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Literacy in mother tongue through new textbooks²

Abstract

Improving early literacy and ensuring literacy development are major concerns of the education systems in the European Union. PISA reports have been severe on Portugal (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007) and the 21st century marked the beginning of a rather innovative reform in Portuguese education. Underlying principles include the need to focus education on the development of competences and to approach the teaching/learning of mother tongue in a transversal way, thus emphasizing its relations with other subjects at school. Developing competences in reading comprehension holds a very important position in this context, because they are essential to life in a modern society and to lifelong learning (Sá, 2009).

In Portugal, textbooks still play a very important role at school and the teaching/learning of the mother tongue is no exception. A study, developed in LEIP/Research Laboratory for Education in Portugal, which began in 2006 and is nearing its end, has shown that mother tongue textbooks in use in the Portuguese compulsory education no longer serve the purposes they were created for. The analysis of some of these textbooks, selected according to pre-established criteria, led to the identification and characterization of some problems. We concluded that textbooks for the teaching/learning of mother tongue are not adapted to the main ideas in today's educative policy, although they may contribute to the development of some competences in reading comprehension and written production. The knowledge thus acquired will allow us to formulate some principles that are designed to ensure the production of textbooks and other educational resources more

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adequately serve the promotion of early literacy and literacy development in Portuguese schools.

Literacy and reading competences

Improving early literacy and ensuring literacy development are major concerns of the education systems in the European Union. Portugal is no exception.

The importance of this issue is related to the transformative potential of literacy and its power in what concerns the construction of a reflective and critical citizenship. PISA reports have been severe on Portugal (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007) and the 21st century marked the beginning of a rather innovative reformation in Portuguese education. Underlying principles include the need to focus education on the development of competences and to approach the teaching/learning of mother tongue in a transversal way, thus emphasizing its relations with other subjects at school (Sá, 2009). The essential competences to be acquired and developed throughout compulsory education were defined in the *National Curriculum for Basic Education* (Ministério da Educação, 2001) and they concern: i) knowledge (scientific, technological and cultural) and its use; ii) language, both mother tongue and foreign languages; iii) methods and techniques centred on problem solving, such as looking for information and organizing it, selecting strategies adapted to specific goals, taking decisions, being autonomous and capable of team work at the same time; and iv) the ability to perceive life in an ecological way (Sá, Cardoso & Alarcão, 2008).

Developing competences in reading comprehension holds a very important position in this context. Reading plays a crucial role in modern societies. It affects success at school, which is seen as essential to social integration. Moreover, it contributes considerably to professional accomplishment. Reading is also a very useful form of access to knowledge that we can apply to novel situations and cultures allowing us to be more creative.

It is a process generally associated with the teaching/learning of mother tongue, but one must recognize that competences in reading comprehension can also be acquired through the teaching/learning of other subjects, because they all involve verbal communication.

Teaching reading comprehension in a first language is a demanding task, since proficient reading comprehension depends on: i) mastery of decoding mechanisms; ii) the development of language skills (such as the use of vocabulary and grammar, among others); iii) knowledge about text genres and their use in written

communication; iv) conceptual and factual knowledge; v) reasoning and inferential skills, essential to the identification of implicit ideas in texts and the relations among them; vi) cognitive strategies used to improve comprehension and to repair it when it breaks down; vii) motivation (Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005; Martins, 2008).

Teaching reading comprehension implies the promotion of learning situations inviting the students to use their skills in written communication, including: (i) writing texts based on the reading comprehension of a text studied in the classroom; ii) reviewing one's own texts; and iii) rewriting those texts according to reviews made by others (such as the teacher or other students).

The importance of textbooks

In Portugal, textbooks still play a very important role at school, at all levels of education, and the teaching and learning of the mother tongue is no exception.

Textbooks can play several roles in the teaching/learning process (Choppin, 2005): i) an instrumental role, by favouring certain teaching methods (in our opinion, nowadays, they should favour methods promoting reading, writing and critical thinking skills); ii) a referential role, providing insights for the definition of curricula and helping to solve pedagogical problems; iii) a documental role, presenting instruments and documents serving the teaching/learning process, thus becoming sources of information; and iv) a cultural role, through the promotion of certain social values, contributing to the construction of ethical models.

In what concerns the teaching/learning of mother tongue related to the development of competences in reading comprehension, textbooks should encourage the students to explore several kinds of texts, in order to acquire and develop strategies in reading comprehension (Giasson, 2004; Sim-Sim, 2007), and promote the activation and development previous knowledge (Carreira, & Sá, 2004).

Do mother tongue textbooks contribute effectively to this purpose?

Mother tongue textbooks' contribution to the promotion of literacy

A study, conducted at the LEIP/Research Laboratory for Education in Portuguese, which began in 2006 and is nearing its end, has shown that mother tongue textbooks in use in the Portuguese compulsory education no longer serve the purposes they were created for. It is a PhD project, entitled *Textbooks and development of transversal competences*

in reading comprehension in Portuguese as a mother tongue: a study in basic education, developed by one of us (Maria da Esperança Martins) and directed by the other (Cristina Manuela Sá).

It is focused on the contribution of mother tongue textbooks to the development of transversal competences in reading comprehension and thus to success at school, socio-professional integration and the effective exercise of citizenship. Two research questions were formulated: 1) Are the present textbooks for teaching Portuguese as a mother tongue adequate for the development of competences in reading comprehension in students in compulsory education?; 2) Is it possible, as a result of the analyses, to establish principles underlying the production of more adequate textbooks? Nine textbooks were selected according to pre-established criteria: “popularity” in Portuguese schools (we selected three textbooks representing several levels of “popularity”, measured according to the number of schools that chose them); characteristics of the editing project they represented (which led us to choose textbooks from different publishing companies); and use in the three levels of compulsory education in Portugal (three for each of the three cycles included in compulsory education for 6-15 year-old students). The analysis of these textbooks was done using a grid previously produced and validated by a panel of specialists (including researchers in several Portuguese universities, teacher training supervisors and teachers of Portuguese in compulsory education). It was focused on five aspects of the textbooks: *competences*, *objectives*, *content*, *strategies/activities* and *resources*. Those aspects were analysed according to three main categories related to competences in reading comprehension, including subcategories: i) *reading comprehension* (divided into *identification of the ideas in the text*, *identification of the main ideas* and *identification of the macrostructure of the text*); ii) *interaction between oral communication, reading comprehension and written expression*; and iii) *autonomy in reading* (divided into *reading for leisure* and *reading for information*). The analysis took account of the presence of references to these categories in the textbooks, either explicit or implicit. A grid was filled for each textbook analysed.

Data analysis showed that these textbooks do try to contribute to the acquisition and development of competences in reading comprehension, but it also led to the identification and characterization of some problems. The texts never explicitly refer to the *competences* that should be developed in the students, although we can infer them, mainly from the activities they present. They mention *objectives*, but sometimes they really are activities. In general, they are rather focused on *content*, i.e. knowledge the students must acquire, mainly concerning literature and grammar. The *strategies/activities* suggested by these textbooks do not always take into account important dimensions of modern conceptions of reading: they tend to focus a lot on language skills (e. g., related to the use of vocabulary and grammar) and ignore

communicative skills (such as knowing how to use several text genres); they pay little attention to the characteristics of reading situations and the acquisition/development of reading strategies (insisting on the same kind of reading situations) and the reader's objectives (ignoring important goals of reading comprehension, such as gathering information); they tend to impose certain "interpretations" of the texts (instead of leading the students to create their own); they do not value previous experience in reading, nor contribute to the acquisition of new reading habits. Briefly, they do not promote citizenship, because they do not approach the teaching/learning of mother tongue in a transversal way, paying too much attention to contents and seeing reading as an instrumental practice, not as a goal in itself. Finally, in what concerns *resources*, these textbooks favoured the use of literary texts, corresponding to excerpts of the works referred to in the official programs. And they seldom related to the world outside school, taking into account the experiences of the students in what concerned reading and writing and non-literary texts. By doing this, they reduced the chances for students to develop skills in reading comprehension and writing that might be useful in everyday life.

The final step in this study will lead us to the formulation of some principles that are intended to ensure the production of textbooks and other educational resources that more adequately focus on the promotion of early literacy and literacy development in Portuguese schools. We are already working on that issue.

Future research into reading in LEIP

In a near future, we intend to develop a new project, i) resulting from this one, ii) centred in the role played by teaching/learning of mother tongue in the development of transversal competences at school and in social life and iii) paying special attention to written communication. Its main objectives will be: i) to characterize the factors conditioning the transversal approach of the teaching/learning of mother tongue and the development of competences in reading comprehension and written expression; ii) to conceive and validate strategies and resources to serve this purpose; iii) to elaborate guidelines concerning teacher training and research centred on this purpose. Thus, the project will include: the analysis of conceptions about reading comprehension and its didactic approach and of instruments and practices used in the teaching/learning process; the conception and validation of strategies and resources for a transversal approach to the development of competences in reading comprehension and written expression; and the production of guidelines for teacher training and research on these topics.

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