Comics and teaching/learning the mother tongue

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Abstract

Teaching/learning the mother tongue is a complex process 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, 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, comics may be used in the mother tongue classroom. They may be used as a resource, seen as a content (when considered as a text genre), studied as a language with special characteristics. In the process, they can contribute to the development of competences in reading comprehension.

Besides they 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 comics does contribute to the development of communicative competences (both verbal and nonverbal) and the development of competences in autonomous and teamwork, so important in modern society.

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

Resumo

O ensino/aprendizagem da Língua Materna é um processo complexo, com repercussões em vários domínios: sucesso escolar, qualificação profissional e exercício de uma cidadania ativa e crítica.

Estas suas finalidades requerem que seja abordado de uma forma transversal, centrando-se no desenvolvimento de competências, nomeadamente as que se relacionam com a comunicação (termo normalmente associado à comunicação verbal, particularmente na sua versão escrita).

Contudo, a comunicação verbal recorre igualmente a elementos não-verbais, como imagens, que as pessoas também precisam de aprender a "ler". É do senso comum acreditar-se que é sempre mais fácil compreender uma mensagem veiculada através de imagens do que quando se usa palavras. No entanto, há muitos adultos que não são capazes de ler imagens.

Deste modo, a banda desenhada tem o seu lugar na aula de língua materna. Pode ser usada como um recurso, um material didático. Pode ser estudada como um conteúdo, surgindo como um tipo/género textual. Pode ser abordada como uma linguagem, dotada de características específicas. A sua exploração pode também contribuir para o desenvolvimento de competências em comunicação verbal (nomeadamente no domínio da compreensão na leitura) e não-verbal. Para além disso, a banda desenhada pode converter-se no produto de um projeto a desenvolver nas aulas, partindo do princípio de que esta metodologia contribui para reduzir a distância entre a escola e a vida quotidiana. Deste modo, o seu estudo poderá também contribuir para o desenvolvimento de competências relacionadas com a autonomia e o trabalho em equipa, tão importantes na sociedade moderna.

Keywords: Língua Materna, Ensino/aprendizagem, Abordagem transversal, Competências, Banda desenhada.

Résumé

L'enseignement/apprentissage de la langue maternelle est un procès complexe entraînant le développement de compétences essentielles en milieu scolaire et professionnel, mais aussi à la vie sociale.

Donc, il faut le faire en ayant recours à une approche tranversale, centrée sur le développement de compétences en communication (généralement vue comme verbale et liée à la lecture et à l'écriture).

Cependant, la communication verbale repose aussi sur des éléments de nature non verbale, comme l'image, et il faut aussi apprendre à les lire. En général, on croit que c'est beaucoup plus facile de comprendre un message présenté en images qu'un autre présenté en mots. Mais il y a beacoup d'adultes qui ne savent pas lire les images.

Donc, la bande dessinée peut être associée à l'enseignment/apprentissage de la langue maternelle. On peut l'utiliser comme un matériel didactique, un contenu (quand on l'envisage comme un type/genre de texte), un langage présentant des caractéristiques bien précises. Dans ce sens, elle peut contribuer au développement de compétences en compréhension écrite.

Elle peut aussi être au coeur de certaines stratégies d'enseignement, si l'on accepte d'engager les élèves en des projets comme une façon de rétrécir la distance entre l'école et la vie en société et de développer leurs compétences. En effet, un projet structuré autour de la bande dessinée peut amener au développement de compétences en communication (verbale et non verbale) et aussi rendre les élèves autonomes et, en même temps, capables de s'intégrer dans des équipes.

Mots-clés: *Lange Maternelle, Enseignement/apprentissage, Approche transversale, Compétences, Bande dessinée.*

Teaching/learning the mother tongue and the development of transversal competences

Teaching/learning the mother tongue is a very important process in education, because it contributes to the acquisition and development of transversal competences, essential in several domains: success at school, qualification for future professional exercise 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 both by researchers in Education (for example, Perrenoud, 1999) and international organizations, namely within the European Union.

One of the most important documents on this issue proposes a list of eight key competences formulated by a European Commission (European Commission, 2007; Comissão Europeia, 2007), which includes a competence related to the use of the mother tongue, concerning both oral and written communication. As a matter of fact, competences in this domain are certainly 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.

Efficiency in verbal communication, especially reading comprehension and writing, is a relevant social issue in the 21st century world. We are 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 importance of the competences in communication

Generally, the word communication refers to verbal communication, i. e. communication based on words. But we can also use nonverbal forms of communication (relying on elements such as sounds, forms, colours, mime, gesticulation, 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). Furthermore, verbal communication also relies on nonverbal elements: oral communication depends on features such as mime, 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.

The reports of the studies concerning literacy also reveal that people have problems using nonverbal forms of communication such as graphs, charts or diagrams.

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). On 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. In fact, it is one of the major concerns in any education system. However, 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 from 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

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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. Even forms of communication they feel they master easily (such as publicity and cinema) may contain traps they are not aware of.

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 type. This means that this process may be combined with the teaching/learning of subjects concerning other forms of communication, instead of keeping them as far away as possible from us.

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

Comics in the teaching/learning of the mother tongue

Comics have been associated to this issue for a certain time now. But they have been assigned different roles, according to the acclaimed views on communication.

Comics 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 educational reform that took place in 1991: the curricula 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 based on the assumption that such languages are easier to read, because they include images. So, nowadays, teachers and students are used to seeing these texts 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. However, there are studies conducted within the teaching/learning of languages revealing that understanding texts including images is not easier than understanding those which use only words (e. g. Sá, 1995, for comics).

Comics may also be seen as a topic to study. The curricula published in 1991 (Ministério da Educação, 1991a, 1991b) recommended the approach of comics as a kind of text and this suggestion is present in the new curricula (Reis, 2009) and aims for the teaching/learning of the mother tongue (Ministério da Educação, 2012) in compulsory education. This conception is based on the idea that it is necessary to help the students to use texts present in everyday life. So teachers of Portuguese as a mother tongue in compulsory education are supposed to master the secrets of these forms of communication and 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 (e.g. Santos et al.: 1979 on comics). However, this kind of information did not 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. 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.

Comics may be studied as a *language*, as it happened for other mixed forms of communication. 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 (Sá, 1996, 2000; Sá et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, in these propositions, the alternative language is often seen as a means to access verbal language. For example, comics 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 a literary narrative or a story created by the students themselves. 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. Besides, generally they are too attached to activities and competences which are important mainly in school, not really in everyday life.

Comics in the development of competences in reading comprehension

Reading comprehension supposes understanding ideas, identifying main ideas in the text and recognizing the usual structure of different kinds of text. So, at school, teachers must involve their students in activities that will prepare them to understand written texts at these different levels. That can be done even with kindergarten children (Amaral, 2012; Capela, 2012; Carvalho, 2012; Osório, 2012; Pinheiro, 2012; Silva, 2012).

This is true for whatever type/genre of text. Therefore, comics may be the object of such a work as any other text (Sá: 2010a).

In what concerns the understanding of the ideas in the text, one can deal with different units.

Comics include (cf. Sá, 1996):
       i) verbal elements (words and phrases), present
          • in small patches of text containing indications about time and place,
          • in the dialogues of the characters in the stories;
       ii) nonverbal elements
          • images (playing with oppositions such as realistic/abstract, figurative/symbolic, complex/simple, and so on),
          • colour (black/white, several colours, realistic/symbolic use), which is normally present in the images, but may also be used in the texts,
          • plans (as in the cinema),
          • balloons (assuming different forms),
          • vignettes, i.e. images (taking into account variables such as size, form, number, disposition in the page, presence/absence of limits, sense of reading),
          • pages (with different kinds of articulation between them).

The students must be involved in activities concerning the identification of the ideas expressed in the text, which force them to recognize the existence of these elements and the role they play in the transmission of the message.

For example, they may answer oral or written questions concerning the ideas of the text, or ask questions about the text, or even tell the story in the text using their own words. And they should explain which elements or combination of elements lead them to the apprehension of such ideas.

It is also important to lead them to the:

- **identification of the main topic of the text,** which may be done using elements such as the title of the story or the series in which it is included, the summary presented in the back of the album, and so on;

- **the distinction between main/secondary ideas**, using activities such as writing a summary of the story or connecting parts of it with phrases/sentences expressing their main ideas.

The students must also get used **to the identification of the narrative structure** in a comic story, focusing

- either on the different categories which are part of it, doing activities such as using schemas to represent the structure of the story, filling tables relative to its various parts or even drawing the part that is lacking in an incomplete story,

- or on textual marks (connectors) that signal the main parts in the story's structure.

These activities will help the students to understand how comics work and contribute to the development of competences in reading comprehension.

Comics in the development of autonomy in the students

A transversal approach 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. Such a methodology promotes the acquisition of knowledge and the development of competences essential to everyday life in a number of contexts.

Comics 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 them, using them as a basis for the development of communicative competences in the students. Creating a comic story 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 comics may contribute to the development of competences in communication in general and verbal communication (even focused on reading and writing). Moreover, it may develop other competences very important in modern society 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.

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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