Integrating a foreign language project in Portuguese pre-schools

Sandie Jones Mourão

I work as a peripatetic language specialist, teaching in several pre-school institutions in central Portugal. Even when all the children in a pre-school group have English lessons, very little of their foreign language experience remains in their classroom to afford them the luxury of connecting it to their daily learning and development. I choose topics and themes which come from their world, and we play games and sing songs that little children in England sing and play, but I do not believe this is enough when we are working with children as young as four and five years old. Children need to be given the opportunity to engage in a FL, to play a game in the FL, to talk to their peers in the FL and to be surrounded by things which remind them of the learning experiences they have all had with the FL.

I began this project in September 1999 attempting to provide evidence that Portuguese pre-school teachers or Educadores could successfully take on the role of generalist foreign language teachers, by integrating a foreign language into their pre-school programme in a way a specialist outsider is unable to.

The Portuguese Education System

The Portuguese education system is made up of nine years of compulsory schooling, called "Ensino Básico", spanning from the age of 6 to 15 years old. This is divided into 1º ciclo (6 to 10 years), 2º ciclo (10 to 12 years), and 3º ciclo (12 to 15 years). Pre-school education is non-statutory, but the state provide pre-school care for children aged 3 to 6 years, 1998 figures show that pre-school education reaches only 54% of the countries 5 & 6 year olds.

National Curriculum objectives for the 1º ciclo include "the learning of a first foreign language and the initiation of a second". Pre-school education, however, has no official programme, but curriculum orientations for education in Portuguese pre-schools were published in 1997. Here it states that there is a "possibility of sensitising the children to a foreign language".

What is meant by sensitisation? I like the definition provided by Driscoll (1999: 20), who describes sensitisation programmes as facilitating a limited use of the foreign language and highlighting the motivational and attitudinal aspects of learning. Children's achievement is not measured against any linguistic objectives. A sensitisation programme also lays emphasis on encouraging a positive attitude towards other languages and cultures.

The project "Línguas Estrangeiras na Educação Pré-Escolar"

In September 1999 I began working with 12 Educadores, two who would work in French and ten in English. All these Educadores were interested in FLs, hence their enthusiasm in participating in such a project. Together they came up with the following objectives for the implementation of a foreign language in their pre-schools:

• To develop and increase motivation towards learning a foreign language;
• To develop a positive attitude towards other peoples and cultures by making the children familiar with another linguistic form of communication;
• To develop an awareness of different sounds and disperse any fears children may have of the unknown, enabling them to confront a different linguistic form with a sense of security and delight;
• To provide opportunities for the children to play with the foreign language, using an informal fun approach.

Nine Educadores continued through to June 2000 with the project and all are including a FL in their educational project this year. A triumph! I shall be sharing only some of the results with you, highlighting some strategies, techniques and activities that have been especially successful.

Children's attitudes

The children were positively motivated towards the foreign language. Results give a very clear picture of how well the children took to the foreign language. Participation was excellent. In reflections, all Educadores noted that...
children requested new words regularly, and some stated that parents related similar experiences, another show of their interest in the foreign language.

Several of the groups of children involved were heterogeneous in ages from 3 to 6 years old. The three-year olds were generally less participative, however, comments from the Educadores during our meetings, and in reflections, indicate in some cases that the three-year olds were quicker at picking up the new words and using them in context, even before the equivalent in the mother tongue.

"I have a little girl, who can say 'pink' but can't say 'cor da rosa'."  
(Field notes from visit to a pre-school)

All Educadores described their children using the foreign language regularly during the day:
- Children greet each other in the foreign language
- Children use the colour words in the foreign language while colouring e.g. "Passa me o 'red'!" (Sic).
- Children sing together in the FL while they are colouring.
- Children compliment each other in the foreign language e.g. "very good!"
- Children give each other instructions in the FL e.g. "legs crossed!"

Not all the Educadores included FL culture in their activities. Those who did noted that the children were interested, and especially liked to compare the festive activities:

2.12.99 While we were out collecting moss for our nativity scene the children asked: "In England do they have nativity scenes?"
"Do they decorate a tree and what else do they do?"
"Do they have Christmas parties at school?" (Reflections translated from the Portuguese)

As a specialist EFL teacher, I would never have the opportunity to participate in these activities or partake of their fruits.

How did the Educadores organise their FL time?
I had suggested that the Educadores have a special time for the foreign language, giving the children the comfort and support of a routine. They went through a process of trial and error to discover the best time for both themselves and their children. Routine was an important factor as several mentioned it in their reflections and during our meetings.

Some Educadores were able to work with the foreign language everyday, others only managed two or three times a week. A couple of Educadores are able to incorporate the foreign language more than just once a day. I was surprised at just how much time the children and the Educadores spent on the FL. They complained (happily) that the children enjoyed it so much that often the sessions devoted to the FL would run for up to an hour with the children voicing their disappointment when the session was over!

With so much FL in the day, several Educadores expressed concern about the reduced time that they had to work in Portuguese. This was especially the case in the state schools, where three hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon was not enough before the foreign language appeared. The Educadores were not concerned with the inability to work with content, because this could be done in the foreign language, but in the time taken away from the input in Portuguese.

Some techniques for integrating the foreign language
What appears to be emerging is the regularity with which all Educadores speak the foreign language with their children, often in child-initiated activities and situations. It has meant the children and the Educador work with the two languages in parallel. The common unifier is the children's interest and not a theme or a story.

1. Incidental language use
This is a technique, which is being used in Modern Foreign Language Projects in the UK. At the beginning of the project I encouraged the Educadores to use the foreign language to organise their children, and begin inserting the language into routine activities, called 'incidental FL use' (Rumley & Sharpe 2000: 7). Several Educadores were enthusiastic. These moments appear to have been most successful.
- Using morning routines like register taking, placing a child’s personal emblem in the presence chart, saying its name and colour.

Spring 2001

CATS: The IATEFL Young Learners SIG Newsletter
Talking about the weather and the days of the week.
Using an English song to indicate who should go and wash their hands for break.
Asking the children to 'stand up', 'sit down', 'come here', and 'speak quietly' or lining up (in this case in French) "garçon, fille, garçon, fille..."

The constant use of the foreign language and the ease with which the Educadores were able to insert words meant that throughout the day the language was being recycled in all manners of contexts. This in itself is a form of integration.

2. Storytelling in the foreign language
The Educadores are more than willing to tell stories in the foreign language, using an activity that they would use in the mother tongue very naturally. Educadores translated Spot stories, only available in Portuguese, and a couple of traditional Portuguese stories, two of which appeared in CATS Summer 2000.

Other English stories were used. "Brown bear, brown bear what do you see?" (Carle & Martin 1995) was probably the most successful. Several Educadores made versions with the children who took them home to tell their parents.

The following extract, from my observation notes, shows how one Educador used the story once the children were familiar with it. The session was in English, and I have translated nothing.

**Educador:** Good afternoon children!
**Children:** Good afternoon (Educador's name)
**Educador:** Do you want to play with English?"
**Children:** Yes!

**Educador:** "Come here T... (4.10 yrs.)" (Indicating for the child to sit on her lap). What do you want to play? The child chooses the story of the brown bear from the activities available and tells the story to his peers.

**T.:** "Brown bear, brown bear what do you see? I see a red bird, looking at me! Red bird, red bird, what do you see? I see a ..." While he is telling the story his peers quietly say the story with him, or watch calmly, if he makes a mistake they carefully correct him. When he's finished, he puts the book back, and the children clap.

**Educador:** Well done T! Let's see! (Her name, her name) what do you see? Pointing emphatically to her eyes and looking around the circle. I see (child's name), looking at me!

**T.: (Own name, own name), what do you see? I see (another child's name), looking at me!**

**JP (5.5 yr.): (Own name, own name), what do you see? I see (another child's name), looking at me!**

This goes around the circle, with even the three-year olds participating. Then another child is invited to sit on the Educador's knee.

**Educador:** D (3.5 yr.) Come here! Do you want to...?

**D:** ...play with English!

**Educador:** Yes! And D chooses another game and they play! (Field notes 15.2.00)

Other stories used successfully were:
* Where's my Mummy? (Hawkins & Hawkins 1993) Four Educadores used this story; making masks and encouraging the children to role play the story.
* The frog family (from Phillips 1993: 19). One Educador turned her foreign language corner into a mini lake and the children role-played the story repeatedly. The children then went on to make a book, and now it is in their library corner.

3. The foreign language corner
The final technique, is the setting up of a FL corner. A FL corner gives the children an opportunity to engage in "free play", in child-initiated activities as opposed to "directed play", which is more teacher directed. It was hoped that in these free play moments the children would be able to "play around" with the foreign language, to play independently of the teacher.

A FL corner needed many resources; a selection of FL games, visuals, books, cassettes and a cassette player, maybe some portable headphones, puppets which the children associate with the FL, images from a story they have been read in the FL ... the list was endless. The pre-school teachers who worked on a FL project became convinced of the appropriateness of such a corner and of its value in the pre-school. The children chose the corner regularly, and were able to play independently of their pre-school teacher using the FL.
The FL corner was not an easy thing to set up. The Educadores needed to produce a lot of materials turning it into a rich area full of flashcards, games, pictures, stories, puppets and masks. The walls were covered in posters, song sheets and children’s drawings. It was considered a lot of extra work and some of the Educadores found it difficult providing resources for it to become a dynamic, stimulating space. However the constant presence of visual images, games and sounds which the children associated with the FL meant that at any moment of their day they could chose to do something in or with the FL.

Several Educadores emphasised the need to make sure the corner changed regularly. One teacher made the corner into a mini stage set. She began with a pretend pond so the children could play at frogs based on a story from Phillips (1992), "The frog family". Another set was a vegetable garden; here the children played with the story "The Enormous Potato", an adaptation of Tolstoy's "The Enormous Turnip". Later the children made a giant castle so they could play with an adaptation of "The selfish giant" by Oscar Wilde.

No matter how much hard work the corner created, the positive results far outweighed the difficulties. It was fascinating to observe the children's ability to use the FL freely with very little adult support. Educadores noted peer teaching at all levels. Children helping each other to remember key words or phrases, to pronounce words properly and even to get words in the right order. The FL corner successfully enabled the pre-school children to engage in the FL.

Setting up a play area for the FL could be the solution many teachers have been looking for. Using the corner to provide free play in the FL not only offers children the opportunity to have fun with the language, try it out, gain confidence and help peers, but also very importantly, the corner naturally integrates the FL into the children’s everyday school world.

Conclusions
The number of projects involving FLs and children as young as 5 and 6 years are on the increase throughout Europe. If countries continue to focus on specialist FL teachers in the learning environment then these projects will never be as appropriate as they ought to be. Children need to be given opportunities to connect their learning to all they are involved in at home and at school. Who better than to do this than their generalist classroom teacher?

The generalist teacher knows the children, knows where they are in their learning curve, how to work with them on good days and bad days and most of all is able to use any situation at any time of the day to include the FL.

The Educadores who were able to remain in my project have emphasised their pleasure in seeing and hearing their children use the foreign language. Several were not all together convinced that this kind of project would have positive results. They have been the most enthusiastic of all the participating teachers.

"I think it was very important, enriching for me and the children. I'm happy because I think they have benefited from a richer personal experience." (Extract from interview)

This project though small has shown that generalist teachers are very capable of working with foreign languages and motivating their children to new sounds and new cultures.

I have shared only a tiny proportion of some very exciting results. This study was the basis for a dissertation to complete my Masters in Education at the University of Manchester (Mourão 2000).

Bibliography
Mourão, S. J. 2000 Integrating a foreign language programme in Portuguese pre-schools. MA Dissertation University of Manchester

Sandie Jones Mourão has lived in Portugal since 1987 and worked with young learners for the last 8 years. She is involved in many projects with generalist teachers and local authorities and is specially interested in techniques for improving conditions for FL acquisition with very young learners.