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Classroom Teaching of Writing Throughout Schooling

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In this paper, by presenting some results of the research we have conducted on the learning of writing and on its underlying teaching practices (Pereira, Aleixo, Cardoso, & Graça, 2010), we aim at providing an important contribution to the first and second working groups — (i) early acquisition of writing skills and (ii) improvements in written communication. Up until now, our work has focused mainly on the three cycles of Compulsory Education in Portugal (covering nine school years) and has allowed us to observe that (a) the teaching of writing put into practice is frequently simplistic and reductive; (b) there is a huge gap between classroom practices and principles emanated from research conducted in this domain (Pereira, 2004). Bearing in mind this scenario, we have aimed at conducting research which allows us to intervene in the classroom work in order to produce knowledge either about the students’ writing practices and their relationship with writing or about the teachers’ practices concerning the development of students’ writing skills. More specifically, we have tried to develop teaching/learning and educational devices which may lead teachers to reflect upon and renew their teaching practices as well as their own relationship with writing.

Furthermore, this group has also developed a study on academic writing, in both online and face-to-face contexts, which focused especially on the argumentative text and on writing-from-sources.

It is important to notice that all our studies consisted in qualitative and interpretative case studies — data was collected by the means of interviews, classroom video recording and questionnaires — which were also complemented by quantitative analyses.
Focusing specifically on the Portuguese Language ‘classroom’, our aims are to understand how students develop academic literacy and to analyse teachers’ contributions towards that development. Teachers usually consider that the transposition reading-writing is immediate; such representation has motivated the development and testing of learning materials for classroom intervention. For the purpose of this report, we have selected, from a number of PhD and Master research projects, three examples which include the implementation of a Didactic Sequence, the use of Writing Notebooks and a Workshop about Writing. Each one of these didactic tools focuses on one of the three important dimensions of written production which we believe to be complementary in the teaching/learning process of such a complex competence as writing: the cognitive/procedural dimension of written production; the dimension of the subject’s relationship with writing; and the social dimension of written language.

Thus, the Didactic Sequence (Pereira & Cardoso, 2011) joins together a social dimension of the written production — given that the writing choices are dependent from the communicative contexts and from the text genres concerned — and a more procedural dimension. Indeed, the Didactic Sequence aims more at the teaching/learning of a specific text genre, by putting into practice teaching modules particularly focused on the development of the skills implied in the writing process of that particular genre and which students are expected to learn how to handle.

This is a teaching/learning device which privileges (i) the recursive nature of the writing process, (ii) the insertion of the written productions in real or virtual communicative contexts, (iii) rewriting and (iv) the hard task of revision. We highlight a set of studies focused on the development of textual revision, whose results stress the relevance of the strategies of collaboration, interaction and verbalization in the construction of knowledge about written production (Pereira, Cardoso, & Graça, 2009).

In relation to the Writing Notebooks, they are specially conceived for allowing the emergence of the students’ personal writing. Additionally, they provide students with the opportunity to have readers for their texts and contributions to improve them. Thus, these notebooks focus on the emergence of an author-subjects relationship, which school is also responsible for fostering.

By making students verbalize their personal relationship with writing, the Workshop about Writing also aims at making learner/individual (re)discover significations for the writing production which may favour a higher individual commitment in the process of appropriation of written production.

As far as higher education is concerned, a specific platform was validated for the development of online argumentation, by providing different digital tools such as Structured Chats, Graph Tool — for mapping arguments — and note taking (Loureiro, Pinho, Pereira, & Moreira, 2008).

In conclusion, our research has attempted to validate teaching/learning devices which (a) incorporate the main theoretical frameworks concerning the teaching/learning of written language and (b) foster teachers’ contribution towards the improvement of the student’s relationship with writing — from an identitarian relationship (which already seems to exist) to an epistemic relationship. Although
the latter does not exclude the former, it acquires a crucial importance within the school context, given that it is a privileged context for knowledge-telling and knowledge construction.

Our studies have raised some problems/issues related to the teaching of different text genres and the importance of understanding students’ individual relationships with writing as a global subject. Results suggest that the pedagogical approaches mentioned above, the production of texts based on students’ personal/own motivation and the understanding of the triad activity/student/subject’s motivation contribute towards the improvement of the written teaching/learning processes and can help each student use writing as citizens with full rights. Moreover, the use of specific text genre online platforms and the process of note-taking promote students’ knowledge of the text genre under study, their self-confidence as writers and their capacity to use specific language features of online interaction.

As future research, we highlight the national research project ‘PROTEXTS’—‘Teaching of Texts Production in Compulsory Education’, financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology (PTDC/CPE-CED/101009/2008), which was recently launched and whose main aims are:

- to design valid criteria for the promotion and control of progression in the written production of textual genres, according to different levels of education — 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles of Compulsory Education;
- to verify the evolution of the fourth-, sixth- and ninth-grade students, throughout one school year, in the experimental and control groups, concerning their written expression and reviewing skills;
- to compare didactic interventions designed according to the same didactic principles, with and without resorting to Information and Communication Technologies, in order to develop more specific guidelines for their effective operationalization within the classroom context;
- to become acquainted with school and extra-school writing practices, at a national level, of students who are in the final grades of each cycle of Compulsory Education.

References


