

Students' difficulties when facing new literacy practices at post graduate levels.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is the description of a study that focuses on the way Portuguese graduate students carry out a literature review. This study was developed after it was found that many students had difficulties with some tasks that imply the use of writing.

We start by referring to the different roles played by writing in academic contexts; we then describe the Portuguese context in terms of how writing is used at school and universities. The second part of this text is the description of the study, including the methodology followed and the results.

THE ROLES OF WRITING IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

Writing is more than a skill that students are supposed to acquire and develop at school. It is frequently used in pedagogic communication and is involved in a great number of tasks that students have to perform in academic contexts.

Expressing knowledge is one of the most important functions of writing and this is particularly relevant for students' assessment. To demonstrate what they have learnt, students have not only to know the contents; they must also be able to express that knowledge through writing. Therefore, some students might fail not because they do not know those contents, but just because they are unable to write them down properly.

Different textual genres may be involved, according to the contexts in which assessment takes place: reports, literature reviews, essays, written answers in tests or exams, etc. Their production requires generic writing skills as well as specific abilities, according to the genres involved and the contexts of their production.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the roles played by writing at school should be focussed not only on the production of the textual genres students are supposed to write for assessment. It must consider other literacy practices related to these and the reading and writing processes those practices imply. In such practices, writing must be seen as an important learning tool that can be used throughout the whole learning process, playing an important role in knowledge acquisition and knowledge elaboration processes. Writing is used to take notes during oral presentations (lessons, lectures, seminars,...) or to register the main ideas of texts that we are reading; through writing, we elaborate and reorganise the knowledge previously acquired, by drawing schemes and maps of concepts, synthesising or summarising information.

The role played by writing in the learning process has been demonstrated by several authors.

From a cognitive perspective, written language is considered a powerful instrument for building an abstract and coherent theory of reality. Requiring explicitness, it enables the expression of logic relationships between different ideas, playing, therefore, an important role in the enhancement of the more complex forms of thought that characterise abstract logical reasoning. Used as a tool to develop concepts and generalisations, promote critical thinking and problem solving, it helps students to analyse and reflect on their thinking and understanding and contributes to learning and remembering content information (Olson, 1977; Applebee, 1984; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Tynjälä, Mason & Lonka, 2001; Armbruster, Mc Carthey & Cummins, 2005).

Learning enhancement through writing depends not only on psychological and cognitive factors. According to Hand and Prain (2002:740), social and contextual factors are also relevant. These authors consider the role played by textual genres in this process, seeing them as frameworks for learning because the *knowledge of the micro and macro structure of texts, as well as the purposes of these structures, enables students to identify relationships between ideas, and hence clarify understanding of content.*

Other aspects related to the production of academic textual genres must also be taken into consideration, especially those concerning the use of textual sources and the quotation and reference processes they imply. These aspects have to do with the sources on which a text is based and the recognition of the authorship of the knowledge displayed. The accuracy of references and quotations is a relevant aspect when we are writing essays and other similar genres. Quotations and references must be made according to the conventions or reference styles adopted by one particular academic community. How to follow these conventions is something students have to learn, as it implies an appropriate use of language which demands the knowledge of certain fixed forms that are adopted and recognised by their community and characterise the texts it uses (Philips & Pugh, 1987; Creme & Lea, 2000; Vásquez, 2001).

THE PORTUGUESE CONTEXT

The role of writing in learning enhancement has been recognised in the Portuguese curriculum since 1991. This role is stated in several documents issued by the Ministry of Education in which students are encouraged to perform writing tasks involving compositional and non-compositional techniques in order to enhance knowledge acquisition and expression. Students are supposed to develop project work, to write abstracts and résumés of texts, to take notes while reading texts or listening to oral communications with the purpose of retaining and reorganising information, to use writing as a way of organising and reorganising their ideas (Carvalho, 2005). Nevertheless, analyses of practices in Portuguese schools demonstrated that writing is still approached in a traditional way, being more frequently used to reproduce, rather than to acquire and elaborate knowledge (Carvalho, Pimenta, Ramos & Rocha, 2006).

At the university level, teachers and programme coordinators often refer in their

evaluation reports to the necessity of enhancing students' writing abilities so that they can fulfil the demands of academic work. Some studies focussing on university students' literacy practices (Carvalho & Pimenta, 2007; Carvalho, 2008) revealed students' difficulties concerning not only reading textual sources, registering, relating and organising information, but also using academic writing conventions. According to these studies, Portuguese university students use writing mainly to take notes during classes and to express knowledge in assessment contexts. Writing to elaborate knowledge, relate information or clarify ideas does not seem to be frequent.

Traditionally, tests have been the most frequent form of assessing students in Portuguese schools. At the end of lower secondary and secondary levels, students also have to deal with national exams. Tests and exams have also been the most common way of assessing students at the university, as far as graduation programmes are concerned. Recently, and mainly due to changes introduced by the Bologna Process, other ways of assessing students, for example, oral presentations, project work or essay writing are becoming more frequent. At post-graduation level, tests and exams still exist but, especially in some domains, such as Humanities or Education, essay writing, literature reviews or project work have been for long time the most common tasks associated to assessment practices.

THE STUDY

This study aimed at analysing how Portuguese graduate (MA) students write a synthesis or short literature review. It was developed in the context of a course on Educational Research Methodology. In this course students are expected to acquire the knowledge and the skills, including reading and writing skills, which will enable them to develop research in order to prepare their master's dissertation. This course includes a theoretical part focussing on research in general and educational research in particular and a more practical section dealing with data collection instruments and data analysis techniques.

The research was based on one of the assessment assignments that students had to carry out in this course. This assignment included three tasks:

- reading and taking notes of some chapters (provided by the teacher) on the topics of the course;
- making an outline/drawing the plan of a text to be written in the next step (a literature review/synthesis of the contents of the chapters previously read);
- writing and editing a text (maximum 1500 words), using a defined reference style (APA).

Seventy students took part in the study. Most of them were secondary school teachers from different content areas who were coming back to the university in order to acquire a specialization in their domain of studies. By the end of the semester, students delivered a portfolio integrating the products that resulted from the tasks above described. They also answered a questionnaire about the difficulties felt when performing the tasks. Seventy students performed the tasks but only fifty five of those answered the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Results emerge from the analysis of the different written products as well as from students' answers to the questionnaire.

READING NOTES

There are different ways of organising and displaying content in the reading notes analysed. The majority of the notes are organised as *text*; only a few display the content in the form of a *scheme* or a *diagram*; there are also notes that *combine* the two formats, *text* and *schemes*.

As to the volume of information displayed, the analysis shows a relevant number of *detailed* notes; *synthetic* and *short* notes are less numerous.

There are different levels of content elaboration in the reading notes: we can either find very complex forms of organisation revealing hard work in information processing or simple transcriptions, mere paraphrases of the sources, showing less ability in catching what is essential. The most complete formats are those that not only display the content but also evidence the relationship between different aspects through the use of graphic devices (arrows, boxes, columns, or others). On the other hand, we can find low elaboration, even in long and detailed texts. Most of these detailed notes tend to be organised according to the titles and sub-titles of the original source and paraphrase or quote each one of its paragraphs. A considerable number of rather long reading notes that include too much information could be found in the *corpus* analysed, what may be considered a symptom of reading difficulties, concerning the selection of what is really important.

TEXT PLANS

Most of the plans analysed are *lists* of contents, a kind of *index* referring to the different sections of the text. The logical relationships between the different aspects of the content can only be assumed from the way they are ordered and hierarchic relationships may be inferred whenever a section appears divided into two or more sub-sections. Only a few plans are somewhat elaborated, organising and hierarchizing the content in order to evidence the relationship between the different aspects involved. The analysis of the plans shows students' difficulty in organising different aspects in a logical way, something that is evident in some redundancy or in the exclusion of relevant aspects. Naturally this is something that we can also detect in the texts students wrote at the end of the process.

TEXTS

The logic and coherent organisation of the contents seems to be one of the aspects in which students have major problems. Redundancy and repetition are frequent as many students seem to have difficulties in merging or synthesising information that appears in more than one source. Therefore, their texts appear as a succession of information separately retrieved from the texts they read. Other problems can be found: some information despite its interest and relevance, is treated in a very brief way or even ignored while other information, including many non-relevant topics,

is presented in a very detailed way. There are also some problems related to the use of a reference style. The style adopted is APA. It was previously presented and discussed in the class and students had a short manual they could check at any point. Nevertheless, students often misused it.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

When asked about the difficulties they felt, students referred different kinds of problems: *organising the reading notes, selecting information; summarising and synthesising; relating and integrating different contents; referring, quoting and paraphrasing the texts; putting all the information in a text no longer than 1500 words; organising the bibliographic references.* Students also mention other difficulties, related to external factors such as difficulties in foreign languages or having little time to perform the task. *Relating and integrating different contents, selecting information, quoting and referring and organising the reading notes* are the aspects that students refer more frequently.

CONCLUSION

Results show that many students had difficulties in performing the tasks they were assigned. These difficulties concern mainly three aspects: reading and selecting relevant content; organising and synthesising information retrieved from different textual sources; making use of conventional forms adopted by the academic community. Many students were unfamiliar with tasks like this and some of them explicitly admitted that, as it was the first time they had to deal with such work, it had been difficult for them to understand what they were expected to do.

These difficulties may be related to students' past schooling experience and the literacy practices they had been used to. As we said above, in Portuguese schools, writing is rarely seen as a learning tool and students are more often asked to use it in knowledge reproduction tasks than in knowledge construction ones.

This problem affects the Portuguese school system as a whole and demonstrates that something has to change in this domain. The relevance of writing in knowledge acquisition and expression processes must be recognised and considered in the tasks students have to perform in different contexts and disciplines, according to their age and their school level. More than specific courses aiming at fostering writing abilities, the most effective ways of promoting their skills appear to be the involvement of writing in school activity and students' engagement in meaningful literacy practices in the context of different disciplines. This will enable them to perform the tasks they have to deal with in academic contexts more effectively and will prepare them to overcome many of the challenges they have to face in their lives, inside and outside school.

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