

## Changes in Portuguese language education in high school from the teachers' standpoint

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### INTRODUCTION

In Portugal, the curriculum framework that emerged from the Secondary Education Curricular Restructuring (1997–2006) embodies significant changes in both curriculum design and syllabi in Portuguese language education. The existing disciplines (Portuguese A, for Humanities; Portuguese B, for Science, Arts and Economics) were replaced by Portuguese Language for all students. Moreover, the Portuguese Language syllabus (Coelho, 2002) follows a trend of transformations in the Area<sup>1</sup>:

- 1) *a progressively more complex conception of the disciplines (...), visible in the increased differentiation and structuring of their various “fields”: reading, writing, etc.;*
- 2) *the displacement from a normative conception (...) to a more “developmental” one;*
- 3) *the redefinition of the structuring nuclei of the discipline that accompanies the shift from “knowledge” to “skills”, affecting the status and functions of “literature” and “grammar”. (Castro, 2007: 97).*

In transforming policy to practice, teachers must travel a considerable distance as they (re)write the official discourse (Bernstein, 1994). This process involves “acquiring new knowledge (...), acquiring new skills (...), or developing new attitudes and values” (Morais & Medeiros, 2007: 66) and is influenced by several instances of pedagogical discourse (experts, the media, textbooks...). It depends on teachers', students', and parents' ideas and features, schools' physical and material conditions, time available... (Ferraz, 2002; Kleiman, 2006; Santomé, 2000), and is not identical between teachers (Ball & Lacey, 1982; Goodwyn & Findlay, 2002; Nystrand et al., 1997) or countries (Carlgren, 2002).

Studies show teachers tend to resist changes they find complex, conceptual or longitudinal (Duffy & Roehler, 1986), they consider unclear, irrelevant or inappropriate; emotionally or intellectually demanding; time and energy consuming (Doyle & Ponder, 1977–78); unenforceable, given schools' conditions, students' characteristics or time available (Ducros & Finkelstein, 1990). On the other hand, teachers tend to embrace changes they find are needed, useful and for which they are given necessary support (Day, 2001).

Our research aimed at understanding the ways in which teachers and students from the Portuguese Archipelago of Azores (re)interpret the curricular changes in the Area (Mira Leal, 2008) in terms of:

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<sup>1</sup> More information on these changes can be found in Mira Leal (2006; 2008) and Castro (2007).

1. their representations of teaching practices before the curricular changes;
2. their representations of the aims, content and methodologies language education should pursue;
3. teachers' awareness and participation in the restructuring movement;
4. teachers' ideas and opinions about the changes in the Area;
5. the interactions between teachers as they (re)interpret the Portuguese Language syllabus and prepare their lessons;
6. students' representations of teaching practices after the curricular changes.

The study included questionnaire surveys to teachers and students from the largest Azorean island (S. Miguel); interviews with Portuguese Language teachers from S. Miguel; the analysis of teachers' reports on the 2 first years of implementation of Portuguese Language syllabus in the Archipelago; and a case study in a secondary school involving the analysis of lesson plans and assessment instruments, in which teachers were observed as they discussed the syllabus and prepared lessons, and their students' perceptions of teaching practices<sup>2</sup>.

We here share data concerning the question, How did teachers monitor the curricular restructuring? What changes did they identify in the Area? How did they judge those changes?

### HOW DID TEACHERS MONITOR THE CURRICULAR RESTRUCTURING?

Most teachers we studied did not join the public discussion regarding curricular changes in the Area. Nor did they show much curiosity or expectation concerning those changes, despite all the information available and the public controversy on the subject<sup>3</sup>: only 4% indicate participation in a forum online; 24% say they simply took a quick look on the new syllabus; 56% admit only coming in contact with the syllabus after they realised they would teach it shortly.

Such attitudes may be related to the fact that the heads of department in schools did not encourage discussion on the syllabus (only one in eight did it).

In general, the process of curricular appropriation was individual, occasionally mediated by conversations with colleagues, textbooks or other documents made available by publishers. Teachers who showed more interest on the new curricular framework were either those who clearly resisted it or the ones who accepted it.

### WHAT CHANGES DO TEACHERS IDENTIFY IN THE AREA?

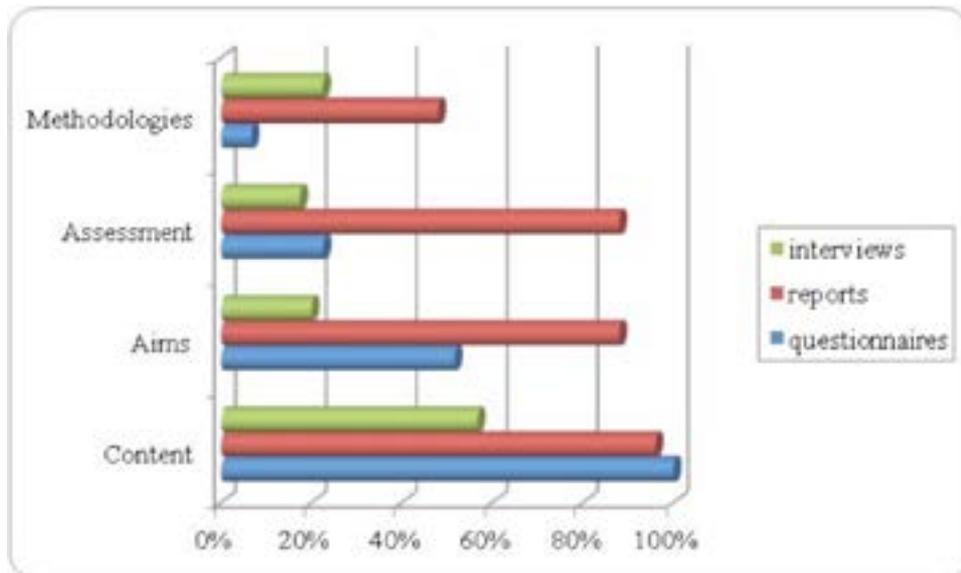
Teachers pay more attention to changes in the syllabus than in curriculum design, and are more conscious of changes in content and assessment than in aims or methodology (Figure 1).

<sup>2</sup> More information on our methodology can be found in Mira Leal (2008).

<sup>3</sup> More information on this controversy can be found in Castro (2001), Bernardes (2005), Branco (2005), and Duarte (2003).

That may relate to an academic tradition that privileged content and the acquisition of knowledge on literature and grammar, or to the controversy concerning changes in the repertoire of literary texts and information about literature.

Figure 1 – Changes teachers identify in the Portuguese Language syllabus



In regard to content, teachers mainly identified: (i) fewer literary texts; ii) less information about Portuguese literature; iii) a functional and critical approach to reading; (iv) the diversification of text types; (v) a new grammar terminology.

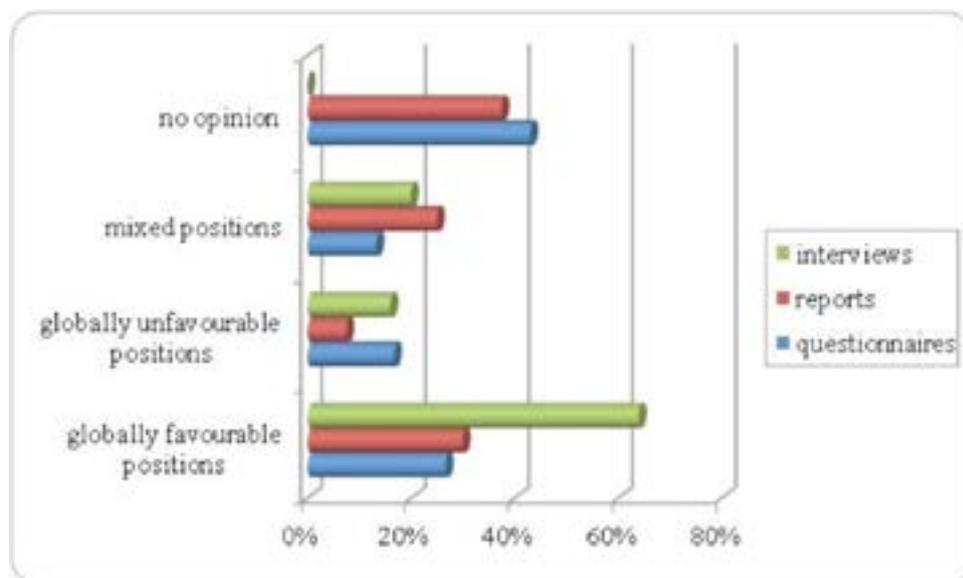
Assessment, however, is sometimes considered ‘the most significant change’ and causes anxiety and insecurity. Teachers identify ‘new’ objects of assessment (‘listening’ and ‘speaking’) and the need to diversify instruments and strategies, aiming a regular and formative assessment of ‘reading’, ‘writing’, ‘listening’, ‘speaking’ and ‘knowledge about language’.

In relation to methodology, teachers focus mostly on: (i) strategies aiming to develop ‘listening’ and ‘speaking’, (ii) grammar use, (iii) ‘process writing’, (iv) ‘contract reading’ of literary or scientific texts chosen by students.

### HOW DO TEACHERS JUDGE THE PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE SYLLABUS?

We can distinguish three types of positions regarding the new syllabus: globally favourable – those who show appreciation and satisfaction, despite some doubts or fears about certain aspects; globally unfavourable – those who express disapproval, although acknowledging positive changes; and mixed – those who do not express an overall opinion, pointing out either positive or negative changes (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Teachers' Opinions on the Portuguese Language syllabus



Contrasting with Poulson, Radnor & Turner-Bisset (1996) and Dionísio et al. (2005), teachers from Azores mostly accepted the new syllabus. There was, however, some tension between what they think is better regarding their students' age, prior knowledge, academic and professional needs and expectations, and their own beliefs and practices.

On the whole, they value the expansion of metalinguistic purposes, listening and speaking practices and 'process writing' from basic (grades 1 to 9) to secondary education (grades 10 to 12). Some already see positive impact from such changes.

They also expect that 'contract reading', the exclusion of medieval poetry and the introduction of additional scientific and functional texts may help students' "intellectual, social and emotional development" (RL1) and get them interested in reading. Some, however, fear students may experience more difficulty in reading and may "devalue" the discipline, judging it too undemanding.

They find the new grammar terminology complex and detached from what students learn in basic school and second language classes. Nevertheless, some say it "helps you work grammar better" (ID5), favours metalinguistic awareness and writing skills.

On the other hand, they approve changes concerning assessment mostly because it gives students an opportunity to succeed:

*I've done two oral assessments and there are two or three students who have better grades listening than writing. (...) before, they would get the grade they got in their written tests. Now I can give them a more appropriate grade. (ID5)*

Globally, teachers reject cutbacks in literary corpora and information about literature; fight functional reading; accuse the syllabus of transforming literature into an object of linguistic and pragmatic analysis, depriving it from its cognitive, symbolic and aesthetic value and depriving students from some cultural backgrounds.

These teachers also find the new grammar terminology “too complex” (RB1) and don’t think it will provide “a solid domain of language or a better understanding of linguistic features and grammar rules” (RD2). Nevertheless, their words are crossed by contradictions that show how sensitive language education policies are and how difficult it is for teachers to deal with changes in the Area: they regret students’ communicational shortcomings, but question communicative approach in the syllabus; some find it too easy for secondary education, others find it too difficult and demanding; some find the new grammar terminology too complex, others say the new approach to grammar is “too elementary” (IB5).

Even though they say ‘contract reading’ may promote students’ interest in reading and ‘process writing’ may “develop writing and logical reasoning” (RB1), they find it difficult to enforce, arising from schools’ lack of physical and material conditions and time available. They also don’t think it is possible to implement changes in assessment: there isn’t enough time to develop a portfolio or assess students’ listening and speaking skills (RB1). Besides, they say national exams “are exclusively written” (ID2) and assess only ‘reading’, ‘writing’ and ‘knowledge about grammar’. This tension shows how difficult it is for them to accept an assessment policy that values equally skills whose relevance they judge to be different in face of previous policies and practices.

Teachers with a mixed position share some of these dilemmas. Even though they value the communicative approach in the syllabus, they regret that it comes at the expense of literary reading and “an historical perspective on Portuguese literature” (QP63). They say the syllabus is too ambitious, and question why the grammar terminology changed for secondary education before it did for basic education: “How can we erase traditional grammar from a student’s memory and replace it by new terms and concepts?” (RS3).

Nevertheless, they say: ‘process writing’ allows “interaction between teachers and students on students’ texts, and individual attention to those who need it” (RP2a); ‘contract reading’ may get students interested in reading and in language classes, which they often resist; a communicative approach to grammar may develop metalinguistic awareness; the reinforcement of ‘listening’ and ‘speaking’ will improve oral skills; the diversification of functional texts meets students’ needs and characteristics; the exclusion of medieval poetry won’t be missed, for it is not essential; the rescheduling of “Os Lusíadas” to grade 12 is good because it is too complex for grade 10.

These teachers say guidelines on assessment are fairer, but some fear it may artificially improve students’ results and undermine Portuguese classes’ relevance (to them as to globally unfavourable teachers, relevance seems related to students’ difficulty to cope).

Even though they don’t express a global position on the syllabus, they mostly share their colleagues’ opinions.

## CONCLUSION

On the whole, our data portrays a widespread lack of participation of teachers in the curricular changes in the Area. Their awareness of curricular changes is mostly built up in action and focuses in the new syllabus, especially changes in content and assessment.

In general, teachers realise the Area is changing from a cultural to a communicative perspective, and even though most of them accept these changes as inevitable and adequate to students' needs and characteristics, they tend to resist those they find intellectually demanding, unclear or inappropriate, and often invoke the time available or schools' physical and material conditions as excuses to reject some changes or judge them as unenforceable.

Ultimately, it all comes down to teachers' ideas on the aims that the Area shall pursue in secondary education and the role literature and reading shall play in that process.

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