SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PORTUGUESE PRIMARY SCHOOL - SOME LEGAL NOTES

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Abstract

Recent years have shown that immigration policies, on one hand, and globalisation, on the other hand, have changed the way we interact with people from other cultures.

Portuguese schools have been one of the first places to integrate newcomers and to find new ways of dealing with different cultures and foreign languages. Teachers, non-teaching staff and pupils were, at one time, the pioneers in finding new educational, social competences to integrate children that talked different languages. Besides, schools were also the first institutions to feel the needs for new communicational and linguistic tools in children. This is to say, schools were the first formal contexts where the need for new linguistic competences was indeed embraced.

Later, legislation was produced in order to organise the different practices that were already spread through the country schools.

Particularly, laws were made to legislate the integration of children who were attending Portuguese schools although they were not Portuguese native speakers. At the time, there were immigrants coming from Portuguese speaking countries but also from China or from the East of Europe and language was really an issue. Simultaneously, English emerged as the language spoken in Europe, as a cultural language, as the language for business. Older Portuguese students had weak fluency in English. Something had to be done at an earlier age. Some projects had already been implemented successfully but they were "unofficial". English teaching became legally suitable in primary schools. The legislation produced translated the philosophy and the conception of multiculturalism and multilingualism as important tools to live peacefully in a global society.

In this paper, I want to contextualise the laws that have been produced and explain what is being done in primary schools in English language teaching and in Portuguese Language as a foreign language teaching.

Keywords: Primary Schools, Language Teaching, Legislation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Using a language is basically a matter of communication. Thus, it is communication that we should be fostering in Language Teaching classes. By analysing the general context of language teaching in Portugal, there is a question that we must ask to ourselves: Why are there so many situations of failure, demotivation and lack of interest in language learning? As a matter of fact, the process of learning and teaching at school, so often failed, is opposed to the results of the natural process of mother tongue acquisition, most of the times well-succeeded, despite the different cultural, social or familiar backgrounds of the speakers. Such different results must be related to some circumstances and vicissitudes that arise from different contact situations.

During the first two initial years of our childhood in which we are in permanent contact with our mother tongue, there are, in my opinion, three key elements that characterise this process: contextualization and experience, repetition and the will or need to communicate. As it is known, babies learn from experience and they can give themselves to the exercise of exploring the world and acquiring knowledge. They get to know their body, the family, the daily life, facial expressions, sounds, intonations. In school context, the success in learning a language is connected to vocabulary memorisation or grammar practice that are taught and rewarded by school marks. The personal relation of affection and the ideal comprehension between the teacher and the student are sometimes diluted in the exceeding number of children in the classroom; the positive motivation cracks under a compulsory programme that has to be followed. The contextualization of a language is reduced to the

manual, to the exercise book and the language practice is lowered to a few meaningless grammar exercises.

Apparently, children acquire their mother tongue, or even other languages, in a quite easy way. In most of the cases, children learn languages in contact with other speakers, adults, peers. All these, in the process of communication, hesitate, repeat themselves, make mistakes, rephrase, interrupt each other… and, in any case, children can get a fluent level of the language. On the other hand, however, adults rarely get to a native-like level of a second language. For instance, when adults migrate to another country, or when adults need to learn a language due to professional reasons, the fluency and even the accent tend to tell they are not, in fact, native speakers of that language. So, we should make the question: what is so different in these two situations?

The Portuguese school system is now updated as far as language teaching is concerned. Language theory, methodologies and approaches in language learning have transformed the way language classes are set in the curricula. Some social changes, such as migratory movements or the acknowledgement of the need to communicate in a business language, have forced the politicians and the regulators to legislate about the new required competences.

Portuguese is the language that is used to communicate knowledge and science at school. Maths, Science, History… all subjects use Portuguese as the instructional language. However, there are some students that do not have Portuguese as their native language and, consequently, this generally means their fluency is compromised. Additionally, English fluency is a tool the market requires. Business, science and universities use this language as a sort of *lingua franca*. Hence, the need to teach this subject during more years.

2   DEVELOPMENT AND RESULTS

The capacity to understand, produce, manipulate the language is a distinctive characteristic of humans when compared to other animals. However, this characteristic is not easily studied, especially because it involves a system that is hardly dissected. All the production and comprehension of language involves diverse periods and steps with different neurological representations. For example, in a psycholinguistic model of representing speech production, we can describe four steps: the intention of communicating, the conceptualization, the semantic and syntactic codification and the production. We can infer that in a speech made in a foreign language, we can also find similar steps that can be slower in their progress in comparison to mother tongue considering the lack of contact and social stimuli.

The contexts of learning – and using - languages are varied. However, it is also possible to establish some similitudes in these different contexts. The formal teaching system of a non-native language does not include, traditionally, a close social contact or a dominant emotional interaction, as opposite to what happens during the acquisition of a mother tongue. Probably, for this reason, it is possible to find several variations of teaching models in school contexts. The experience of a linguistic and cultural immersion can be an extra motivation, but it can also be a social obstacle in situation of unsuccessful social integration. The right option for suitable methodologies or approaches to the objectives of the learning/teaching process as well as some flexibility in the adaptation to the learners constitute powerful resource in teaching. In general terms, the methodology used in second language teaching can be defined as a set of procedures that are explained and supported by some background settings. Methodology is an expression that shows a pedagogy of a language and that can, simply, refer to the way we teach a language. Approach, on the other hand, is a wider concept. It implies beliefs, supports and theoretical principles and, from a practical point of view, direct experiments in classrooms and in all teaching and learning dimensions. The syllabus, the curricula, the programs, the teaching materials even the assessment are directly connected to the approach.

Language serves communication: at home, at school or work, in the street, in all the social cultural environments of human interaction. A language has its fundamentals in identity, be it national, religious, ethical and so forth. Consequently, teaching a foreign or second language is much more than passing crystalized linguistic knowledge. Teaching a language implies developing integrational and comprehensive attitudes towards different languages and cultures, it involves the expansion of linguistic resources with the students and the affirmation of a motivation connected with human, cultural and linguistic learning.

English has been slowly introduced in primary schools in Portugal. It started as a non-compulsory area in school. Although in the beginning it was not compulsory as far as attendance is concerned, it was a

compulsory offer from the point of view of official primary schools. This is to say: all primary schools had to offer English classes even if children were not forced to attend them. It was a free offer. Initially, in 2005 (Despacho inº 14 753/2005), the Program of Generalization of English Teaching in 3rd and 4th years of schooling considered learning English as an essential process of the construction of a multilingual and multicultural conscience. The concept was developed according to the spirit of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language. It was supposed that this offer would increase the interest of learning this language during the subsequent years. In the long term, the fluency in English could improve the economical competitivity of Portuguese workers in an international scale. The implementation of programs of second language teaching has been arising some interest in academic level. It is particularly discussed the concepts that support these legal changes. On one hand, there are the defenders of the perspective of sensitization. On the other, the supporters of a more formal approach to learning. Both concepts follow different ways. From the point of view of application, sensitization has more general objectives, with the aim of creating social and affective bonds with a language and a culture. A more formal approach is more focused in the development of purely linguistic competences. A close analysis to the Portuguese Program of Generalization of English Teaching from 2015 shows some principles that are, in my point of view, nearer a sensitization program, namely as far as the construction of a multilingual conscience towards citizenship is concerned. However, it simultaneously shows an effective concern with learning the English Language, defining clear instrumental objectives. It seems that the next step would be to follow a more formal path in the future. The next Summer, in 2006 (Despacho 12 591/2006), English classes in official primary schools became compulsory in all schools although it was still not a mandatory subject. Being so, a new challenge was set: all children may attend English classes in their 3rd or fourth year of schooling but they do not have to. Some families, for different reasons, did not register their children in these English classes and, as a result, in the following years – the 5th and the 6th – teachers had to face classes that were very heterogeneous: some children had already had two years of contact with the English Language, some others were simply in the early beginning. More recently, in December 2014, the Ministry of Education decided to create new curricula and syllabus for all the official English classes, starting with the introduction of mandatory English classes in the last two years of primary schools.   The basic idea for this change was to consolidate the changes already introduced and to assure more coherence to all study cycles. Currently, the children officially start mandatory English learning in the 3rd year of primary school and must have, at least, seven years of this contact, improving their levels of proficiency from A1 to C1 in the end of compulsory schooling.

The official document *Currículo Nacional do Ensino Básico* describes the main competences in languages. The capacities and skills are organized under different competences that vary with the study cycle and the schooling year. In this context, the competences defined for primary schools are significant. A linguistic competence is, at this point, defined as the appropriation of organized knowledge that is included in a culture and a people's identity but also as the capacity to use strategically linguistic resources in a real communicative situation. Linguistic competence implies a metacognitive capacity and the recognition that languages are in permanent evolution and in constant interaction with the way individuals behave and live in society. Furthermore, this legal document demonstrates the concern with the need to articulate and integrate language teaching with all the other areas of basic education, especially in the paragraphs that deal with the general competences of the curriculum and the competences that are specific to languages. Stimuli and trust are key words in the documents made by the Ministry of Education. The process of language teaching is to be centered in the promotion of an affective relation with the second language itself and opportunities of motivating communicative learning situations must be granted to learners in general.

In the first paragraphs that introduce the guiding principles of the specific competences of second language learning it is defended that schools must be open and welcoming to different ways of being and of living. This concern recognizes the existence of some children coming from different cultures and the need to prepare ourselves, as a community, to linguistic and cultural diversity. All the recent and current migratory movements, as response to social turbulence and new markets demands, have changed the paradigms at school. In Portugal, in 1986 a new law was produced, the so-called *Lei de Bases do Sistema Education* (Law of the Basis for can Educational System). At the time, there was already some sensitivity towards language and diversity, specially concerning the different knowledges and cultures (Article 3).

The document, *Português Língua Não Materna no Currículo nacional – Documento Orientador* (Portuguese as a non-native Language – Guiding Document) was produced in July 2005. The main aim was to foster the learning condition of children to whom Portuguese was not their Mother Tongue. This document was made in a context of reorganization of school management system in 2001. It

presents a diagnostic of the Portuguese situation at that time. According to this work, in 2005, there were ninety thousand students that spoke Portuguese as a second language and that, therefore, were not considered native-speaking citizens. In the document, some objectives are pointed in order to begin the socialization process of children coming from other countries but integrated in the Portuguese system of Education. All the children who do not speak Portuguese as their native language are targeted in this document, even if they were already born in Portugal (because their parents were immigrants). The basic concept of this is to assume the school as a place where integration can take place, where active intercultural and democratic knowledge can really happen (*Português Língua Não Materna no Currículo nacional – Documento Orientador:6).* The lack of proficiency in Portuguese Language is a real obstruction to a successful social integration of the pupils as well as a handicap in acceding all the subjects taught, as they are studied in Portuguese Language. The needs revealed by this group of learners are outlined within three distinct levels: linguistic level, curricular level or social level. Culturally, a Mother Tongue is associated to a culture, to a legacy, a History and some traditions. When we do not share the same language, most likely, we do not share all the culture, History or tradition. In the development of the socialization process of these children, there is a team that has to assess the level of proficiency of the students. The Diagnostic test is made by a specific office of the Ministry. The test assesses the competences in spoken comprehension, reading, spoken and written Portuguese Language. The team is composed by the class teacher and second language teachers. After this test, the students are placed in groups of proficiencies according to the Common European Reference Framework. Through classes of Portuguese, pupils will eventually reach higher levels of proficiency. In addition to the language classes, the program supposes that the language is to be learnt in a context of immersion and cooperation (*Português Língua Não Materna no Curriculo nacional – Documento Orientador p13-14).* The basic principles of this philosophy of integration perceive schools as places of socialization and cooperation, schools of opportunities that are equal to all, as opposed to a school of exclusion. Multilingualism and interculture are key words of the concept. More recently, in 2006, another legal document (*Despacho Normativo de 7/2006*) integrates teaching Portuguese as a second language in the school curriculum.

3   CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis of the competences of Portuguese as a non-native language and English as a second language described in Portuguese legal documents, we can highlight the idea that a language is a unique agent of social and cultural values. These values can never be disregarded when a language is taught, either when we teach a majority language or a minority language. On the other hand, we are pleased to know that a language is theoretically approached in a relation that is transversal and multicultural in the scope of all the other school subjects. The school is the main place where a language is formally taught and this function implies other functions and responsibilities of an extraordinary significance. Whether we refer to Portuguese as the school instructional language, whether we refer to English as sort of *lingua franca*, both languages are proximate due to the human worth they represent. In Portuguese official documents, languages are a passport of tolerance as they are a means to access knowledge and to communicate human, social and cultural values from Europe and the entire world. Any language contains a spelling, syntactic and morphological code but also a cultural code that reveals itself as essential to a fluent and effective communication. The European Commissioner of Multilingualism sees language teachers as cultural ambassadors. Cultural competences are as important as linguistic ones. Culture is not far from language. In conclusion, we can say that the linguistic choices we make as speakers as cultural choices also that identify who we are and where we want to go as communities.

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