Animation and teaching/learning the mother tongue

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Abstract

Teaching/learning the mother tongue is a complex process and essential in several domains: success at school, qualification for future professional performance and critical citizenship.

These aims demand its approach in a transversal way focusing in the development of competences such as the ones related to communication (generally viewed as verbal communication and mainly related to reading and writing).

Nevertheless verbal communication relies also on nonverbal elements such as the image, be it animated or not. And people need to know how to read them. It is common sense to believe that it is easier to understand a message presented in images than the ones using words. However there are many adults that do not feel at ease when they must read images.

Thus, animation may take a place in the classroom. It may be used as a resource to present several topics and motivate the discussion and organize the work around them leading to the development of communicative competences in the pupils. But it may also become the issue of the work done in the classroom, if one agrees that involving the pupils in projects is a good way of thinning the distance between school and everyday life and developing competences in them. A project built around animation does contribute to the development of communicative competences (both verbal and non verbal) and it may also be important for the development of competences in autonomous and teamwork, so important in modern society.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Teaching/learning process, Transversal approach, Competences, Animation

Teaching/learning the mother tongue

Teaching/learning the mother tongue is a complex process. First of all, it is never finished: it begins with the first articulated sounds and it can always be improved, independently of our age and status. Also, it can take place in several contexts: informally in a social context (at home, with the family and elsewhere, within the several groups the subject is part of) and, more formally, in an institutional context (first at the kindergarten and than at school, including Higher Education).

The role of this process in the development of transversal competences

Whatever the conditions are, this process is a very important part of education, because it contributes to the acquisition and development of transversal competences, essential in several domains: success at school, qualification for future professional performance and critical citizenship.

One of the main concerns of both political and educational institutions today is the definition of these essential competences. And the main characteristic of such competences is that they must be transversal: they must be developed in whatever context the individual is placed and they are supposed to influence – positively – one's action in every context.

They are mentioned by researchers in Education. One of the most prominent is Philippe Perrenoud (1999), who defined ten essential competences teachers should develop in their students. These essential competences concerned the ability to deal with heterogeneity and diversity, autonomy and teamwork and the exercise of critical and active citizenship. Peter Moss (2008) proposed a similar model for compulsory education (namely the primary school), featuring competences focused in integration, socialization and solidarity, diversity and contact with several contexts and democratic social practice preparing for the political one. Even the kindergarten was considered in this effort: e.g. Ferre Laevers (2008) defended a model of education for young children that should develop in them self-confidence and openness to others and encourage them to explore the world using all their abilities, in order to improve them and acquire other competences.

These competences are also mentioned by international organizations, in recent documents on several aspects of social life, including economy and education. In what concerns the political context, namely within the European Union, there are several documents concerning this agenda.

One of them is a list of eight key competences formulated by an European Commission, on 2007. This list (Comissão Europeia, 2007) included competences we can relate to traditional knowledge domains: *Communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages*, *Mathematical literacy and basic competences in science and technology*, *ICT skills*. The other five competences on the list were related to life in a modern society: *Learning lo learn*, *Entrepreneurship*, *Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences*, *Civic competences* and *Cultural awareness*).

Being a member of the European Union, Portugal followed these directions. The 90s saw the beginning of a reformation of the education system which included the formulation of transversal competences to be developed at least during compulsory education, which were presented in the *National Curriculum for Basic Education* (Ministério da Educação, 2001). They concerned: knowledge (scientific, technological and cultural) and its use, communication (in the mother tongue and in foreign languages), methods and techniques for problem solving (looking for information and organizing it, selection of strategies adapted to a specific goal, taking decisions, autonomy and teamwork) and

the ability to perceive life in an ecological way (Sá, 2009).

Previously, the Portuguese Ministry of Education had already recommended the development of a set of transversal competences that still coexist with the ten competences included in the *National Curriculum for Basic Education*. They are: i) methods for study and work, ii) processing information, iii) communication, iv) cognitive strategies and v) interpersonal and team relations (Sá, 2009).

The competences related to the use of the mother tongue are especially important in this context. The *National Curriculum for Basic Education* (Ministério da Educação, 2001) emphasizes this idea. As a matter of fact, competences related to oral and written communication are essential to everyday life.

The acquisition and development of these competences demand the approach of the teaching/learning of the mother tongue in a transversal way. This means that the mother tongue is to be taught: i) in interaction with other subjects at school (making the students use their competences in oral and written communication in other contexts besides the mother tongue classroom) and ii) taking into account its social function (which makes it necessary to involve the students in meaningful learning situations allowing them to play a more active role in the whole process). Thus the teaching/learning of Portuguese promotes success at school and a better preparation for professional contexts and the exercise of a reflective and active citizenship. Such an approach also takes into account the fact that the work done in the classes of the other subjects is essential to improve the students competences in their mother tongue. In addition, this approach also values the knowledge and the competences the students may acquire and develop outside school, in their everyday life.

This conception of the teaching/learning process demands new methodologies involving: i) a change of roles, with the students becoming the central part of it, thus being more responsible for the work done in the classroom and more autonomous, and the teacher acting as a mentor using all his/her knowledge and competences to help them in the building of their own knowledge and the acquisition and development of their own competences (Sá, Cardoso, Alarcão, 2008); ii) the involvement of all the teachers and students in collaborative work, which will help them all to acquire the knowledge and develop the competences they need to be more and more autonomous.

Of course such a way of conceiving activity may be transferred into social life, namely in the professional context.

Project work is a rather interesting strategy in this context. As a matter of fact, a project implies i) the identification of a problem, ii) the definition of aims, iii) the selection of strategies and means to solve the problem and achieve the aims, iv) the implementation of those strategies, v) the evaluation of their success and vi) the reformulation of the adopted strategies or the selection of other ones more adequate to our purposes. Consequently, it is necessary to form a team whose members are supposed to work together or alone, depending on the moments, and mobilize their knowledge and abilities to solve the problem identified. Thus such a methodology promotes the acquisition of knowledge and the development of competences essential to everyday life in a number of contexts.

The importance of the competences in communication

As we have already stated, among essential competences, we can place the ones related to communication. This point deserves further discussion.

Generally, when one uses the word *communication*, one is referring to verbal communication. But we can also use non verbal forms of communication (relying on elements such as sounds, forms, colours, mimic, gestures, movements), which gave origin to other forms of expression (musical, plastic, dramatic and physical) and namely the arts (music, painting, sculpture, drama, dance and so on). Verbal communication also relies on nonverbal elements: oral communication depends on features such as mimic, gesticulation, body language and written communication makes good use of iconic symbols, which may include the image. And arts are more and more dependent on the fusion of different forms of expression.

Efficiency in verbal communication, especially reading comprehension and writing, is a relevant social issue in the 21st century world. We are now used to the press regularly diffusing the results of studies on literacy, both national (Benavente *et al.,* 1996) and international (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010). The fact that the reports of these studies also reveal that people have problems using nonverbal forms of communication such as graphics, charts or diagrams is not so discussed, but it is not less relevant.

The image, be it animated or not, frequently combined with text in several ways, has an important place in modern communication. Everyday life is full of such forms of communication: some of them include non animated images (e. g. publicity on printed supports, newspapers, illustrated books, comics), others offer animated images (television, cinema, animation). In the internet, which provides most of the information and means of communication in modern society, we can find documents in all these formats. So, communication in the modern world is full of images.

No one would think of depriving the students of learning how to use words and the mechanisms that lead to their combination to communicate both in oral and written forms. It is one of the major concerns in any education system. But in everyday life people also need to know how to use nonverbal forms of communication, both in comprehension and expression. That is why the curricula include subjects related to several forms of expression. The problem is that nobody cares about them, including the political authorities responsible for education: they are seen as a minor concern. This attitude derives of the lack of conscience concerning the important role they play in everyday life. People look at them as if they were the privilege of a small group of citizens including the artists, the entertainers and those who have a professional career in sports.

Image especially is affected by its frequent use in forms of communication and products aimed for the childhood. It is common sense to believe that it is easier to understand a message presented in images than the ones using

words. That is why texts aimed for children present illustrations. Therefore, people commonly believe that forms of expression such as comics and animation are aimed for childhood, although there are special versions for adults, generally related to eroticism or even pornography.

However, there are many adults that do not feel at ease when they must read images, so they are not apt to use or even enjoy forms of communication that make use of them. Many adults do not like comics or animation because they cannot read them. And even forms of communication they feel they master easily (such as publicity and cinema) may contain traps they are not aware of.

Therefore the teaching/learning of arts and sports at public school should not be neglected as it is. The mother tongue, foreign languages, mathematics, sciences and technology are certainly very important. But there is no reason to believe that music, drama, plastic arts and gymnastics are secondary areas in the curricula.

The teaching/learning of the mother tongue should play an important role in this issue, because it is responsible for the development of competences in communication and we do it with words and many other elements we can easily combine with them, even if we are not of the artistic kind. This means that this process may be combined with the teaching/learning of subjects concerning other forms of communication, instead of keeping as far away as possible from them.

This leads us to the idea that animation can and must be used in teaching/learning of the mother tongue. Thus, animation may take a place in the classroom. And not only for children!

Animation in the teaching/learning of the mother tongue

Discussing the importance of the presence of animation in the mother tongue classroom leads us to the recognition of the different roles non verbal communication may play in this context.

Animation may be used as a *resource* as most nonverbal or mixed language means of communication are. In what concerns the teaching/learning of Portuguese as a mother tongue, the use of such resources is suggested since the reformation that took place in 1991: the programs introduced in that year (Ministério da Educação, 1991a, 1991b) recommended the use of such resources in the classroom, with special reference to comics. This conception is still based on the assumption that such languages are easier to read because they include images. So, nowadays, teachers and students are used to seeing them as resources to present several topics and motivate the discussion on them. It happens from time to time in all subjects at school and it is seen as a mark of great innovation in pedagogy. There are studies conducted within the teaching/learning of languages revealing that this proposition is rather false (e. g. Sá, 1995, for comics).

Animation may also be seen as a *content*, a topic to study. It already happened to other forms of communication combining text and image, such as comics. The programs published in 1991 (Ministério da Educação, 1991a, 1991b) recommended the approach of comics as a kind of text and this suggestion is also a part of the new programs, being experimented since 2010 (Reis, 2009). This conception is based on the idea that it is necessary to help the students to use texts present in every day life as opposed to literature, which remains the focus of the teaching/learning of the mother tongue. So teachers of Portuguese as a mother tongue in compulsory education are supposed to master the secrets of these alternative forms of communication in order to be able to reveal them to the students. Everybody knows this is far from being true. In order to help them and the students with this task, some textbooks presented information on this topic and some didactic booklets were produced (Santos *et al.*: 1979). But this kind of information did note make neither the teachers nor the students understand how these forms of communication really work or become able to use them. As a matter of fact, this kind of approach does not work for any form of communication, including literature. In order to understand any language, you must use it, in comprehension and in expression, and reflect on the use you make of it. Theoretical concepts help, but they do not exclude the practical contact with them and they frequently derive from the reflection on their use. There were some attempts of explaining how to work with them proposing activities related to several aims including the development of competences in communication. I tried to do so some years ago (e. g. Sá, 1996). But it was hard to make them work.

Animation may be studied as a *language* in itself, as it happened for other mixed forms of communication (e.g. for comics, Sá, 2000; Sá et al., 2006). Nevertheless, in these propositions, the alternative language is seen as a means to access verbal language. For example, comics or animation may be used to develop the students' knowledge on story telling and competences on reporting facts. Or they may be used in activities involving and exercising competences in reading comprehension: e.g. adapting to comics or animation a literary narrative or a story created by the students themselves, a task that implies a deep comprehension of the text, especially concerning its main ideas, and the ability to deal with the underlying structure in order to express it in another language. They may also be used in written expression: for example, writing down in full words a story that has been presented using those mixed languages, implying again the ability to to deal with the underlying structure in order to express it in another language, the identification of the main ideas in it and the use of mechanisms concerning coherence and cohesion. Besides, generally they are too attached to activities and competences which are important mainly in school, not really in everyday life.

But animation could be much more helpful if the teaching/learning of the mother tongue accepted to organize some of the work done in the classroom around it, using it as a basis for the development of communicative competences in the students. Animation could be the core of team projects intended to thin the distance between school and everyday life, involving students from the same class or several classes in the school, some of their teachers or all of them and even people from outside the school. A project built around animation may contribute to the development

of all sorts of competences, including the ones concerning the teaching/learning of the mother tongue through a transversal approach: communication in general, verbal communication (even focused on reading and writing). Moreover, if one takes as reference the essential competences defined in the National Curriculum for compulsory education in Portugal (Ministério da Educação, 2001), it is easy to understand that taking part in a project (that may be focused on the production of an animation film) may develop competences concerning: the use of knowledge from several areas and the language associated to it, the selection of strategies adapted to previously defined aims (namely looking for information, treating, selecting and organizing it), taking decisions and working autonomously or in a collaborative way, so important in modern society. Those who have already worked in animation may easily understand that this is really true.

Cooperation between schools and cultural institutions related to animation

This kind of cooperation is essential to lead to the implementation of projects in this domain.

First of all, cultural institutions – such as the Cine Clube de Avanca (Portugal) – may provide education in this field, both to the teachers and the students and even to the community in general. Using today's techniques and resources and a little formation – such as the workshop I attended last year in this same festival[1], any teacher can get prepared enough to face such a challenge. Without previous training on the subject, I was able to make a short film during that workshop, using my knowledge on comics and one of my stories as a basis and the help of one of the coordinators in the workshop. So, workshops for the teachers and the students, taking place in the cultural institution or even in the schools would be quite important.

Cultural institutions can also support the projects developed in the schools, thus contributing for the development of essential competences in today's students. And they can promote educational projects in this area themselves, in collaboration with the schools. Such cooperation may rely on isolated actions (as the contest *Filmes de Animação Júnior em Concurso* promoted by the Cine Clube de Avanca[2]). But longer actions are needed, e.g. the foundation of animation clubs in the schools. They would be an excellent means of attracting people of all ages, as spectators/consumers or even as artists/producers.

Cultural institutions may also support research on this field, since they have the practical knowledge as well as the theoretical one essential to the reflection on the way this means of communication and expression works. Consequently, they could be partners of scientific institutions for instance taking part in research projects.

Final words

We are living difficult times. So the intention underlying this reflection is to improve education in order to give a better life to everyone in a better world. This is a purpose that knows no boundaries or limits, whatever they may be.

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