

Mother tongue education: What Portuguese language students say they should learn in High School?

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INTRODUCTION

In Portugal, the curricular restructuring initiated in 1997 rejected the subordination of secondary education (grades 10 to 12) to the demands of higher education and acknowledged the need to respond to the increased number of students in high school, their diverse interests, motivations and capabilities (Fernandes, 1998), as well as to pressures to prepare them for socio-cultural and professional life (DES, 1997).

After a long and nation-wide discussion, a new curriculum design was approved in 2001 (Law 7/2001). It introduced significant changes in the curricular design and framework regarding mother tongue education and was later followed, in 2009, by changes in basic education (grades 1 to 9).

The new curricular design presented a new discipline (Portuguese Language) common to all students, replacing the existing disciplines in the Area (Portuguese A, for Humanities; Portuguese B, for Science, Arts and Economics). It was first implemented in 2003/2004.

The Portuguese Language syllabus caused controversy. Personalities from literature and linguistics publically exchanged accusations and arguments. The discussion focused on the 'exclusion' of the most canonical Portuguese text – “Os Lusíadas”, but “it enabled the expression (...) of ideas and representations about the status and the functions of literature in school and, therefore, about the curriculum and school” (Castro, 2007: 101).

The Portuguese Language syllabus challenges a long lasting tradition in which knowledge about literature played a central role. Students had to read a wide range of canonic literary texts and literature was treasured mainly for its cognitive and symbolic value. Aiming to prepare “young citizens towards integration in socio-cultural and professional life” (Coelho, 2002: 4), the Portuguese Language syllabus, on the other hand, establishes “listening”, “speaking”, “writing”, “reading” and “knowledge about language” as “nuclear competencies”, in articulation with various types of texts (idem).

Such controversy demonstrates that there is no consensus on what students should or should not learn in mother tongue classes (Ball & Lacey, 1982; Breen, 1996; Brumfit, 1995; Cox, 1991; Poulson, Radnor and Turner-Bisset, 1996; Sawyer & Van den Ven, 2006). There are “different ‘patterns’ of mother tongue education – patterns in which topics, activities and legitimacy are connected to different conceptions of language and literature. Each pattern can also be characterised as more or less different, albeit often hidden, perspectives on teaching and learning.” (Sawyer & Van den Ven, 2006: 10).

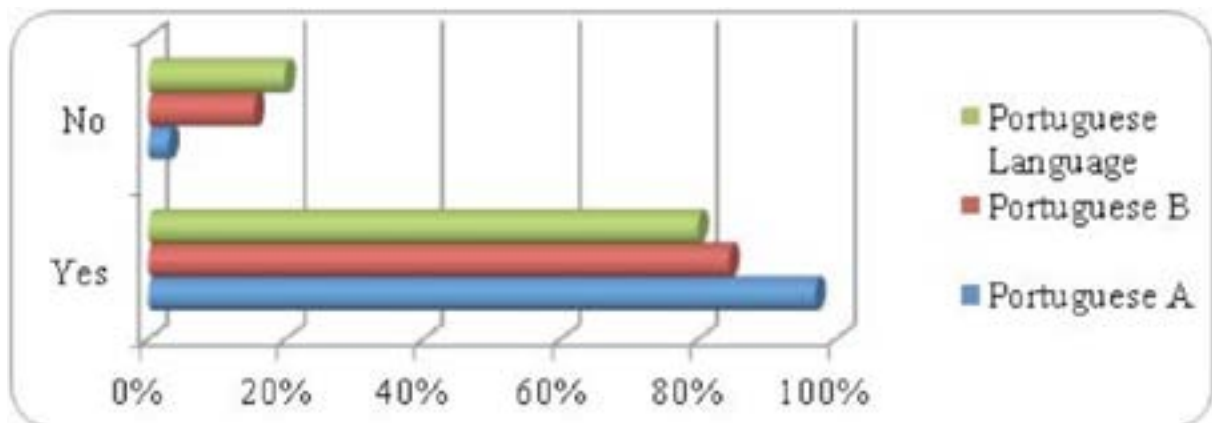
Our research aimed to understand, among other things, high school students' ideas on topics such as: Should Portuguese language classes be compulsory? Why/ Why not? What do students do/learn in Portuguese language classes? What should they do/learn? How are they assessed? How should they be assessed? What characteristics should a Portuguese language teacher have?

Our research took place between 2003 and 2008 in the Portuguese Archipelago of Azores. It involved questionnaire surveys to two samples: first, we surveyed 539 11th grade students (66.5% of the 11th grade students from S. Miguel – the largest island in the Archipelago) enrolled in Portuguese A (18.6%) and Portuguese B (81.4%) – Sample 1; later, we sampled 146 11th and 12th grade students enrolled in Portuguese Language from one of the largest high schools in S. Miguel (81.6% of all 11th and 12th grade students from that school) – Sample 2. Both samples have more girls than boys and students' ages range from 16 to 20.

SHOULD PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE CLASSES BE COMPULSORY?

86.8% of students from Sample 1 and 80.8% from Sample 2 agree that Portuguese language classes should be compulsory in High School (Figure 1). Girls value Portuguese language classes slightly more than boys. There are also slight differences between disciplines and courses (Figure 1). Students who disagree are mostly from Arts (Sample 1) and Science and Technology (Sample 2). Students from Humanities (Sample 1) and Language and Literature (Sample 2) seem to value Portuguese language classes more.

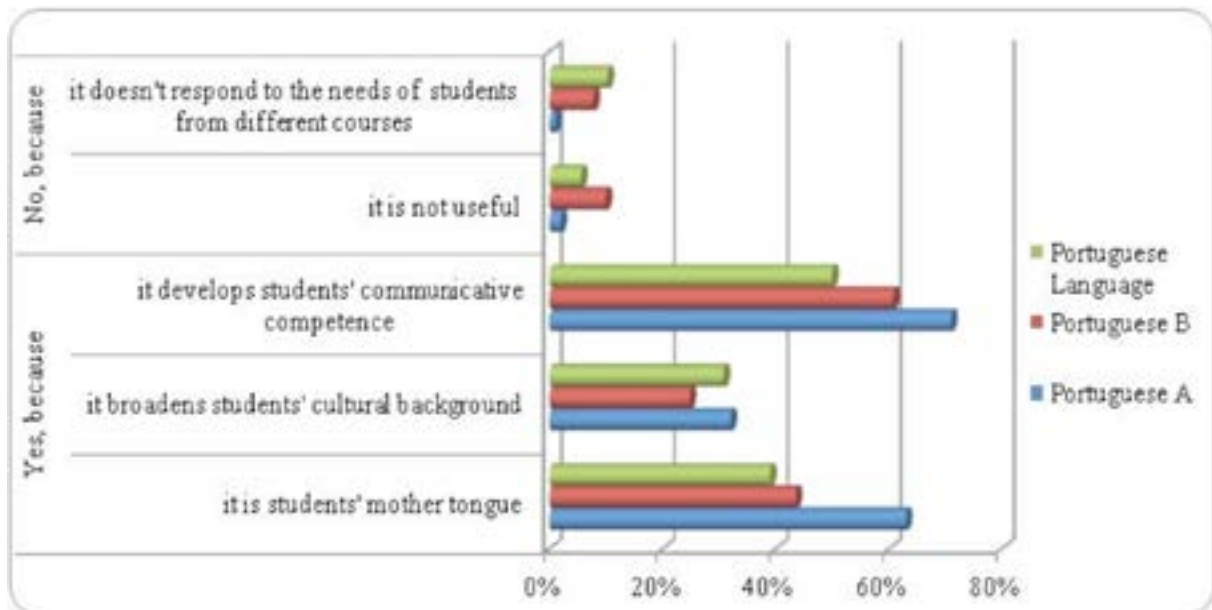
Figure 1 – Students' opinions on whether or not mother tongue classes shall be compulsory



Students judge the relevance of mother tongue classes based mainly on their own learning experiences (Figure 2). Students from Arts (Sample 1 – Portuguese B), Science and Technology and Social and Human Sciences (Sample 2 – Portuguese Language) are more sceptical on the relevance of mother tongue classes. Many say the syllabi are not adequate to their academic and future professional needs. Students from Humanities (Sample 1 – Portuguese A) and Social and Human Sciences (Sample 2 – Portuguese Language) seem more sensitive to identity reasons. Cultural reasons are invoked mostly by students from Humanities (Sample 1) and Science and Technology

(Sample 2). Even though most students underline the importance of mother tongue classes to the development of their communicative competence, it is mostly those from Humanities (Sample 1), Science and Technology, and Natural Sciences (Sample 2) who value mother tongue classes for communicative development. Surprisingly, this is more visible in students from Portuguese A and Portuguese B (Sample 1) than from Portuguese Language (Sample 2), a discipline that embodies communicative principles and aims, contrary to the cultural heritage approach underlying the other two.

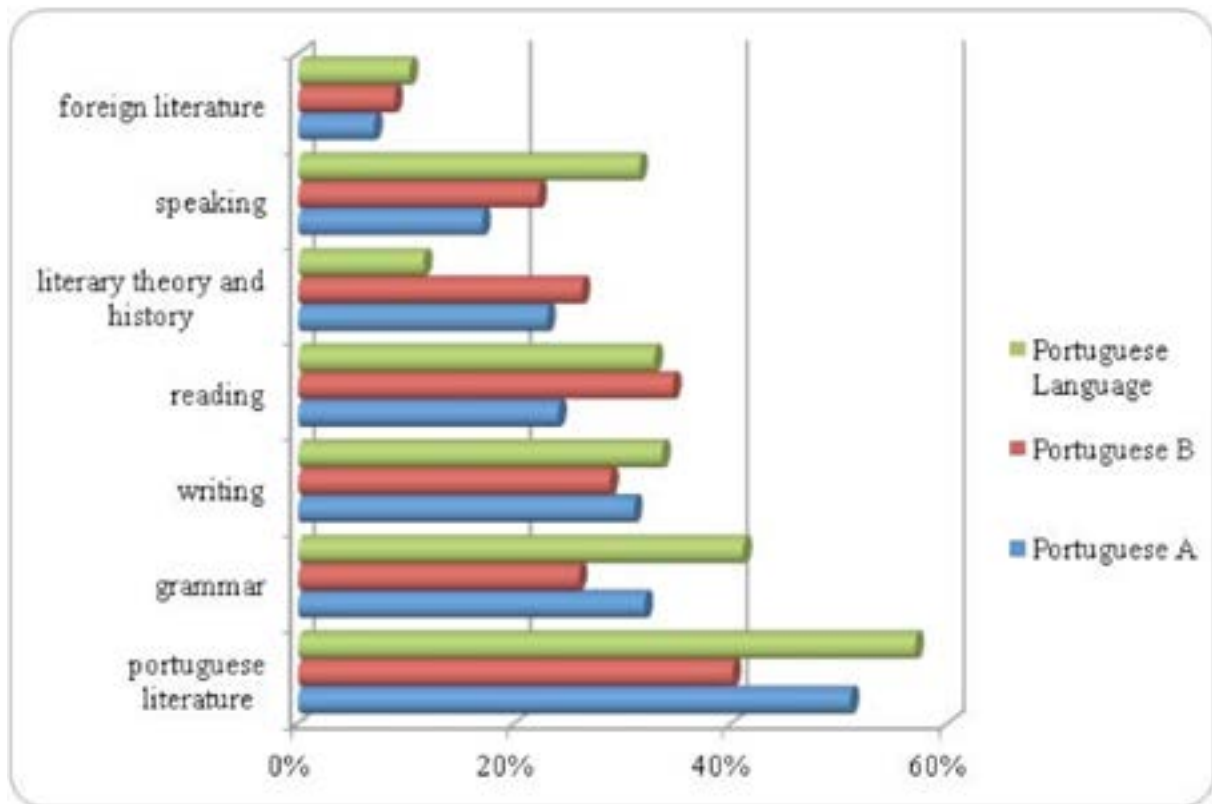
Figure 2 – Students' opinions on why mother tongue classes shall or shall not be compulsory



WHAT DO STUDENTS DO/LEARN IN MOTHER TONGUE CLASSES? WHAT SHOULD THEY DO/LEARN?

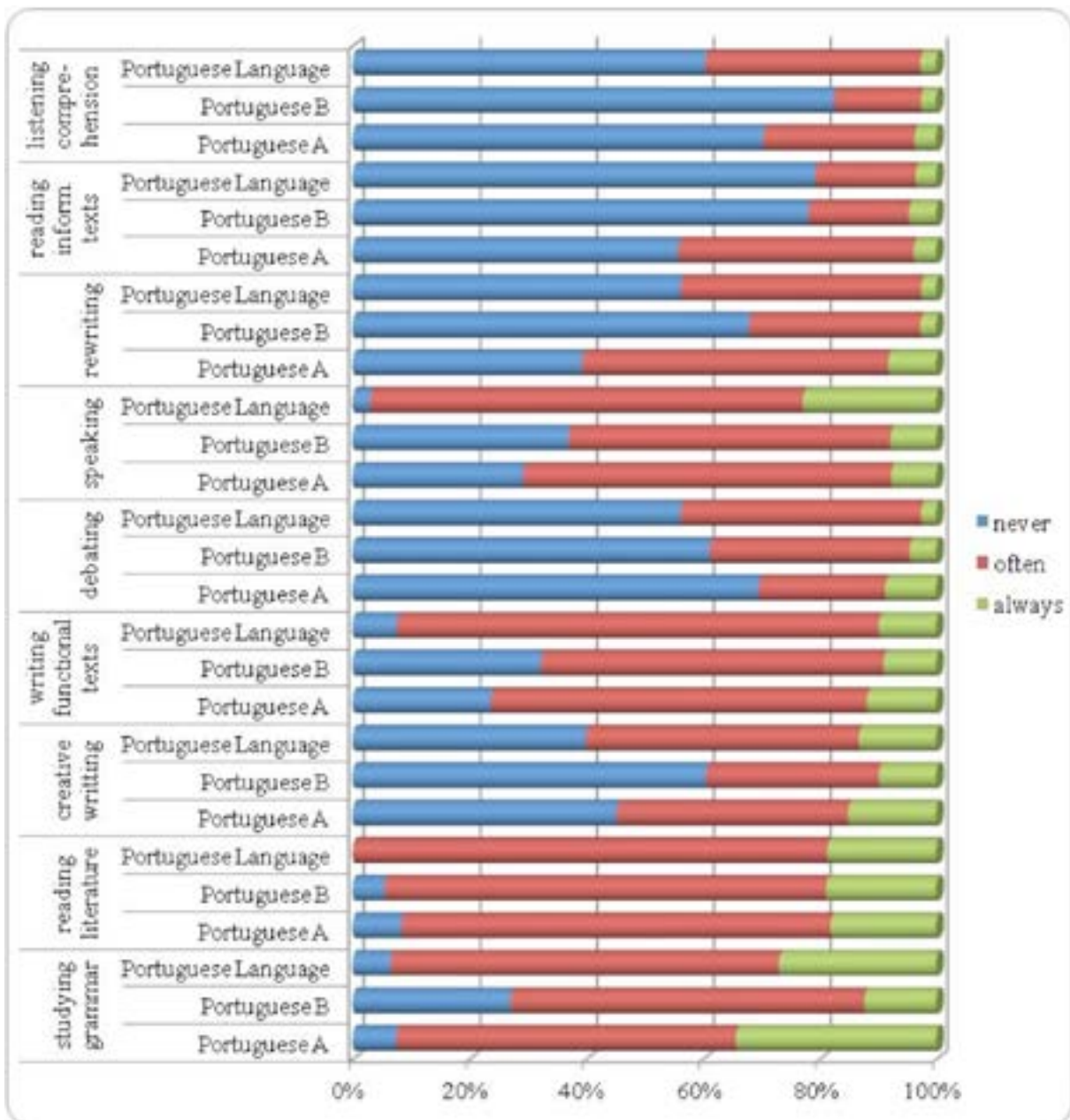
Though students emphasize mother tongue classes' potential to develop their communicative competence, they say they usually read literary texts and study grammar, consequently, they mostly learn about Portuguese literature and grammar (Figure 3). Nevertheless, Figure 4 indicates there is more 'speaking', 'listening comprehension' and 'writing' in Portuguese Language than in Portuguese A and Portuguese B. That substantiates results in Figure 1.

Figure 3 – Students' ideas on what they learn in mother tongue classes



These results may reassure those who claimed Portuguese Language syllabus undermines Portuguese literature and 'reading'. At the same time, it suggests that the new syllabus may already have introduced slight changes in teachers' practices regarding the development of students' communicative competence.

Figure 4 – Students' opinions on what they do in mother tongue classes



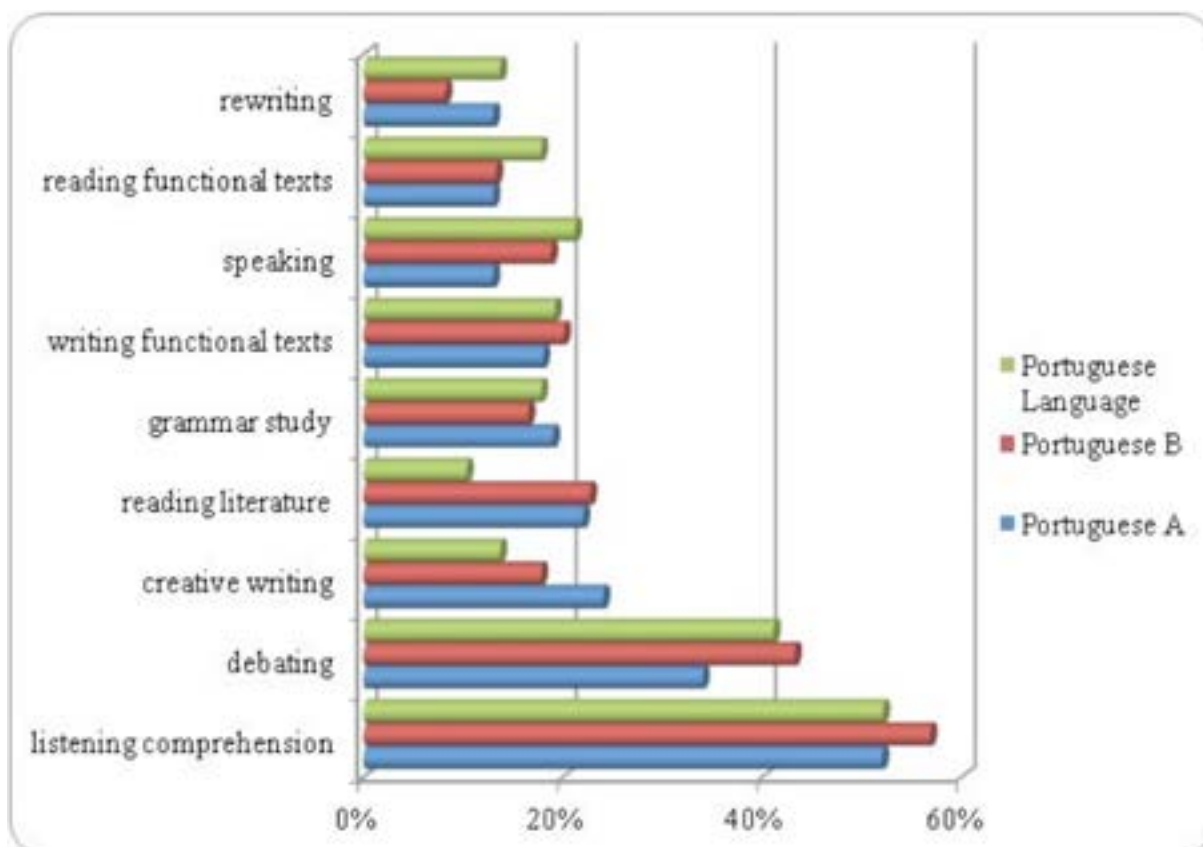
Regarding what students should do in mother tongue classes, students obviously indicate activities they enjoy. It is, therefore, mostly a personal and individual choice. Nevertheless, they usually justify their choices with pedagogical implications. And these seem to be mostly of a communicative nature.

For the majority of students, activities involving 'listening comprehension' and 'speaking' are the most appealing and, even though these seem to have increased in language classes, students still wish for more. They say it helps them understand content better and learn more about their fellows' ideas.

Grammar study seems to cultivate both resistance and affection. To 6.3% of Portuguese A and Portuguese B students, it is needed and relevant to develop communicative skills. Therefore, they call for more. Even though grammar study has increased in Portuguese Language classes (Figures 3 and 4), 17.8% of students still want more. Nevertheless, 9.6% say it is now too much.

Portuguese A and Portuguese B students demand an increase in writing activities, mostly creative writing and writing functional texts “to develop their literary creativity” (S239) and their writing skills regarding technical and informational texts, which they find relevant for their academic, social and professional lives. Portuguese Language students, on the other hand, do not seem to enjoy creative writing much. They find functional writing much more important. 3% of Portuguese A and Portuguese B students would exclude ‘writing about literature’ and ‘rewriting’. They find these boring, hard and useless. So do some Portuguese Language students. However, these find ‘rewriting’ important.

Chart 5 – Students’ opinions on what they should do in mother tongue classes



34% of Portuguese A and Portuguese B students think they have to read too many literary texts, 38.3% claims for less and more contemporary texts. Even though the Portuguese Language syllabus includes fewer literary texts, 54.8% of Portuguese Language students still find too many activities involving reading literature, and argue for the exclusion of some literary texts (basically the same canonical texts that

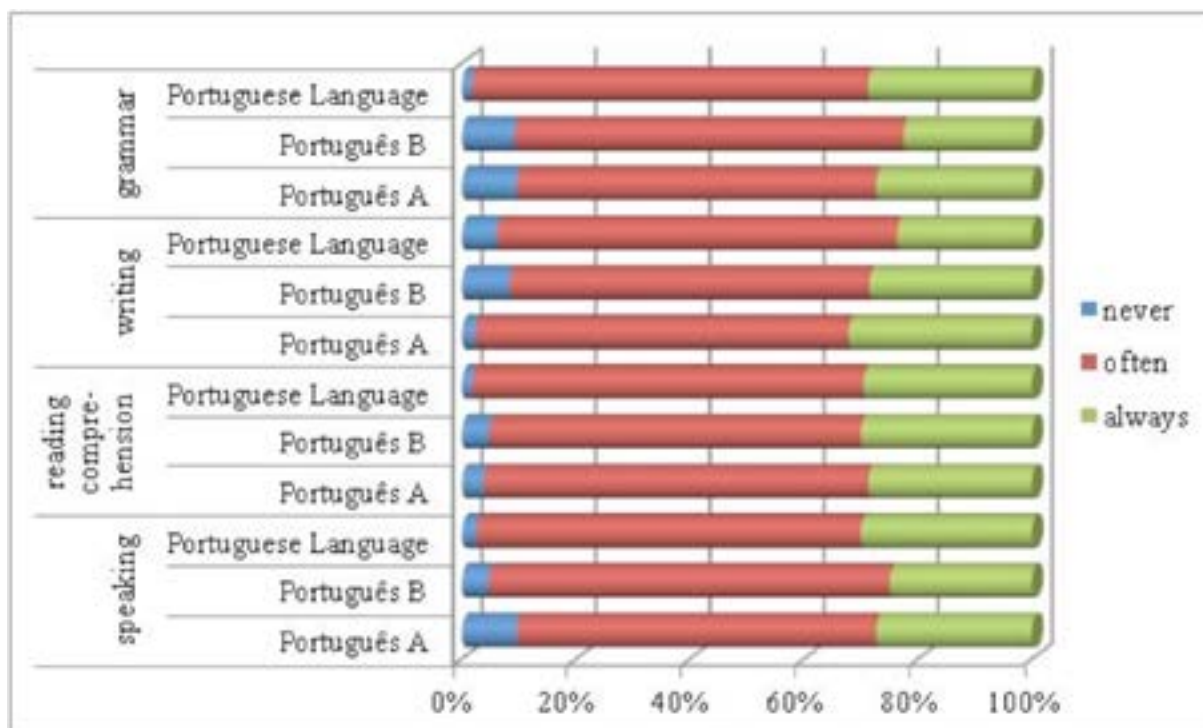
their fellows from Portuguese A and Portuguese B would exclude), and 24.7% claim those should be replaced by shorter and more contemporary texts. On the other hand, they all agree that activities involving “reading informational texts, news, abstracts and letters” (S94) should increase for they find these quite useful to develop ‘listening’, ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ skills.

On the whole, students would mostly reinforce ‘listening comprehension’, ‘speaking’, ‘creative and functional writing’ and ‘grammar study’. On the other hand, they would reduce the emphasis on ‘creative writing’ and ‘writing about literature’.

HOW ARE STUDENTS ASSESSED? HOW SHALL THEY BE ASSESSED?

In what concerns assessment, students seem critical. They say they are often assessed on ‘reading’, ‘writing’ and ‘speaking’ skills and ‘knowledge about grammar’ (Figure 6), nevertheless, they say teachers use mostly written tests to assess them, and these weigh far too much on their final mark – “usually it weighs up to 80% or 90% on our assessment” (S217) – which they find unfair, for written tests assess only “reading comprehension of literary texts”, “knowledge and writing about literature” and “knowledge about grammar” (S148).

Figure 6 – Students’ opinions on assessment



On the whole, students find mother tongue classes quite important in developing their communicative skills, but they think they are being assessed mainly on their knowledge about literature and reading comprehension of literary texts. Some say written tests are quite difficult and should not involve complex and long literary texts, should not “appeal to memory on historical facts or literary information”, should not

“require knowledge or writing about literature” (S148), should not demand writing “abstracts, argumentative or creative texts” (S404) or “commentaries that lower students grades” (S148). Also, written tests should weigh less in their final grade, and teachers should use other instruments to assess ‘reading’, ‘writing’, ‘listening’ and ‘speaking’.

WHAT CHARACTERISTICS SHOULD A MOTHER TONGUE TEACHER HAVE?

As students speak of their mother tongue classes, they often speak of their teachers’ dos and don’ts. In fact, 30.4% of students think their success depends on the “way the teacher teaches” (S402), that is to say “the way he/she approaches the topics and texts” (S16), the “way he/she explains content” (S50) and “gets students interested in content” (S321), the “pedagogic materials he/she uses” (S98) and “his/her teaching methods” (S272). Nonetheless, it is mostly Portuguese B and Portuguese Language students who value teachers’ didactical knowledge and teaching skills. On the whole, students mostly say that language teachers must know a lot on the topics and content and must have great speaking and writing skills. Students also value relational skills over the capacity to organize and manage the teaching process, which includes selecting resources/ materials and carrying out activities.

Regarding assessment, most students value teachers’ fairness and consistent behavior over using different instruments, despite criticizing teachers’ assessment methodologies and demanding new instruments and criteria.

CONCLUSION

In general, our results regarding Portuguese A and Portuguese B substantiate the portrait of a ‘cultural heritage’ framework drawn elsewhere (Cymbron, 2002; Dionísio, 2000; Lobo *et al.*, 2002; Sousa, 2000). Regardless of gender or study course, Portuguese A and Portuguese B students say mother tongue classes in High School aim mostly for the acquisition of information about Portuguese literature; privilege reading over writing or speaking; emphasize reading comprehension of literary texts; and use writing mostly to learn more about literature.

Despite reporting slight differences, mostly regarding ‘listening comprehension’ and ‘speaking’ skills, on the whole, Portuguese Language students share their fellows’ representations and opinions on mother tongue classes. And, even though they all agree that language learning should be compulsory in high school, they say it needs to adopt a communicative orientation rather than a cultural one to meet their academic and professional needs and interests. Therefore, it should privilege reading and writing functional texts rather than reading literature or writing about literature; and it should develop listening and speaking skills.

These transformations not only require changes in the syllabi (which have already taken place), but also changes in teaching practices, which tend to take longer and depend greatly on teachers’ beliefs and previous practices. Nevertheless, students seem to value more their teachers’ personal and relational characteristics over their didactical profile.

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