“Contribution of mother tongue textbooks in the acquisition/development of transversal competences in reading comprehension”

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Abstract

This study deals with the acquisition/development of transversal competences in reading comprehension within the scope of the teaching/learning of Mother Tongue in basic compulsory education, a main concern in the current educational context.

Over the past few decades, research on reading comprehension has highlighted the importance of developing competences in this domain both for academic uses and for social purposes. Reading is regarded as an irreplaceable instrument which allows people to acquire knowledge as well as to go through a whole set of experiences.

Therefore, each country must create conditions for students to take pleasure in reading and, at the same time, acquire and develop the necessary competences that allow them to understand what they read.

It is agreed that textbooks are a relevant element in the teaching/learning process. Textbooks for the teaching/learning of Mother Tongue must take into account the transversality and the need to encourage the development of reading comprehension competences. The mentioned principles led us to develop a study focused on the relationship between the acquisition/development of reading comprehension competences and: a) students’ academic success; and b) their future socio-professional integration.

Introduction

Reading comprehension occupies a decisive position in the construction of the future of individuals and of societies. The more and better people read, the greater their ability to perform the most wide-ranging tasks of community life and the higher their level of literacy will be. This is a fundamental condition of economic development, cultural enhancement, democratic quality and international assertion (Unesco, 2005).

Literacy is a human right, a tool of personal empowerment and a means for social and human development. Educational opportunities depend on literacy.
In this context, we consider that reading is “the capacity to understand, use and reflect upon written texts in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (OECD, 2004).

A person who is functionally literate can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for the effective functioning of his/her group and community and also for enabling him/her to continue to use reading for his/her own fulfilment and contributing towards the community’s development.

**Why is literacy so important?**

There are good reasons to place literacy at the core of education for all: a good basic education gives pupils literacy skills for life and further learning; literate parents are more likely to send their children to school; literate people are better able to access continuing educational opportunities; and literate societies are better geared to meet pressing development challenges (Unesco, 2005).

It is consensual that literacy, in general, and reading, in particular, contribute to the social development and personal success of citizens, as well as to access to information and knowledge, to the creation of a collective consciousness and, through those mechanisms, to the changing of mentalities. This teaching/learning potential of reading is revealed through the creation of awareness, through the development of language and through the understanding of reading as a specialized skill given its cognitive dimension.

There are countless studies that focus on social, political, cultural, linguistic and cognitive consequences for the subject-readers and for the communities to which they belong. It is undeniable that reduced competences in this domain generate serious risks of social exclusion among individuals and groups, and the equally serious risk of cultural and political subordination among countries. In this context, understanding what is being read is a personal, social and professional requirement that human beings must fulfil.

Nevertheless, recognized international studies dedicated to assessing subjects’ literacy levels in different countries, such as PISA, developed by the OECD, show that basic school pupils from some countries have severe problems when it comes to reading comprehension (OECD, 2001, 2004 e 2007).

Hence, knowing how to read and write a simple sentence, in a comprehensible manner, regarding daily life, which is the minimum requirement to be considered a literate individual, is an unattainable goal for almost a fifth (18%) of the world population.
The fact that around 770 million adults do not have basic literacy skills is not only morally indefensible, but it is also an appalling loss of human potential and economic capacity. This is a serious violation of human rights. It also constitutes a major impediment to the realization of human capabilities and to the achievement of equality and of economic and social development, particularly for women. (Unesco, 2005).

In Portugal, like in other countries, there has also been an attempt to find solutions for the serious problems arising from high levels of illiteracy of the population in general, and of students in particular, revealed by national and international studies on literacy (cf., for example, Benavente et al: Pisa 2001, 2004 and 2007)

Such an effort led to the awareness that the acquisition and development of transversal competences in reading comprehension must provide better answers to the educational needs of the learners, as well as to the demands of society. Teaching/learning at this level should mainly promote a closer articulation between Education and Society, easing the transition into the labor market.

Nowadays, learning how to read is not enough. It is essential to acquire regular reading habits that allow for the development of competences such as understanding, interpreting, knowing, thus contributing towards a conscious and critical participation in a freer society.

In our society, it is the school’s responsibility to teach individuals how to read, although we acknowledge that school’s role in the acquisition and development of reading competences is not enough. Acquiring, improving and using literacy skills take place at all levels of education, and in multiple formal and non-formal contexts.

For centuries, teaching how to read was believed to be of the teachers’ exclusive responsibility – with emphasis on Primary School teachers – and that this learning experience took place within formal contexts. Nowadays, the understanding of the importance of reading competences goes beyond the mere teaching of letters, syllables, words and understanding of a text. The mastery of these competences in themselves does not make individuals good readers nor does it guarantee that they will continue to read throughout their lives.

Today, learning how to read implies the creation of a book culture from an early age which requires a strong contribution from the family and from pre-school education. Learning how to read also depends on the following: the knowledge of the reading material available in bookshops, in libraries and on the Internet; on the ability to locate and select the required written material; on the ability to adapt reading to its purposes, obtaining as much information as possible in less time; on the ability to conciliate reading for specific purposes with leisure reading; finally, on the ability to relate what is read to previous experiences and knowledge.
Despite the fact of not being an innate skill, reading is predominantly cultural and social, as it results from a development process that depends on multiple exogenous factors surrounding the subject-reader.

The reading habits developed within a school context are linguistic experiences recognized as having a fundamental role in the development of the cognitive dimension. Thus, it is easy to conclude that reading is an excellent study aid and the foundation of the teaching/learning process practiced at school. In this sense, considering that reading is a means through which the reader accesses the learning of different subject areas and throughout his/her life, school is seen as a means for the creation of lifelong reading communities.

As in all linguistic activities, reading is a complex process. Its mastery is not limited to learning how to decode a text. On the contrary, learning how to read is a task that requires the coordination of varied and interconnected sources of information. Therefore, learning how to read should take place continuously throughout students’ entire schooling experience.

It is absolutely essential to provide students, both inside and outside the classroom, with the necessary instruments that allow them to learn how to read and to enjoy reading, as well as to know how to read and what to read. In order to achieve this, reading must cease to be a curricular obligation and become a part of children’s and youngsters’ fundamental habits.

In this context, the mother tongue is perceived as a factor of transmission and appropriation of the different curricular subjects and as a mediating element that allows us to identify ourselves, communicate with others and to discover, understand and master the world that surrounds us. It is therefore necessary to reflect upon what importance is given to reading comprehension within the context of mother tongue teaching/learning.

**Reading comprehension and mother tongue teaching/learning**

The development of competences in reading comprehension has been, and continues to be, one of the major challenges of the teaching/learning process.

Notwithstanding the central role that is ascribed to reading in the teaching/learning process in general, it is unanimously accepted that the development of competences in this domain is specifically associated with mother tongue teaching/learning.

On the other hand, we must acknowledge that, despite all efforts, the teaching/learning of the comprehension-interpretation of texts still requires a structured strategic action, capable of supporting a more reflective practice, based on models previously tested through empirical research and which have provided significant results.
Reading comprehension can benefit students in many ways. We give particular emphasis to the following:

- the conscious control over each reading task, over online processing, over the type of strategies to be adopted;
- the ability to read and understand a full array of text types;
- the ability to act according to the information obtained through the reading of a variety of text types
- voluntary reading, the freedom to choose and assess information sources (Costa, 1998).

We therefore suggest an approach to reading comprehension based on the following basic principles:

- reading as an interactive process between the reader, the text and the context – which requires the ability to decode graphematic chains, to extract relevant information from written texts, to ascribe meaning to the texts and to build knowledge;
- the practice of comprehension at several levels – i.e., reading comprehension results from the interaction between the assimilation of the concepts and ideas expressed in the text (microstructure), the identification of the main ideas of the text (macrostructure), and recognition of the schematic structure of the text approached (superstructure);
- reading serves different purposes, among which we highlight the acquisition of information and recreation, due to their relevance and scope;
- teaching reading requires a transversal approach – through the involvement of the curricular subject area associated with mother tongue teaching/learning, which is perceived as having a greater responsibility regarding its promotion, and strongly support itself on the remaining other curricular areas (disciplinary or non-disciplinary), particularly the ones related to the teaching/learning of foreign languages.

Considering the statements presented above, we must now find answers to the following problem – how do we encourage the development of competent readers?

We live in a context of great educational concerns regarding the levels of literacy, the acquisition and development of reading comprehension competences and the promotion of reading habits, so it is essential to promote teaching and learning experiences which:

- develop the subject’s communication competences in semantic, lexical, morphologic, syntactic and pragmatic terms (Costa, 1998)
- develop strategies that encourage the activation and development of the subject’s previous knowledge (Carreira e Sá, 2004);
- contribute towards the acquisition/development of strategies that allow different written texts to be explored at different levels (Giasson, 2004; Sim-Sim, 2007).
- encourage the transversal approach to teaching/learning of reading, turning it into an instrument for learning and developing new competences and preventing it from being restricted to school environments, without any usefulness in working life (Sà e Martins, 2008).

Reading is not limited to decoding textual codes. It is necessary to interpret, to understand, to establish connections between what is read and what is revealed through the act of reading. Hence, bearing in mind the didactic principles for the teaching of reading that we have just listed, it is urgent to:

- put aside the reading practices that turn students/readers into consumers and non-interpreters, subjects who are dependent and trained to follow instructions, acritical receptors of conceptual framework, whose mission consists in searching the texts for meanings that others ascribe to them, namely the teacher or textbook authors (Vieira, 2005);
- implement practices that allow the reader to acquire greater depth and speed in the comprehension of written information and to use research techniques and varied reading strategies according to the context of situation;
- develop reading habits in individuals, given that reading allows them, on the one hand, to gather useful and essential information and, on the other hand, to promote the pleasure associated to this activity.

Only in this way will it be possible to overcome obsolete reading approaches that prevent reading from being an instrument of transversal lifelong learning.

Considering the literacy problems discussed throughout this paper and having confirmed the responsibility of the teaching/learning of the mother tongue in solving them, we shall now analyze the role that mother tongue textbooks can play within this context.

**The role of mother tongue textbooks in the development of transversal competences in the comprehension of reading**

Given that reading is one of the privileged activities within the teaching/learning of the mother tongue and that the textbook is a central resource to the teaching/learning of reading, it is our belief that it is utterly important to analyze and reconsider the role of mother tongue textbooks in the development of transversal competences associated with reading comprehension.
Considered the main mediator in the teaching practices promoted by school, the textbook is usually or almost exclusively, the main source of teaching material used by teachers in mother tongue classes in Portuguese schools.

It is a relevant didactic-pedagogic resource, although not the only one available, used in the teaching/learning process, designed for period of one year or for a specific school cycle, and which assists the work carried out in the classroom, while simultaneously providing the students with material to carry out independent/autonomous work, hence contributing to the development of the competences defined in official documents upon which reflect priorities of the current educational system reform.

Hence, a textbook should be a tool which promotes reading and develops competences related to reading comprehension, by giving students the opportunity to interact with varied textual repertoires, thus allowing them to experience different reading situations.

In this way, the students’ intellectual, social and affective dimensions will be developed and he/she shall be furnished with the indispensable tools to participate actively in the society he/she belongs to. Only in this way will the textbook play a relevant role in the development of competent, intervening and critical citizens.

This being 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, or do they not, facilitate the development of transversal reading comprehension competences? Which are the textbooks’ contributions to a successful school education?

These questions were the starting point for the research project entitled *Textbooks and transversality of reading comprehension in Portuguese as a Mother Tongue: a study in Basic Education*¹, which substantiates this work and which 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 to the improvement of teaching practices as far as reading comprehension is concerned.

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Among the many motivations underlying the choice of the topic of our project, the following reasons are worth highlighting:

i) the awareness of the importance of the transversal influence of students’ mother tongue and of the contribution of the competences acquired during the teaching/learning process on the individual’s school and social success;

ii) the need to promote a form of teaching/learning the mother tongue that effectively leads to the development of transversal competences, namely with regard to reading comprehension.

iii) the awareness of the importance of the role that textbooks used for the teaching/learning of the mother tongue may come to play in operating the transversality mentioned above.

**General outline of the methodology adopted in this study**

The research resulting from this project and which sustains our arguments shall hopefully contribute to the production of a document containing didactic suggestions which are in fact targeted towards the development of draw the attention not only of textbook authors and publishers responsible for the designing of the textbooks, but also of the teachers, hence providing guidelines for the careful selection of textbooks while promoting a more critical use of these resources.

In order to define principals that promote a more appropriate designing of manuals which encourage the development of transversal competences associated to reading comprehension and in order to find answers to the questions that are at the basis of our research, several stages were defined for this project.

First of all, extensive bibliographic research was carried out with the objective of revising literature which allowed us to define general teaching/learning guidelines for the Portuguese language and which would, simultaneously, encourage the development of transversal competences in the domain of reading comprehension.

At the same time, it is our objective to associate these principles to the current educational policy guidelines for the teaching/learning of the Portuguese language.

Considering the objectives defined for this study, a research methodology of a qualitative type was chosen; in other words, we chose to carry out the documental analysis of a corpus consisting of nine Portuguese Language textbooks used in the final years of the three school cycles within Portuguese Basic Education (Mason, 2002).

The selection of the textbooks to be analyzed was based on the following criteria: the school cycle and the grades they were designed for, the possible amplitude of their influence
(considering the number of schools which adopted the textbook) and their representation of publishing trends (assuming that textbooks from different editorial houses are analyzed).

To proceed with the documental analysis of our corpus, and to gain a deeper insight as to how each textbook approaches the process of reading and how this contributes towards the acquisition and development of transversal competences in this domain, an instrument of analysis was designed – an analysis grid – which allowed us to collect, organize, systematize and analyze data.

The grid includes pre-defined categories of analysis, which take into account the theoretical framework of this study, and indicators, which refer to the elements to be identified in the corpus.

With regard to the categories, the following distinctions should be considered:

- three macrocategories (Reading Comprehension, Oral - Reading - Writing Interaction and Reading Autonomy), which correspond to relevant aspects in the universe of the transversality of the Portuguese language when associated to the development of competences in reading comprehension and its operationalization;

- several categories, are defined within these macrocategories:
  - the Reading comprehension macrocategory covers three categories (The apprehension of the ideas in the text, The identification of the main ideas in the text and The identification of the schematic structure of the text);
  - the Oral - Reading - Writing Interaction macrocategory covers the following categories: Oral expression as a means to develop reading comprehension, Written expression as a means to develop reading comprehension, Revision of the text produced and Rewriting and improvement of the text;
  - the macrocategory Reading Autonomy covers the categories: Reading as a means of learning and Reading as a means of recreation.

Given that the analysis of the textbooks focuses on elements perceived as fundamental in the promotion of a transversal approach to the teaching/learning of the mother tongue along with the development of competences in reading comprehension, these items have been included in the grid and defined as indicators.

The indicators are defined as follows: i) Competences (general, transversal and specific); ii) Aims; iii) Contents; iv) Strategies and Activities; v) Didactic resources; vi) finally, Assessment.

These indicators will be analyzed in the light of the macrocategories and categories defined above.
The main purpose of the analysis of our corpus is, with the help of the indicators, to determine how the categories defined by us are operable when aiming at developing reading and comprehension competences and simultaneously hence promoting Mother Tongue transversality.

Before analyzing our corpus, we proceeded to validate the grid designed for our research purposes. Two validation methods were used, which allowed some initial inconsistencies to be eliminated: the first was the consultation of a panel of specialists; the second consisted in carrying out the pilot analysis of a Portuguese Language textbook that was not part of our sample.

Based on the pilot study carried out and on the first analysis of research corpus, we shall now discuss some of the weaknesses that this work has already allowed us to identify in Portuguese Language textbooks used in Basic Education:

**Some findings resulting from current research**

At this moment when the implementation of our study is taking place, we can already state that the Portuguese Language Textbooks for the Basic Education do not always take into account important dimensions such as: the conceptions of reading that are the basis of teaching/learning reading comprehension; the acquisition and development of comprehension and textual interpretation strategies; the importance of providing contact with diverse textual repertoires; the need to select, manage and organize information gathered through reading and, lastly, the motivation to read.

In the majority of Portuguese Language textbooks for Basic Education, the way in which reading is approached is not totally compatible with the objectives in the National Curriculum for Basic Education (Ministério da Educação, 2001).

Portuguese Language textbooks are still lacking in text comprehension practices that lead to plural readings and active involvement of the reader in the construction of meaning.

These textbooks present characteristics that can prevent the development of motivated, competent and critical readers:

a) The readings and reader are “formatted” – the textbook defines how the texts are to be interpreted, as if these meanings were the only valid ones to be taken into account during readings.

b) Textbooks convey “ready-to-use” meanings –whether describing what they see, or arriving at conclusions about what they read, or even when evaluating the text, the authors of the textbooks outline their involvement with the text and present it to the students, in the light of
the reading they themselves have experienced. In this way, reading is perceived as a process of reproducing meaning, sacrificing the construction of meaning which would otherwise be expected given the uniqueness and knowledge of each reader.

c) The readings are imposed and controlled – this is the result of the characteristics mentioned above; confronted with the textbooks’ selection of texts, the reader is confronted with several limitations to his/her possibility of intervening in the texts and feels coerced to respond within a given framework of meaning, already defined by the activities presented to him/her.

d) The predominant reading operations are centered in decoding. In this way, the reader is faced with a context of monotonous reading movements, where he/she is only rarely given the opportunity to carry out autonomous reading comprehension.

The reading operations considered valid by current research on textbooks and verbal interaction in the classroom (cf., for example, Dionísio, 2000 and Vieria, 2005) are the following: identification, confirmation, reorganization, inference, evaluation, appreciation, mobilization, justification, classification and decoding.

It is our belief that textbooks should provide the students with the possibility of practicing these operations, whether reading takes place inside or outside the classroom. Only in this way it will be possible to create the necessary conditions that will allow students to develop their ability to understand, use and reflect upon written texts in order to achieve their objectives, develop their personal knowledge and potentials and to actively participate in society.

e) “Transparent texts” prevail – texts that clearly show what meanings the reader should extract from them, thus not allowing for multiple readings and exercising a strong control over the student’s interpretation activity, who sees his/her role as a reader disregarded.

In this way, Portuguese Language textbooks have to be presented as pedagogical entities in themselves, which tends to nullify any personal reading of the texts proposed, imposing truths perceived as universal and irrefutable. Therefore, not only do they invalidate the reader’s autonomy during the act of interpreting, but also clearly define the pedagogical strategies used during the study of those texts, procedures which become even more obvious when dealing with literary texts.

In general, textbooks perceive reading as a product and not as a process. In this sense, the reader’s role is passive and extremely undervalued.

It is also necessary to overcome the approach centered on the mere transmission of contents which still prevails in textbooks and in pedagogical practices and focus, instead, on the teaching/learning process which aims at developing competences.
Textbooks should also allow students to use the different stages of contact with the written text – pre-reading, comprehensive reading and questioning -, which seldom happens.

Other equally negative aspects which need to be overcome have to do with the identification of language and scientific errors, conceptual imprecision/inaccuracy, and the use of vocabulary which is inappropriate to the students’ age group, the non contemplation of the objectives defined in the program, the excessive detail given to some subjects and the unnecessary inclusion of others which, jeopardize the possibility of approaching others.

Although otherwise expected, what frequently reaches teachers and students, in the shape of textbooks, are pale, simplified and, sometimes, reversed images, which derive from subjective interpretations, from teachers or small groups of teachers, from principles and curricular and didactic options, essential to the teaching and learning process.

Considering the guidelines of the Portuguese education policy, all the characteristics we have pointed out in our analysis of textbooks must be subjected to a serious discussion, as it is essential to question how the steps that sustain knowledge and competences are built.

Studies carried out on Portuguese Language textbooks reveal the flaws of the textbooks discussed in this work and unveil the gap between didactic speech and the quality of textbooks and teaching materials. In general, the quality of the programs is acknowledged. However, textbooks are the object of harsh critics and, judging by the influence these have over pedagogic practice, it is possible to acknowledge a relationship between the quality of the regulating discourse conveyed by them and the current classroom practices which present significant flaws (cf., for example: Castro, Rodrigues, Silva e Sousa, 1999; Dionísio, 2000; Alarcão et al., 2004; Vieira, 2005).

As stated previously (Martins and Sá, 2008: 234, 244), “The textbook, as a promoter of reading comprehension, must provide a favorable reading environment clarify purposes, present objectives to be accomplished and competences to be developed during the act of reading. It should also make all curricula contents and diversified reading materials available to students and teacher allowing them to work, to experience varied reading situations, in order to motivate and encourage the act of reading.”

Hence, there is a significant amount of work to be carried out so as to adapt the Portuguese Language textbook to its functions and to the demands of a post-modern society, where the individual is judged by his/her ability to understand what surrounds him/her and to act critically within such an environment
Final Considerations

In today’s Knowledge Society, the ability to read is essential to maximize success in the endeavours of daily life, for continued intellectual growth, and for the realization of personal potential. Similarly, literate citizenship is vital to a nation’s social growth and economic prosperity.

It is our intention to contribute to the discussion of the problems that challenge today’s teaching/learning of the mother tongue in school contexts, without overlooking the political orientations that are simultaneously constraining.

In this context, it is worth noting that an inadequate command of reading comprehension which is evinced by the population in general and by students in particular generates illiteracy problems which condition the shaping of our collective memory and the exercising of responsible and active citizenship.

The emphasis should also be placed on the importance of encouraging reading practices which make the student an individual who seeks the organization of a more democratic and just society, without losing sight of the pleasure of reading which requires questioning and rethinking the role of the Mother Tongue textbook in the teaching/learning process.

Despite the focus on Portuguese reality and having Portuguese Language textbooks as the object of research, this project may contribute towards the creation of guidelines for the design of more adequate textbooks, as far as the teaching/learning of reading comprehension in Mother Tongue is concerned. These guidelines can be adapted to the context of other countries facing similar problems of illiteracy.

References


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