

Adriana Cardoso

Escola Superior de Educação de Lisboa, Centro de Linguística da Universidade de Lisboa (CLUL)

Campus de Benfica do IPL

1549 - 003 Lisboa – Portugal

Tel. (+351) 966 189 466

acardoso@eselx.ipl.pt

Susana Pereira

Escola Superior de Educação de Lisboa, Centro de Linguística da Universidade Nova de Lisboa (CLUNL)

Campus de Benfica do IPL

1549 - 003 Lisboa – Portugal

Tel. (+351) 965 206 945

susanacp@eselx.ipl.pt

Encarnação Silva

Escola Superior de Educação de Lisboa, Centro de Linguística da Universidade Nova de Lisboa (CLUNL)

Campus de Benfica do IPL

1549 - 003 Lisboa – Portugal

Tel. (+351) 963 182 560

esilva@eselx.ipl.pt

Abstract

The article describes an experiment in teaching training undertaken in the context of the Masters programme in Teacher Training (for primary school teachers) at the Lisbon College of Education. The training experiment was able to: (i) incorporate language teaching into the broader curriculum; (ii) relate the teaching of texts and the teaching of grammar; (iii) integrate the theoretical and practical dimensions of teacher training. The didactic scheme adopted relies on theoretical assumptions, such as the concept of the integrated curriculum advocated by Beane (2003), the model of didactic sequence developed, amongst others, by Dolz and Schneuwly (1998), and the principles of Socio-Discursive Interactionism established by Bronckart (1985, 1997).

This training experiment has proved to be particularly useful for all the participants in the process (teachers of the course; trainee teachers; children in the schools, and the form teachers of the classes where the trainees do their practice). As a result of it, there has been a clear improvement in the quality of the teaching provided by our trainees in

the domains of writing and grammar. The main advantages of this approach are that: (i) it structures the teaching of writing and grammar; (ii) it uses projects to socially contextualize writing tasks; (iii) it develops various language skills in an integrated fashion, while at the same time working on different areas of knowledge; (iv) it defines forms of spiral progression.

Keywords: teacher training, didactic sequence, teaching grammar, text genre

Grammar and text: an experiment in teacher training

0. Introduction

This article describes an experiment in teacher training undertaken in the context of the Masters programme in Teacher Training (for primary school teachers) at the Lisbon College of Education (*Escola Superior de Educação de Lisboa*). It focuses on the subject of *Text Grammar*, integrated into the teaching practice that the trainees have to do in their last year of their preliminary training.

This training scheme was motivated by the observation that many of the classroom practices used by the trainees and the teachers in the schools for the teaching of writing and grammar were largely ineffective. These subjects tended to be taught through disconnected activities without any clearly defined pedagogical aim, which produced poor results. Nevertheless, these unsuitable practices continued to be perpetuated in teacher training programmes.

It was thus decided that *Text Grammar* should be approached in conjunction with the discipline of *Supervised Teaching Practice*. The trainees were asked to plan didactic sequences focusing on various text genres, in which different language skills (particularly grammar) would be broached in an integrated manner. These sequences were then implemented during their teaching practice.

This article aims to show that this training experiment was able to: (i) incorporate language teaching into the broader curriculum; (ii) relate the teaching of texts and the teaching of grammar; (iii) integrate the theoretical and practical dimensions of teacher training.

1. Theoretical framework

This training scheme follows the concept of the integrated curriculum advocated by Beane (2003), which seeks to generate multidirectional relationships through a problem-solving approach that emphasises project work, personal experience and the promotion of social and democratic insertion. Integration occurs at two levels: (i) the integration of language learning, particularly at text level, in projects that socially contextualize written material and give them meaning by inserting them into communication circuits; (ii) the integrated development of different linguistic and textual skills, i.e. reading to understand the structure of the text genre in question; reading to understand the text content for use in a subsequent writing task; reading in order to improve writing skills, and for discussion purposes; reflecting about writing and about the linguistic characteristics of the genre in question.

Taking these principles into account, the didactic sequence (cf. Dolz & Schneuwly 1998; Dolz, Noverraz, & Schneuwly 2001; Schneuwly & Dolz 2004) was adopted as the best way of achieving the defined training objectives. According to these authors, the didactic sequence is an organized series of teaching, learning and assessment activities centred on a precise task of oral or written output. It involves a series of carefully staged, interconnected activities, organized as follows (Fig. 1):

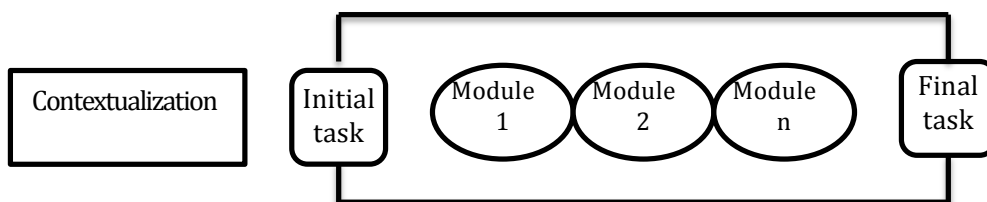


Figure 1. Model of the didactic sequence. Adapted from Dolz and Schneuwly (1998)

In short, this model requires a context, such as a project, which will give meaning to the text genre that is being studied. The students are asked to do an initial oral/writing task in order to test their prior knowledge of the genre and identify any problems they may have with it. These problems are then broached in the various modules of the didactic sequence, after which the pupils are given a final oral/writing task to test the knowledge acquired. Comparison of the initial and final tasks will enable the teacher and students to assess the progress made (cf. Silva, 2010).

This work also draws upon the principles of Socio-Discursive Interactionism established by Bronckart (1985, 1997), and the notion of text genre inherited from Voloshinov (1972) and reworked by Marcuschi (2008), amongst others.

2. Stages in the training scheme

The trainees do their teaching practice in classrooms with children at different levels of primary education. This initial teaching practice is organized into two stages: an observation stage followed by a practice stage.

During the observation stage, the trainees think up projects that could be of interest to the groups of students with whom they will work. They select one and, with our support, identify the text genre that could be developed within it. Then they proceed to implement the initial writing task.

From the lesson observations and written output, they will then prepare a five-phase assignment.

Phase 1: Class description: The data collected in the classroom is used to characterize the pupils' linguistic and textual competence. This analysis, which is

carried out with the support of the teachers of the *Text Grammar* course, is essential to define the modules that make up the didactic sequence.

Phase 2: Genre description: The trainees explore the characteristics of the genre that they are going to teach, making use of the theoretical knowledge acquired over the course of their initial training.

Phase 3: Planning the didactic sequence: This includes a detailed description of the materials and activities required for each module. In addition to the principles mentioned in Section 1, the didactic sequence must also include: (i) a grammar laboratory⁶ in one of the modules (cf. Costa, Cabral, Santiago, & Viegas, 2011; Pereira, 2010); (ii) anticipated progress, suggesting contents and activities that could be developed in previous and subsequent years of schooling using a spiral approach (Chartrand, 2008).

Phase 4: Implementing the didactic sequence: During their initial teaching practice, the trainees will apply the didactic sequence under supervision.

Phase 5: Reflection: In the feedback phase, the trainees reflect upon the implementation of the didactic sequence in the classroom and upon the impact of the whole training experience on their professional development.

3. Final remarks

This training course has proved to be particularly useful for all the participants in the process: teachers of the *Text Grammar* course; trainee teachers; children in the schools, and the form teachers of the classes where the trainees do their practice. As a result of it, there has been a clear improvement in the quality of the teaching provided by our trainees in the domains of writing and grammar.

The main advantages of this approach are that: (i) it structures the teaching of writing and grammar; (ii) it uses projects to socially contextualize writing tasks; (iii) it develops various language skills in an integrated fashion, while at the same time working on different areas of knowledge; (iv) it defines forms of spiral progression.

Finally, the approach did have some drawbacks. The trainees had problems thinking up integrated activities, mobilizing their theoretical and methodological knowledge in the classroom situation, and linking the teaching of text dynamics with the teaching of grammar. Moreover, the teachers at the host institution sometimes raised objections, believing the didactic sequences to be too time-consuming for the teaching of textual genre (indeed, these teachers generally had difficulties understanding the advantages of this approach to the teaching of writing skills).

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¹ The primary school corresponds to the 1st and 2nd cycles of the Portuguese school system (i.e. children between the ages of 6 and 12).

² In the grammar laboratory module, the trainees have to select language features that are relevant for the text genre in question and construct a sequence of activities with the following stages: (i) observation and manipulation of data; (ii) identification of patterns and regularities; (iii) systematization. After this focus task (cf. Camps, 2006), they are also asked to think of ways of making the students use this knowledge in comprehension and production tasks centred on examples of the genre in question.