Teaching portuguese for the development of transversal competences

Cristina Manuela Sá (cristina@ua.pt)
Universidade de Aveiro (CIDTFF e LEIP)

Abstract
Modern education emphasizes the importance of developing competences essential to life in an ever changing society.
Teaching the mother tongue contributes to the development of transversal competences, which play a primordial role in success at school and in social and professional contexts.
Reading and writing are included in this set of competences.
Otherwise, one must recognize that the teaching of all the other subjects may contribute to a better performance in reading and writing, because all the verbal intercourse between teachers and pupils takes place in the mother tongue. So, teachers of all the other subjects should recognize this role and act according to it for the benefit of their pupils.
Thus, we conducted a series of studies leading to the presentation of PhD and Master dissertations and centred in the analysis of the principal features of this issue.
Some of them concern the conceptions of the actors involved in the process (teachers, pupils, people in charge in the schools, supervisors, teacher trainees). Others deal with the analysis of instruments devoted to the transversal approach of the teaching of mother tongue. Some of them are focused on the design and assessment of classroom practices leading to a new kind of curricular management contributing to an effective development of transversal competences while learning the mother tongue.
These studies (and others still taking place) produced some tips to strengthen the contribution of school for a better preparation for life.
1. Modern education emphasizes the importance of developing competences essential to life in an ever changing society.

These competences are being defined both by prominent researchers in the educational field and international organizations, namely within the European Union.

In what concerns research, Philippe Perrenoud (1999) presented a set of competences teachers should develop in their pupils in order to prepare them for the modern society in the 21st century about to begin. These competences covered three main fields: i) the ability to cope with heterogeneity, ii) team work and iii) active citizenship (cf. Sá et al., 2008: 3).

Ferre Laevers (2008), taking into account an individual perspective, stresses the need for educational systems to promote competences such as self-confidence and the ability to explore the entourage with all one’s capacities (leading to active citizenship), as well as openness to the world (allowing the subject to cope with heterogeneity and engage in team work) (cf. Sá et al., 2008: 3).

In the political sphere, the European Commission (2007: 5-13) also pointed some important competences related to traditional scientific areas (Communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages, Mathematical literacy and basic competences in science and technology and ICT skills) and others more directly associated to life in a modern society (Learning to learn, Entrepreneurship, Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, Civic competences and Cultural awareness) (cf. Sá et al., 2008: 2).

Naturally, the governments within the European Union organized their educational policies in order to implement these important guidelines.

Portugal is no exception. Several documents issued since the beginning of this century stated their importance.

Among them there’s the National Curriculum for Basic Education (Ministério da Educação, 2001), which recommends the development of competences attached to i) knowledge (technological, scientific and cultural) and its use, ii) language (both mother tongue and foreign languages), iii) methods and techniques centred in problem solving (looking for information and organizing it, selecting strategies adapted to a specific goal, taking decisions, being autonomous and capable of involvement in team work) and iv) the ability to perceive life in an ecological way (cf. Sá et al., 2008: 5).

These competences are viewed as transversal ones, because they are essential at school and in everyday life as they favour success in academic life and the adaptation to professional life and the exercise of active citizenship.

2. Teaching the mother tongue promotes the development of such transversal competences.
Recently, new curricula concerning the teaching of Portuguese as a mother tongue designed for the three cycles within Basic Education in the Portuguese educational system (ranging from 6 to 14/15 year-old pupils) were published (Reis, 2008), reinforcing the importance of these transversal competences and associating them to specific competences to be developed while attending Basic Education.
This document explicitly refers to very important principles underlying modern education in the Portuguese context, namely the essential role played by the mother tongue in the development of competences, attitudes and values and the acquisition of knowledge (Sá, 2009a).
Reading and writing are included in this set of competences. And surely they are essential and transversal competences to be developed through the teaching of the mother tongue.
But one must recognize that the teaching of all the other subjects may contribute to a better performance in reading and writing, because all the verbal intercourse between teachers and pupils takes place in the mother tongue. So, teachers of all the other subjects should recognize this role and act according to it for the benefit of their pupils.

3. Thus, I directed a series of studies leading to the presentation of PhD and Master dissertations and centred in the analysis of the principal features of this issue.
Some of these studies are already concluded and gave origin to papers presented and published. Others are still on the make, but the main ideas in them are being diffused too.

3.1. Some of them concern the conceptions of the actors involved in the process: supervisors (Neves, 2004; Neves, 2008; Neves & Sá, 2005), teacher trainees and in service-teachers (Santos, 2007, 2008), pupils (Pereira, 2008a, 2008b) and educational stakeholders in the schools (Barbosa, 2008, 2009).
These studies helped me to understand that these actors are aware of the importance of:
- the teaching/learning of the mother tongue for success at school and in everyday life;
- adopting a transversal approach while teaching/learning Portuguese as a mother tongue;
- using the teaching/learning of other subjects to develop competences in mother tongue, namely related to written communication;
- reinforcing the relation between written and oral communication, both in comprehension and in production.

But they also revealed that these actors – and specially the teachers – do not feel at ease while trying to develop these competences in their pupils.

And the difficulties seem to come mainly from three sources:
- a lack of training in this domain for teacher trainees and in service teachers and also for their supervisors and stakeholders in the schools;
- a tendency to close oneself in one’s subject;
- the (perhaps) excessive importance attached by the Ministry of Education to some subjects such as the mother tongue, Mathematics and Science.

3.2. Other studies deal with the analysis of instruments devoted to the transversal approach of the teaching/learning of mother tongue: documents produced by the teachers in order to design the bases for their practices in the classroom (Bartolomeu, 2008; Bartolomeu & Sá, 2008; Bizarro, 2008; Capucho, 2009; Carvalho, 2006) and textbooks (Martins, 2008, 2009).

These studies also led to important conclusions.

Such as the ones concerning the conceptions, they have revealed that the teachers and the authors of the textbooks are aware of the importance of a transversal approach of the teaching/learning of Portuguese as a mother tongue.

But they pointed to some problems and helped to identify their sources.

In what concerns the documents produced by the teachers in order to design the bases for their practices in the classroom, possible sources of problems are:
- the inability of the teachers to assume a reflexive and critical attitude towards the documents issued by the Ministry of Education, in order to be able to adapt them to the particular conditions in each school;
- lack of team work involving all the teachers in each school and external elements such as the families of the pupils and the community;
the inaptitude to conduct the teaching of other subjects in order to develop competences in mother tongue, such as reading comprehension and writing.

In what concerns the textbooks for the teaching of Portuguese as a mother tongue, the problems revealed result essentially from:

- a tendency to focus on the development of competences mainly important at school (e.g. related to the literary texts and the teaching of literature);
- an emphasis on certain domains (for example, the processing of explicit ideas and the teaching of grammar, while neglecting comprehension strategies dealing with implicit information and writing);
- the inability revealed by teachers to select strategies and design activities leading to a transversal approach of the teaching of the mother tongue.

3.3. Another set of studies (fewer than the others) is focused on the design and assessment of practices leading to an effective development of transversal competences while learning the mother tongue.

Two of them were already concluded, one within a PhD (Balula, 2007, 2008) and the other within a Master degree (Carvalho, 2007, 2008) and they concern the teaching/learning of reading comprehension and writing in the mother tongue.

There are three other studies being implemented within Master degrees: one deals with the development of reading competences related with the processing of implicit information (Ferreira, 2009); another one with didactic strategies to motivate the pupils for reading (Pinto, 2009); and the third one concerns the development of competences in reading comprehension and writing while teaching the mother tongue in association with sciences (Neves, 2009). This last study is being directed by me and a colleague expert in the teaching of sciences in primary school (Professor Rui Marques Vieira, from the Department of Education of the University of Aveiro, Portugal).

These studies have been showing me that in fact it is possible to design practices involving the teaching of Portuguese as a mother tongue to promote the development of transversal competences in the pupils. This may also work when the teaching of Portuguese as a mother tongue is associated with the teaching of other subjects. Nevertheless, they pointed to some sources of discomfort among teachers. All of them were already mentioned:

- a lack of training in this domain;
- the tendency to close oneself in one’s subject;
- the inaptitude to conduct the teaching of other subjects in order to develop competences in the mother tongue, such as reading comprehension and writing.

4. These studies produced some tips to strengthen the contribution of school for a better preparation for life (Sá, 2008a).

First of all, the situation requires some intervention from the Ministry of Education centred on: i) a clarification of new principles in Education, ii) better diffusion of its guidelines among teachers in the school all over the country and iii) the creation of in-service training programs focused on the development of transversal competences (namely on reading comprehension and writing) through the teaching of Portuguese as a mother tongue and other subjects.

The new curricula concerning the teaching of Portuguese as a mother tongue in Basic Education recently published (Reis, 2008) contributed to the clarification of some of the above mentioned principles: i) the importance of developing transversal competences in the pupils through all the Basic Education, ii) the need to promote a transversal approach of the teaching of Portuguese as a mother tongue by relating the study of grammar with the development of competences in reading comprehension and writing and promoting the interaction between oral and written communication and also between reading comprehension and writing, iii) the importance of promoting team work involving the teacher and his/her pupils in the implementation of projects iv) and the building of bridges between the teaching of mother tongue and other subjects at school (cf. Sá, 2009b).

Stake holders in the schools must create new opportunities of training for their teachers and promote a critical reflection on the documents published by the Ministry of Education.

The teachers should engage in teamwork and discussion of ways of generating a transversal approach of the teaching/learning process for all school subjects as well as the conception and assessment of practices promoting the development of transversal competences (namely the ones related with reading comprehension and writing) by their pupils.

The institutions in Higher Education responsible for teacher training must also take part in this movement providing training opportunities for teacher trainees and in-service teachers emphasizing the need for a transversal approach in teaching, especially in what concerns the mother tongue, and teamwork.
A study conducted by me (Sá, 2008b) concerning teacher trainees showed that teachers in Higher Educations institutions should:

- involve their students in project work demanding a collaborative attitude among them and also between the teacher and his/her students;
- create partnerships with other teachers of other subjects and their students;
- promote the acquisition/development of ICT competences and the use of web 2.0 tools, because they generate interactions that can not exist otherwise.

Now I am involved in a research project centred in the creation of communities including language teachers, supervisors and researchers presenting the characteristics above mentioned (Andrade et al., 2008) and it is really working, although there are always some problems.

Next school year we will be analysing the data we are collecting now and I sincerely believe the conclusions will show that this is effectively a better way of doing this kind of work in Education as elsewhere.

Bibliography


Formadores/Laboratório de Investigação em Educação em Português (publicado em CD-Rom).


