

11TH INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE ON
TEXTBOOKS &
EDUCATIONAL
MEDIA

28 - 30 SEPTEMBER 2011

REPRESENTATION
OF OTHERNESS
KAUNAS, LITHUANIA

CONFERENCE VOLUME

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Representations of otherness

The Eleventh International Conference on Research
on Textbooks and Educational Media

September 2011 Kaunas – Lithuania

This book presents cutting edge research and research methodologies from members
of the International Association for Research on Textbooks and Educational Media
(IARTEM)

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ISBN 978-0-9580587-6-7

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Evaluation and selection of textbooks in Portugal: Perceptions from mother tongue teachers

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Introduction

Quality education issues are dominating public and political debates in the western world. In Portugal, the discussion has widened to include quality control of textbooks, leading to the establishment of an evaluation and approval system of textbooks aimed at guaranteeing their conceptual and pedagogical quality (Law 47/2006).

In these times of change, perhaps the most significant in the past four decades since the end of the dictatorship and the roll out of the single book policy in schools, the purpose of this paper is to examine the positions and perceptions of mother tongue teachers from both compulsory and secondary education, concerning their criteria for approval, evaluation and selection of textbooks.

The empirical data was gathered by means of a questionnaire answered by 340 Portuguese teachers. The questionnaire requested teachers to state their level of agreement with arguments concerning the editing, selection and evaluation of textbooks. The aim of this research was to understand teachers' positions on textbook evaluation in order to improve: 1) the process of selection and 2) the quality of the material object itself regarding its function as a core tool for quality teaching and learning. The research also aims to understand the criteria that teachers value most in selecting the best textbook.

The study shows teachers' opinions are divided regarding the quality standards for textbooks; for some lack of quality is due to conceptual and scientific errors, for others it is pedagogical inadequacies. Despite this disagreement, teachers recognise the important role that the current approval process plays in improving the selection process and increasing quality of education.

This study is part of a wider project on the evaluation process of textbooks in Portugal, funded by The Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BD/43827/2008), under the NSRF-POPH (National Strategic Reference Framework – Human Potential Operational Programme), which is being developed in the Research Centre of Education (CIEd) of the University of Minho, in the scope of the Research Group Literacies: Practices and Discourses in Educational Contexts.

Background

In recent years, the Portuguese Ministry of Education has adopted several measures to improve the quality of education. The concern with finding more efficient ways for organising education is on political agendas across Europe. This concern can be seen

in new state intervention models and in the evaluation of the quality of the system in general. Among those actions, assessment of student learning, the certification of previous knowledge, the evaluation of schools and the evaluation of teachers and their teaching materials are the most important.

Textbooks have become, in the past three decades, the most common resource in everyday classroom practice. The massification of education, the conditions of teachers' employment and a system of free publishing resulted in a significant increase in the number of textbooks, the selection of which has been the responsibility of schools and their teachers. In the face of a complete absence of control by the Ministry of Education that contributed to a totally unregulated system for the publishing and adoption of the textbooks, publishing house marketing strategies became prevalent in schools.

Law 47/2006, which sets textbook evaluation by committees of experts and the maintenance of the free selection of textbooks by teachers in their schools, was a means to go against this situation aiming at improving textbook quality. These concerns show the importance of two main functions of textbooks: the referential function, "also known as curricular or programmatic", and the instrumental function, "which puts into practice learning methods and purposes, exercises and activities" (Choppin 2044, 553).

Teachers and discourse analysis

Considering the controversial questions surrounding textbook evaluation, this research study aims to investigate the policies and practices of textbook evaluation. The main aim is to examine the positions and perceptions of mother tongue teachers from both compulsory and secondary education. To this end, a questionnaire was developed to gather data about the criteria teachers use for the approval, selection and evaluation of textbooks.

The use of a questionnaire made possible the quantification of a large amount of data from which to draw conclusions. Besides this methodological goal, our concern with teachers' positions on textbook evaluation was also due to the fact that "process-oriented research", this is, research targeted at the several stages that mark the development of a textbook, has not been a common practice in textbook research (Choppin 2004, 563).

The questionnaire was organised in three parts. In the first section, the questions were aimed at identifying the participant's personal and professional profile with respect to the following variables: age, gender, working years, academic qualification, teaching level and degree of participation in textbook evaluation meetings at schools and in publishers' textbook promotion events.

In the second section, teachers were asked to give their opinions on arguments related to the quality of textbooks and the selection processes. A Likert scale with four points was used: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. The intention was option to encourage teachers to give a positive or a negative response to a statement, thus avoiding ambiguous positioning. The 20 statements were, mostly, framed with

reference to Portuguese Ministry of Education documents concerning the evaluation process, but also publishers' arguments against this process.

The third and last part of the questionnaire aimed at understanding the most important criteria, according to teachers, for selecting quality textbooks. Teachers were asked to select the 5 most important among the 22 that were presented.

The data was analysed using the PAWS Statistics, version 19.

Presentation and discussion of results

The results related to the second part of the questionnaire will be outlined first. For the analysis, the 20 statements presented to teachers were organised in three sections: "quality of the approval process", "quality of the selection process" and "quality of the Portuguese textbook".

The first section, "quality of the approval process", aimed to understand teachers' positions on:

1. The evaluation process – statements 7, 9 and 14
2. The contributions of the approval system to quality:
 - a. Quality of teaching – statement 10
 - b. Quality of education – statements 15 and 18
 - c. Quality of the textbook as a material object itself, regarding its functions as a teaching tool – statements 19 and 20.

The second section – "quality of the selection process" – included 7 statements about the contribution of the approval system to the selection process in schools, and classified in two categories:

1. Market issues – statements 1, 2, 3 and 13;
2. Selection criteria – statements 6, 8 and 16.

The third section, "quality of the Portuguese textbook", consisted of 5 items – statements 4, 5, 11, 12 and 17.

After the sample characterisation, we will present the results according to these dimensions and categories.

Sample characterisation

The sample was taken from 340 Portuguese teachers: between 26 and 63 years old (mean 44.06), most of them female. A large number of these teachers have a degree and the mean working years is 20.07 (SD = 7.67). Regarding the question on participation in school textbook evaluation meetings and publishers' textbook

promotion events, most of the teachers gave a positive answer: 91.3% of teachers participate in school textbook evaluation meetings and 83.3% participate in publishers' promotion events.

As can be seen, most teachers take part in the textbook selection process, even though the selected textbook may not be one they will use in the coming year. This has been noted by Choppin (1991, 131): "les opinions qu'ils [les enseignants] expriment sur le manuel en général sont fortement corrélées au jugement qu'ils portent sur l'ouvrage qu'ils utilisent [...] qu'ils n'ont pas eux-mêmes choisi".

Although it appears that teachers participate more in school decision making, it could be hypothesised that the selection of a textbook in schools is to some extent controlled by information delivered by publishing houses. It could be concluded, therefore, that the school-based selection of textbooks is strongly controlled by the power of the market; however, teachers may not always recognise this, as can be seen further on with the responses to statements 1 and 13.

Teachers' positions on and perceptions of the approval system

When considering the 20 items of the second part of the questionnaire, which asked teachers their positions on arguments about evaluation, selection and quality, the data demonstrates a certain lack of strong agreement or disagreement on most of the 20 items. The teachers' positions are mostly distributed between the options "agree" and "disagree". It has been concluded that teachers, in this controversial area, claim to have a neutral position.

Quality of the approval process

The responses provided by teachers concerning the quality of the approval system show this process as a positive contribution in several ways. First, the evaluation process by external experts is not seen as a threat to quality and exemption. In fact, when 56% of teachers in Item 7 agree that the evaluation committees will ensure quality and exemption, it seems they do not see their educational know-how put into question, not even by the academic know-how of the experts, as might be expected (Batista 2004, 48).

Teachers also do not feel their professional freedom and autonomy threatened; indeed, in Item 9, 60% of teachers disagreed with that suggestion. Moreover, in Item 14, the majority of teachers believe the evaluation of textbooks might simplify and improve the selection process at schools; consequently, they undervalue the risk of a smaller and weaker involvement with textbook selection.

These findings to some degree contradict the position of those publishers who refused the evaluation system because it implied mistrust of teachers: "I can't accept publishers being despised in the evaluation process; and the way the Ministry of Education deals with publishers is the same that they use with teachers, being suspicious of them" (publisher's comment in Sousa & Dionísio 2010, 493).

Concerning the quality of the approval process as a contribution to the quality of teaching and education (Items 10, 15 and 18), teachers expressed their agreement, with little disagreement. In fact, when 83.9% of teachers agree and strongly agree that the approval system will contribute to the improvement of quality on education, they are assuming that the quality of teaching is determined by that educational resource. In this way, the importance and the role of the textbook is positioned as a material with the power to structure and to control school knowledge.

Similarly, 81.32% of teachers recognise the importance textbook evaluation to guarantee a match between teaching and learning assessment (Item 15). In so doing, teachers assume, on one hand, that what is taught in schools and what is assessed by the national examinations might not walk together and that control over textbooks could solve the problem. Furthermore, the 81.74% of teachers who value the evaluation as a regulatory factor of pedagogy (Item 18) contribute to reinforcing the fundamental role of the textbook. From these results, it could be concluded that teachers make the textbook their single resource for teaching and learning, despite all the technological innovations they have now available.

At the same time, this validation of the evaluation process might have something to do with pressure from international studies such as PISA; that is, teachers eventually expect that only external evaluation ensures the regulation of learning that is going to be assessed by international organisations.

When teachers disagree and strongly disagree – 72.13% – that the referential dimension (Item 20) is the major argument for evaluation, and also when they agree (70%) that the instrumental dimension (Item 19) is also an important factor for textbook selection, teachers strengthen textbooks in their double function.

As can be seen thus far, the data shows that the approval system has potential for quality.

Quality of the selection process

The second dimension concerns statements about the quality of the selection process in the categories ‘market issues’ and ‘selection criteria’. As with any other product, the commerce of the textbook is guided by the principles of capital investment and return, as well as the power of marketing to boost profits: “finance and costing took an immensely important place in the decisions of publishers and booksellers” (Apple 1989, 157).

As to sections of the questionnaire that dealt with how market factors influence – or do not influence – teachers’ selection of textbooks: 91.02% of teachers stated that their judgements prevail in the selection (Item 1), while 85.14% of teachers disagreed that their selection depends on how the textbook is marketed and presented by the publisher. Therefore, it appears that teachers do not fall under the power of marketing strategies.

On the other hand, in Items 2 and 3, both regarding the number of textbooks available on the market, teachers agreed that the number of textbooks was too high and should

be reduced to simplify the selection process. This can be seen as teachers' call for change, as other academic discourses have already noted:

It was also shown that the criteria for selection and adoption of the textbook are numerous, inconsistent and unreliable. On the other hand, it was also found that, given the constraints that involve teachers in the moment of the selection, it is urgent to change the way the textbook is selected.
(Bento 2000, 184)

On the matter of selection criteria, 63.15% of teachers agree that the lack of proper criteria for the specific area of the teaching of L1 is a factor that affects the selection (Item 6). Teachers do not see themselves limited in their ability to choose textbooks by the marketing power of the publishing houses, but, on the other hand, they feel that their responsibility lies more in the moment of choice than on the analysis and evaluation tasks.

According to the teachers participating, the pedagogic approach is one of the most important criteria when evaluating textbooks (Item 16). In this particular case, teachers' agreement (54.5%) about the importance given to "pedagogic approach" is consistent with the relevance they attribute to the regulation of pedagogy (Item 18) as well as a certain lack of interest in scientific content (Item 20).

Quality of the Portuguese textbook

The factors involved in the quality of the textbook are related to the most important functions that have been attributed to these pedagogical tools: recontextualisation (Castro 1995) and regulatory roles through the selection and structuring of content and its processes of transmission. As Baker and Freebody state, "Given that school textbooks present school knowledge (content) within a school technology (literacy), it is not surprising that textbooks are treated as 'authoritative' sources of content and method" (1989, 263).

Concerning textbook quality, teachers' continued to show consensus (Item 4). Teachers agreed (74.61%) that there were problems with, and a lack of quality in textbooks. This is the only item in the questionnaire to which none of the teachers responded 'strongly disagree'. This calls into question publishers' arguments supporting the quality of the textbooks they produce, and which also claimed that teachers' choices were the best indicators of quality (Sousa & Dionísio 2010). For this lack of quality teachers point to the inadequacies of the curriculum and syllabi (Item 5): 77.4% of teachers agree they are not suitable.

If there is no doubt about the lack of suitability, the same is not true concerning content and pedagogical approach, issues that divide teachers' opinions. 164 teachers agreed that textbooks contained conceptual errors that undermined their function as a tool for learning (Item 11), yet 159 teachers disagreed. This division is repeated – almost with the same figures – in response to the question on pedagogical errors (Item 12).

The emphasis now given to the content and a certain devaluation of the teaching and learning processes may be related to a certain way of thinking about Portuguese

language teaching, which traditionally reduces the teaching of reading and writing to content underestimating processes and practices.

In any case, the division in teachers' opinions is not entirely consistent with that in Item 20, concerning teachers' devaluation of the role of the scientific content, or in Item 18 concerning the importance given to the evaluation as a way to regulate pedagogy. It is also not consistent with data obtained from Item 16 about the need for a focus on pedagogical processes.

This division reflects the conflict, at least according to the perceptions of teachers, about what is to be evaluated by the committees of experts. This conflict is exploited by publishers, who continue to call for the end of this policy, even though it is already in its second year.

Considering the texts that are included in textbooks – always a difficult issue when commenting on textbooks (Dionísio 2000) – the division of teachers' perceptions is not obvious. Indeed, 66.8% of teachers agree that the texts included in textbooks are appropriate to the age level and socio-cultural development of students (Item 17). This may not be disconnected from the fact that authors repeatedly state in their opening texts that the texts they choose are suitable.

Teachers' selection criteria

In the last part of the questionnaire teachers were asked to select the 5 most important criteria to evaluate Portuguese textbooks. The displayed list was build up from two other lists, both produced by the Ministry of Education: “the evaluation criteria for textbooks selection” (1995) and “the evaluation criteria for textbooks approval” (2007).

Figure 1 shows the criteria most selected by teachers from the 22:

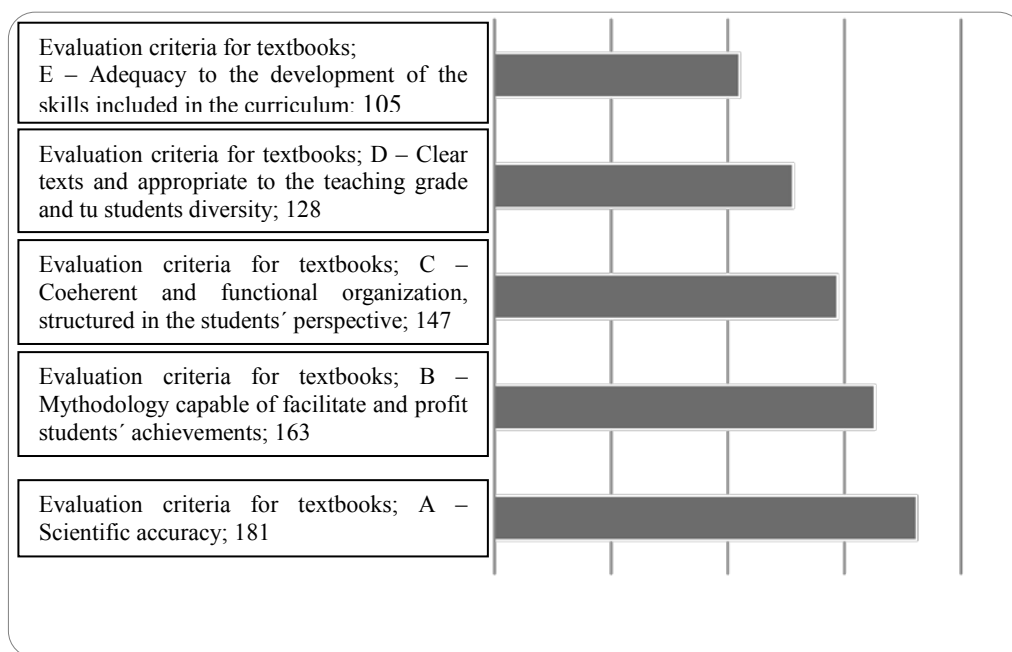


Figure 1. Evaluation criteria for textbooks

- e) Adequacy to the development of the skills included in the curriculum
- d) Clear texts and appropriate to teaching grade and student diversity
- c) Coherent and functional organisation, structured from student perspective
- b) Methodology capable of facilitating and enhancing student achievement
- a) Scientific accuracy

Looking at the data presented above, it can be seen that teachers prefer organisational criteria (B and C) showing some concern with the structure and organisation of their educational work and the learning process. The criteria most selected (A – Scientific accuracy), with its emphasis on content, followed by criteria B (Methodology capable of facilitating and enhancing student achievement) and C (Coherent and functional organisation, structured from student perspective), more ‘pedagogical’ ones, once again emphasise the conflict that teachers have indicated regarding the quality of the Portuguese textbook – the focus on content or pedagogy.

The selection of criterion D (Clear texts and appropriate to the teaching grade and student diversity) is consistent with teachers’ agreement on the suitability of texts to the students’ level (Item 17). This might mean a way of teaching L1 in which texts take a central place.

Due to the inadequacy of textbooks to the general curricula and syllabi indicated in the second part of the questionnaire, Item 5, it was now expected teachers would signal criteria E (Adequacy to the development of the skills included in the curriculum) to be highlighted, which did not happen. This also reflects a certain gap between teachers and the curricula and a greater following of traditional educational practices than the curricular guidelines.

These data still show an almost total absence of the evaluation criteria from 2007, the criteria that is supposed to be used by evaluation committees, since only criteria A belongs to that list. Although teachers have agreed on the need for proper criteria for Portuguese teaching (Item 6), the absence of criteria from the 2007 list might indicate a certain lack of confidence in the new criteria to solve problems concerning textbook evaluation.

Conclusion

Recognising the contributions of the textbook to quality teaching, teachers assume that the teaching of Portuguese relies almost exclusively on this educational tool. Perhaps this is why teachers also recognise the importance of the textbook in transforming educational objectives and curriculum guidelines into specific learning activities.

The results of this survey also demonstrate how a policy so badly received and criticised by the publishers is now legitimated by teachers’ discourse, especially

concerning the choices they make. Teachers feel the selection of textbooks to be their responsibility as educational agents and decision-makers.

In summary, according to the teachers surveyed in this study, the Portuguese textbook is a tool with the potential to transform and improve the quality of language teaching. Teachers, uncertain about the factors that contribute to the development of a quality textbook, but not about their lack of quality in general, support the ideals of quality in the policies of the Ministry of Education particularly and of Europe in general.

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