

# **New Trends for Language Courses in a Student-Oriented Curriculum - Restructuring Language Undergraduate Courses within the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the Principles of the Bologna Declaration**

In the framework of such programmes as ERASMUS and TEMPUS, the promotion of international co-operation between educational institutions of the Member States of European Union has increased student mobility, but, nevertheless, this objective can only be completely attained when the schools involved can develop some means to recognise study abroad. In order to meet this objective, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was developed, first as a pilot scheme within ERASMUS, and more recently as an approved set of common procedures to guarantee academic recognition of study periods abroad.

ECTS provides a transparent way of measuring and comparing study programmes and learning achievements, and transferring them from one institution to another. The use of ECTS is voluntary and is based on mutual trust and confidence in the academic standards of partner institutions. The challenge of languages courses under the ECTS and following the principles of the Bologna Declaration is to enable future graduates to design polyvalent academic paths based on the potential offered by the new curricular programmes. The possible career opportunities for human and social science graduates force them to show that they possess instrumental knowledge oriented towards flexibility and career mobility since careers are also subject to conversion. The strategic advantage should be maintaining professionally oriented courses in the area of teaching education combined with other interdisciplinary, non-professional choices.

My school (Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the New University of Lisbon) hold until last year a faculty-oriented curriculum system, a long-established model in conservative universities in Portugal and in most European countries. A university-oriented curriculum always envisages a teaching-learning process in which substantive knowledge should be attained from what has been previously designed for the student. Each teacher sets his own lessons according to univocal principles of disciplinary organization. In general, there is

no room for interdisciplinary teaching in such a model. In a multicultural society and in a multi-layered educational system that we all want to put into action in the European Union, this kind of curricular philosophy has no future in human and social sciences. We moved then from a closed system of undergraduate courses with little or no choice (totally faculty-oriented) to a more open system with wider choice (totally student-oriented), thereby signifying a greater intervention by students in the choice of their own educational path within the major or minor range of possibilities offered to them. Student-oriented curriculum design was then created around student needs, background, and goals, and aiming at long-term competence using a combination of broadly-applicable methodological knowledge, and a strong emphasis on self-learning skills.

This change had a strong effect on language courses. We moved from faculty-oriented *curricula* choices, as the traditional combination of mother tongue (Portuguese) with a foreign language, to student-oriented *curricula* with many ground-breaking combinations, such as

<b>MAJOR (180 ECTS)</b>	<b>MINOR (60 ECTS)</b>	<b>COURSE ("LICENCIATURA" = 4 YEARS)</b>
<b>MONODISCIPLINARY COURSES</b>		
Portuguese	+ <i>Minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (Portuguese)
German	+ <i>Minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (German)
Comparative Literature	+ <i>Minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (Comparative Literature)
French	+ <i>Minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (French)
Hispanic Studies	+ <i>Minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (Hispanic Studies)
English and American Studies	+ <i>Minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (English and American Studies)
<b>BIDISCIPLINARY COURSES WITH 2 + 1 FOREIGN LANGUAGES</b>		
English and German	<i>3rd Language or minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (English and German)
English and French	<i>3rd Language or minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (English and French)
English and Spanish	<i>3rd Language or minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (English and Spanish)
<b>BIDISCIPLINARY COURSES WITH PORTUGUESE AND 1 + 1 FOREIGN LANGUAGES</b>		
Portuguese and French	<i>2nd Language or minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (Portuguese and French)
Portuguese and German	<i>2nd Language or minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (Portuguese and German)
Portuguese and English	<i>2nd Language or minor</i>	Modern Languages and Literature (Portuguese and English)

This is a major development for a country still engaged in the traditional degree with a single framework (first degree, *licenciatura*, with 4 years of study of the same subject-area), and with a structure of 45-50 semester disciplines (or 23-25 annual disciplines). We believe that a course in modern languages and literatures should be designed with other perspectives on curriculum development, such as:

- ✚ An interdisciplinary research-oriented subject-areas;
- ✚ An inquiry-oriented curriculum able to provide opportunities for learners to acquire information from a variety of sources and perspectives and to analyze a body of multidisciplinary general knowledge;
- ✚ A thinking oriented-curriculum encouraged by collaborative teacher-student relationships and high teacher efficacy and capacity for conceptual change in the human and social sciences.

How to work such a restructuring within the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). In 1988, the Community programme for credit transfer was established to facilitate the mobility of European Community students under the ERASMUS programme. The system was named ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and it is a system for both transferring and accumulating credits related to the student's annual volume of work. ECTS takes into account the number of lectures, amount of practical work required, specialist seminars and tutorials, extracurricular activities, research etc. The system is incorporated in the current Socrates/Erasmus programme and has been adopted by student mobility programmes in over one thousand higher education institutions throughout Europe.

Under the Bologna Declaration, ratified in 1999 by Ministers of Education from 29 different European countries, it was agreed that it was necessary to facilitate the mobility of students both for academic or professional purposes. To this end, it was agreed to universally adopt ECTS. The Confederation of European Rectors further insisted on the urgent need to create a framework of professional qualifications which would be more readable in the European space and a common system for degree accreditation. It is not so much a means of promoting uniformity in curricular programmes, which would be impractical and unacceptable, as of facilitating the recognition of undergraduate and postgraduate academic qualifications while respecting the specific nature of each institution and the differences between countries.

The Bologna Declaration has three main objectives: mobility, employability and competitiveness. These three objectives have been subject to extensive debate in all EU countries. Mobility depends on implementation of ECTS and the Diploma Supplement and these have already received a broad consensus. Employability is a general concern of all countries but it is accepted that new courses should not be created solely to satisfy the employment argument. An institution which wishes to affirm its role as a higher education institution of quality cannot ignore the importance of competitiveness both within and outside the country of which it is part. Allied to this need for competitiveness is the desire to create courses which are attractive to the educational community at large. The growing interest in this has already led, for example, to consideration of the fact that Europe could become a major study centre attractive to students from Latin America, which is following the process with a certain amount of interest. Languages courses ignoring this new interest will miss the opportunity of gaining a new public-target.

We reorganized our old system following the tradition of Anglo-American universities by adopting the major/minor system, and at the same time adapting all the courses to the ECTS principles, as follows:

- ✚ The first degree corresponds to courses worth 240 ECTS credit units (equivalent to 8 semesters or 4 years with 60 ECTS credits each year).

- ✚ A major is an area of intensive studies, different to the concept of general studies. In this curricular system it is not possible to obtain a degree without having obtained a major;

- ✚ The major is equivalent to 180 ECTS credit units, thus permitting the 60 credits needed to complete the degree to be obtained with a complementary path of which there are three possibilities: 1) a minor obtained in (an)other group(s) of disciplines, 2) an optional area with either a pre-defined path or an area of specialisation within the same group of disciplines, 3) a diversified set of disciplines that by themselves do not constitute a structured minor or an optional area;

- ✚ A minor serves as a complement to other studies and is combined with a major. It should not be confused with an area of specialisation within the major. It corresponds to a structured path within a consolidated but wide-ranging group of disciplines. The minor path offered by a discipline group(s) to outsiders is worth 60 ECTS credits in order to allow students enrolled in majors offered by other discipline groups to choose it as an educational complement.

One of the most important guiding principles behind our curricular reform is that of making the first degree (*licenciatura*) a four-year course. This principle arose from European recommendations on the gradual reduction of the length of initial studies. It is important to note that in today's society long study or training programmes are not more competitive and neither do they respond to the effects of the globalisation of higher education. All the resolutions of the European Commission point in this direction, and it should be pointed out that at the recent Lisbon Convention the need to adopt a common system of credit transfer within equitable academic levels was emphasised.

Thus, the Council of Portuguese University Rectors recommended in a report dated 17 April 2001 that the following organisation of initial academic degrees should be adopted in Portugal: "The first cycle consists of a licentiate degree (L4) awarded at the end of four years, and involves studying a wide range of subjects but with options in the final year which could then lead to specialisation. For some courses with specific qualification requirements to exercise a particular profession, the degree could be five years long with the final year assuming the role of postgraduate complementary training (PGC (...))." This recommendation is consistent with our curricular reform, which has organised its curricula programmes into four-year undergraduate courses.

This restructuring was projected according to some essential principles for higher education course planning.

- ✚ Reform of the curricular structure of undergraduate courses, including an eventual reduction in the number of disciplines per semester and students' timetable loads, introduction of a greater degree of optionality and the possibility of a modular organisation (namely, the *major/minor* system).

- ✚ Definition of a research strategy based on the principle of linkage between teaching and research but greatly increasing the value given to the role of research units.

- ✚ Increase in the weight given to scientific criteria in the curricular organisation of teacher training courses to meet the accreditation requirements whilst maintaining the scientific autonomy.

- ✚ Greater intervention by students in the choice of their own educational path within the major or minor range of possibilities offered to them.

- ✚ Freedom of choice in terms of the order in which disciplines are taken through the system of obtaining credit units (except for those disciplines

considered to be propaedeutic or for which justifiable rules governing prerequisites have been established).

- ✚ Crossdepartmental or interdepartmental communicability of identical disciplines offered by different departments, thereby making it explicit that students enrolled in any undergraduate course that requires a particular discipline are able to attend it in any department.

- ✚ Crossdepartmental or interdepartmental complementarity in building curricular paths in the sense that these can and should result from cooperation between different subject-areas.

Several measures had to be taken to adapt the organization of disciplines and workload of students to the ECTS framework.

- ✚ Reduction in the number of disciplines per semester to a *maximum* of five for any course.

- ✚ Reduction in the *maximum* weekly timetable load for each discipline to three hours.

- ✚ Recommendation to multiply the number of classes available as opposed to multiplying the number of disciplines in order to improve the *quality* of the teaching.

- ✚ Reduction in the students' weekly presential timetable load (which in some cases exceeded 24 hours a week) to 15-20 hours a week, requiring in exchange more private study by students of the subject matter for each discipline. For this, more opportunities for accessing primary and secondary sources in libraries, archives, the Internet or through field work will be made available.

The objective behind such a restructuring is to enable future graduates in the social and human sciences to design polyvalent academic paths based on the potential offered by the new curricular programmes and which are more in tune with the actual requirements of the job markets in which they will be operating. The possible career opportunities for these graduates force them to show that they possess instrumental knowledge oriented towards flexibility and career mobility since careers are also subject to conversion. University is thus understood as a space for permanent and interdisciplinary studies as it enables various fields of scientific and cultural knowledge to be combined at each level of instruction and allows knowledge to be updated in a

sequential or intermittent manner at the different levels of teaching or in the different diplomas offered by the institution.

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*Quelles représentations auprès des jeunes, des parents, des éducateurs, des entrepreneurs ? Quelles motivations, quels acteurs privilégier ?*