



A Comprehensive Study Of Portuguese As A Foreign Language Textbook Instructions For Writing Activities—Preliminary Results

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to present the preliminary results of an ongoing study related to the teaching and learning of writing competencies, through the analysis of writing practices promoted in six Portuguese as a foreign language (PFL) textbooks for young adults. There is no systematic research about their adequacy with regard to the latest methodological guidelines or the existing curricula. Therefore, the theoretical and methodological assumptions and the organization of content and learning practices present in the textbooks are, to some extent, unknown. Although research in Didactics highlights their role in the planning of educational action by teachers and their influence on teaching and learning practice in the classroom. Preliminary results show that there are relatively few writing activities in the textbooks, and that they are mostly guided by behaviorist choices (audiolingual and audiovisual methods).

KEYWORDS

Foreign Language, Portuguese as a Foreign Language, Textbooks, Academic Context, Writing Instructions, Writing Task, Methodology, Teaching of Writing.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language writing has always been a difficult area for foreign language teaching and learning, and a constant topic of research. Archibald (2004), Cumming (2001) Javadi-Safa (2018), and Zhang (2008) detail the recurrent

topics of research involved in foreign or second language writing: the writing process (in L1 and L2); the writing context (the writer, social background, psychological variables, the place and aims for writing, social

constructions, etc.); the teaching and learning of writing (the modeling process, the instruction model, resources, etc.); the assessment of writing (the role of the feedback from the teacher and/or peers, analytic rating or holistic approaches, etc.); and the use of technological tools for writing. This list certainly does not cover all the research topics and aspects involved in the acquisition and development of writing competencies in a foreign language context, but they are representative of the research activity in this area and they all, directly or not, influence the instructional process.

The advent of the digital age and the proliferation of e-books and digital resources to assist teaching and learning led to the belief, years ago, that physical paper books would progressively disappear. The complicated period we are living through, including the SARS-COV-2 virus pandemic, may have caused the increased use of these web-based resources and digital versions of textbooks, because of the successive lockdowns. However, teachers and students continued to use them (in digital format, PDF, or paper), highlighting the importance of textbooks in regulating teaching and learning practices.

This paper is part of the analysis of writing activities in textbooks for learning Portuguese as a foreign language (European variant) for the A1 and A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The corpus consists of eight textbooks published in Portugal but used in several parts of the world on different Portuguese courses. Even if Portuguese courses have been available for many years, there is still a lack of global research in the area. This study aims to contribute to the description of this specific reality. Even if it only analyzes the textbooks

used by the teachers, this could help to characterize teaching practices that are usually influenced by the choice of school resources, and textbooks in particular (Okeeffe, 2013; Priolet & Mounier, 2018). The textbook remains a central element in the teaching and learning process. For Gerard and Roegiers (1993) and Tavares (2008), the textbook is intentionally structured to fit into a learning process in order to improve its effectiveness. Therefore, they offer to the students a body of knowledge through which they can discover, learn, and understand new skills and knowledge. For their part, the teacher finds in the textbook a support for managing the teaching and learning process, as well as a set of pre-programmed exercises (Memai & Rouag, 2017).

According to the processual view of writing (e.g., Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Guerra, 2013; Nunan, 2003; Tribble, 1996; White & Arndt, 1992), writing implies that the writer has knowledge of the content to be written, the context of production and reading, the language system, and the (intrinsically recursive) writing process (planning, writing, revising, editing, and publishing). Currently, the specific context of textual production is also highlighted. The genre-based approach (Guerra, 2013; Hyland, 2007; Johns, 1997; Swales, 1990) that considers writing as an act of meaning creation, and focuses on the contextual analysis in which the writing situation takes place, is one of the theoretical and methodological frames to follow in writing practices in the classroom.

This research assumes (i) that the teaching of writing in the foreign language is one of the four basic skills to communicate in social interaction situations (formal or informal), and it must be taught and learned; (ii) that the teaching of text production is conducted from

coherent and current theoretical and methodological assumptions (like communicative approaches, task-based learning, or problem-based learning); and, finally, (iii) that reflecting about the teaching of writing through the activities present in textbooks can foster discussion about the teaching practices in PFL classes.

The instruments of analysis were previously tested in an exploratory study (Guerra, 2020) from which it was possible to establish criteria for the selection of the writing activities to be analyzed. Then, the aim was to theoretically and methodologically frame the textbooks themselves, by analyzing the discourse of the authors and/or scientific coordinators of the publication, in order to highlight their vision about the teaching of writing (Guerra, 2021). At this stage, the study focuses on the analysis of the selected activities to establish a relationship with the authors' discourse, as well as to methodologically frame the activities. The main goal is to understand how the textbook conducts and promotes the teaching and learning of written production in early levels of PFL (A1/A2). This paper will present a summary of the preliminary results of this ongoing research.

The background syllabi

The Portuguese government has progressively adapted language programs to the CEFR recommendations, starting with those offered in the basic and secondary education curriculum. In 2013, the first framework of reference for teaching PFL across borders was published by the Ministry of Education (Grosso, 2013), and in 2017 it was the turn of the Camões Institute (under the purview of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), which coordinates the teaching of Portuguese abroad in language centers and university chairs (DSLCL, 2017). Both syllabi adapt the principles, progression, and proficiency levels of the CEFR to Portuguese language teaching.

Regarding writing competence, the official syllabi do not change the essence of the CEFR, reproducing with minor changes the original text (DSLCL, 2017), or refining it in several competence descriptors (Grosso, 2013), as we can see in Table 1.

Table 1. Background syllabi for PFL teaching and learning (translated from Guerra, 2020)

Referential	Proficiency level	Descriptors
CEFR (written output; Council of Europe, 2001, p. 55)	A1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I can fill in a form with personal data, for example entering my name, nationality, and address on a hotel registration form. I can write a short, simple message or postcard, for example, at vacation time.
	A2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I can write short, simple notes and messages on matters of immediate need. I can write a personal letter, for example, to thank someone for something.
QuaREPE	A1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can ask for or communicate information about him/herself, family, and friends using simple phrases

(written production / interaction; Grosso, 2013, p. 30)		<p>and sentences related to personal identification and characterization, and about family and friends.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can write simple and short messages (SMS, postcards, e-mail, etc.). • Can respond affirmatively or negatively to invitations and requests. • Can fill in forms with references to self and others (name, nationality, age, address, etc.).
	A2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can use simple phrases and sentences linked by simple connectors such as “and,” “but,” and “because” on topics related to his/her everyday life. • Can give a short, simple account of personal events and experiences. • Can write real or imaginary biographies in a simple way. • Can write short, simple notes or messages relating to concrete, immediate needs, rephrasing if necessary. • Can write simple texts of personal correspondence. • Can fill out simple surveys and forms, providing data (identification, health) about himself/herself or others (family, friends).
Camões Referential (Written outputs; DSLC, 2017, p. 43)	A1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can write simple expressions and sentences (general written production) • Can ask for or convey in writing detailed personal information (general written interaction).
	A2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences connected by simple connectors such as “and,” “but,” and “because” (general written production). • Can write simple, short notes related to issues of immediate need (general written interaction).

The descriptors have the advantage of being easily adaptable to different contextual realities (geographical, social, age, etc.), as they do not impose socio-cultural content.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As mentioned before (Guerra, 2021), we examined the writing production activities

from six PFL textbooks (see Table 2) and performed a descriptive content analysis of them in order to understand (i) if the writing activities are consistent with the descriptors of the syllabi; and (ii) what kind of writing activities are presented in the manual.

Table 2. Textbook corpus and ID

ID	Reference	CEFR level
TB_A	Carmo, L. (2004). <i>Olá! Como está? Livro de textos. Curso intensivo de língua portuguesa</i> . LIDEL.	A1/A2/B1/B2
TB_B	Coelho, L., & Oliveira, C. (2015). <i>Português em foco I</i> . LIDEL.	A1/A2
TB_C	Coimbra, I., & Coimbra, O. M. (2011). <i>Novo português sem fronteiras 1</i> . LIDEL	A1/A2
TB_D	Dias, A. C. (2011). <i>Entre nós 1. Método de português para hispanofalantes</i> . LIDEL.	A1/A2
TB_E	Ferreira, A. M. B., & Bayan, H. J. (2011). <i>Na onda do português</i> . LIDEL.	A1/A2
TB_F	Kuzka, R., & Pascoal, J. (2014). <i>Passaporte para português</i> . LIDEL.	A1/A2
TB_G	Oliveira, C., Ballmann, M. J., & Coelho, M. L. (2006). <i>Aprender português I</i> . Texto Editores.	A1/A2
TB_H	Tavares, A. (2012). <i>Português XXI. Livro do aluno</i> . LIDEL.	A1

We excluded all activities that, although they could be framed by the authors as writing activities, their ultimate goal does not correspond to the development of this competence, but rather to the development of other competencies and skills (for example comprehension questionnaires, reproducing dialogues to repeat structures, and rewriting sentences with the aim of acquiring certain grammatical content). The writing activities from the textbook [TB_B] were analyzed in the exploratory study (Guerra, 2020), and we excluded two textbooks at the second stage of the research (Guerra, 2021). We excluded the first one, [TB_A], because it was prepared for intensive courses and included levels of the CEFR from A1 to B2. The second, [TB_E] is aimed at young teenagers, while our study focuses on textbooks whose target audience is young adult college students.

Therefore, we retained the activities the purpose of which corresponds to learning the written production competence, even if they were not designated as such in the manual, by reference to the syllabi descriptors mentioned above (see Guerra, 2020 for more details and examples).

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The analysis indicates that there is a lack of activities with the purpose of developing the writing competencies of the learners. Even though a total of 63 writing activities were obtained, as can be seen in Table 3, most of them are concentrated in only two textbooks: [TB_D] and [TB_G].

Table 3. Writing activities present by textbook sorted by text type

Writing task	Textbooks					
	TB_C	TB_D	TB_F	TB_G	TB_H	Total
Fill forms	1	2			1	4
Descriptions	1			4	2	7
Taking notes		3				3
Summarize		1				1
Narration	2	15	1	5	2	25
Advertisement		1				1
Correspondence (letters, emails, etc.)	1	3	1	4		9
Invitation		1				1
Short messages				1		1
Recipe			1			1
Dialogue	1			4		5
Claims				4		4
Survey					1	1
Total	6	26	3	22	6	63

They also prioritize the narrative mode, probably because this is suitable in various communicative situations (daily routine,

reporting future or past actions or situations, etc.) and it corresponds to a similar textual genre in most languages and cultures.

Table 4 sorts the writing activities by level of proficiency.

Table 4. Writing activities in textbooks sorted by level of proficiency

Writing task	Textbooks									
	TB_C		TB_D		TB_F		TB_G		TB_H	
	A1	A2	A1	A2	A1	A2	A1	A2	A1	A2
Fill forms		1	2						1	
Descriptions	1						4		1	1
Taking notes			1	2						
Summarize				1						
Narration		2	3	12	1		4	1		2
Advertisement			1							
Correspondence (letters, emails, etc.)		1	2	1		1	1	3		
Invitation				1						
Short messages							1			
Recipe					1					
Dialogue	1						3	1		
Claims								4		
Survey										1

Total	2	4	7	17	2	1	13	9	2	3
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In most of the textbooks, level A1 includes the least writing activities, (although there is a minimal difference), with the exception of [TB_D] and principally [TB_G] that concentrate a higher quantity of textual production at level A1.

The textual genres favored by the authors are in accordance with the descriptors of the programs. Nevertheless, they are not uniformly present, since the only genre common to all is the narrative genre. Next, correspondence, description, and form filling are the genres that are most widespread in the textbooks.

Surprisingly, even if the dialogue is the written text most present in the textbooks, there are only five writing activities to produce a

dialogue. This does not mean that there are no writing activities that ask students to produce dialogues. However, in most cases, the written text produced has no relevance. These kinds of activities are more oriented toward the reproduction, in another social context, of the same speech acts that have been read (for example a dialogue in a shoe store that should be adapted for a clothing store), and which are to be spoken later in class. With this type of task, an attempt is made to fix in the students' memory the speech acts involved, and the lexicon relative to each of the contexts. The students do not write to learn the conventions of writing, or to reproduce oral dialogue in writing, like the use of dashes, quotation marks, and didascalies, for example.

[TB_C]

Escrita 1

Complete os diálogos de acordo com o texto:

A

Na banca dos legumes:

D. Cristina: _____ das cenouras?

Vendedora: _____ a €0,89 o quilo, minha senhora.

[...] (p. 86)

[Translation to EN]

Writing 1

Complete the dialogues according to the text:

A

At the vegetable stand:

D. Cristina: _____ of the carrots?

Saleswoman: _____ at €0.89 a kilo, ma'am (or madam).

[...]

The students only have to pick the parts in the dialogue they read before (and present, p. 85, in this textbook) to fill in the blanks. The previous text was at the fish stand and the second exercise they need to produce in this example is at the fruit stand.

The selected activities also have some problems, as we can see in the following example:

[TB_G]

Imaginar que a mãe leva o filho ao medico.
Escrever o diálogo. (p. 97)

[Translation to EN]

Imagine that the mother takes her son to the doctor. Write the dialogue. (p. 97)

There is no more information for the writing activity. The students read a dialog between a person and the doctor, in which symptoms, causes, and treatment are discussed. They work on irregular verbs in the present tense (like the verb to hurt—"doer") and the imperative mode. To finish, the student is asked to "imagine" a dialog, and basically reproduce all the content they have learned. This is a typical example of the writing activities found in textbooks. Thus, we can infer that the writing production is more product-oriented than process-oriented.

The same results were found in the exploratory study (Guerra, 2020). The main genre to practice was the narrative, followed in that particular case by descriptions. The dialogue genre was also present, but in oral activities. The written material takes the role

of notes to produce a speech or to simulate a dialogue supposedly in a real communicative context. The writing activities purposes are usually intended to train and reproduce different speech patterns involved in each unit, based on the threshold level for Portuguese (Malaca Casteleiro, *et al.* 1988). The student is never required to plan the text, write it, revise it, and so on, that is, the activities do not include any aspect of the writing process, focusing mainly on the writing product.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

The analysis developed was based, essentially, on the concept that language teaching and learning a language is more than memorizing structures and speech acts. The teaching process should make the student aware that language structures are meant to act through language, and to communicate with others in different sociocultural contexts through speaking or writing, allowing the development of cultural intercomprehension awareness.

Even if the analysis is still not concluded, the data collected allows us to infer that the textbooks attribute a greater predominance of oral competence, associated with the learning of speech acts and grammatical content, in line with the options defended by the behaviorist vision of learning. This is closer to the audiolingual methodology than to communicative approaches.

In general, the results are similar to the exploratory study. The textbooks privilege the basic principles of behaviorism / audiolingual

method such as (a) language corresponds to a set of repeated conditioned habits (speech acts) that are acquired through a process of stimulus and response; (b) language is initially acquired through orality (spoken language) and not written language, in order to try to follow the natural order of language development; and (c) language is acquired through operant conditioning, forming habits, and the more it is repeated, the better the learning will be (Guerra, 2020, pp. 100-101; translated by the author).

Therefore, writing is understood as an activity to reinforce oral language acquisition and grammatical learning, and writing activities are used as a diagnostic or planning activity of orality and as an assessment instrument.

Thus, writing is not adequately understood as a communicative practice, whose purpose is to promote social interaction in various contexts. It seems, moreover, that the development of writing competence in its various dimensions is not promoted. Consequently, it can be concluded that the type of activities is in line with the reference frameworks (Conselho da Europa, 2001; DSLC, 2017; Grosso, 2013), however, the activities themselves do not fit into the currently recommended methodological frameworks.

Finally, a more detailed analysis of the writing activities present in the textbooks may provide us with more clues as to how the development of writing competence is fostered in the PFL textbooks.

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