African Voices Spell out a Harsh Reality: a Case-Study of English as International Language at a Portuguese University

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Abstract

This article examines the plight of African students taking their degree in Portugal, by uncovering their problems and reactions to learning English. When students from Portuguese-speaking African countries arrive at ISCSP, Universidade de Lisboa, they are met with the need to learn today's international language of academic and professional contexts: English. However, they find themselves at a disadvantage in relation to their Portuguese counterparts because they have usually had less years of English study. This study shows that despite feeling and revealing many difficulties when learning English, African students believe this subject is useful and should be compulsory. The study concludes that there is no significant difference between the learning problems showed by African-origin students who come to ISCSP directly from Africa and those who concluded secondary education in Portugal. Moreover, the data also revealed that in the comparison with Portuguese students, African-origin ones do show less preparation to take an English-learning course at college.

Keywords: English as international language, African students, Higher education in Portugal

Introduction

By listening to the voices of African students taking their degrees in Portugal, this study uncovers the harsh reality of those who have to study a language which in Europe, and in most of the world, is taken for granted as the international *lingua franca*, in itself a legacy of former imperialist times when Britain ruled over a quarter of the world's surface.

For historical reasons, anchored in the fact that Portugal once held a vast overseas empire which comprised African Territories, many young Africans from Portuguese-speaking countries opt to pursue higher education in Portugal. Once there, they are met with the challenge of learning English, a core subject within the Portuguese school system which privileges proficiency in this global language also at university level.

Educational protocols between the governments of Portugal and some of its former African colonies[1] allow young Africans to pursue their studies in Portugal under special conditions.

Most of the students, who take this option, come to Portuguese universities because they have immigrant relatives in Portugal and/or they have the minimum fluency in Portuguese to facilitate integration. The School of Social and Political Sciences (ISCSP), Universidade de Lisboa (University of Lisbon), is favored by many of these students because several of its degrees cover areas of study in dire need in their countries of origin, thus guaranteeing high employability rates when they return home.

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[1] Di*ário da República* Nº 231, 2/10/1999, Art. 3º Alínea d.

ISCSP is the only Portuguese State university in this area of studies in the region of Greater Lisbon which has contemplated English as a compulsory subject in all its courses since 1921. Currently, this strategic institutional choice is based on the premise that proficiency in English is regarded as a curricular competitive advantage asset: English is contemporaneously regarded as the language of freedom and prestige (Ostler 2006:551). Given the present economic circumstances of the country, under a financial bailout supported by the IMF, the European Union and the European Central Bank, many Portuguese graduates are fleeing abroad in search of a better job. To function as global citizens, they need English, the international language of the academic, professional and business worlds. Now, more than ever, knowledge of the *lingua franca* is as essential as computer literacy. All first-year students who enroll at ISCSP take an English-language placement test and are distributed among the four available levels, A2, B1, B2 and C1 of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), respectively, levels I, II, III and IV at ISCSP.

Although Portuguese is the official language in the Portuguese former colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and São Tome and Principe, the first language of the population is frequently a Creole or a Pidgin language, Portuguese being the second. French and English make for the foreign languages usually studied. Most of the times, only upon enrolment at ISCSP, do African students realize that English is a compulsory subject. On arrival, a significant number have had little or no contact with the English language. Not surprisingly, they are placed in level I at ISCSP, and consequently, experience greater difficulties than their Portuguese counterparts who have had, on average, five to seven years of English at secondary school.

African students need to learn communicative skills and fluency in the international contact language to be on equal terms with other citizens around the world or they will be at an even greater disadvantage when they enter the job market. Is the harsh reality of studying English considered a chance to have a better future or the imposition of an added difficulty? We resort to a quantitative methodology based on survey analysis to reveal their perspectives on English language learning at ISCSP.

1. English as International Language

Unquestionably, English has become the most widely spoken contact language in the world. Its current status as the global or international language involves a complex relationship intertwining historical, cultural, social, political and educational issues. English has spread out of colonization and decolonization processes. It has a strict connection with globalization stemming from the symbiotic assumption that 'economic globalization encouraged the spread of English but the spread of English also encouraged globalization' (Graddol 2006: 9). Therefore, the vicious circle of demand and use of English generated by its popularity and functionality has given the language a life of its own.

The popularity of English comes from the fact that it is a grassroots' language, with a cosmopolitan and state-of-the-art character. According to Mc Crum *et al* there is an 'exotic energy that is re-charging the language at the level of the street, the bar and the market place' (2003:393). For Ostler (2006:542), the current status of English has to do with population, position and prestige. The figures for users of English as a contact language have been steadily rising. In 2003, Mc Crum *et al* (2003: 9) claimed there were more than 750 million users of English. Graddol (2006: 14) later calculated that the number would be around two billion. In 2009, Ur (2009: 1) set the number between two to three billion and as recently as 2010, Crystal (2010: 8) referred that a quarter or even a third of the world's population spoke English, regardless of proficiency. Nowadays, speakers of World English(es) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) 'vastly outnumber those of English as a native language (ENL) and even those of English as a second (immigrant) language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL)' (Jenkins 2006:159). A well-established sociolinguistic reality is thus that non-native speakers (NNS) currently outnumber native speakers (NS) (House 2003: 557; Dewey 2007: 333), or that NS 'are in a minority for [English] language use' (Brumfit 2001: 116). ELF speakers use English to communicate with other NNS in NNS contexts (Jenkins 2004:63).

In the 21st century, what is relevant is the volume and range of spoken and written interactions in the common language of the (now predominant) NNS, and the volume and variety of functions and purposes it serves. The realistic emphasis is on the occasions of English use, the existing networks of interaction in English, the language's worldwide presence and visibility, and 'how it infiltrates every day speech' (Griffin 2001: 55).

English is also considered a 'symbol of modernization, a key to expanded functional roles and an extra arm for success and mobility in culturally and linguistically complex and pluralistic societies' (Kachru 1990:1).

It gives international status to people and has a global audience at its disposal because it permeates life and society in general. English is being used as the world's predominant functional contact language, under the names of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English as International Language (EIL), International English, Global English and English as a global language, the emphasis being on its international use (Seidlhofer 2003: 7). ELF is used in a real global speech community of 'English-knowing bilinguals' as the 'default language' (Pakir 2009: 233) for socio-pragmatic functions by citizens characterized as 'sharing a multilingual habitus and multilingual communicative competence' (House 2003: 571).

The relationship between globalization and the English language has affected societies and their lifestyles around the globe. The world is becoming more urban, with metropolitan workplaces and city lifestyles and a better-off middle class. These major changes at the socioeconomic level have also brought about sociolinguistic alterations. One of the most significant linguistic effects is the general adoption of English as the language for international, intercultural communication. It is a passport for self-improvement (e.g. Ostler 2006), associated with the acquisition of an international existence.

Nowadays, educational paradigms are all about life-long learning and learning how to learn, demanding a 'constant shift in skills and knowledge' (Graddol 2006:72). The basic skills are now: literacy in national language (and mother-tongue if different); numeracy; Information Technology; and English. These skills, driven by the choices of education planners, parents, or governmental authorities, and by the demands of the new globalized postmodern world, are a fact of life in many countries where English is not the native language.

1.1 A Basic Skill in Education

The fact that most interactions in English, nowadays, take place between people of different mother tongues, all NNS, means that current students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are learning English to communicate mostly, if not wholly, in non-native speaking environments. The popularity and demand for English are, in a certain way, linked with its functional character for educational and professional upward mobility. Besides the educational curricula, which have to do with institutional or governmental policies, parental imposition of English on children's education is more and more common around the globe, assuming all the trappings of an *English mania*. Young people's fascination for the Western or American way of life makes English fashionable. Using India as an example, Sridhar describes English being 'perceived as all-powerful and as a ticket to upward mobility' (Sridhar 1996:53).

Many countries have taken steps to implement curricular reforms in education to adapt to an increasingly globalised world and, in consequence, English has made its way to their educational systems. There has been a significant rise in the number of NNS countries where English is the first foreign language at primary and secondary school. Many of these countries, Algeria, China, Finland, Japan, Germany, Greece, Morocco, Norway, Poland, Spain, or Switzerland were not even a part of the British Empire and so, have no historical reasons that may account for the implementation of English as a school subject (Suárez 2005:461). English, which used to be taught as all the other foreign languages from the ages of eleven or twelve, is increasingly taught as a basic skill given the fact that 'its function and place in the curriculum is no longer that of 'foreign language' and this is bringing about profound changes in who is learning English, their motives for learning it and their needs as learners' (Graddol 2006:72).

As a result of globalization, universities are now competing at a global level. English has become a medium of education in some countries of Europe and knowledge of English is one of the selection criteria, or entry requirements, used by universities in many countries. As a global academic language, it facilitates the international mobility of students, teachers and researchers. It is a key educational investment and indeed: 'one of the most important drivers of global English has been the globalization of higher education' (Graddol 2006:74).

1.2 The case for Portugal

Today, English is pervasive to most sectors of Portuguese society having therefore greatly permeated Portuguese life and language. Portuguese people have daily visual and audio contact with the language through various industries. Advertising resorts to English because it is fashionable and it 'sells'. On the radio, there is a large diffusion of English-language music, mainly American. Additionally, and unlike many European countries, where foreign programs and films are dubbed, in Portugal TV and Cinema are broadcast in their original sound with Portuguese subtitles.

The global status and role of English has meant that it 'is the language that Portuguese people mostly use in international settings, the idiom dominating youth culture, science and technology, and a skill generally required in the tertiary sector' (Barros 2009:35).

Although English has been taught in Portugal since the 18th century, the middle of the 19th century witnessed EFL grow in Portuguese schools due to its worldwide diffusion, the historical and political links between England and Portugal and their neighboring colonies (Guerra 2005:12). Suffice to say that Portugal and Britain share the oldest still-standing alliance between two countries, a pact of cordiality for economic and political reasons, the Windsor Treaty, which dates back to 1386. Since the Portuguese Revolution of 1974, French, once the dominating foreign language, has meantime been replaced by English. In 2005/2006, the Government implemented the compulsory study of English in primary education, as from the third and fourth grades or ages eight and nine (Decree Law no. 14460/2008- 26 May). In 2008/2009 this was extended to make English compulsory in primary education, as from the first and second grades or ages six and seven. In addition, several universities now have degrees taught solely in English.

2. Portuguese-Speaking African Countries

Not unlike many other African former colonies, Angola, Mozambique, S. Tome and Principe, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, have been economically and politically unstable since independence. They are all much dependent on external financial aid, namely to develop the education sector and rank lowly in the UNDP's Human Development Index, meaning that populations have limited access to quality health and education[2]. None of these countries is expected to reach the education development goal established by UNESCO for 2015[3]: access to primary education for all children.

2.1 Education

The afore-mentioned African countries are characterized by bilingualism or multilingualism. They have several indigenous languages, some of which working as *lingua franca* or contact language to establish communication bridges between the different linguistic communities. Although Portuguese is the official language, and the language of social prestige, in most countries only a small percentage of the people speaks it and an even smaller percentage has it as a mother tongue. It is Seibert[4] who reveals the numbers for the linguistic situation of these countries. In Cape Verde, the most spoken language is Creole (*Kabuverdianu*) and it is only at the age of six, when starting school, that the majority of the population has the first contact with Portuguese. In Sao Tome, even if 98.9 per cent of the population understands Portuguese, the Creole language, *Santomé,* is the main language spoken by 72.4 per cent of the archipelago's inhabitants. In Mozambique, there are forty-three languages and almost 40 per cent of the population can speak Portuguese, but it is the mother tongue of only 6.5 per cent. In Angola, there are forty-one languages and 30 per cent of the population speaks Portuguese as their first language, whereas in Guinea-Bissau, there are twenty-one languages and only 11 per cent of the people speak Portuguese.

In these countries, the high levels of educational failure, retentions and drop-outs in primary school, are believed to be a consequence of the syllabus not contemplating multilingualism as a cultural reality. Linguistic policy in Guinea-Bissau, for example, requires teachers to speak only Portuguese in the classroom.

For that reason, many children are kept away from primary school (Benson 2010:325). According to Luís Cardador[5], education in Guinea-Bissau is only compulsory until the 6th grade (age eleven) and most young people cannot afford to pay for education beyond that, hence the low literacy rate. In Mozambique, the exodus of the Portuguese after independence has 'adversely affected many sectors including that of education' (Mkuti 1999:48).

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[2] United Nations Development Programme 2009

[3] João Pedro Oliveira, PALOP não cumprem metas para a educação. Diário de Notícias, 9/11/2004. http://www.dn.pt/inicio/interior.aspx?content_id=588767 (last accessed March 31, 2014)

[4] Gerhard Seibert. A Situação Linguística no Espaço Lusófono: Contributo para um debate ciêntífico. 22/04/2008 Saber Tropical Knowledge, Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical http://www2.iict.pt/?idc=102&idi=13116 (last accessed March 31, 2014)

[5] Luís Cardador. Educação guineense à procura de uma 'visão'. BBC para Africa. http://www.bbc.co.uk/portugueseafrica/news/story/2009/07/090716_gbeducationmt.shtml (last accessed March 31, 2014)

A study on education carried out in 2010/2011 by Roberto Luis on Youth and Adult Learning and Education in Mozambique [6] revealed that a clear policy, realistic funding and good governance are essential to ensure that young people and adults have access to education. The Mozambique educational programs for young people and adults do not have the necessary resources to provide education for all by 2015. Primary education is free and has been growing but in 2011, 300,000 children did not have access to it. It was only in 2002 that bilingual education in both Portuguese and seventeen Mozambican native languages was set up in the country. By 2011, secondary education was only attended by less than 20 per cent of those who completed primary school and the drop-out rates are chronically high. Places in the country's six universities (two public and four private) are limited and an entry-exam makes competition fierce. Approximately 80 per cent of the Mozambican labor force has no education and the unemployment rate is also high. Besides, there are very little professional training or life-long learning opportunities.

Since 2001, the Angolan Government has been trying to reduce illiteracy, on the one hand, and on the other, it has been making efforts to improve the quality of teaching and education and professional qualifications. The education system has witnessed an increase in the number of pupils, classrooms, teachers and equipments, but similarly to the above mentioned examples, it is still not able to provide primary education for all children. In certain provinces, in 2007, a project implemented the gradual introduction of some of the national languages.

In Sao Tome and Principe, the education reform of 2003, which enforced compulsory education as from the age of six, was an important step towards universal education, but it has thus far failed to meet its objective. Many children live too far away to receive any sort of schooling and teachers still do not get proper training or materials. There are low levels of enrolment in secondary education and high drop-out levels. There are three higher education institutions in the country, one is public and the other two are private. In spite of initiatives by Indian authorities which provide video-classes to undergraduates in Sao Tome, many students prefer to study abroad in Lusophone countries such as Portugal or Brazil, despite having to wait up to six months to receive their scholarship grants.

The situation concerning education in Cape Verde is similar. Despite efforts by the government to achieve the goal of primary school for all children, this is still far from reality for lack of resources. The government intends to introduce bilingual education in the near future.

2.2 English Language Learning

The status of English in the countries under scrutiny has been growing on account of globalization in general, the Americanization of culture, and the fact that it is the international language *par excellence* for all sorts of professional and non-professional settings. People in Portuguese-speaking African countries have ample opportunities of contact with the language on national TV, radio, cinema and internet. As a consequence, its role in education is also increasing.

When Mozambique became a member of the Commonwealth in 1995, enthusiasm for English grew amongst the government, companies and parents. The fact that it was an official language in Mozambique's neighboring countries, particularly South Africa, was also important. English was the only foreign language to remain in the curriculum after independence because of its international status (Mkuti 1999: 45), and functional character. According to Mkuti, it is one of the most popular subjects which students start learning at secondary school, in the two levels: junior (two years) and high (three years). In high school, it is chosen by many students alternatively to French. In university, it has been given special attention and many English language schools have been set up because people believe it is the language of the future for Mozambique (Mkuti 1999: 50). Qualified teachers, textbooks and materials are still deficient, though.

According to the director of the National Institute for the Development of Education in Angola, English is ministered throughout secondary education and the aim of the government is to introduce English in the later years of primary education[7]. The reason for this is, again, that English is the language of work and research in a globalized world. Also, in Angola, lack of textbooks and training for teachers are the greatest challenges when it comes to the widespread teaching of English.

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[6] http://www.osisa.org/open-learning/education/mozambique/youth-and-adult-learning-and-education-mozambique *(last accessed March 31, 2014)*

[7] http://www.angonoticias.com/Artigos/item/17158 (last accessed March 31, 2014)

In Cape Verde, in 1995, English, which had been until then the (optional) second foreign language in secondary education, took over French (Azuaga and Cavalheiro 2012). English became the most important foreign language in education and in society in general because of the influence of American cinema and music and as an important vessel to communicate with immigrant relatives outside Africa.

3. The Study

This is a quantitative study aiming to reveal the feelings and perspectives of first-year African students as to the compulsory study of English at ISCSP. The authors of the study, both teachers of English for Specific Purposes for over a decade, were moved by the wish to uncover these students' linguistic reality after witnessing their constant struggles in the subject of English.

The study was conducted over a period of two school years, 2012/2013 and 2013/2014, during the months of October and November. In all, there were seventy-nine first–year students from Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and Sao Tome and Principe, who voluntarily answered the anonymous questionnaires, fifty in 2012/2013 and twenty-nine in 2013/2014. The questionnaire was elaborated by the authors of this study and was applied by four teachers, corresponding to seven classes of English for Social Sciences, levels I (A2 of CEFR), level II (B1 of CEFR) and level III (B2 of CEFR). As level IV (C1 of CEFR) is an optional subject and only a residual number of African-origin students are placed in this level, the survey does not include them. The questionnaire is composed of eighteen closed questions and written in Portuguese. Although the authors had anticipated the questionnaire to be answered in more or less two minutes, it took students five to ten minutes on average to complete it. This may be a sign that for these students, Portuguese is also not a language they manage proficiently.

3.1 Findings

This section of our study is composed of two parts. Firstly, we establish the profile of our respondents in terms of gender, age, country of origin, linguistic background, degree, date of arrival in Portugal and reasons for choosing ISCSP. Secondly, we scrutinize the English-language level of students as well as their needs and preferences in terms of the study of English.

3.1.1 Profile of Respondents

As might be expected for first-year students, 82 per cent of them are aged seventeen to twenty-five. Girls correspond to 68.3 per cent of the whole population studied. Of the respondents, 32.9 per cent are from Guinea-Bissau, 21.5 per cent from Cape Verde, 20.2 per cent from Angola, 16.4 per cent from Sao Tome and Principe and 8.8 per cent from Mozambique. The majority of the students (63.2 per cent) arrived in Portugal before 2008 which means they completed secondary education already in Portugal and then continued to university. Figures show that 12.6 per cent came in 2009, 15.1 per cent in 2010, 3.7 per cent in 2011 and 5 per cent in 2012.

The profile of respondents was given further shape when results showed that 49.3 per cent chose ISCSP to benefit from the Protocol established between the Portuguese government and Portuguese-speaking African countries or because they have relatives already living in Portugal (40.5 per cent). This means that it is essentially for logistic and pragmatic reasons that ISCSP is chosen as the place to carry out higher education.

Another important fact taken from the analysis of the questionnaire is that, although Portuguese is the official language in these African countries, the reality is that ISCSP and Portugal are not chosen primarily for linguistic reasons (only 10.1 per cent of the students do so). Indeed, some students reveal quite a lot of difficulties in speaking Portuguese as was indicated by the amount of time that it took students to respond to the questionnaire.

Taking a closer look at the course preferences of these students when they enroll at ISCSP, it is verified that, Public Administration is the degree with the highest percentage of enrolment (37.9 per cent), thus confirming the dire need for qualified employees in the management structures of their countries. In the second place of students' choice is International Relations (22.7 per cent), meaning there is also some concern about relations with other countries. The course of Human Resources Management and the course of Public Administration and Territorial Policies come third and fourth with similar numbers (15 and 12.6 per cent respectively) giving further expression to the need detected when it comes to the lack of qualified labor for the public and tertiary sectors of these countries.

Table 1 shows that Portuguese is considered the first language/the mother tongue by almost 60 per cent of the students and the second language by 43 per cent. English is regarded the second language by nearly 20 per cent of the students and the same result is had when English is considered the third language. A curious finding is that French ranks as the most important third language, which may stem from the strategic importance of Francophone neighbor countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania, The Democratic Republic of Congo or Madagascar. In fact, all Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa share terrestrial or maritime borders with French-speaking countries.

Table 1: Linguistic Background

1st language	%	2nd language	%	3rd language	%
Portuguese	56.9	Portuguese	43	Portuguese	0
Creole	40.5	English	18.9	English	18.9
Umbundo	0	Creole	22.7	Creole	7.5
Kimbundo	0	French	2.5	French	26.5
Konhama	0	Spanish	0	Spanish	6.3
Landim	2.5			None	39.2

3.1.2 Learning English at ISCSP

When it comes to the specific area of English learning at ISCSP, the vast majority of the students inquired, (69.9 per cent) were placed in Level I (A2), confirming their low competence in English. The rest were placed in level II (B1) and Level III (B2) on exact equal percentages: 15.1 per cent. These results can be explained by the low number of years of English study in their respective countries of origin as can be verified by Table 2 and which shows that an overwhelming majority of 64.5 per cent had no formal schooling of English in Africa.

Table 2: Years of English Study in African Country of Origin and in Portugal

Years of English in Africa	%	Years of English in Portugal	%
0	64.5	0	31.6
1	3.7	1	5
2	2.5	2	6.3
3	7.5	3	10.1
4	7.5	4	3.7
5	5	5	11.3
6	6.3	6	3.7
7	1.2	7	10.1
8	1.2	8	8.8
		9	3.7
		10	5

Despite numbers being different, it is also shown that even when students carried out formal education in Portugal, 31.6 per cent had no learning of English and only 10.1 per cent had a background of seven years of English learning as their fellow Portuguese counterparts.

Although the questionnaire only asked for one option in relation to the questions 'Main difficulties in English' and 'How to overcome difficulties', several respondents opted for more. Authors decided to include all options because it would thus enrich the perspective sought for in this study and also because it would amplify the "voices" of the African students and concomitantly the challenges they face.

In terms of difficulties felt, Speaking tops the list at 49.3 per cent, followed by Grammar and Vocabulary indicated by respectively 39.2 per cent and 36.7 per cent of respondents (see Table 3).

Table 3: Areas of Greatest Difficulty in English

Difficulties in English	Speaking	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading	Comprehension
%	49.3	39.2	36.7	20.2	11.3

These difficulties may be overcome predominantly by studying more and attending classes regularly which are pointed out by 69.6 per cent and 39.2 per cent as can be seen from Table 4.

Table 4: Overcoming Difficulties in English

Overcoming difficulties	Study more	Go to classes regularly	Read newspapers	Watch movies
%	69.6	39.2	3.7	12.6

Of all the respondents, 59.4 per cent find English 'moderately difficult' whereas 31.6 per cent find it 'difficult' and only 8.8 per cent find it 'easy'. When asked if they liked studying English, 46.5 per cent of the students answered 'more or less' closely followed by 45.5 per cent who answered 'a lot'. Figures also show that 75.9 per cent of the students think studying English is 'useful' and 77.2 per cent believe it should be compulsory. These results indicate that, as was perceived by the number of students placed in level A2, English configures a course subject which is difficult to learn. The difficulty then translates into a 46.3 per cent of students who state not liking to study English so much. This bleak perspective is somewhat reversed by the fact that, despite their evident struggles to cope with the learning of English, a great majority of students believe in the usefulness of the language to a point that it should be a compulsory subject at university level.

Conclusion

It is a given that, in this day and age, English is the language for professional needs worldwide and that, like much of the world, African-origin students can only benefit from learning it. By offering English in its curricula, ISCSP is catering for that global need and therefore making such a tool available for its African-origin students.

Our study confirms initial suspicion that African students are hindered in their study of English and that their learning of the language in Portugal is impaired by lack of former contact with EFL. Results also show that, surprisingly, it is not only the African students coming directly from the former colonies to Portugal who struggle with learning difficulties as far as the acquisition of EFL is concerned. African students who had formal schooling in Portugal before coming to university also struggle with problems to learn English, showing not to be distinct from those ones who pursued secondary studies in Africa. This finding is relevant because it may cast doubts over the secondary school system in Portugal when EFL teaching and ethnic minorities are brought under consideration and deserves a study on its own.

Although the majority of the students in our survey speak Portuguese as their first language and 43 per cent as their second language, many revealed difficulties in understanding some of the questions in the questionnaire and the majority could not answer it in the time predicted, a fact which came as a surprise and constituted a collateral finding to the overall study. It was also noticed that French is still considered the most chosen third language by African-origin students, possibly because of the importance given to the relations established with neighboring French-speaking countries. The statute of French as a third foreign language goes against the fact that English is, on the one hand, the international language of today, and, on the other, that former Portuguese colonies in Africa also share borders with Anglophone countries. These two findings could be interpreted as reminiscent of the colonial legacy/past which has greatly shaped the contemporary map of Africa.

Results confirm that most African students seem to be aware of their difficulties in learning English and how to overcome them. Most find English 'moderately difficult' and 'difficult' which explains why so many are placed in Level I. In spite of this, they state English is 'useful' and 'should be compulsory' and 45.5 per cent say they enjoy studying it a lot.

In the face of these findings, which validate pre-held assumptions that students, whose origins are located in Africa, face added difficulties when learning English vis-à-vis their Portuguese peers, a few conclusions are worthy of attention. Firstly, it would be pertinent that, in the future, this study be replicated at other Portuguese colleges where English is also part of the curriculum and where there are communities of African-origin students.

This would help clarify whether there is an overall pattern or whether the difficulties experienced by these students are a phenomenon restricted to ISCSP. Secondly, this study may point out in the direction of implementing solutions that could be useful in helping students overcome their difficulties. Colleges where the same problem exists could implement "back-up lessons", actually much in line with what ISCSP used to do up to 2005/2006, when understaffing constraints led to the closure of these lessons. Indeed, these lessons were optional but were offered as a means to improve the linguistic skills of students with poorer performance and emphasis was placed on the brushing up of grammar/structural basis and vocabulary acquisition.

Finally, this study is important inasmuch as it now gives consistency and support to the idea held by English language lecturers at ISCSP that African-origin students are usually lagging behind their Portuguese counterparts and that, in these globalized modern societies, lack of English proficiency can hinder the prospects for socioeconomic improvement. More than ever, it is essential that all students, 'citizens for whom education continues to be a technology of hope' (Chissale 2012:19), should profit from the benefits entailed by a global language, irrespective of the difficulties they encounter along the way to proficiency.

Acknowledgements

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