

Language and Literacy

Functional Approaches

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8 Language, literacy and cultural politics: the debate on the new language curriculum in Portugal

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1 Introduction¹

This chapter discusses the cultural politics of a genre-based approach to Portuguese language teaching in the context of secondary schooling in Portugal, where the implementation of a new language curriculum has drawn fierce criticism from public opinion leaders. What attracted the attention of writers and newspaper columnists in particular and the public in general was the new language curriculum's explicit openness to different text types and genres, together with a restructuring and reduction of the literary canon in use during the three years of secondary education (15- to 17-year-old students). Since it was understood that literary texts would no longer have the same privileged status in the school curriculum as they used to have, most of what people wrote was centred on the role of literature both in society and in the characterization of the country's culture as being unique. In this respect, arguments were based on the belief that whoever is competent in reading the literary classics is also competent in producing all types of texts.

More than discussing the curriculum, people were actually engaged in a politics of representation, whereby an ideology of the subject was being shaped and transmitted, received and contested. From this understanding of what happened, I analyse the views presented in the arguments put forward during the discussion, in an attempt to show that the criticisms raised in the public arena of the newspapers aimed in fact at the reorganization of the cultural hegemony.

In order to achieve these goals, I will start by briefly describing the present state of affairs and problems raised in the public discussion of the new curriculum, moving on in the second section to the identification of some of the issues that were involved in the politics of representation that was actually taking place. In section 4, I will briefly discuss some linguistic approaches to language learning and

teaching and how they are related to different theories of language, and finally, in section 5, I draw some conclusions.

2 The new curriculum

Even if not presented as such, the new curriculum for language teaching in primary and secondary education in Portugal is inspired by what one may consider a text or genre-based approach. Adopted in 2001 in the new curriculum for the seventh, eighth and ninth grades (12- to 14-year-old students), this same approach was followed in the development of the curriculum for grades 10, 11 and 12 of secondary education (15- to 17-year-old students), which is now being implemented, having started with grade 10, in 2003/2004 (Coelho *et al* 2001/2002).

The implementation of the new curriculum was amply publicized in the newspapers, with some opinion-makers bringing into the public arena the idea that Portuguese language teaching and learning is a matter of national interest and, as such, it should not be dealt with lightly. During the discussion, which involved teachers, linguists, literary writers and some political leaders, the idea that something was wrong with the teaching and learning of Portuguese was constantly stressed, with the curriculum and its *never-ending* restructuring being held responsible for this undesirable situation. And, even if this was not exactly an image activated by linguists, they were also contributing to the general feeling of frustration concerning the situation of Portuguese language teaching and learning by bringing into the forefront of the discussion the undeniable fact that Portuguese students were assessed below the average of EU and OECD students in the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (Ministério da Educação 2000).²

Actually, it was the acknowledgement that many students do face difficulties when expressing themselves in a written form that promoted, as one of the main goals of the curriculum, the production of different types of texts, following textual typologies that are valid for the development of all the skills (Coelho *et al* 2001/2002: 3). This new pedagogy of writing expressed in the curriculum was specifically targeted in the criticisms expressed in the newspapers, but along with it came the criticism of the 'reduced' importance that such pedagogy attributes to literary genres in the teaching and learning of Portuguese (see, for instance, Pedrosa 2003; Guerreiro 2004; Graça Moura 2004a, 2004b; Seixo 2004). Even though the attacks on the curriculum did not single out this last aspect as the main cause for the poor

performance of Portuguese students, it was quite clear that what was behind the attacks was an attempt to discredit the new focus on the communicative function of language. As I have already noted elsewhere (Gouveia 2004), the idea that one cannot learn to speak Portuguese properly without knowing about the great legacy that is made up of all the literary authors in the canon (Graça Moura 2004a: 7) is more an attack on the communicative function of the language than a defence of literature. This attack was explicitly expressed by one of the main protagonists in the discussion, Vasco Graça Moura, a member of former governments, a poet and a translator. By assigning linguists the authorship of the curriculum, Graça Moura held them directly responsible for the chaotic state of Portuguese language teaching and learning:

Os responsáveis dos programas são linguistas e os linguistas têm ódio à literatura. Esse é o principal problema. Preocupam-se com a questão comunicacional e não com o valor da própria língua.

(Graça Moura 2004a: 6)

(*The authors of the curriculum are linguists and linguists hate literature. That is the main problem. They concern themselves with the communicative aspect and not with the value of the language itself.*)

What one can read in this statement is an accusation directed not only at linguists but also at any teaching methodology that emphasizes the communicative function of language. It is as if the value of the language in itself, attributed particularly by the literary use writers make of it with complete disregard for the communicative function, could be sufficient for the teaching and learning of Portuguese. Such a position unquestionably denies principles of equal access of students to the systems of opportunity at play in society. Also it recalls Bernstein's (1981) work showing how certain groups are disfavoured by processes of social stratification and cultural reproduction, a theory thus summarized by Halliday (1990: 16): 'while the *system* of the language construes the ideology of society as a whole, the *deployment of resources within the system* differentiates among different groups within a society'.

The use of the resources of the system is therefore both a consequence of social stratification and cultural reproduction, helping to differentiate groups, and a means for social and cultural discrimination, helping to evaluate those social groups differently. Explicit teaching of the language as a system of communication and an instrument for power will help students in the deployment of the correct resources to fight their disempowerment.

The argument against teaching language from the perspective of its communicative function, then, disempowers students right from the start, since it denies them access through the education system to the whole range of resources of the linguistic system. By not favouring the development of all the students' pragmatic and discursive abilities to produce different types of texts, such an argument ends up favouring principles of social and cultural discrimination. It is an argument that does not take into account the consequences that the development of those abilities has for opening up opportunities for students in their lives, since it does not recognize Bernstein's assumption that codes and other linguistic constructs take over from socio-economic structures as the most important factor in determining the actions of individuals. Since texts get their value from the particular contexts or markets in which they are produced, part of the practical competence and knowledge of speakers is to be able and to know how to produce texts and other linguistic constructs which may be valued in the markets they want to have access to (Bourdieu 1991). The linguistic marketplace is, then, just a part of the economic marketplace. As Bernstein (1981: 327) says, one has to bear in mind that 'class relations [inequalities in the distribution of power and in principles of control between social groups] generate, distribute, reproduce and legitimate, distinctive forms of communication, which transmit dominating and dominated codes; and that subjects are differentially positioned by these codes in the process of their acquisition'.

Taking into account the type of ideological stance involved in the discussion of the curriculum, it is not surprising, then, that almost all the other arguments against the implementation of the curriculum were centred on the general perception of degeneracy in standards of language learning and use. Contributing to that fall in standards was also, of course, the curriculum's disrespect for the literary canon and for the symbolic value of the language. To counteract this, the need for standard models (standard language vs. non-standard forms; literary genres vs. non-literary genres; written language vs. spoken language; etc.), for absolute rules of correctness in grammar and pronunciation and the defence of formal grammar teaching and learning came to be presented as the only right and possible solution.

3 Cultural hegemony

From the short description presented so far, one can easily conclude that, more than a discussion of different approaches to language teaching, what was actually happening in the newspapers was a fight

for power, a fight for legitimacy. This is not new and it is certainly not exclusive to Portugal. In fact, as Alan Luke (1996: 309) argues, literacy education has always been a site of struggle:

The history of literacy education thus is about power and knowledge. But it is about power not solely in terms of which texts and practices will 'count' and which groups will have or not have access to which texts and practices. It is also about who in the modern state will have a privileged position in specifying what will count as literacy.

The imposition of a specific cultural design on the basis of the power possessed by a dominant group, whereby that group's culture is reproduced and distributed through the school, is a fundamental characteristic of the development of systems of opportunity, means of production and modes of representation, and constitute what Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) have defined as cultural hegemony. As a successful attempt of a dominant class to establish its view of the world as an all inclusive and naturalized reading, cultural hegemony exercises its power via control over the resources of the state and civil society, such as the mass media and the educational system. Therefore, the history of literacy is also, to use Luke's expression, the history of cultural hegemony and the fight to impose a specific cultural design.

An appraisal of the Portuguese discussion shows that power (and cultural hegemony with it) was being reconfigured in all three dimensions referred to by Luke: i) which texts and practices count; ii) which students have or do not have access to which texts and practices and iii) who specifies what counts as literacy. It is interesting to notice, though, how the three dimensions are interrelated, and how the first one cannot be separated from the other two. In fact, choosing between giving students access to the different means of functional variation in the production and reception of texts, so that they may also have access to the literary canon, a position defended by linguists, and giving them access to the literary canon, because this automatically guarantees them access to other types of texts, a position defended by many of the detractors of the curriculum, is not only to make a stand on which texts and practices count (first dimension), but also one on which students have access to which texts and practices (second dimension). In a country where 45 per cent of young adults aged between 18 and 24 have not finished their secondary education, almost two and a half times more than the average for the EU (19 per cent)³, support for the latter solution seems, at the least, offensive, such is the principle of exclusion it presupposes. In the end, the specification of

what counts as literacy does not depend on scientific and validated criteria. It depends on the force of certain political solutions and the ideological motivations behind them (third dimension), that is, on the specific cultural and educational designs being imposed and on whether those designs give people the possibility to have access to education or not, considering not only language learning, but also the role of language in learning and in education in general.

Once again, Luke's words (1996: 309) put the point very clearly:

Viewed sociologically, literacy training is not a matter of who has the 'right' or 'truthful' theory of mind, language, morality or pedagogy. It is a matter of how various theories and practices shape what people do with the technology of writing – and of how, once institutionalised, these selections and constructions serve particular class, cultural and gendered formations.

The connection referred to by Luke between the implementation of a language curriculum and class, cultural and gendered formations is of paramount importance here. Life in society is a configuration of systems of opportunity, means of production and modes of representation, whose access is regulated and monopolized via the production, distribution and consecration of knowledge and capital. Access to literacy is, therefore, access to those systems of opportunity and the right to master the genres of power of the dominant culture.

Thinking of the classics as 'all those who constitute the great patrimony of the Portuguese language without whom one cannot learn to speak Portuguese properly' and resorting to a solution of failing all the students who do not speak Portuguese properly, as Graça Moura (2004a: 7) proposes – and one should read here the assumption that proper Portuguese is that Portuguese learnt through the reading of the classics – seems to me to favour a principle of exclusion that will reduce future life opportunities for students. Also, it involves an idea of the language as some entity crystallized somewhere in the past, in the literary canon, as if the natural evolution of the language and the needs speakers ask it to fulfil do not exist, an idea any linguist would reject.

4 Approaches to language teaching

Curriculum design is not only a matter of developing a coherent plan for a course of study based on explicit objectives. It involves also beliefs about what the nature of language is and what one thinks learning is. It is exactly this aspect that is stressed by Nunan (1988: 10), when he

says that while selecting curriculum components from the set of options available, we make judgements that 'are not value free, but reflect our beliefs about the nature of language and learning'. It is a fact that over the past forty years we have been witnessing a proliferation of different approaches to language teaching in the fields of applied linguistics and language teaching methodology. It is also a fact that these approaches have been informed by an increasing knowledge of the nature of language and language learning. Whether based on theories that construct a natural language as a set of sentences and language as the capacity to generate those sentences, or on theories that consider situational aspects extremely relevant for the production and exchange of meaning, each of these new approaches challenges the legitimacy of the previous one. According to Feez (1998: 13), this has had three consequences whose negative impact one should consider: first, 'People assume that language teaching is based on fads and fashions rather than on an evolving body of knowledge'; second, 'Language educators are divided between those who support the latest approach and those who reject it' and third, 'Language educators lose access to valuable aspects of the approaches which have gone before'.

While these consequences may not be true of all the approaches to language teaching developed during the past decades, it is certainly true of most of them. And it was surely this that came out in much of the public discussion that has taken place in Portugal. Most of the approaches to language teaching, in Portugal at least, have been implemented by drawing on theories developed within linguistics, but the results have not always been satisfactory. Linguists frequently mistrusted the use of their theories and data by teachers in the classroom and teachers mistrusted the type of knowledge linguists were producing, mostly seen as hermetic and highly specialized (cf. Castro 2003: 211; Gouveia, 2004). In fact, communication has always been problematic, with general linguists constantly dissociating themselves from anything connected with language teaching (Castro 2003: 213) and almost all of the research in language teaching being produced by applied linguists. The latter nevertheless have been producing their own theoretical body based on findings from general linguistics on the nature and functioning of language, while bringing along contributions from psychology, sociology and language didactics.

Despite the dependency of applied linguistics in relation to general linguistics, the two fields have always threaded their ways along parallel paths, as if applied linguistics could offer nothing to general linguistics, but, on the contrary, had everything to gain from it. While bringing in notions of text and discourse, thus somehow contributing

to the idea that they are all about fads and fashions, some modern approaches to language teaching seem to have failed in their mission, because the final outcome has been the integration of learners' pragmatic ability to produce texts with the learning of the grammar in formal terms. Many of those approaches end up evolving in a dual manner, with the teaching of grammar on one side and the teaching of pragmatic competences on the other, in a strange and unproductive attempt at conciliation of what, in the end, are two opposing views of language. And even if this kind of false conciliation is not stressed in the curriculum, it is exactly what happens, considering that teacher-training programmes in Portugal still hold a formal view of language, with the metalinguistic competence being taught in mere structural terms and with the description of the sentence as its main goal. Notice here that I am not denying the importance of developing metalinguistic alongside pragmatic or discursive competence. But we have to bear in mind the conception of language that teachers hold when teaching grammar. As Macário Lopes (2004) has stressed when taking position in the discussion reported here, 'the reflection on language is not reducible to the grammatical knowledge that traditionally has been considered its structuring core: morphology and syntax' (my translation). The type of language teaching expressed and defended in the curriculum does not hold a traditional view of grammatical knowledge and, therefore, does not choose morphology and syntax as the structuring core of language; however, the teachers implementing the curriculum do in fact hold such a view. And that is understandable, since they have not been given the instruments and support to change it.

Language teaching is no longer the product of views of 'language as an accumulation of separate building blocks, e.g. individual grammatical forms and structures, vocabulary items or pronunciation items' (Feez 1998: 4). Therefore, we cannot go on exemplifying the rules for learners for putting those building components together in contrived, isolated sentences and insisting on their learning of forms and rules 'through repetition, drills and other kinds of intensive practice'. While no longer the product of such views of language, language teaching nevertheless needs to be the product of *a* view of language; and one where the description of the linguistic system and the developing of the students' metalinguistic competence go along the same paths as the description of the language products and processes. Such a view is presupposed in the new Portuguese curriculum, but no one seems to notice it or care to explain it to the teachers involved in the teaching of the curriculum. Furthermore, no one seems to be interested in

addressing the problem of implementing such a curriculum using as agents for that implementation teachers who hold a view of language as being constituted by grammatical forms and structures, vocabulary items and pronunciation items that are learned through the repetition of decontextualized and detextualized grammar exercises.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, let me just stress that there are reasons to be apprehensive about the situation in Portugal; not only because of the discussion generated by the implementation of the curriculum, but also because of that implementation and the problems I have referred to concerning the students' metalinguistic competence. While I am totally in favour of the textual typologies introduced in the curriculum, presented as 'having a praxiological dimension, allowing for the production of texts that, fitting into one of the categories of textual prototypes, prepare young citizens for integration in socio-cultural and professional life' (Coelho *et al* 2001/2002: 4), I actually fear the practical results of the work to be undertaken in the classroom. This is because I feel that the views and beliefs about language that motivate the praxiological dimension of the curriculum will end up submersed by the radically different practices and beliefs of the teachers. Notice, though, that I am not here blaming the teachers, I express compassion towards them, on the one hand and praise them, on the other: compassion, because even though they are the social actors involved in the teaching of the curriculum, they have not been given the instruments and the institutional and social conditions to teach them, and praise because once again they will have the courage to go ahead with the teaching of this new curriculum without the necessary training and support. Thus, again, unfortunately, teachers will become the scapegoats for whatever problems may be identified in the future evaluation of the curriculum implementation.

In fact, a text or genre-based approach to language teaching is not only a way of designing and developing and implementing a school curriculum, it is also a response to changing views of language and language learning. The question that remains refers to the way university courses and teacher-training programmes are responding to these changing views. It seems they continue as before: teaching future teachers to master syntax and morphology, understood as the core components of the system, in a decontextualized manner. In the majority of teacher-training programmes, foreign language ones excluded, neither notions of text and discourse variation nor aspects

of representation associated with the production of texts and discourses are taken into consideration. By representation I mean the capacity of relating 'two qualitatively different types of phenomenon – an expression and a content – to each other so that the significance of one is understood in terms of the other', as Hasan (1996: 379) puts it, which is 'a necessary condition for using any semiotic system whatever'. So, the use of language is the use a semiotic system whereby the significance of the world is understood in terms of the language used, that is, the texts and discourses produced. Involving register choices of a representational nature, those texts and discourses vary according to the nature and content of the social action that is taking place.

What, then, distinguishes a text or genre-based approach to language teaching from other possible approaches? Is it the approach in itself, or the theory of language behind it? Or is it both? In contrast to the sort of text or genre-based approach one can read in the Portuguese curriculum, the genre-based approach to language teaching developed within the framework of systemic functional linguistics is also a fundamental part of its theoretical body of knowledge and of its particular way of looking at the nature of language.

As Halliday put it as far back as 1990, language teaching needs to reconcile two conflicting but complementary themes:

Our practice as language teachers depends more on our being able to adopt the complementary perspectives of two conflicting themes, that of 'learning' and that of 'meaning', than on putting together pieces from linguistics with pieces from psychology and sociology.

(Halliday 1990: 8)

Learning a language is thus learning how to mean, to echo a title of Halliday's (1975), that is, learning to make appropriate choices from the meaning potential that is made available by the system, or in other words, considering register and genre, learning the means of functional variation, of the difference between texts and the contextual motivations for that difference. In contrast with many other approaches, a systemic genre-based approach to language teaching evolves alongside the linguistic theory, not from it. With Eggins and Martin (1997: 237), one may say that a genre-based approach to language teaching 'involves both a detailed account of language, and a theory of context and the relationship between context and language'. Is this the case of the Portuguese curriculum? I fear it is not.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Luísa Azuaga and Sandra Barcelos on an earlier draft of this text.
2. Vd. 'Nos três domínios de literacia em estudo – leitura, matemática e ciências – os alunos portugueses de 15 anos tiveram um desempenho médio modesto, uma vez comparado com os valores médios dos países do espaço da OCDE.'
(*In the three assessed domains of literacy – reading, mathematics and science – 15-year-old Portuguese students had a modest average performance, when compared with the average values of the countries in the OECD area.*)
(Ministério da Educação 2001: 47).
3. Source: Ministry of Education: www.min-edu.pt/Scripts/ASP/destaque/numeros.asp

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