Towards a characterization of the literacy teaching and learning context in the primary school in Portugal:
A research on students' competencies and teachers' conceptions and practices

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Introduction

In this paper the results of a research on the literacy teaching and learning contexts in Portuguese primary schools are presented. I start by describing the two complementary theoretical perspectives framing the study. I then introduce the research question and aims, the method of inquiry, detailing the unit and sub-units of analysis, the results and a final discussion on the educational importance of the research.

Theoretical framework

Two main sets of theoretical assumptions supported the research in the first place, one linguistic and another pedagogical in kind.

A view of language as a social semiotic (Halliday, 1978) was firstly assumed as it allowed a comprehensive definition of school literacy and a clarification of the object of literacy education. The social semiotic view of language assumes that different views of the world, different stances towards the information, different expected modes of conveying those same ideas and different socio-cultural purposes to fulfil, that is, different meanings emerging from different contexts of situation, imply the use of different linguistic choices; it further assumes that language is a complex semiotic system that has evolved to represent differently those different social meanings emerging from different contexts of situation. Therefore, the statement of the social semiotic nature of language puts in evidence the situated (and thus diverse) character of language used in the texts (also) at school; to be more precise, the existence of as many different varieties of language as there are school subjects, as well as the existence of a divergence between school varieties of language and the informal varieties that are learned in the primary contexts of socialization with which children represent the meanings emerging from ordinary reality (Halliday, 1978, 1994; Heath, 1983; Gee, 1996, 2001, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2004).

According to this social semiotic view of language, successful school learning is considered to be dependant on the learning of the singularity of the linguistic patterns that are used to represent meanings in school texts (Halliday, 1993; Christie, 1998; Christie & Mission, 1998; Gee, 1996, 2001, 2004; Rose, 2005; Martin & Rose, 2005). In particular, it is claimed that learning (content) at school is inseparable from learning the language (that represents that content), thus implying that the ultimate object of the pedagogy of literacy (as it is expected to be carried out in the language class) is the linguistic singularity that is used to represent school knowledge. It is also maintained that such specific learning at school expands or, at least, is expected to expand, the capacity to make meaning beyond the semiotic resources which children

have already naturally mastered when they start school, thus acting as a democratising force of children's learning success.

A view of learning as social constructivist process was the second major theoretical assumption underlying the research as it allowed a comprehensive approach to the principles of the pedagogy of literacy. This view of learning, which is profusely influenced by the ideas of Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1995; Wood, Brunner, & Ross, 1976; Wells, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004), assumes that demanding social action is the basis for individual development, which Vygotsky describes as the 'interiorization' of human culture. In this perspective, happily intersecting with the social semiotic linguistic theory, language is considered the most important semiotic means that sustains human development, first through the dialogue that is established with more capable others when carrying out a collaborative action, then intra-individually, when the learner has finally internalized the semiotic means for learning and is thus able to use them to learn by himself. The socio-constructive view of learning further assumes that an explicit instructive intervention is essential in order to direct the learner's attention to the new and demanding tasks, ideas or concepts that (s)he would be unable to understand (and, thus, internalize) on her/his own, thereby creating the child's Zone of Proximal Development, where learning actually takes place. According to this theory, it is such a practical and explicitly assisted learning that then allows for future transformation in the actions in which the individual learner takes part (Rogoff et al., 1996). In fact, Vygotsky himself states that development is a 'transitive' process, that is, it only truly occurs when learners are given the possibility to actually do something for others with what they have learned. Also of interest to the understanding of these socio-constructive ideas about learning is the theory of situated cognition (Barsalou, 1999), which has been claiming that the mental representations that constitute individuals' learning and knowledge are analogical in character, like videotaped records of actual experiences in which the learner has taken part (either physically or not) (Gee, 2001). Summing up, a pedagogical position is assumed that aims at pulling together school practices and the literacy capacities that are demanded in the extra-school communities (de Castell et al., 1986).

In view of this theoretical framework on learning, three principles were assumed to uphold the pedagogy of literacy, namely 'situated practice', 'explicit teaching', and 'transformed practice' (The New London Group, 2000). Briefly, the apology is made for the implementation of authentic contexts where reading and writing of written texts is done for the carrying out of concrete actions, thus allowing for a kind of tacit learning of the language of schooling, the teacher being expected to call students' attention to language forms in the context of shared discussions of meanings, and then to provide further practical contexts in which students are able to apply their explicit learning, thereby transforming their practices (Wells, 2001; Rose, 2005; Martin & Rose, 2005). Yet a fourth principle, namely 'critical framing' (The New London Group, 2000), was added in the pedagogy of literacy. It is backed up by the theory of critical literacy, which has shown that the social nature of language makes of texts ideologically loaded instruments (Alvermann et al, 1999; Lankshear & Knobel, 1997; Leland & Harste, 2000; Macken-Horarik, 1998; Vasquez, 2003). The theory of critical literacy defends that semiotic learners can only become effective meaning makers (and not merely meaning consumers) when these ideological variables are also explicitly controlled, thus justifying the pertinence of including the principle of critical framing within the pedagogy of literacy.

The research: question, aims, and method

The research was primarily instigated by the difficulties that Portuguese students have shown in literacy (Ministério da Educação, 2001). Within the above sketched theoretical framework, literacy difficulties have been attributed to the setting of literacy learning contexts where a continuity lacks between students' learning difficulties, which are put down to the singularity of the language patterns of schooling, and the pedagogical practices carried out by teachers, which are considered not to be the most adequate to deal with those linguistic needs. In other words, literacy difficulties have been attributed to the configuration of literacy teaching and learning contexts where no adequate scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) exists for the learning of literacy. The research thus aimed at characterizing the literacy teaching and learning context in Portugal, and the focus on the primary school contexts was essentially due to the fact that the difficulties of Portuguese students begin to show up when children start dealing with texts that are written in more academic varieties of language at the end of primary school cycle, a fact that actually converges with what is referred to in the literature on the subject as the 'fourth-grade slump' (Gee, 2004).

The investigation involved two sub-units of analysis of the literacy teaching and learning context (which was its main unit of analysis), each associated with a specific aim: (i) the description of students' capacity to make meanings with language patterns that are typical of school texts; (ii) the description of the pedagogy of literacy that is implemented by their teachers. In the study, a multiple case research strategy was followed, involving four literacy teaching and learning contexts comprising two third-year and two fourth-year classes of students and their teachers.

Students' competencies to make meanings: data sources and results

The characterization of the first of those sub-units of analysis was based on the quantitative (and qualitative) analysis of data collected using a test specifically created for the research. It consisted in four texts, one narrative, two news reports and one expository. The whole test focused exclusively on the capacity to make meanings with a set of linguistic features that were previously presented as characteristic of the language of texts that are usually used in school.

In fact, in the research report an original linguistic description was included of demonstrative expressions showing how they adequately represent some meanings that emerge in different school texts. Like in Spanish, demonstratives in Portuguese are tripartite, and they are initially learned by speakers to index a physically present entity, that is, they are firstly learned as deictic markers, varying in accordance with the three different distance values they semantically encode. However, in discourse, they are readapted to represent a kind of textual meaning, namely anaphoric reference, thus contributing to textual cohesion, as well as other meanings of interpersonal and ideational nature. Space limitations do not allow the detailing, but the examples bellow, taken from one of the texts involved, may be enough to clarify the reader. In addition to the anaphoric meaning, the demonstrative in (1), in italics, conveys an authoritative stance about what is being talked about (an interpersonal meaning) and it further is used to introduce a classification of the entity (an ideational meaning) that is anaphorically referred to:
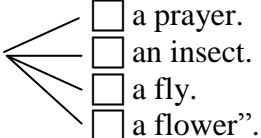
(1)
"Some animals camouflage themselves to get their prey. One of the
species of praying mantis in Malaysia has a vivid pink colour. This way,
this insect remains virtually invisible when he stands on the pink orchid.
Any fly that comes to rest in there is quickly caught and devoured".

The test included tasks like the following:
(2)
"Sign with an X the correct option.

☐ a prayer.

The praying mantis is ☐ an insect.

☐ a fly.

☐ a flower".

The statistical analysis showed a normal distribution of results; more importantly, it revealed that making meanings with those linguistic structures caused students many difficulties, although varying in line with students' school year (cf. Figure 2).

	Text A		Text B		Text C		Text D		Total	
	3rd year	4th year	3rd year	4th year	3rd year	4th year	3rd year	4th year	3rd year	4th year
Mean	4,86	6,31	3,67	4,27	5,47	8,42	4,47	5,19	18,47	24,19
Median	5,00	6,50	4,00	4,00	5,00	8,00	5,00	5,00	18,00	24,00
Std. Deviation	1,907	2,033	1,169	1,125	2,208	2,132	1,369	1,671	3,881	5,266
Minimum	1	2	2	1	2	4	2	0	10	12
Maximum	9	11	6	6	10	12	7	8	28	36

Figure 1: Sensibility of the results of the test according to school year: normal distribution.

One of the most striking results of the qualitative analysis of children's incorrect options was the evidence that their previous personal knowledge about some of the issues in question did not have a significant interference in the answers given; another was the fact that children's options were frequently driven by the general topic information of texts and/or paragraphs. In other words, children did show difficulties in managing the local information linguistically represented in texts by demonstratives in order to make (potentially new) meanings with texts.

Teachers' literacy conceptions and practices: data sources and results

The description of literacy pedagogy was based on the qualitative analysis of data collected by interviewing the teachers of the same students who were previously tested and by asking them to develop a set of literacy activities that they might carry out in their classes with the same texts used in the test.

The interview was organized in three main themes with the intention of getting to know whether teachers assume and put into practice the principles of the pedagogy that were described above.

Firstly, the interview focused on teachers' literacy conceptions and reported practices. More specifically, teachers were asked about the texts they used in their classes (kinds of texts and criteria for their choices) and about their opinions and viability of use of the texts used to test

their students. Then they were asked about their definitions of (the meaning making process through) reading comprehension, the way they usually carry out their practices of reading comprehension and the aims that they associate with those practices.

The second part of the interview was based on the activities suggested by the teachers. These were analysed before the interview took place, making it possible to organize this moment of the interview in three main sub-parts, questioning the teachers about pre-reading activities, reading activities and post-reading activities.

The third part focused on the test and on the results obtained by the students. Teachers were asked to identify the aim of the questionnaire of the test, to share their predictions and to analyse the actual results, stating their reasons for the marks students' got as well as for the usual difficulties they show in literacy, and to express their views and strategies to bring such difficulties to an end.

The results of the qualitative analysis of the data collected showed that teachers' theory and practice of literacy pedagogy is quite distant from the pedagogy that was assumed as the most adequate to the learning of literacy.

In fact, their ideas and practices showed a limited concern as far as the implementation of the principle of 'situated practice' is concerned. Teachers actually manifested a conscious concern with the development of meaning making practices that are situated in children's previous knowledge and experiences, showing a worry with creating those experiences in the classroom in order to promote the emergence of the necessary previous ideas to be able to understand texts.

However, many other data pointed to different conclusions. A first hint came up with the definition of comprehension as a uniform, passive process, where no role is actually recognized to the reader in the meaning making process, the text being the carrier of 'one' unquestionable, predetermined meaning:

> *"Understanding a text is being able to read and understand what is there… the message of the text. It is being able to understand exactly the content of texts" (Teacher2).*

Also relevant was teachers' actual stronger concern with children's previous knowledge in curricular areas other than the language class, as well as their conception that the curriculum syllabus (as it is reproduced by the textbook) is always the most important determinant of what goes on in the classroom, children's interests and needs having little or no interference in that:

> *"It is good to have and read these texts… But in order to be able to accomplish the curriculum program, which is very extensive, we cannot escape from what we have (to teach). Contents would remain untaught. That is an enormous pressure that we are submitted to, because we have to teach those contents and they (students) have to know the official contents. Although they (curriculum developers) say it not necessary, that is what the tests are about, the tests that students have later on (…). They then leave the primary school and go to the next school level, and when they get there they (students) must know all these contents. Therefore, we are also going to be evaluated by the next school level according to what we have taught. If we do not respect the program and teach other things instead – important and appealing things that belong to the daily life but that are not part of the program - we are losing time because the evaluation is about what the program dictates" (Teacher2).*

Other facts were important to get to the conclusion about the non-situated character of teachers' literacy pedagogy, such as the reference to the designing and carrying out of reading activities 'off' a functional context of use. In fact, no reference at all was found to the reading of

texts because of needs created during the completion of a concrete activity. On the contrary, teachers conceive of reading activities in the language classroom as a preparatory step to the introduction of other curricular areas mostly in social studies. That is to say, there is no other aim in making meaning in the language classroom besides preparing to those curricular issues by answering teachers questions, and preparing to general evaluation. This is naturally connected to the fact that the texts that are read in the language class are restricted to narrative and poetic genders, mostly dictated by the textbooks:

> *"I always try to get texts that are connected to the theme in the Social Studies area that we are studying, because one thing is going to 'solidify' the other. The text in the language class serves as a pre-introduction to the theme in the Social Studies area. (...) For instance, now it is the time to tell them about a certain issue... I try to choose a text to work in the language class, to work reading, ... a text that is related to that issue or that may serve as a motivation to that issue"* (Teacher4).

Furthermore, evidence was found that the meaning making process is not conceived of as a collaborative practice at all. Teachers' answers made it clear that they believe that there is a separation between what the student builds on his own (the mental reconstruction of the meaning of the text when it is read) and what the teacher does afterwards, which is aimed at evaluating that individual comprehension (or at providing the intended meaning for the children):

> *" (I start by doing) silent reading so that students understand what they are reading and interiorize it. (...) Then I do oral reading and I try to explain and talk with them to see whether they have understood anything that says in the text"* (Teacher 2).

In fact, such conception of the process of meaning making as an individualized process emerges in the conformist and resigned stance that some teachers showed vis-à-vis children's difficulties in literacy learning This individualized conception of learning was also revealed when teachers did not make reference to the pedagogy actually implemented as one of the possible reasons of (and solution for) the literacy problems children face: this is a fact for which teachers do not feel responsible at all. In a vygotskian framework, such positioning can be interpreted as showing that students' 'limited capacities' are not conceived of as capacities that urgently need to be developed by their teachers, that the pedagogical context is not conceived of as a natural challenge of what students need to develop; in a bernsteinian interpretative framework, such arguments can be seen as illustrating the role of school as reproducing social inequalities: students who have different needs are differently prepared to reach different results.

Last, the conclusion on the limited use of the principle of 'situated practice' was supported by the analysis of the activities suggested by the teachers themselves, because the meanings that the students were asked to build were frequently partial and even inadequate to the texts at hand. Many of the problematic points revealed by the analysis are due to teachers' indiscriminate use of the narrative categories when guiding the reading of non-narrative texts. For instance, for the expository text from which excerpt (1) was taken one of the activities asked children to 'order the sequence of events' and another asked children to identify the main characters.

The data collected further revealed an almost absolute non-implementation of the principle of 'explicit teaching'. It was possible to conclude that teachers do not recognize 'language' as an object of teaching and learning at all. In effect, language is not visible when they referred to how they determine and evaluate texts, as well as to the process of judging, projecting and creating literacy activities. Instead of using linguistic criteria and instead of

creating activities to make language visible in the meaning making process, teachers focused their attention exclusively on the content of texts, welcoming those contents that are programmatic.

> *"At this time of the year I would not give students these texts. I would keep them for later on, to the moment when we are going to talk about of the environment. For instance, we talk about insects (...), about those little animals, and then it would be another curiosity. At this time of the year we are studying another area (it's about the human body)" (Teacher1).*

That is, the object of the language class, which should be linguistic, ends up being, most of times, a preparation for the teaching and learning of contents in other curricular areas. The very few times in which any linguistic preoccupation showed up in the activities were diluted when teachers made their aims explicit, because they only referred to the intention of having students make the intended meaning and of evaluating their abilities; they were also absent when teachers made it clear that they act intuitively:

> *"To see if children have really developed... so that they understand the message of texts" (Teacher3).*

> *"Well, probably I also do that intuitively.(...) My academic development would still have a lot to receive. (...) I think it is my innate tendency towards language issues (...). That is, when I am preparing the question I am not thinking, it comes out naturally. Academically, this is not very 'favourable' for me, because things just come out this way, naturally. It is intuitive" (Teacher4).*

That is, teachers do not seem to recognize that there is any linguistic object to be learned at all. This was also evident in the analyses that teachers made of students' literacy difficulties, because no mention was made to any linguistic reasons at all. Besides, the solutions for those problems (in the limited cases where teachers admitted the possibility of solving them) consist basically in an insistence in the contents to be learned. Last, in no moment was there any intention to promote any kind of transformed practice that was linguistically informed, another clear sign of the invisibility of language for these teachers. In spite of the concerns with situating those practices in children's interests and in spite of the (now) clear concern with organizing those moments collaboratively and (sometimes) around a concrete aim, these activities focused exclusively in the contents of texts and in the programmatic contents.

The data revealed some possible explanations for this generalized invisibility of language in their literacy conceptions and practices. Besides other moments in the interview like the one exemplified above, where teachers spontaneously referred to their theoretical back up, teachers showed a quite limited knowledge of the linguistic processes of meaning construction when asked to think about the linguistic object that was evaluated in the test.

Accordingly, it was no surprise to realize that language was never referred to as an object of critical analysis. The only consistent critical preoccupation was focused on the contents of texts and it was found in the words of one teacher alone. Clearly, her critical stance was not so much determined by the official recommendations, which are very sparse, as by her own life experience and political points of view:

> *"I belong to a generation that lived the 25th April in Portugal [a revolution against fascism]. My education was influenced by the fundamentalist Christian church and then by the extreme left winged movements. The symbiosis of both influences made me like this" (Teacher4).*

In the other teachers' discourse, reference was only found to literacy activities with socializing intentions, therefore not challenging the status quo represented by texts.

To sum up, these teachers' pedagogy did in fact differ from the kind of pedagogy that we assumed to be the most adequate to promote the learning of literacy, thus not creating the necessary zone of proximal development of children's literacy needs as would be expected. It was possible to conclude that these teachers' pedagogy clearly act in a elitist rather than in a democratising way, as it seems to benefit those students that bring to school a tacit knowledge of school language. Above and beyond teachers' literacy and pedagogical education, another explanation was found to this state of affairs in the official guidelines concerning the teaching of literacy, because many conceptions and instances of activities suggested by the teachers were a faithful reverberation of the guidelines they find in those documents. In other words, the limitation in these teachers' pedagogy of literacy seems to be a consequence of the limitation they find in those same documents.

Literacy teaching and learning contexts in Portuguese primary schools: conclusions

The main conclusion that emerged by bringing back together the results of the analysis of both sub-units was that *the literacy teaching and learning contexts that were studied indeed showed a lack of continuity (or intersection) between students' linguistic needs in the process of making meanings with the language of the texts used in school and the pedagogical practices carried out by their teachers, which are not conceived of nor implemented in an adequate manner to carry out such linguistic teaching*. That is to say, the pedagogical contexts that were studied did not turn up to be contexts of true scaffolding of literacy learning.

Educational importance of the study

On the whole, these results empirically corroborated the theoretical propositions that sustained the research in the first place. Being a multiple case study research, no external generalization of the results to all the contexts of literacy teaching and learning in primary schools in Portugal was aspired after. Accordingly, the most important breakthrough of the research was the validation, and, thus, generalization (Yin, 1994), of a theoretical framework on (the pedagogy of) literacy, and the subsequent unlocking of paths of future research and field intervention.

The theoretical framework is clearly structured into an *object* of learning as well as *a mode of literacy learning*. The focal point of such theory is the elevation of language to the centre of the discussion about the (pedagogy of) literacy. It assumes that the language that is used in the texts at school is irrefutably singular, and that the successful school learning depends on the learning of that linguistic singularity. It further assumes that such an object is best learned when it is learned according to a definite set of pedagogical principles sustained by socio-constructive and critical theories. A natural consequence of these assumptions is the statement that the difficulties in literacy learning are due to the implementation of an inadequate pedagogy of school language, one that does not scaffold students' learning of the singularity of language at all. The research that was herein described amply supported this last assumption, although parallel backing was given to the singularity of language of schooling too.

Nevertheless, as Robert Yin (1994:36) states, "[a] theory must be tested through replications of the findings in (other) contexts where the theory has specified that the same results should occur". The number and the contexts studied in this research were still very limited, thus making it necessary to extend the research domains in the first place. Besides, the research was necessarily partial, because not all the circumstances implied in the theory were tested. For example, the test applied to students focused on the capacity to make meanings with one linguistic structure in particular, which is very limited; the interview allowed the gathering of data on 'conceptions and reported' practices, and the analysis of the documents produced by teachers gave the idea of some 'potential' practices: an in depth, local look into what actually goes on in the classrooms is now necessary, the best method of research emerging being a different one, namely 'action-research', which will also allow for the testing of the pedagogical ideas assumed in actual contexts together with teachers and students. I believe that then one will be sure that the difficulties of the Portuguese students are in fact due to the factors that are theoretically claimed; hopefully, then one will be able to inform education politics with the intention of improving literacy standards in Portugal.

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