Exploring an integrated approach to professional development for the enhancement of English language teaching and learning

Ana R. Luís[†]

The University of Coimbra, Portugal

Professional development is widely recognised as an essential path to promoting quality teaching and learning, but 'effective' professional development is dependent on core features such as duration, relevance and active teacher participation, all of which are central to teacher-centred research (Garet et al., 2001; Sanford, 2015; Scheerens, 2010). In Portugal, where continuing professional development is mandatory, teachers often find short-term and 'one-size-fits-all' seminars – which generally do not meet these core features - only remotely relevant. This paper describes an alternative path to professional development developed at the University of Coimbra which encourages English language teachers to develop research projects based on their own teaching experience. The results so far reveal that, when given the opportunity, teachers focus on problem areas which emerge directly from their daily concerns about student learning and motivation. It is therefore our thesis that the kind of professional development generally on offer paradoxically fails to help teachers develop their aptitude to examine and provide solutions for the problems they diagnose in their own classes and schools, thus failing to allow professional development to have an effective and immediate impact on teacher practice and student learning.

Introduction

As educational policies struggle to meet the needs of the 21st century, it has become increasingly evident that teachers need to be prepared for higher standards of teaching and learning:

[†] Address for correspondence: Ana R. Luís, Universidade de Coimbra, 3004-531 Coimbra, Portugal. Email: aluis@fl.uc.pt.

> Teachers need not only to be able to keep order and provide useful information to students but also to be increasingly effective in enabling a diverse group of students to learn ever more complex material. In previous decades, they were expected to prepare only a small minority for ambitious intellectual work, whereas they are now expected to prepare virtually all students for higher order thinking and performance skills once reserved to only a few (Darling-Hammond 2001: 1).

Given the increasing pressure on what teachers need to know and should be able to do, much emphasis has been placed on professional teacher development and, especially, on the quality of the activities (Angrist and Lavy, 2001; OECD, 2009). Teachers prefer activities with a greater research component, as these stimulate a greater involvement and help teachers transfer their training into innovative pedagogical practices (Caena, 2011; OECD, 2013). A survey involving teachers in the Netherlands, for example, confirmed that teachers feel more inclined to changing their teaching practice if they can carry out teacher-centred research based on their own teaching practice (Scheerens, 2010). One contrary, 'one size fits all' activities are perceived as being too general and hence only loosely linked to their teaching practice (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

According to Garet et al. (2001), effective professional development is dependent on three factors: a) relevance of activities, b) duration and c) emphasis on content knowledge. Relevant activities are those that give teachers the chance to carry out research-centred activities based on their teaching practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Closely linked to relevance is duration, which affords teachers the opportunity of pursuing their research goals for a longer period of time (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Finally, emphasis on content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) is also pointed out as a factor determining effectiveness, supporting more recent international reports (OECD, 2013) according to which activities aimed at updating and deepening subject matter have very positive effects on teaching, especially at higher (lower and upper secondary) levels of education.

In this article we report on the outcomes of an integrated approach to professional teacher development which combines the three effectiveness factors advocated by Garet et al. (2001), namely relevance, duration and subject matter. During one academic year, English language teachers at the University of Coimbra are encouraged to carry out research projects on relevant language-related problems and find solutions which can have an impact on their own teaching practice. Our data will be gathered from the personal reports produced by ten English language teachers over a 5 year period. Based on our findings we argue that this approach to professional development could be adopted by higher education institution as a meaningful option.

The structure of the paper is as follows: First we survey teacher education policies in Portugal with a focus on professional teacher development. We then offers an outline of the integrated approach offered to in-service English language teachers at the University of Coimbra. The following sections lay out the methodology, which is followed by a discussion of the main findings. The paper briefly addresses the limitations of the study and offers a short conclusion.

Professional teacher development in Portugal

Although professional development be fostered by educational policies (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2006; Desimone, 2009; Desimone *et al*., 2002; Garet *et al*., 2001), significant discrepancies exist between European countries given that numerous countries still seem to consider it optional (Eurydice, 2009). In Portugal, however, continuous teacher development is compulsory and aimed at improving "the quality of education and the results of the educational system" (Ministry of Education 2014: 1286-1287). According to the legal framework, the purpose of continuous teacher development is to enhance i) the scientific and pedagogical quality of teaching and learning; ii) the institutional cooperation between primary and secondary schools, including higher education institutions and scientific and professional associations; and iii) a school policy which monitors and evaluates the training system and

the training being offered. The same legal framework has set up a typology which defines professional development activities in terms of content, course structure and duration. With respect to content, activities may focus on pedagogical practice, classroom organization, classroom management, general educational training, educational organization, school and educational administration, leadership, pedagogical supervision, ethical training, and ICT. As to course structure and duration, activities may consist of short-term courses, workshops and seminars, and last between 3 to 6 hours or up to 12 hours.

Two weaknesses in the current legislation however deserve our attention. First, the typology recommends mainly short duration courses which do not leave much room for research-centred activities, assigning a more passive role to teachers. However as Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1990, 1993) point out, knowledge about teaching should not only be produced by external researchers but also be produced by "the voices of the teachers themselves" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990: 2). By participating more actively in their research, teachers closely examine their own classes and share the results more easily with other teachers (Bonne & Pritchard, 2007).

The second weakness derives from the failure to assign a central role to subject matter. The listed sub-fields within which professional development can be offered are almost exclusively from the Educational Sciences and are, as such, addressed to teachers from all subject areas, rather than being specific to one subject area. While it is beyond discussion that sub-fields such as school and educational administration are relevant for professional development, teachers perceive emphasis on subject matter as one of the core properties of effective professional development.

Given these two weaknesses, many of the seminars on offer perpetuate the gap between teacher-centred research and content knowledge (Gould, 2005: Little, 2012, Sanford *et al*., 2015, Timperley *et al*., 2007). An informal survey confirmed that this gap effectively exists within the Coimbra area: we searched the courses

available during 2016-2017 at the main authorized center for professional teacher development and observed that not one activity had been designed exclusively for English language teachers. Even though English is the only compulsory foreign language being taught at Portuguese schools since primary school, we only could find a general session aimed broadly at 'language teachers' of all learner levels (e.g., beginner, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, advanced, etc.) and all age groups (e.g., pre-school, primary school, preparatory school, secondary school)[1]. What we observe then is a case of forced "standardization" (Goodwyn, 2012), whereby professional teacher development treats language teachers and students as having "the same shape and size".

Teacher-centred research with a focus on subject matter

In this paper we take with Garet et. al. (2001) the view that a more effective path to professional development may be achieved by offering opportunities that are i) relevant, ii) extended in time and iii) encourage active teacher participation. An alternative (and also complementary) path to professional development must therefore stimulate active teacher participation by focusing on subject matter and giving teachers the necessary time to investigate problem areas emerging from their own teaching practice. The model represented in Figure 1 is based on the core features duration, relevance and active teacher participation.

Pursuing a research goal during an extended period of time entails that teachers have the ability to use research tools and apply research methods, which most often is not the case. This means that one of the module must offer sessions on research methodology. Other skills must also be trained, including gathering background information on the research topic, handling different perspectives, setting up an experiment, collecting data and discussing results. The

---

[1] One notable exception (which confirms 'the rule') is the effort made by the Portuguese Associations for English Language Teachers (*Associação Portuguesa de Professores de Inglês*) which annually offer short-term seminars, workshops and conferences about very specific aspects about English Language Teaching.

kind of professional development proposed here also relies on guided supervision to help teachers accomplish their goals. An example of how such skills flow is illustrated in Figure 2.
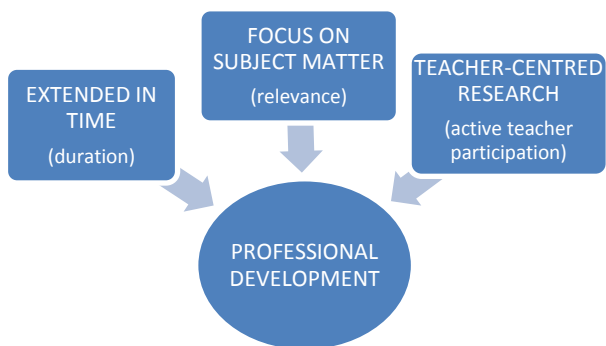
Figure 1 –Approach to professional development integrating core features duration, relevance and active teacher participation
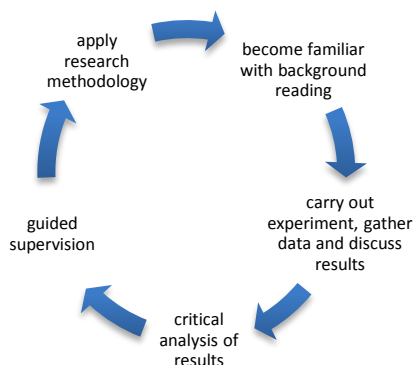
Figure 2 – Work flow for research-centred professional development

At the University of Coimbra, this model of professional development has been adopted since 2015 and is being offered as a postgraduate module to in-service English language teachers (from lower secondary and upper secondary levels of education). Once a week, during one academic year, teachers attend a 3-hour seminar during which they take part in work sessions with a two-fold aim: to reflect upon their teaching practice so as to identify a problematic teaching/learning topic; to investigate solutions for it, putting their teaching experience into perspective and focusing on a research topic. As the work flow depicted in Figure 2 illustrates, teachers i) explain the motivation underlying the choice of the topic; ii) clarify the relevant concepts; iii) offer a short literature survey; iv) lay out the adopted methods, v) describe which pedagogical/methodological experiments have been carried out; vi) present, analyze and discuss the research results.

Through supervised research, teachers reflect on their teaching practice, conduct innovative experiments, try out solutions, read state-of-the art references, and share their findings with colleagues and other teachers. The research problems lead to the elaboration of working hypotheses, inspired by the work of other researchers or teachers within the domain of English language teaching. The experiments may be carried out in real classrooms, sometimes with the collaboration of other teachers at school.

Methodology

As stated at the outset, this study reports on the outcomes of a postgraduate module, with the duration of one academic year, which offers English language teachers an integrated approach to professional development. With this module teachers are given the opportunity to carry out research based on problem which derive from their own teaching practice.

Participants

A total of ten teachers participated in the study. All participants had a similar academic background (i.e., a 4-year BA in Modern Languages) and were trained English language teachers with a vast teaching experience. As shown in Table 1, their experience ranged from a minimum of 13 years to a maximum of 26 years. The average number of years of teaching experience was 18,3. As to the participants' age range, Table 2 shows that an age range between 41 and 54. The average age was 46,2.
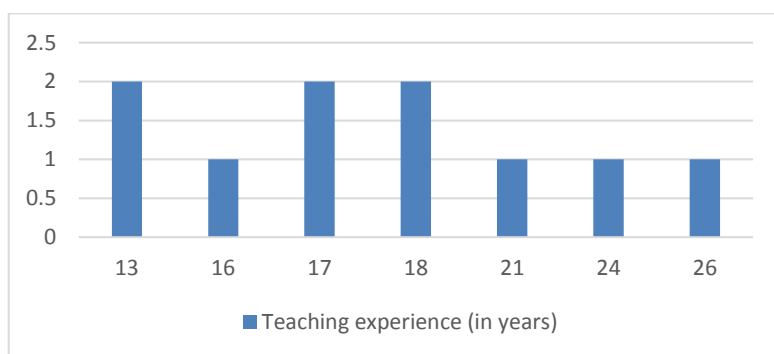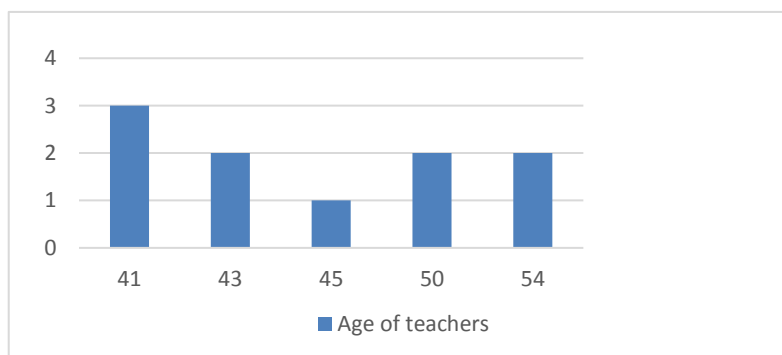
Teaching experience (in years)

Table 1

Age of teachers

Table 2

As part of the course work, all teachers attended a weekly 3-hour session during which they gave presentations, participated in class discussion and carried out supervised research. At the end of the year, each one submitted a Teacher Report which was organized into two parts: Part 1 offered a biographical survey and Part 2 reported on the design, delivery and outcomes of the teachers' research project.

Data collection and analysis

The evidence was gathered through personal Teacher Reports produced during a 5 year period, between 2013 and 2018. For our study, we were interested in a) the beliefs and motivation that led teachers to pursue a postgraduate module as part of their professional development and b) the teachers' research interests and choice of pedagogical research topic. We used Part 1 of the Teacher Report to collect data on beliefs and motivations, and used Part 2 to gather evidence on research interest and research topics. To analyse the data we adopted a descriptive, qualitative approach: we defined categories for beliefs and motivations from the biographical section (Part 1) and repeated the same process for research interests, where new categories emerged from Part 2 of the Teacher Report.

Findings and discussion

With respect to the beliefs and motivation of teachers, we identified two main categories:

a. The quality of teaching and learning
One of the factors which motivate teachers into pursuing professional development is their firm conviction that teachers need to adapt to the newer generations, on the one hand, and to current educational challenges and curriculum reforms, on the other. As part of their wish to update teaching strategies, they put much emphasis on the development of inclusive teaching practices, which they regard as both a human and pedagogical concern. Such views effectively confirm the idea, widely discussed in the literature, that student success is one of the most rewarding

factors driving teacher motivation (Frase, 1992; Day, 1993). Not surprisingly, this group of English language teachers also shares positive perceptions of professional development, regarding it as a path to promote the renewal of their teaching practices and improve their performance.

b. Teacher-centered research

As to the research-centered component of the module, teachers value the opportunity of enriching their practical experience with theoretical insights and a principled methodology. As part of the teachers' appreciation for their active involvement in their professional development, all the teachers also participated in scientific conferences, where they gave presentations on their research topics in the presence of other pre-service teachers, researchers and school teachers. Within this context, the research was shared and discussed, serving as inspiration to some of other in-service or to the pre-service teachers. Some presentation were also submitted to conference proceedings for publication. Overall, then, our results strongly support the idea that pedagogical-methodological knowledge can also be produced by school teachers. As Lytle & Cochran-Smith (1992) put it, "school-based teacher researchers are themselves knowers and the primary source of knowledge about teaching and learning for themselves and others" (1992: 447).

The research topics chosen by the teachers derive mostly from their own concerns about student learning and success. However, it also seems that some topics are shaped by the current climate of educational change and recurrent reforms of the English as a foreign language curriculum. The topics we have identified in the Teacher reports can be grouped into the following categories: language skills, methodologies and inclusion.

a. Language skills

Language skills effectively form the core component of language teaching and learning (Harmer, 2015, Scrivener, 2011). These skills comprise spoken comprehension (listening), spoken production (speaking), written comprehension (reading) and written production (writing). Most Teacher Reports address one or several skills from different angles, depending on whether teachers are exploring new teaching methods (such as CLIL), examining ways of stimulating language learning through more stimulating materials (such as film) and ways of integrating ICT tools (such as mobile technology). However, there are four Reports which focus specifically on the development of speaking and reading skills: two reports explore the assessment of oral production and comprehension, while two reports investigate the development of reading skills inside and outside the classroom.

b. Methodologies

Methodologies are also among the teachers' priorities, revealing the teachers' genuine interest in innovating their own practice. Two teachers explored the CLIL methodology, by combining English language learning with the Natural Sciences or with Portuguese literature, largely in response to the current demand, in Portugal, for cross-curricular teaching and learning. Likewise the interest of teachers in exploring ICT in the classroom also reflects current policies in favor of technology-enhanced teaching and learning.

c. Inclusion

In this category we have included all the topics which tackle the challenges posed by mixed-ability classes and special needs education. This concern is also aligned with the current educational policy for inclusive teaching practices which have been placing an increasing pressure on teachers who need to are not given the necessary

training. One Teacher Report investigates teaching methodologies for students with special needs, while two Reports investigate strategies which may help increase student motivation through innovative resources (such as film, rather than texbooks) or strategies (such as collaborative and cooperative learning).

Limitations

While the postgraduate module offered at the University of Coimbra can indeed produce positive outcomes, there are nonetheless serious limitations which suggest that this kind of professional development cannot only be optional. Teachers, to begin with, have to struggle with a) high costs and b) lack of time. All our participants paid a yearly tuition fee the value of which would duplicate in case they extended their submission deadline. In addition, since most teachers did not live in Coimbra (with some (3) living 100 km away), teachers had to incur high travel costs, which would not be reimbursed. One further difficulty faced by teachers was the workload at school, which they had to reconcile with the module's coursework and which explains why some teachers did not meet the first submission deadline. Given such practical difficulties, our integrated approach to professional development cannot be compulsory, at least not until educational policies provide teachers with the necessary support and incentives.

Conclusion

Our paper started out by observing that professional development for teachers, although mandatory in Portugal, does not always constitute a stimulating moment in the life of teachers. Teachers are offered professional development that "targets large numbers of educators from very different schools and classrooms who have students with different needs" (Mizell, 2010: 20). As Warren-Little (1999) points out, professional development that is dominated by the "one-size-fits-all" approach is generally unproductive and does not lead to significant changes in the classroom. Effective teacher development should instead focus on real contexts and address the

real challenges that teachers have to face in their classrooms, some of which emerge from recurrent educational change or curriculum reforms.

One possible approach to professional development, which may be regarded as an option to the existing programs, has been discussed in this study, based on evidence drawn from a postgraduate module which, over the past 5 years, has witnessed the interest and aptitude of teachers to carry out research within their subject area, as well as their ability to identify problem areas which emerge from their own teaching practice. As a result of this module, teachers have not only furthered their understanding of existing problems but have also shared their findings with other teachers and engaged in future research. While our experience has been exclusively with English language teachers, the type of professional development described here is transferrable to teachers from other subject areas.

References

Angrist, J.D. & Lavy, V. (2001). Does Teacher Training Affect Pupil Learning? Evidence from Matched Comparisons in Jerusalem Public Schools. *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol. 19(2), 343-369.

Bonne, L. & Pritchard, R. (2007). Teacher Researchers Questioning their Practice. In J. Watson & K. Beswick (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 30th annual conference of the Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia*, 621-630. Retrieved from https://www.merga.net.au/publications/counter.php?pub=pub_conf&id=379

Caena, F. (2011). *Literature review: Quality in Teachers' continuing professionaldevelopment*. European Comission: Directorate-General for Education and Culture. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/teacher-competences_en.pdf

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (1990). Research on teaching and teacher research: The issues that divide. *Educational Researcher, 19*(2), 2-11.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S.L. (Eds.). (1993). *Inside outside*. New York: Teachers' College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M. and Lytle, S. (1999). The Teacher Research Movement: A Decade Later. *Educational Researcher* Vol. 28(7), 15-25.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (2001). Beyond certainty: Taking an inquiry stance on practice. In A. Lieberman & L. Miller (Eds.), *Teachers caught in the action: Professional development that matters*, 45–61. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* 8(1). Retrieved from http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n1.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st-century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 57, No. X: 1-15

Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). *Powerful teacher education: Lessons from exemplary programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Darling-Hammond, L. & Richardson, N. (2009). Research Review. Teacher Learning: What Matters? *How teachers learn* 66(5), 46-53.

Day, C. (1993) Reflection: A necessary but not sufficient condition for professional development, *British Educational Research Journal*, 19(1), 83-93.

Desimone, L. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher,* 38(3), 181–199.

Desimone, L.M.; Porter, A.C.; Garet, M.; Yoon, K.S. & Birman, B. (2002). Does professional development change teachers' instruction? Results from a three-year study. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24(2), 81-112.

Eurydice (2009). *Key data on Education in Europe 2009*. Brussels: Eurydice publications.

Frase, Larry E. (1992). *Maximizing People Power in Schools: Motivating and Managing Teachers and Staff*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Garet, M.; Porter, A.; Desimone, L.; Birman, B. & Yoon, K. (2001). What makes professional development effective? *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, 915-945.

Gould, P. (2005). From the hill to the swamp. In P. Clarkson, A. Downton, D. Gronn, M. Horne, A. McDonough, R. Pierce, & A. Roche (Eds.), *Building connections: Research theory and practice*, 50-53. Sydney: MERGA.

Harmer, J. (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Harlow: Pearson Longman.

Little, J.W. (2012). Understanding data use practices among teachers: The contribution of micro-process studies. *American Journal of Education* 118(2), 143-166.

Lytle, S. & Cochran-Smith, M. (*1992*). Teacher Research as a Way of Knowing. *Harvard Educational Review* 62 (4), 447-475.

Ministry of Education (2014). Decreto-Lei 22/2014, February 11 2014. In *Diário da República*, 1st Series, Nr. 29. Retrieved from http://www.dre.pt

Mizell, H. (2010). *Why professional development matters.* USA: Learning Forward. Retrieved from http://www.learningforward.org/advancing/whypdmatters.cfm

OECD (2009). *Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments. First Results from TALIS*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/17/51/43023606.pdf

OECD (2010). *TALIS 2008 Technical Report*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/44978960.pdf

OECD (2013). *An International Perspective on Teaching and Learning.* TALIS 2013 Results. OECD Library. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264196261-en

Ponte, J. P. (1998). Da formação ao desenvolvimento profissional. In *Actas do ProfMat 98* (pp. 27-44). Lisboa: APM.

Ponte, J. P. (1999). Didácticas específicas e construção do conhecimento profissional. In *Investigar e formar em educação: Actas do IV congresso da SPCE* (pp. 59-72). Porto: Sociedade Portuguesa de Ciências da Educação.

Sanford, K.; Hopper, T. & Starr, L. (2015). Transforming Teacher Education Thinking: Complexity and Relational Ways of

Knowing. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education* 12/2: 26-48.

Scheerens, J. (Ed.) (2010). *Teachers' professional development: Europe in international comparison*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Union. Acedido a 2 de fevereiro de 2017. https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7454deec-f2ec-4537-845c-ce01f8c1317b

Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning Teaching*. London: Macmillan.

Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher* 15 (2), 4-14.

Timperley, H.; Wilson, A.; Heather, B. & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*. University of Auckland, New Zealand Ministry of Education. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/48727127.pdf

Warren-Little, J. (1999). Organizing schools for teacher learning. In Darling-Hammond, L. & Sykes, G. (Eds.), *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

About the Author

Ana R. Luís is Auxiliary Professor at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Coimbra, in Portugal. She has been coordinating the Teacher Education Program for English Language Teachers since 2007 and has also been responsible for the pedagogical supervision of English pre-service teachers. Between 2014 and 2017, she was also the Head of the Teacher Training Council of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Coimbra. Her research interests include ELT methodologies, materials development in ELT, initial-teacher education (microteaching and classroom observation), professional development of in-service teachers, pedagogical innovation in higher education and technologically-enhanced teacher education. She is the editor of *Cruzamento de Saberes na Aula de Inglês* (2014, Coimbra University Press) and co-editor of *A Formação Inicial de Professores nas Humanidades* (to appear, Coimbra University Press) and of *A supervisão pedagógica no século XXI* (to appear, Coimbra University Press). She has also published journal articles, conference papers and book chapters.