, and finally a comprehensive bibliography. It was an attempt at providing for standardisation.

2.1 Some definitions

I'd like to look at a couple of terms before I continue: In the *Decretos-Lei* I highlighted the term sensitisation appears several times. I think it's important to briefly discuss and define what sensitisation is and look at how it sits in the present language learning situation in Portugal.

A language learning model - Sensitisation or language acquisition?

'Sensitisation models suggest an experience which is essentially primary, emphasising as it does the value of developing the present skills and interests of the pupils. The language content is more than incidental but continuity of learning and future attainment is not stressed (...)' (Driscoll 1999)

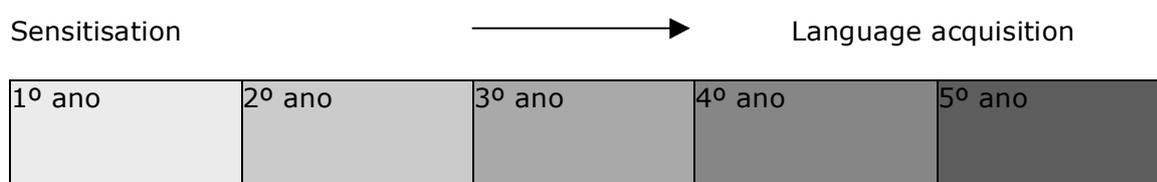
Despite the confusion behind all the recent Ministry initiatives, it is continuity which is now guaranteed, English will begin in the first cycle and continue into the second cycle and beyond. So can we continue defining our first cycle English language projects as sensitisation models? For sure they facilitate a limited use of the foreign language focusing primarily on the attitudinal and motivational aspects of the language learning experience, but language acquisition programmes can also highlight these objectives. Generally sensitisation models facilitate a limited use of the foreign language because there is a marked absence of linguistic objectives. Listening and speaking are the predominant skills and long term planning is not an issue. It is primarily a language experience, which occurs for short periods of time once/twice a week, invariably with no explicit measurable objectives or assessment procedures. Finally a teacher with a lower proficiency can run such an initiative.

A language acquisition model on the other hand, encourages a greater emphasis on performance. In a language acquisition model we see the introduction of all four skills, but an appropriate introduction, with listening and speaking coming before reading and writing. This is a more formal language learning model, in which progression is a feature and this progress is accountable. It includes performance levels and is usually subject to a monitored assessment. It demands more teaching time and would be the responsibility of a teacher whose English language proficiency is higher.

Without a doubt, positive attitudinal outcomes are one of the objectives of a programme for 'ensino precoce' in Portugal, but alone are insufficient, especially if continuation for more than two years in the 1º ciclo is contemplated. If this is the case, this objective should be combined with a minimum of FL competence, and early language learning should be taken *seriously* at the stage of transition from 1º ciclo to 2º ciclo. Figure 1 shows a continuum of sensitisation to language acquisition, which takes continuation into consideration in an English programme that runs from year 1 to year 5.

With this continuum in mind, a purely sensitisation model in the 3rd year is fading very quickly from view. In addition to this the project depends upon specialist language teachers. A sound approach backed by Ministry guidelines and an official programme is required if we are to take a language acquisition model to heart.

Figure 1: **Sensitisation continuum.**



3. The approach

The plans we were all privy to in early journalistic publications outlined extra curricular English in 25% of Portuguese first cycle schools, with a focus on existent language projects emphasising what experience Portugal had in the field and building upon these to allow for a gradual introduction covering all children in 3rd and 4th years by 2009. Despite the complaints that it should take so long, the positive side to this initial strategy was that those language projects, which were already up and running would remain in place and the experience already gained in this field would be valued.

We were led to believe that the majority of teachers who would be involved in this initiative were upper cycle language specialists from the 2º and 3º cycles and secondary education, under the supervision of the *agrupamentos*, who would be the main stakeholders in these projects. We were also informed that local town councils and parent associations were to be involved in the logistical planning of these English projects, providing space and transport for the children to attend English classes.

These plans caused concern because we knew that those teachers who had been nominated had the language competence, they were specialists, but very few had the training which enabled them to plan and teach appropriately in classes with children as young as seven and eight years old. Sadly those generalist primary teachers the ESEs had carefully prepared from 1996 to 2001 were completely ignored as possible candidates.

As the new ministry policy was set into action, a very different plan took root. July saw the Despacho nº 14 753/2005 (2ª Série) published which described a financial carrot per child of €100.00 and the possibility of practically any entity involved in educational services to apply for this funding, as long as there is a signed protocol which included an *agrupamento*.

Despite the obligatory inclusion of *agrupamentos* in all proposals for funding it appears that just about anyone but *agrupamentos* have become the promoting organisers. Figures taken from the Ministry of Education (ME) website at the end of September show that the majority of projects are lead by the local town councils. In the listing from Direção Regional de Educação do Centro (DREC) this is a total of 76% of the projects. Where town councils are absent, the promoting organizations are in their majority language schools, a total of 18%, and the remaining are parents' associations at 5%, with an ESE, an *agrupamento* and a private school completing the remaining 1%.

4. How does this new approach affect first cycle English projects?

4.1 Apparent privatisation

These percentages disguise the reality of the situation. The lists are of the organisations who will receive the ministry funding for the projects. In the majority of cases the teaching is the sole responsibility of a language institute, the town councils and associations, are acting as intermediaries only.

In a recent article, which appeared in the Região Centro Informação (RCI), the magazine for the Sindicato de Professores de Região Centro, many of the approaches adopted by the ME are disputed in typical union fashion, including what they describe as a calculated privatisation of the teaching of English in Portuguese first cycle schools. They also argue that the ME funding has deliberately kept the *agrupamentos* from coming forward as candidates.

I find this strange: money available is equivalent to € 11,10/child per month. We know that in small classes this is not enough, but with larger classes (between 18 to 25 students), this is actually quite a lot of money per hour. Of course this would mean that only large classes, most likely in urban areas could have started off with English in the first cycle. That English would not be for all was an accepted result of the plan, which would take four years to implement. In the ensuing three years it was hoped that solutions for small classes would be reached and eventually all first cycle aged children would have access to English.

So what happened to the four-year gradual implementation? The Ministry got carried away and said 'Yes' to everything, with apparently very little selection.

That the *agrupamentos* feel that other entities should bear the brunt of this financial discrepancy is rather disconcerting as well.

4.2 The diminishing role of the *agrupamento*

In June 2005, I asked two *agrupamentos* if they would be interested in a consultant/trainer for their 2nd and 3rd cycle teachers, to work with them on this ministry initiative. Both expressed a keen dislike of the idea that their teachers should be involved in the initiative at all. They foresaw internal organizational problems as being too great to make any such project viable.

Both of these *agrupamentos* signed protocols with a promoting organisation. The first *agrupamento* partnered with their Town Council, who had a contract with a language school, continuing a project which had been in existence for eighteen months. The second *agrupamento* looked to the parents' associations encouraging them to bring language institutes into the picture, continuing projects already in existence and initiating others.

Both *agrupamentos* refused to become the promoting organisation. Being responsible for receiving the funding from the Ministry would incur additional paperwork they were not prepared to deal with. Each *agrupamento* happily signed the protocol, openly accepting that another institution be responsible for the work involved in such a project.

The RCI magazine I quoted from earlier also described a study which took place in June/July of 2005. It included information from 160 of the 191 *agrupamentos* (83,4%) in the Central Region of Portugal.

- 27,3 % of the schools already had an established foreign language project, in the majority of cases the foreign language was English;
- 25,9% of the *agrupamentos* included foreign language teaching in 1st to 4th years;
- 46,9% of the *agrupamentos* taught a foreign language in curricular time and the ME financed 67% of these projects;
- 50% of the teachers involved were from upper cycles and 52% of these placements were considered '*complemento de horário*'. Just 17,5% of the teachers involved were considered 'others';
- 1 *agrupamento* indicated using generalist classroom teachers.

I have been selective in choosing the information I have shown you, but it is clear that there has been a definite swing from using upper cycle teachers employed by the ME and working with an *agrupamento* to using 'other' teachers. It is also clear that the number of schools with foreign language projects was over and above the initial number suggested by the ME, 25% if you recall, at the start of this initiative. Have their experiences been valued, and how many of them have been continued this year with this new model?

4.3 Who are the 'other' teachers involved in the present initiatives?

When we first heard that upper cycle teachers would be responsible for teaching English in primary, many of us were worried because of the lack of experience and training these teachers had within the area of primary pedagogy. However, by bringing in language institutes, or privatising the initiative, the Ministry has not resolved this situation, far from it.

Promoting organisations have rarely been able to rely solely upon their present staff to cover the first cycle classes they have agreed to cover. In my own personal case, I needed two additional teachers to work on this project, where I am responsible for three primary schools in the *freguesia* of Cortes, Leiria. I advertised and received calls from a wide range of possible candidates. In a total 17, two had had specific training in teaching young learners: however the small timetables I could offer meant they were not interested. The other candidates were in the majority recent graduates, looking for their first job, graduates from universities, not ESEs, implying a more theoretical background and certainly no training in teaching primary aged children.

I only needed two teachers, I know of language institutes who have had to employ in excess of twenty teachers to cover the schools they are responsible for. I am certain their candidates were of a similar calibre to mine! How have these and other promoting organisations approached the lack of primary knowledge these teachers have? How are they supporting these teachers?

5. The '*agrupamentos*' as sleeping partners

The role taken on by the majority of *agrupamentos* is that of a sleeping partner within a business deal. In this case there is no financial investment on their part but the provision of a valuable signature, which enables them to sit back and let things happen. I'd like to focus on the consequences of this phenomenon, which affects both the children and the teachers.

5.1 Vertical articulation

Table 1: **Articulation between cycles**

Agrupamento run initiatives	Other initiatives
There is a possibility that a teacher can follow the children through into the 2 nd cycle, continuing their learning.	x
The 1 st and upper cycle schools are linked in terms of executive bodies.	x
There is possibly a common educational project.	x
The 1 st and upper cycle teachers have a common understanding of the organizational procedures within the teaching context. (Eg. meetings/reports)	x

In the RCI publication I mentioned earlier, they lament at the lack of vertical articulation between the first cycle and second cycle schools. It is very clear from table 1 that an *agrupamento* can offer much in terms of vertical articulation between cycles. Any other promoting organisations look more than inadequate in comparison.

5.2 Teacher instability

What the RCI did not discuss was that the teachers employed by the promoting organisations to teach English in first cycle schools would be negatively affected by the approach taken by the ME.

The number of teachers employed under normal circumstances by language institutes was in no way sufficient to cover the extra first cycle classes that were taken on, and additional teachers have been employed in the majority of cases. If a language institute is not involved then teachers are employed by a promoting organisation, invariably an organisation unused to working directly with teachers. These teachers do not teach enough hours to entitle them to be full time employees of any of the promoting organisations. This leads to instability in financial terms.

Table 2 very clearly outlines the instability caused by the kind of remuneration teachers are receiving and how it differs from that which would be provided if they belonged to an *agrupamento*, and were paid by the ME.

Table 2: **Remuneration – comparing ME employed teachers with others.**

Agrupamento run initiatives	Other initiatives
Teacher's salary is set on a national scale.	Salary, in the majority of cases, is on an hourly basis and possibly unnecessarily low.
Teachers are earning a salary which includes additional benefits.	Teachers are in the majority on <i>recibo verde</i> with no benefits included.
Teaching experience counts in terms of accountable service.	The teaching experience does not count for anything official.
Teachers have a contract with the Ministry and this is considered valuable in one's curriculum	Teachers may have contracts, but one's which are easily broken if a better offer of employment arises.

5.3 Teacher isolation

Isolation is one of the major difficulties encountered by teachers who are employed by 'other' promoting organisations. These teachers belong no-where, with such small teaching timetables; it is very difficult to feel part of any workforce. If there is a staff room available, they may use it, but when travel is involved they are likely to plan lessons at home, and rarely meet other teachers.

On arriving at the first cycle school, these teachers are rarely greeted by the classroom generalist. Instead are left to cope alone with the children. No information is passed on about learning difficulties. The English teacher comes and goes alone, invariably feeling that the problems encountered are their fault and responsibility.

In-service training, something which could help the teachers overcome their inexperience and isolation is almost beyond reach too. Teachers employed by an *agrupamento* are entitled to eight in-service days per year. Teachers working for other promoting organisations will not be encouraged to miss classes, neither will they be given paid time off.

6. How can we overcome these difficulties?

I'd like to suggest some strategies to overcome the difficulties I have outlined above and describe some of the ways we can prevail over this in-articulation, instability and isolation.

6.1 The role of the *agrupamento* and promoting organisation

Active *agrupamentos*

Agrupamentos should take a more positive role in promoting collaboration between the two teachers involved in educating a group of children and in liaising with the promoting organisation.

1. *Agrupamentos* should schedule meetings in teacher timetables, for classroom teachers to be available to meet with the English teachers.
2. *Agrupamentos* should show support for the implementation of English by encouraging classroom teachers to take a positive approach to their children's English lessons;
3. *Agrupamentos* should request regular meetings with the promoting organisation to ensure the smooth running of the project.

Pro-active promoting organisations

1. Promoting organisations should visit schools to meet classroom teachers and see classrooms;
2. Promoting organisations should encourage their teachers to collaborate with the classroom teachers;
3. Promoting organisations should remunerate teachers for any extra time spent in scheduled meetings with classroom teachers;
4. Promoting organisations should meet with *agrupamentos* to ensure smooth running of the project;
5. Promoting organisations should ensure that teachers keep up to date registers and lesson summaries, so that projects are accountable;

6.2 Teachers collaborating

If we want to take our children seriously, we should be looking at bringing all those involved in their education together. Collaboration between teachers, specialist English teacher and generalist classroom teacher, is a very important aspect of working in the first cycle. Through communication integration may begin, and despite English at this moment in time being extra curricular, it is essential that we make every effort to integrate the children's learning.

Communication is simply two teachers talking to each other about the education of the children they share. The English teacher asking about what the children are learning at any one time and vice versa.

If we are to put the children before everything, the specialist should turn to the generalist for support and information regarding their shared group of children, and certain individuals - after all it is the generalist teacher who is able to get to know a class more quickly and to a greater extent. Consequently, the generalist should be seen as the primary font of knowledge regarding the children. This means that generalists should be both available and amenable towards providing this information and supporting the specialist. Specialists in return should explain what they are doing, what their objectives are and how they work. They should share positive things about the children, as well as any problems they are having.

Teachers should be allies in the education of their children.

6.3 Connecting learning

The specialist:

In first cycle schools children's learning is not divided into areas and given by different teachers. The generalist classroom teacher is the one and only educator and is able to bring all their learning together. It is our role as English teachers to try when ever possible to connect this learning with English. Linking themes of work can do this - many course books deal with several themes appearing in the social studies programme, family, health and our body, animals. When possible, why not discuss having a bilingual display, which links English with the children's other studies.

Leaving traces of English behind is an excellent way to connect learning experiences, why not try setting up a display of the children's work either in the classroom or in the entrance hall? The children will be proud of having English on show and will be able to talk about what they are doing to their peers, their teacher and their parents as well as anyone else who comes to school. As long as this display is changed regularly, mirroring the progress made in English, it will become an exciting and interesting place for the children and every one else who uses the school.

The generalist:

A generalist teacher can also include English in his/her ordinary school day. By showing an interest in their students' foreign language learning, by asking the students what they have learned and what they have most enjoyed doing, a generalist teacher will demonstrate a concern for the children's *other* learning. This is highly motivating for the students, who should be encouraged to participate in the bilingual art-work displays, include English songs and short theatrical activities in end of term shows etc. In summary, include the students' English learning in their everyday classroom world.

Generalist teachers can also use English during the school day by including it in classroom routine situations. This is called using incidental English and involves the use of English for greetings; calling out the register; writing the date; completing the weather board; saying "please" and "thank you"; celebrating birthdays... The list is a long one, but provides a simple but effective way of including English. Not only does this show the children that the classroom teacher is keen to participate, it also demonstrates how a language can be used successfully in context. In return children will readily want to share what they have done with the specialist language teacher, helping English to infuse through from one learning context to the other.

7. Paperwork

7.1 How can we ensure standardisation?

Standardisation is the removal of variations and irregularities bringing conformity. However without a set of official guidelines, it is very difficult to see how things can conform.

Three weeks after starting English in the three first cycle schools I am responsible for, I received an official communication from DREC, requesting that I should work with the *agrupamento* and use appropriate registers for teacher and student attendance, as well as provide a description of the activities which have been developed over the period of a trimester. Of course this makes absolute sense: transparency and accountability. This is

the only way we can realistically evaluate what is happening, which in turn will allow for some kind of standardisation. But where are the guidelines to deal with this required bureaucracy?

7.2 Bureaucratic guidelines

The request from DREC means that promoting organisations should be standardising the approaches they have in relation to attendance registers; lesson summaries and although not mentioned by DREC, reports. I shall look at some possible guidelines for the latter two requirements.

Summaries

The most important of the DREC requests is the description of activities. I believe strongly that teachers should be encouraged to write summaries after every lesson. However several questions need answering about these summaries:

Question: What language should they be in?

Answer: Portuguese! The summaries should be public documents.

Question: What should they include?

Answer: The "Orientações Programáticas" are a great help here - teachers should ensure that the following are included: theme; lexical items; structures and principal activities.

Question: Who should see them?

Answer: The classroom teachers? The *agrupamentos*? The promoting organisation? As they are accountable documents they should be made available to all those with a stake in the project.

Reports

Reports come naturally into a first cycle English programme, but how exactly?

Question: How often should they be sent?

Answer: Two/three times a year.

Question: What information should they include?

Answer: Information about the whole child's learning experience. Progress in terms of: attitudinal development; motivational development; social development; linguistic development.

Question: Who should see the reports?

Answer: Parents of course, but also classroom teachers, and a copy should be kept with the promoting organisation.

Question: Should reports go into the children's educational process?

Answer: yes, I think they should. We are looking at a Ministry initiative, all be it extra curricular.

I have no idea if my answers are correct, but these are the directions I am following as a promoting organisation.

8. Parent expectations

Many parents are unaware that as yet English is not a compulsory subject in the first cycle. They have misunderstood the gold rush-like approach that the ME has encouraged.

It is our role as the child's educator to inform parents about their child and the programme of learning they are following. Introductory notes should be sent out to the parents describing the English course that will be used and its objectives. Parents should feel that above all the English teachers are open to their queries and questions. Parents should also be encouraged to take an interest in their children's learning, asking about what they are doing and taking learning English seriously. English teachers can feed this

interest by making sure that children take things home from English, games they can share, mini books they can retell, etc. By making English visible in schools we are also inviting responses, as well as helping parents to have realistic expectations about the results of such a learning programme.

9. Conclusion

I was harsh in my talk on Saturday 29th October. It evoked varied responses from many of the participants, both positive and negative from its content. I continue to feel that what I said was important, and that the Ministry of Education is ignoring most of it. If we really want to make English in the first cycle a success, we must be aware of the problems that will be created if we follow the suggested diversified approach. Once aware of the problems it is possible to do things about them.

The ME has much to do before a truly successful first cycle English project surfaces and takes root. For the children and their learning we need an official programme. For the teachers, their teaching and their sanity, we need official guidelines, as well as recognition of the work which is being done in such diversity. As to *agrupamentos*, they need to wake up and take an active interest in the children and teachers who are involved in these English projects.

At the end of September 2005, the Minister of Education announced that English would be curricular for 3rd and 4th year students in the next academic year 2006/2007, with the inclusion of 1st and 2nd year students following a non-statutory programme. How this will happen and who will be involved in the teaching, we can but guess. Portugal has gone about this present initiative back to front, we must however do our very best to make sure that English is turned the right way round and that it is a worthwhile and enjoyable experience for the children involved and their teachers.

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The above is the write up of Sandie Mourão's plenary session at the APPI & British Council Young Learner Conference, held in Lisboa, on October 28 & 29, 2005.