Echoes through Portuguese: teaching practices in Portuguese language curriculum development

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1. Introduction - The restructured curriculum for the Timorese general secondary education (RCGSE) introduced new teaching and learning approaches, tools and materials, such as textbooks and teachers' guides, and also the Portuguese as language of instruction [1]. This need for restructuring emerged from a historical lack of professionalised teachers, in particular, and qualified human resources, in general, that East Timor register during the earlier 21st century [3], [4]. To face this situation, several initiatives have been undertaken in order to qualify human resources, to rebuild schools and to improve the educational levels [5], [6]. A cooperation project between East Timor and Portugal focusing on secondary education was conducted, where new curricular instruments and materials were developed [1], [7]. Additionally, the implementation of RCGSE was followed by in-service teacher training for secondary teachers focused on the new curricular materials and on Portuguese language of instruction [1], [2], [7]. Regarding this scenario, an impact evaluation of the RCGSE is being held by a research project, entitled "Evaluating the impact of restructuring secondary education in East Timor – a study in the context of international cooperation" [2].

Considering the new curriculum orientations [1], a new model of teaching is pursued, where students must be critical and participate in class by questioning or, for instance, developing group work followed by oral presentation. In this context, it seems also important to take into consideration teaching structures and cultures need of change [8], and to emphasise the role of teachers in curriculum development [9]. Additionally, it matters to consider that teachers have different backgrounds and, thus, distinct ways to conceive the curriculum [8], [9].

Some of the theoretical approaches allow us reflect upon this issue from a technical point of view to a critical and reflexive way [10]. In the context of the technical approach, a curriculum is seen as sum of syllabuses [11], [12], where learning constitutes a rigid body of knowledge [11], oriented by a plan of studies [12]. Within this context, pedagogical materials as textbooks emerge as curricular tools for teaching practice. As for the critical and reflexive approach, curriculum development is understood as a process where teaching practice takes a very relevant part [12]. Thus, curriculum development can be seen as a pathway where there is place for learning and development through contextual, scientific and pedagogical interaction between students, knowledge and teachers [12].

Likewise, teaching practice can be conceived under more reproductive approaches or, in the opposite, oriented towards emancipatory perspectives [12], [13], [14]. Also, there are different ways to put teaching in perspective. On one hand, when teaching practice assume an applicative function, where teachers act acratically, mainly by exposing contents in a linear, simplistic and reproductive way [12], they could be seen as technicians [12], [13], [14]. On the other hand, when teachers perform in a more active, reflexive and critical way, recognising the importance of their professional knowledge [14], they become an essential key to advise educational policy, contexts and teaching and learning practices [14].

Regarding this, teachers have an important role in the curriculum development [9], [10]. According to the way that they relate contents, learning and contexts of learning, as much as they conceive teaching and learning, we are able to develop an analysis of their practice as "curriculum-developers", "curriculum-makers" or "curriculum-transmitters" [4].

Within this framework, the present study aims to analyse the teaching practice of the Portuguese language teachers concerning the use of new curricular materials, students' evaluation and new strategies introduced by the RGSE.

2. Method - Addressing the main objective, this case study [15] focuses on a qualitative research supported by a constructivist approach [16]. This paper mobilises data gathered mainly through inquiry by focus group (FG) with six Timorese teachers of the Portuguese language (T), also being prepared to become teacher trainers for this subject. In addition, non-participant observation (O) of Portuguese classes

(PC) was conducted. Data from curricular documents (DA) was also retrieved for the purpose of this study.

In this context, data collected through focus group aims to understand the perceptions of six female teachers of Portuguese language, whom also shared their experiences as teacher trainers. It is important to register that only two of those six teachers studied to become teachers of the Portuguese language. The others hold a bachelor in Biology (two of them) and in Mathematics (the other two). At the moment of the inquiry, they taught in six different schools.

From this group of teachers, two of them were observed during their Portuguese language classes, one from a public school (ES12NOV), and another from a private school (SM). Notes were registered.

Regarding this, data was identified as displayed on the following table.

Table 1. Collecting data techniques and codes

Technique	Codes
Document collecting	DA-PP (program of the subject); DA-TG (teachers' guide)
Inquiry by focus group	FG-T-4.6.14
Direct observation (non-participant) of classes	O-PC-ES12NOV-12.6.14&12.10.14; O-PC-SM-10.6.14

It is important to note that the observation of classes was authorised by teachers and school principals. Under this circumstance, the observation was limited to three classes.

Data was analysed for the purpose of this study regarding three main categories, which emerged from content analysis [17]. Thus, results will be discussed in reference to those categories in order to allow us to analyse, as following, the teaching practice of Portuguese language teachers concerning the use of new curricular materials, teaching strategies and evaluation strategies.

3. Results and Discussion – Regarding the data gathered through focus group of the Portuguese language teachers and teacher trainers, direct observation of classes and curricular documents analysis, we are able to discuss the main results achieved. For that, we will guide our discussion considering: (a) the use of new materials; (b) teachers main teaching strategies mobilised during classes and (c) evaluation strategies used.

(a) Use of new materials

Regarding the orientations from curricular plan [1], teachers' guides and textbooks should constitute some of the main materials for teachers to prepare and deliver classes. Nevertheless, teachers should not be confined to these materials, as the new reform also introduces teaching strategies based on a more constructivist way of teaching (DA-PP). So, teachers should continue to update their strategies as much as improving and mobilising different types of pedagogical resources (DA-PP; DA-TG).

Participants confirm that, when the materials are available in schools, they use to use them. For instance, the curricular plan and program of Portuguese subject is mainly used to consult, as much as teachers feel that guidance is needed, and to prepare classes (FG-T-4.6.14). Concerning textbooks and teachers' guide, they affirm to use it frequently to prepare and deliver classes, particularly the textbooks as it constitutes the everyday class resource (FG-T-4.6.14). Also, teachers' guide is seen as a very important material because with it teachers are able to prepare structured classes, and oriented for the main goals of this subject (FG-T-4.6.14). Complementarily, in the textbooks they can find all the contents to be worked during the secondary education (FG-T-4.6.14). Thus, teachers find it the most important resource for teaching and learning process, and they follow it "step by step"[1] (FG-T-4.6.14). This way of conceiving the curriculum and its materials, as we analyse forward, can have a direct influence on teachers teaching strategies.

Through direct observation of classes, we were able to see that teachers follow the contents exposed in the textbook, but we were also able to see that they use likewise other pedagogical resources, e.g., as grammar copies (O-PC-ES12NOV-12.6.14&12.10.14). We were also able to notice, during the focus

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[1] Translated from the original "passo a passo".

group and through observation of classes, some of the difficulties that teachers show in speaking and understanding Portuguese.

(b) Teaching strategies

Through documental analyses, we are able to characterise teaching and learning orientations, particularly in relation to teaching strategies and use of new tools and materials. In this context, a new constructivist approach is introduced, where students are asked to be more actively participant in the learning process and teachers help them to do it so, by providing supported guidance through teaching (DA-PP; DA-TG). Activities like debates, group working, students' oral presentations, exposition of contents, questioning, are pursued by the curriculum for secondary education (DA-PP) as some of the teaching and learning strategies. In this context, teachers affirm to mobilise "oral exposition, reading, resolution of activities from the textbook, text reading, text dictation and oral questioning"[2] (FG-T-4.6.14).

Despite this, all six participants found themselves with the dilemma of knowing the significance of some strategies on learning and facing the difficulty of its implementation in classes with a large number of students: "in a class with 50, 60, 70 students it is difficult to implement these strategies"[3] (FG-T-4.6.14).

In classes of the Portuguese language, we were able to see some of the teaching strategies mobilised by the teachers. Apart from being familiarised with the new curricular orientations (FG-T-4.6.14), teachers seem to keep putting themselves at the centre of the teaching and learning process, namely by giving classes through oral exposition of contents, supported on the textbooks and by reading or copying contents in the board (O-PC-ES12NOV-12.6.14&12.10.14; O-PC-SM-10.6.14).

(c) Evaluation strategies

Teachers start to use different types and instruments to evaluate their students. They seem to be aware of the different ways to evaluate activities. There are those linked to a more summative way, and the ones that have a formative function. As teachers mention, there are "summative, formative and diagnostic evaluation"[4] (FG-T-4.6.14), as exposed in the curricular materials (DA-PP; DA-TG). Teachers affirm to evaluate their students regarding this three ways of evaluation. Nevertheless, they also emphasise that the use of this kind of evaluation depends on the difficulties that they find in everyday classes – e.g., large number of students per class, lack of a grounded school leadership and infrastructures, which appear in the curriculum as crucial in terms of pedagogical methodology [1]. Apart from that, teachers understand the importance of tools such as "observation guides [or] checklists"[5] (FG-T-4.6.14), but find it hard to implement. In terms of the dimensions to evaluate, teachers affirm to consider students' behaviour, attendance and class participation (FG-T-4.6.14), which emerge from the curricular documents (DA-PP; DA-TG). Also, they affirm to evaluate student's oral and writing performance, and refer to mobilise the accomplishment of students in tests and exams, resolution of activities from the textbook and oral participation (FG-T-4.6.14).

Despite this, we were able to confirm that tests and exams, instruments likewise explored by the curricular documents to evaluate the students (DA-PP; DA-TG), continue to be the strategy that teachers mobilise the most (FG-T-4.6.14). Teachers also show to have a particular concern about final exams (FG-T-4.6.14; O-PC-ES12NOV-12.6.14&12.10.14; O-PC-SM-10.6.14).

Furthermore, Portuguese language teachers seem to recognise value of the teaching strategies introduced by the RGSE but show some resistance to put them into practice, mostly because of the difficulties that they find in everyday class. They also present some curricular and didactical flaws, a fact that could be justified by the high levels standards of Portuguese to be taught (FG-T-4.6.14)and the lack of a proper training for teachers who are teaching Portuguese (O-PC-ES12NOV-12.6.14&12.10.14; O-PC-SM-10.6.14).

4. Conclusions - Results helped us to analyse the teaching practice of Portuguese language teachers concerning the use of new curricular materials, students' evaluation and new strategies introduced by the

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[2] Translated from the original "exposição oral, leitura, resolução de fichas do manual, leitura dos textos do manual, ditados e questionamento oral".

[3] Translated from the original "[n]uma turma com 50, 60, 70 alunos é difícil implementar estas estratégias".

[4] Translated from the original "avaliação diagnóstica, formativa e sumativa".

[5] Translated from the original "grelhas de observação [ou] listas de verificação".

RGSE. They allow us to primarily conclude that teachers start to mobilise curricular materials to plan and deliver classes, mainly to transmit the curricular contents, and keep using traditional evaluation strategies and instruments. Nevertheless, they still face some school organizational problems and curricular and didactical flaws. Despite some signs of change, more in-service teacher training might be carried out to help teachers to evolve from curriculum transmitters to curriculum developers [9] and to support them through these times of change in their professional knowledge and development [8].

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