



## **Syllabuses, textbooks and teaching practices: Literacy and language teaching in Portugal<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses the problems connected with the development of a genre-based approach to language teaching in the context of basic and secondary schooling in Portugal. It claims that the lack of a concerted and planned pedagogy, involving not only syllabuses, but also textbooks and teaching practices, lies at the core of those problems. In fact, in the context of basic and secondary schooling in Portugal, a genre-based approach to language teaching cannot be fully accomplished without taking into consideration aspects not yet fully addressed in that context.

**KEYWORDS:** genre, literacy, syllabus, literary canon, language teaching.

**RESUMO:** Neste artigo abordam-se e discutem-se questões relativas à implementação de uma metodologia de ensino de base genológica no contexto dos ensinos básico e secundário em Portugal. Afirma-se que a ausência de uma pedagogia planeada e concertada, envolvendo não apenas estruturas e conteúdos curriculares, mas também manuais e práticas de ensino, se afigura como o núcleo central de tais questões. De facto, no contexto dos ensinos básico e secundário em Portugal, uma metodologia de ensino de línguas de base genológica não poderá ser completamente implementada sem que sejam tidos em consideração aspectos até agora não totalmente clarificados no contexto de tal implementação.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** género, literacia, conteúdos curriculares, cânone literário, ensino de línguas.

### **Introduction**

In this paper I will be addressing some of the problems connected with the implementation of a genre-based approach (MARTIN, 1997; EGGINS & MARTIN, 1997; ROTHERY, 1996) to language teaching in the context of basic and secondary education in Portugal. Mostly driven by the discussion of the syllabuses held in the public arena, the paper aims at pinpointing some of the issues involved in that discussion, to ascertain the reasons beyond the arguments, the facts beyond the motivations, the problems beyond the controversy.

In order to achieve these goals, I will start, in the first section of the paper, by briefly describing the syllabuses and the motivation for their implementation, moving on then, in the second section, to the description of the reasons, the facts and the problems raised in the discussion that took place mainly in the newspapers, but also on the Internet and within the academia<sup>2</sup>. In section three, I will try to identify some of

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the aspects that, from my point of view, one has to take into consideration when dealing with language teaching policies in the context of Portugal. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn.

## 1. Syllabuses

Although in a not entirely explicit way, the new syllabuses for language teaching in basic and secondary education in Portugal take what one may consider a genre-based approach to language teaching, that is, one that aims at providing “equal opportunities for all pupils to develop their discursive abilities precisely in those respects which are essential to their education”, as described by Hasan (1996, p. 399). In that sense, Hasan further states: “Compared with the traditional approach to, say, creative writing or self-expression, genre-based pedagogy differs significantly in its arguments and in its methodology, not least because of its commitment to language as a social semiotic.”

Tentatively introduced in the syllabuses implemented in 1991 for the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades, this genre-based approach was later adopted as the framing approach in the new syllabuses implemented in 2001 for those same grades but, most importantly, for those of secondary education, that is, grades 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>.

From the point of view of what may be labelled a pedagogy of writing, the syllabuses in use from 1974 up to 1991 made a break with the previous ones, as their main focus was on the development of skills other than writing, mainly speaking and reading. As Vilela (1994, p. 65) points out, by then the general aims of Portuguese language teaching were the capacity for communication, the pleasure of reading, creativity, critical analysis, and sensitivity to the relativity associated with aesthetic patterns. In those syllabuses writing was only implicit in the capacity for communication, the first and foremost aim, and in reading. In the explanation of activities the focus was directed towards creativity and spoken language. Writing was mainly perceived through reading, from a diversified set of texts with a political and ideological intent; the production of texts was mainly reduced to compositions with open and free themes (VILELA, 1994, p. 66).

With the introduction of the new syllabuses in 1991, a shift was proposed in relation to the production of written texts. The writing of letters and other texts motivated by projects involving school correspondence was suggested, together with the writing of narratives, titles, stories with a close ending, and texts with poetic features. It was further suggested that the texts thus produced were to be contextualised by processes of distribution and social functionalities.

Despite the shift just referred to, the shortcomings of the syllabuses introduced in 1991 seem to have surpassed their success. The difficulties students face when reading and understanding a text at the final stages of their basic and secondary education are undeniable, as the report on the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA 2000) clearly shows, with Portuguese students being assessed below the average of EU and OECD students: “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”<sup>3</sup>. (MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO, 2001, p. 47).

The general feeling in the Portuguese society is that something is wrong with the teaching and learning of Portuguese; moreover, the syllabuses and their *never-ending* restructuring are usually held responsible for it. The introduction of new



syllabuses from 2001 onwards, with the syllabus for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade being introduced in 2003/2004, was amply publicised by some opinion leaders in the newspapers, who brought back to the public arena the idea that Portuguese language teaching and learning is a matter of national interest. Their criticism was directed to the new pedagogy of writing expressed in the syllabuses, and the consequent “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 and 2004b; and SEIXO, 2004).

From the acknowledgment that many students do in fact face difficulties when expressing themselves in a written form, the 2001 syllabus for the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades elects as one of its aims 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, p. 3). Those typologies include written and spoken texts framed by such genres as narrative, descriptive, argumentative, expository, injunctive, instructional or conversational. Social domains of communication include: educational, professional, media, social and transactional relations.<sup>4</sup> The textual typologies are presented as “having a praxiological dimension, allowing for the production of texts that, fitting into one of the categories of textual prototypes, prepare the young citizens for integration in the professional and socio-cultural life” (COELHO ET AL., 2001/2002, p. 4).

## 2. The public discussion

As it might be expected, it was the syllabus explicit openness to other different text types and genres, together with a restructuring and reduction of the literary canon in use during the three years of secondary education, which attracted a lot of attention from writers and newspaper columnists in particular and the public in general. It was understood that literary texts would no longer have the same status in the school curriculum as they used to have. Most of the positions assumed in the public discussion were in fact based on incorrect information, since literary texts were not banned from the curriculum. Actually, on page 5 of the syllabus the importance of literary text is explicitly expressed (COELHO ET AL., 2001/2002, p. 5):

Reading of the literary text must be stimulated, as it decisively contributes for the development of a broader general culture, integrating the humanist, social and artistic dimensions, and enhances the importance of literary language in the exploration of linguistic potentialities. In that sense, authors/texts of recognised literary merit are chosen for compulsory study so as to ensure access to a common cultural legacy. The interaction with literary texts will also take place when **reading contracts** negotiated between teacher and students are put into practice.<sup>5</sup>

What the syllabus envisaged for literary texts was not taken into consideration by the majority of the people writing in the newspapers. For instance, in an article published in one of the supplements to one of Portugal’s most important weekly newspapers, *Expresso*, Inês Pedrosa, a journalist and novelist, confessed: “I am astonished that, in spite of everything, there are still some youngsters capable of



surviving the disdain for literature that is so clearly stated in this syllabus”<sup>6</sup> (PEDROSA, 2003). And she goes on to say: “Will no one explain to these poor souls [Association of Teachers of Portuguese] that whoever learns to read in depth Gil Vicente or Camões, Garrett’s poetry or nineteenth-century short stories (...) is capable of producing any kind of report, regulation, official letter or newspaper article, whereas the opposite is not possible?”<sup>7</sup>

The same type of attitude can be seen in the petition *Em defesa do ensino do Português* (“In defence of Portuguese teaching”), available on the Internet at <http://www.thepetitionsite.com>, which aims at changing the diminishing way in which the syllabus regards literary texts, said to be taught as mere examples of textual typologies and not because of their meaning within Portuguese culture and literature: “The important thing, according to the authors of the syllabus, is to subordinate the authors to the textual typology. It is precisely this type of situation that can still be reversed / altered in the textbooks for the 11th and 12th grades of ‘Portuguese Language’ currently being produced by the publishers. Let the Portuguese authors be studied for their meaning within Portuguese culture and literature and not as mere appendixes of the textual typology”<sup>8</sup> (VIEIRA, 2004).

### 3. Relevant aspects

Having briefly described the terms in which the syllabus has been publicly discussed, I will now turn to the assessment of one important aspect that lies at the core of the problem. In order to do that, let me just briefly step out from the discussion and refer to a paper published in the first issue of the *Journal of Language and Politics*. In that paper, Rajagopalan (2002) looks at what he calls the emergent linguistic chauvinism in Brazil and the role of linguistics in the national debate that provoked it to conclude that, as a subject, linguistics has failed to influence the debate over language legislation not only in Brazil but elsewhere.

According to the author, “We as linguists ought to be doing a little bit more of soul-searching to see if we ourselves have our share of responsibility in the way things have come to pass.” He then goes on to argue that “if we linguists are at all to have a say in matters such as language teaching and language planning, what we urgently need is to convince ourselves of the political implications of our own work”. Rajagopalan’s position may not be shared by most linguists, but it is certainly shared by some. In fact, linguistics has failed to provide the community with a self-image that may stand as a correct appraisal of what it can offer to other subjects and to the development of society.

Despite this reference to Rajagopalan’s position, it is not my intention here to talk about this linguistics that has failed us or about the fact that, as a subject, linguistics is far from being a unified whole, classified accordingly both as a cognitive science and as a social science. I would like to stress, though, taking into consideration the Portuguese case and the teaching of Portuguese as a first language in particular, the fact that linguistics *does* need to rethink not only its research agenda but also its options concerning its involvement with the public opinion and the enforcement of political actions involving language planning and policies. Take, for instance, the following statement about the syllabus, made last February by Vasco Graça Moura, a member of former Governments, a poet and a translator, in an interview published in the Sunday supplement to the leading daily



newspaper, *Público*: “The authors of the syllabuses [of Portuguese language teaching] are linguists and linguists hate literature”<sup>9</sup>. (GRAÇA MOURA, 2004a, p. 6).

When confronted with such a statement, linguists can actually dismiss it as both irrelevant and hate-driven, and as the result of someone’s willingness to be involved in a controversy at all costs. In fact, that was what the majority of the linguists did, either publicly or in private, thus contributing to the construction of an “epistolary novel” in the pages of several newspapers (see, for instance, how a linguist such as Inês Duarte – DUARTE, 2004a and 2004b – reacted to Graça Moura’s views).

What most linguists did not do was, in fact, question their own attitude and reaction to such a statement. They didn’t involve themselves self-reflectively in an appraisal of their activity and of the possible reasons, other than the ones pointed out, for such a vehement statement on the part of someone who apparently has nothing to gain from such an attack to a professional class. A serious reflection on the role of linguistics in Portuguese language learning and teaching has yet got to be fully undertaken, despite Castro’s attempt (2003), in a paper written well before the whole controversy started.

In the words of Castro, the relationship between linguistics and Portuguese language teaching has gone, in the past 30 years or so, from a conjunctive relation to a disjunctive one. The movement from one type of relationship into another was only possible because there was a mostly negative assessment by both fields of what was achieved. Castro (2003, p. 211) explicitly refers that, on the one hand, linguists mistrusted the use of their theories and data by teachers in the classroom, and, on the other hand, the teachers mistrusted the type of knowledge that linguistics was producing, mostly seen as hermetic and highly specialised.

The lack of a concerted and planned pedagogy, involving not only syllabuses, but also textbooks and teaching practices, lies at the core of the problems just referred to. In fact, in the context of basic and secondary schooling in Portugal, a genre-based approach to language teaching cannot be fully achieved without taking into consideration aspects not yet fully addressed in that context, such as: the “reduced” importance that such an approach attributes to literary genres; the differences between teaching language and teaching literature; the recurrent use of textbooks that elect literary genres as the genres to study; the high number of teachers who are not used to reviewing their practices reflectively and analytically; the role of language in learning and in education in general; the power of public opinion in the development of school curricula; and last but not least, the lack of acknowledgment that a genre-based approach to language teaching entails a perspective on language and learning that is different from the cognitive one that pervades current educational theory and practice in Portugal.

Although the attacks on the syllabus do not single out the “reduced” importance it attributes to literary genres as the chief culprit for the bad performance of Portuguese students, it is pretty much clear that the prime target in the attacks is the genre-based approach to language teaching that implicitly frames the syllabus. For instance, 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, 2003, p. 7) is more an attack on the communicative function of the language than a defence of literature. This is quite obvious when



Graça Moura (2003, p. 6) places the value of the language well above its communicative function.<sup>10</sup>

One must admit that the value of the language is important (whatever is meant by that), but one must also wonder if it is in fact the most important aspect in the teaching and learning of a first language. Language teaching and literature teaching are two different school subjects that can coexist in the curriculum either as separate subjects or as one; but when taught as a single subject it must not be concerned only with the teaching of literature. We must agree that “any project that aims at teaching as a mere communicative medium a (mother) language whose formation process is knitted together with literature is incomprehensible and unacceptable”, as Gusmão (2003, pp. 244-245) puts it.<sup>11</sup> But one should honestly ask whether that possibility is even considered in the syllabus.

Language plays an important role in learning and in education in general and should be looked at accordingly. Rothery (1996, p. 120) puts it sharply when she says that “If we want our students to develop high levels of literacy and a critical orientation, we must engage them, at all levels, in an explicit focus on language”. This focus on language must include a focus on literature, no doubt about it, but one should not forget that, more than in any other historical period, we are dealing nowadays with both highly complex and multifunctional speakers and communicative situations which constantly create and open up new possibilities for language to mean.

## **Conclusion**

According to Castro (2003), Portuguese linguists have progressively dissociated themselves from matters related to language teaching. The moment has come for a re-articulation between the two areas. But in that re-articulation the idiosyncratic aspects of each area must be taken into account. Linguistics substantiates a type of knowledge that is both exempt from normative intentions and continuously under revision, as it is the product of a context that is marked by disciplinary and theoretical plurality. In opposition, language teaching is based on knowledge that is substantially normative, consensual and stable, a characteristic that calls for a correct appraisal of the recontextualizing process that linguistic concepts and theories must undergo when applied to language teaching. Bertstein's words may be of great help here and should be taken into account (BERNSTEIN, 1990, p. 196):

The recontextualizing field brings together discourses from fields which are usually strongly classified, but rarely brings together the agents. On the whole, although there are exceptions, those who produce the original discourse, the effectors of the discourse to be recontextualized, are not agents of its recontextualization.

In the re-articulation of linguistics with language teaching one has to acknowledge that a genre-based approach to language teaching entails a perspective on language and learning that is different from the cognitive one that pervades current educational theory and practice not only in Portugal, but across the



world. The development of school curricula and syllabuses cannot be one paradigm's job, one theory's job. And surely it cannot be the job of a paradigm that does not take into precise account the social role of language in the production of meaning. In that sense, Joan Rothery (1996, p. 87) is quite right when she calls for an understanding of competing theories and practices in a field:

Developing an alternative theoretical perspective on literacy and learning to the prevalent psychological one is an instance of critical literacy. One requirement for developing a critical literacy is to have a substantial understanding of competing theories and practices in a field in order to make assessments about the value of the contributions they make to teaching practice, curriculum development and so.

A genre-based approach to language teaching substantiates questions and findings of a cognitive dimension but moves further to questions and findings that refer to socially motivated aspects of language use. Michael Halliday (1982, pp. 11-12) rightfully asks those questions the following way:

What are the universals, the culturally specific features and the individual variables of the language development process? How do people interpret the situations in which they find themselves in such a way that they can effectively exchange meaning in those situations? How do people construct a model of reality, a picture of the world through language, and what is it about the nature of language that enables them to do so? How is language related to social structure? What part does it play in transmitting, maintaining and modifying that structure?

There are many possible answers to these questions, but let me just finish by giving you a possible Hallidayan answer (HALLIDAY, 1990, p. 17), which rightfully underlines the power of language as a social semiotic and with it the pertinence of teaching and learning to use the system following a genre-based pedagogy:

If language merely 'reflects' our experience of what is out there, by correspondence with the categories of the material world, it is hard to see how we could threaten or subvert the existing order by means of working on language. But this is what we are doing when we plan the grammar in order to combat sexism. That this makes sense is because language does not correspond; it construes.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Luísa Azuaga and Isabel Mealha for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper, thus helping to make it better than it was originally. The paper was originally presented at the *First Regional Latin American Conference of Systemic Functional Linguistics: Systemic Functional Linguistics in Language Education*, National University of Cuyo, Mendoza, Argentina, 8-10 April, 2004, and is to be published in the proceedings of that Conference.



2. The organisation of two not related one-day workshops in state universities to address some of the issues raised in the public debate is a symptomatic sign of the academia's involvement. The first workshop took place at the Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon, in 25 March, and was entitled "The teaching of Portuguese for the 21st Century" ("Ensino do Português para o Século XXI"). The other one is scheduled to take place at the University of Minho, in the North of Portugal, in 19 April, and is entitled "The curricular reform of Portuguese studies (the area of Portuguese) in secondary education: syllabuses, textbooks, practices" ("A Reforma Curricular na Área do Português no Ensino Secundário: Programas, Manuais, Práticas").
3. All passages quoted from Portuguese texts are my own translation. Portuguese originals are given in italics in footnotes. "*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.*" (MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO, 2001, p. 47).
4. "*Desta forma, a tipologia textual prevista para o ensino secundário adquire uma dimensão praxiológica, permitindo abordar textos que, cabendo numa das categorias de protótipos textuais, preparam os jovens cidadãos para uma integração na vida sociocultural e profissional.*" (COELHO ET AL., 2001/2002, p. 4).
5. "*A leitura do texto literário deverá ser estimulada pois contribui decisivamente para o desenvolvimento de uma cultura geral mais ampla, integrando as dimensões humanista, social e artística, e permite acentuar a relevância da linguagem literária na exploração das potencialidades da língua. Nesse sentido, são seleccionados para leitura obrigatória autores/textos de reconhecido mérito literário que garantam o acesso a um capital cultural comum. O convívio com os textos literários acontecerá também quando se puserem em prática **contratos de leitura** a estabelecer entre professor e alunos.*" (COELHO ET AL., 2001/2002, p. 5).
6. "*(...) o que me espanta é que, apesar de tudo, ainda haja tantos jovens capazes de sobreviver ao desprezo pela literatura que neste programa se enuncia de forma transparente (...).*" (PEDROSA, 2003).
7. "*Ninguém será capaz de explicar a estas almas-em-alínea que quem aprende a ler em profundidade Gil Vicente ou Camões, a poesia de Garrett ou o conto do século XIX (só para falar de obras literárias agora excluídas) é capaz de se lançar a todo e qualquer relatório ou regulamento, requerimento ou artigo jornalístico – e que a inversa não é verdadeira?*" (PEDROSA, 2003).
8. "*(...) o importante na óptica dos autores dos programas, é subordinar os autores à tipologia textual. É precisamente esta situação que ainda pode ser alterada nos manuais dos 11º e 12º anos de «Língua Portuguesa», que, neste momento, as editoras preparam. // Que se estudem, pois, os autores portugueses pelo seu significado na Cultura e Literatura portuguesas e não como meros apêndices da tipologia textual.*" (VIEIRA, 2004).
9. "*Os responsáveis dos programas são linguistas e os linguistas têm ódio à literatura.*" (GRAÇA MOURA, 2004a, p. 6).
10. "The authors of the syllabuses [of Portuguese language teaching] 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."/ "*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, p. 6).
11. "*É incompreensível e inaceitável qualquer projecto que tenda a ensinar como mera língua veicular, uma língua (materna) cujo processo de formação se entrelaçou com uma literatura.*" (GUSMÃO, 2003, pp. 244-245).

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