Textbooks and the development of transversal competences on reading comprehension in mother tongue

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Abstract
Our paper intends to explore relations between teaching and learning Mother Tongue and educating for citizenship.
Living in a modern society requires active and critical citizens relying on transversal competences such as: i) Learning to learn, ii) Entrepreneurship, iii) Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, iv) Civic competences and v) Cultural awareness, according to the European Commission for Education and Culture.
The teaching and learning of Mother Tongue is certainly very important in this context. While allowing the pupils to develop competences in oral and written communication, which are transversal and contribute to success, both at school and in society, it also contributes to the education for citizenship. Textbooks are a main feature in this process.

Context
The study referred in this paper is being developed as a part of the research plan designed for the LEIP/Laboratory for Research on Portuguese Language Education, which is located in the University of Aveiro (Portugal) and financed by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT).
The research line related to Portuguese as a mother tongue has the following aims: i) to gather knowledge concerning the nature of transversal and specific competences in reading comprehension and written production and ii) to implement didactic strategies for the
development of competences in reading comprehension and written production in different educational contexts.

In this context, a series of studies are taking place (Sá 2009; Sá & Martins 2009). They can be related to three main topics:

i) the identification and characterization of the conceptions of the actors in the Portuguese educational system, including pupils, in service teachers, supervisors and stakeholders in the schools;

ii) the production of instruments for a transversal approach of the teaching/learning of Portuguese as a mother tongue, namely concerning the development of reading comprehension, including documents produced by the teachers in order to prepare their intervention in the classroom and educational materials;

iii) the design and assessment of practices leading to an effective development of transversal competences, namely in reading comprehension, while teaching/learning Portuguese as a mother tongue.

The study which is in the centre of this paper is a PhD project entitled “Textbooks and Crossing of Reading Comprehension in Portuguese as a Mother Tongue: a study in Basic Education”, which is being developed with the financial support of FCT – POCTI 2010. It is related to the second research topic above mentioned and it concerns the use of textbooks as educational materials for the teaching/learning of mother tongue, specially focused on the development of transversal competences in reading comprehension (Martins 2008, 2009; Martins & Sá 2009).

It has the following aims:

(1) To identify a reader's profile based on the acquisition/development of transversal competences associated to reading comprehension, in order to promote academic success and facilitate the students’ social integration;

(2) To analyse textbooks associated to the teaching/learning of the mother tongue, in order to assess their adequacy in the acquisition/development of transversal competences concerning reading comprehension in compulsory education;

(3) To define essential principles for the designing of textbooks capable of promoting the acquisition/development of transversal competences associated to reading comprehension and the improvement of teaching practices as far as reading comprehension is concerned.
We are analyzing nine textbooks centered in the teaching and learning of Portuguese as a mother tongue used in the three cycles that compose compulsory education in Portugal (concerning 6-15 year-old students), based on categories dealing with the acquisition and development of competences in reading comprehension. Oral communication and written expression are also concerned, although in a secondary position, because it is impossible to isolate reading comprehension from them.

**The importance of the textbooks in the educational context**

Life in modern society places challenging demands on individuals and requires from them the acquisition and development of a certain number of key-competences. Defining such competences is essential to the identification of main goals in education and the integration of young people and adults in social life. These key-competences include lifelong learning, as society is always changing.

Textbooks are related to this context, since they are a master-piece in modern educational systems and in the teaching and learning practices. Even if they are not the only educational material available, they are extremely relevant in the teaching/learning process. They assist the work carried out by the teacher in the classroom and they provide guidance and educational material to the students, allowing them to do some autonomous work. Thus, they contribute to the development of the essential competences defined in official documents published by the Ministry of Education concerning compulsory education.

The textbooks help solving pedagogical problems through playing (according to Choppin 2005):

1. an instrumental role, that favors certain teaching modes, which suppose certain ways of learning;
2. a referential role, as they provide insights for the definition of curricula;
3. a documental role, because they are perceived as repertories of documents and instruments serving the teaching/learning process; this makes them important sources of information;
4. a cultural role, through the promotion of certain social values, becoming a source of ethical models and an instrument in the constitution of local, national and transnational identities.
The centrality of textbooks in the educational context can be established from different perspectives. In this sense, they are responsible for:

i) the planning of pedagogical actions by teachers;

ii) their pedagogical practices, which are generally referred to them;

iii) the acquisition and the development of competences by the students.

Nevertheless, they must follow the principles established by official documents such as the *National Curriculum for Basic Education* (Ministry of Education 2001). This document defines a set of essential competences to be developed in the students while attending compulsory education. It also determines the types of educational experiences students must be provided, in order to acquire the final profile set by the development of such competences.

Textbooks are also influenced by a complex system of discursive relations – formal curriculum, editorial policies and authors’ conceptions. Thus, textbooks are not simple translations of an educational programme, concerning both teaching and learning: they assume themselves as distinctive curricular projects.

In this paper, we value all the different roles played by mother tongue textbooks as a way of ensuring the development of transversal competences in reading comprehension. However, we are aware that they should also contribute to the development of competences in written production, oral communication and critical thinking, which are essential to life in a modern society.

Mother tongue textbooks are perceived as an important element in the questioning of the pedagogical and didactic directions recommended by official texts, concerning the presentation and treatment of curricular contents. In what concerns our study, they also show the complexity of reading comprehension and the need to promote the acquisition and development of competences in this domain.

**Development of competences in reading comprehension**

Modern education emphasizes the importance of developing competences essential to life in an ever changing society. Competences in reading comprehension are part of this set of essential competences to be developed while attending school and elsewhere.

Reading comprehension occupies a decisive position in the construction of the future of both individuals and the societies. The more and the better people read, the greater will be
their ability to perform the most wide-ranging tasks of community life and the higher their level of literacy. This is a fundamental condition of economic development, cultural enhancement, democratic quality and international assertion.

Competences in reading comprehension lead to success at school, both in language education and in learning all the other subjects. Verbal language is an important means of communication in academic life and much information is acquired through reading in every subject at school.

Outside school, reading comprehension is an important component of professional accomplishment and social integration and a way to the exercise of an active and critical citizenship. Reading is also an essential means of access to knowledge and enjoyment of culture. It may also lead to the creation of cultural products.

A good teaching of reading comprehension must convey a sense of its social and cultural dimensions. Students must be aware of its importance to the improvement of their communicative competences, as well as their ability to access knowledge and enjoy culture.

As mentioned before, scholar reading practices are mainly determined by textbooks. They are produced on the bases of theoretical assumptions, apparently related to the official educational policies. Mother tongue textbooks include a set of texts perceived as essential to the development of reading comprehension, among other competences.

Our main issue is trying to determine if they effectively contribute to the development of such competences in a transversal perspective.

**Mother tongue textbooks’ contribution to the promotion of reading comprehension**

To begin with, textbooks are a central piece in the acquisition of the essential mechanisms of reading, when children go to primary school. However, they should rely on the competences children already have in reading comprehension and on the knowledge they have acquired previously through their contact with books and other written materials, readers and reading situations.

Hence, textbooks should promote reading and develop competences related to reading comprehension by giving the students the chance to interact with varied textual repertoires and thus experience different reading situations.
In this way, the student’s intellectual, social and affective dimensions will be developed and he/she will be able to play an active role in society. Only in this way will the textbook play a relevant role in the development of competent, intervening and critical citizens.

If this is the case, the following questions need to be asked: Do mother tongue textbooks promote a growing awareness of the need to develop reading comprehension competences? Do they favour the development of transversal reading comprehension competences? Which are the textbooks’ contributions to a successful school education?

This study intends, as well, to analyze the importance that Portuguese Mother Tongue textbooks give to reading and the way they raise the interest in it. It is also important that these textbooks guide students from the decoding of words to reading comprehension and contribute to the acquisition and development of reading strategies. The development of such competences in reading comprehension also supposes increasing abilities to look for information and therefore to select, treat and organize the important items.

Textbooks should also favour personal appropriation of information by including materials or information which might make the lesson personal, spark student’s interest, increase motivation and make them likely to continue to read and seek information outside of the classroom. In this context, we intend to determine whether Portuguese Mother Tongue textbooks motivate the students for reading.

Taking into account what was referred before, we are analyzing textbooks for the teaching/learning of Portuguese as a mother tongue. This analysis is revealing a gap between the expected contribution of textbooks and their real contribution.

Thus, we have already understood that textbooks do not always take into account:

i) important dimensions of modern conceptions of reading comprehension and the teaching/learning of abilities related to it; they do not care about the characteristics of the reading situation, the nature of the reader’s objectives and the kind of text being used;

ii) the acquisition and development of strategies involved in reading comprehension, since it seldom is the object of the teaching/learning process;

iii) the need to provide the students several reading experiences involving different types of texts; they tend to present always the same kind of texts and the same reading situations with similar reading objectives, though different texts make different demands on the readers; consequently, pupils do not become conscious of its objectives,
namely, reading for pleasure, leading to strong reading habits, and reading for studying and gathering information, essential to success at school and everyday life.

We recognize that the act of reading concerns not only the purposes and processes of reading, but also the reader. Nevertheless, the textbooks we are analyzing do not take into account the students’ previous knowledge and experience in reading comprehension and they are based on the conception of comprehension as an instant product of reading. In this way, they do not help the students in a personal appropriation of reading strategies, essential to an effective development of their individual competences in reading comprehension.

In a near future, we hope the conclusions of this analysis will allow us to define principles that can lead to the conception and selection of textbooks more suitable to life in a modern society and capable of promoting the acquisition/development of transversal competences associated to reading comprehension through a more adequate teaching/learning process.

**Final words**

Mother tongue textbooks can directly contribute to the development of key-competences such as Learning to learn, Entrepreneurship, Interpersonal, Intercultural and Social competences, Civic competences and Cultural awareness, according to the European Commission for Education and Culture (European Commission 2007).

While helping the teachers to develop transversal competences in reading comprehension in their pupils, they are contributing to the development of active and critical citizens and therefore to the organization of a more democratic society.

In a near future, we intend to design a suite for this project centered on: the conception and production of educational materials for the teaching/learning of Portuguese as a mother tongue promoting the development of transversal competences in reading comprehension and the validation of these materials with the help of teachers (both trainee teachers and in service teachers) for different levels in the Portuguese educational system.

Possibly, we will be using web 2.0 tools in the conception and validation of these educational materials, as they promote their diffusion and the interaction around them.

**Bibliography**


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