

Bilingual Education in Mozambique: dilemmas of two teachers

Educação bilíngue em Moçambique: dilemas de duas professoras

Lourenço Alfredo Covane¹

ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to understand, through the Bakhtinian senses of centripetal and centrifugal forces, relations between the official discourse and the teaching performance in the classroom in relation to the conception and practices of teaching reading and writing, analyzing the oral statements of two teachers of bilingual education. The analysis statements were generated from the observation of classes of a Mozambican mother tongue (Citshwa) and Portuguese (second language) in a primary school in Mozambique. The results of the analysis of statements reveal the reproduction of conceptions and practices of teaching reading and writing consecrated as official, but reductionist because they lead to the non-appropriation of written language by students.

Keywords: Mozambique. Bilingual Education. Reading and writing.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é o de compreender, pelos sentidos bakhtinianos de forças centrípetas e centrífugas, relações entre o discurso oficial e a atuação docente na sala de aulas relativamente à concepção e práticas de ensino da leitura e da escrita, analisando enunciados orais de duas professoras de educação bilíngue. Os enunciados de análise foram gerados a partir da observação de aulas de uma língua materna moçambicana (Citshwa) e de Português (língua segunda) numa escola primária em Moçambique. Os resultados da análise pelo cotejo de enunciados revelam a reprodução de concepções e práticas de ensino da leitura e da escrita consagradas como oficiais, mas reducionistas porque levam a não apropriação da linguagem escrita pelos alunos.

Palavras-chave: Moçambique. Educação Bilingue. Leitura e escrita.

¹ University Assistant at Universidade Licungo – Beira Extension, in Mozambique. PhD candidate in the graduate program in Education at Universidade Estadual Paulista “Julio de Mesquita Filho” – Marília Campus, Brazil. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3253-4918>. E-mail: l.covane@unesp.br.

1 Introduction

Talking about the teaching and learning process of reading and writing in Mozambique means talking about crucial issues in the struggle for an educational process that attempts to reduce the prevalence of illiteracy, understood as a condition of people who have never had any contact with learning written language and those who, even though they have had contact with it, have acquired it to use as a cultural tool for integration into society.

Mozambique, officially designated as the Republic of Mozambique, became independent of Portuguese colonial rule in 1975. Since then, the country has been fighting tirelessly to reduce illiteracy. However, despite these efforts, the rate remains high. A brief survey of numerical data indicates that in 1975, 93% of the population was illiterate. In 1980, data from the 1st General Population and Housing Census (IRGPH) indicate that the rate fell to 72%, to 51.9% in 2005, to 50.4% in 2007, and to 38.6% in 2017.

The problem, however, becomes even more serious when we consider that, in addition to these figures, which only indicate registered illiterates, there are countless numbers of so-called functional illiterates. Faced with this problem, the government has initiated a series of actions, one of the most important of which took place in 2004 with the reform of the basic education curriculum. However, this reform began in 1995, the year in which the National Education Policy was created, a policy that implements the National Education System (SNE) established by Law 4/83 of March 23. With this reform, bilingual education came into force on the grounds that children should be literate in their mother tongues and then, through a process called skill transfer (INDE/MINED, 2003), move on to learning Portuguese, which is a second language for most Basic Education students.

In 2003, the government expanded the use of Mozambican mother tongues throughout the country, although it is still restricted to a few schools. Since the introduction of bilingual education, many researchers have become interested in the topic in order to respond to some of the anxieties of parents and society, which point to the prevalence of students who do not finish primary school without

knowing how to read and write. Patel (2006), Chimbutane (2009), Nhongo (2009), Patel (2012), and Chambo (2018) address the issue of bilingual education in their studies from a structural linguistics perspective that studies fragments of language rather than written language in use.

This article seeks to respond to some of the concerns that cannot be addressed by structural linguistics. Although the previous studies are important, they do have some problems. When these scholars criticize the current teaching conducted in Portuguese and its prescriptive nature (GONÇALVES, 2000), it seems, however, that they do not understand language as a dialogical activity.

The conception of language postulated by Russian authors of the philosophy of language - Volóchinov (1895-1936), Medviédev (1892-1938), and Bakhtin (1895-1975)—in its most general principles, can form the basis for an interactive linguistic-pedagogical proposal, providing the initial and necessary support for a qualitative change in the tradition of language teaching.

The objective of this article is to understand, through Bakhtin's concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces, the relationships between official discourse and teaching practices in the classroom in relation to the conception and practices of teaching reading and writing. This study analyzes the oral statements of two bilingual education teachers. Consequently, it is essential to pose the following inquiries: A critical inquiry into the pedagogical practices employed by the faculty at the subject school reveals an intriguing phenomenon: the pervasive influence of social discourses within the pedagogical discourse. It is imperative to ascertain the expressive and axiological elements that embody the centripetal and centrifugal forces articulated by the teachers in question.

In the context of the stylistic constitution of the novel, Bakhtin (1993) conceptualizes centripetal forces as a category of common language, defined as "a system of linguistic norms [...]" and "[...] a theoretical expression of historical processes [...]" (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 81). This category is further delineated as "the only language of truth," a notion that underscores its centralization of verbal-ideological thought. For Bakhtin, centrifugal forces play as important a role in the

unity of the novel as centripetal forces. Indeed, he argued that thanks to these centrifugal forces, "the novel orchestrates all its themes, its entire objectual, semantic, figurative, and expressive world" (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 74). These centrifugal forces, therefore, give concrete form to living language.

The present article elucidates the significance of centripetal and centrifugal forces in facilitating comprehension of the intricacies inherent in the bilingual education program. The discourse encompasses a comprehensive exploration of the teaching-learning process from a humanizing perspective, as well as an exposition of select concepts and functions of reading and writing from a sociological, anthropological, and philosophical vantage point. The research methodology is based on the analysis of dialogues between bilingual education teachers.

2 The teaching and learning process of reading and writing in Mozambique

There are several studies in Mozambique that address this topic, but many do so from a reductionist perspective of language. Santos (2006), Nhongo (2009), Siteo (2016), and Faquir (2016) are examples of this approach. Despite their criticism of traditional ways of understanding the object of reading and writing, they also take a reductionist approach, believing that in order to read and write, students must necessarily use their knowledge of the grammar of the language.

This reflection is based on another assumption, which takes language as a historical and cultural practice, since it is constituted in the dialogical relations between people. From this point of view, language ceases to be an object of study, because in the philosophy of language, greater emphasis is placed on verbal exchanges between people. In other words, if verbal exchanges are what matter, this study highlights, among other aspects, the role of the reader and writer in creating meaning from their contact with the text.

During Greco-Latin antiquity, the spoken word, linked to power, dominated the written word. However, today, scientific studies of written language reveal errors made over time. Spoken language was considered the model for written language, and written language was considered a transcription of spoken

language. Evidently, this understanding today leads to errors in the conception of written language and teaching procedures.

There is no doubt that, as Bakhtin (2011) says, text is the starting point and end point of any study of language. Under this understanding, written language and oral language are not the same thing. Reconsidering these aspects has an important didactic implication for language teachers: our view of language establishes a new space for teaching reading and writing.

Far from regressing to a devastating crisis in linguistics, which isolates letters and sounds, sentences, text, and fragments of phrases from life, the new science of language advances toward text and life, toward the subject and the text, toward the subject and its “Other.” It is clear in the teaching-learning process that it is not the appearance of language, the materiality of the signs themselves, the form of the letter, or the sound that matters. For Santos and Arena (2011), it is the function of the letter that determines reading and writing, without which these two important processes of language are meaningless.

Language is constituted from a complex system of signs available in everyday culture, which Volóchinov (2017) calls the extra-verbal situation. Evidently, teachers of Portuguese or any linguistic sciences observe the simplest expressions and gestures that students present when they try to appropriate written language or a certain cultural structure outside the linguistic system.

The act of decoding words, traditionally taught as the act of reading, causes language to freeze in time in order to capture the letter and the dead word as a code. Reading and writing are dialogical acts that require a broad understanding of meaning, as a response to the manifestation of the other. The dialogical conception of Bakhtin and Volochinov is a major contribution to the formulation of a new approach to the processes of reading and writing, although these authors never specifically wrote about reading and writing in their extensive work. However, in the various spheres of language, their position lays the foundations for a change in the way we treat the act of reading and writing, treat the text, the reader and their “other,” the author of the text and the reader.

The notion of “production,” a term used by Volochinov (2017), includes the content of the text and, in the case of the text being read, the clues provided by the author of the text. However, the extra-verbal reality shared by the reader and the author of the text extends to the concrete particularities of a situation in which the word is used. On the other hand, the notion of “recognition,” also used by the same author, but to indicate what should not happen in the understanding and appropriation of language, is limited because it reflects a situation that has to do with the reference and value of the proposition.

The world boasts a multitude of writing systems, with Mozambique being no exception. In addition to alphabetic writing, it is imperative to consider Afro-Arabic writing, as well as the distinctive imagery writing characteristic of the sign representation of the oral culture of African societies. Indeed, the preeminence of alphabetic writing in Mozambican mother tongues, which are inherently hybrid in nature, warrants scrutiny. This is primarily due to the dearth of the purported correspondence between the sounds articulated and the graphic symbols represented in the majority of words. Moreover, there are numerous sound symbols in the mother tongues that do not correspond to any graphic symbol in the Latin alphabet. Consequently, these symbols are frequently supplanted by those devised by linguists, a practice that is largely divorced from the usage patterns of the mother tongue speakers.

3.1 Concepts and functions of reading and writing

According to Bakhtin (2011), the utilization of language should be conceptualized as an act of liberation from the confines of one's immediate environment, an endeavor to comprehend the nuances of another individual, and a process of constructing and exchanging verbal and nonverbal signs among individuals. To this end, it is imperative to cultivate a conceptual framework for reading and writing that can serve as a guide for the formation of a reader of words and life.

By considering written language as a historical, cultural, and constitutive process of human beings, schools exercise the autonomy of the subject who reads and writes, which is fundamental for human beings. The ability to critically examine objects before them and develop the reflective capacity necessary for intellectual and cultural transformation is dependent on this understanding.

Reading and writing from the perspective of dialogical language has been demonstrated to promote the integral and complete formation of the student. This theoretical position is predicated on the assumption that not all other positions are necessarily true, particularly those espoused by individuals who opt to teach the elements of language. Geraldi (2009) and Arena (2009) have both expressed disapproval of pedagogical practices related to reading that are deemed to be counterproductive to human development. Specifically, they have criticized the practice of reading for the sole purpose of demonstrating that a student has mastered the skill of reading aloud. These practices do not respond to any interest or need of the reader or writer themselves. Conversely, these exercises are not aligned with students' real-world needs and are, therefore, superfluous. The process of negotiating meanings with the author through the text and the composition of texts with themes that are meticulously crafted by the writer are considered commendable practices.

3 Research methodology

In accordance with the established objective, the research methodology employed was guided by the procedural framework of humanities as delineated by the scholars in the domain of philosophy of language. According to Bakhtin's (2011) conceptualization, the approach's foundation is in the dialogical process, as it is concerned with life. Therefore, the statements' provenance is the text itself. The researcher is the primary instrument through which these statements are generated.

The objective of the present research was to elucidate the power relations between official discourse and everyday school reading and writing. This investigation was conducted from the perspective of two bilingual education teachers at a primary school in the municipal area of the autonomous city of Vilankulo, in Mozambique. The research was conducted through dialogical meetings, classroom observation, and audio recordings. These procedures are distinguished by the encounter of words that constitute two differently oriented consciousnesses and reveal the dialogical character of the word that interests the philosophy of language.

The theoretical principles of Bakhtin (2011) and Graue and Walsh (2003) guided the entire process of dialogue and dialogic observation, based on immersion and dialogue in the field and participation in classes. The research adopted a dialogic character, shifting between the individual and the social.

The subsequent proposal entailed the researcher's presence alongside educators both within and beyond the confines of the classroom, thereby fostering an understanding that is defined by the convergence of diverse voices. The study examined the dimension of the multiplicity of voices. However, while the researchers participated fully in the event, they maintained an exotopic position that allowed them to see the Other from a more distanced perspective, as recommended by Amorim (2004).

The selection of teachers for the research study was determined by the findings of Volochinov (2017). According to the author, interlocutors are defined as individuals who share the context of communication. The context gives rise to the words articulated by the interlocutors, and reciprocally, these words mirror the prevailing conditions of that specific context. The teachers who serve as interlocutors are the voices of the bilingual education classroom, as they are the individuals who work directly in these classrooms.

Due to the confidentiality requested by the teachers themselves, the names used here are fictitious, and the ages of the subjects are indicated by age ranges. Isabel and Sarneta are bilingual education teachers. At the time the field research was conducted, Sarneta was 10 years younger than Isabel.

Isabel is approaching the age of 55, which is the standard retirement age in this country. In contrast, Sarneta is significantly younger and has not yet reached that age, as she began her career in the civil service at a later stage in her life. Both individuals are bilingual in two Mozambican languages and Portuguese, with Portuguese being their second language. At that time, Sarneta had already obtained a bachelor's degree in Portuguese teaching from the Universidade Católica de Moçambique through distance learning, while Isabel had completed her secondary education at the Instituto de Magistério Primário. Both respondents indicated that they had received a training period of only 15 to 21 days to prepare them to teach bilingual education.

The research activities documented herein pertain to the period from May to August of 2019. These activities took the form of two dialogical meetings with the professors, held on June 6 and July 27, respectively, as well as eleven classroom observations. However, due to limitations regarding the available space and the focus of this particular article, only a selection of the recorded dialogues will be discussed herein.

The analysis of the statements was based on Bakhtin's concept of collation as an act of interweaving texts, which, according to Geraldi, allows us to recover “part of the infinite chain of statements to which the text responds, which it opposes, with which it agrees, with which it argues, which voices are there without being explicit because their origin has been forgotten” (GERALDI, 2012, p. 33). Based on this understanding, the analysis of the statements, although focused on the dialogues between teachers and their students, is also based on theoretical sources and specialized literature that allow us to situate the problem of reading and writing in the present day.

4 With the floor, the teachers' voices

As the dialogues illustrate, although at times the teachers attempt to subvert the effects of official discourse, they are unable to do so because they are conditioned by their professional training as teachers and by the influence of the sociocultural sources that surround them on a daily basis.

Teacher Sarneta's Class – Portuguese Language, 3rd class

[...] *Look closely at the text and the drawings. What do you see? Hmm? What do you see? Can't you describe it? Nothing?* The students murmured, trying to describe the images accompanying the text. *How many children? What are they doing?* she asked. After a few answers from the students, the teacher said: *Now I'm going to read the text, and you must follow along carefully to understand it.* The teacher then proceeded to read the text aloud. Afterward, she asked them: *Did you understand?* Seeing that they did not respond, she said: *Then I'll read it again, and you follow along. Okay?* She did so line by line, and the students followed along. To conclude, she asked them again: *"Was the reading good? Did you like it?"* She then asked them to read the text aloud. She said: *"Read as I did, respecting the punctuation marks and pausing longer where you find a period and pausing less where there is a comma."* (Note, June 17, 2019)

As can be understood, the teacher's words reveal recurring and mistaken practices if we consider the perspective of discursive practices. Without going into detail about the images that accompany the text—a subject not covered in this discussion—the verb chosen by the teacher, *"describe,"* rather than *"interpret understand,"* reveals a poor premise for the beginning of the reading activity.

Too often, images have been viewed not as text in the sense of conveying meaning. And, not infrequently, also not as text in the sense of interacting with other texts, other thoughts, or with the ideological environment in which they were produced. According to Volochinov (2017), comprehension is a human act par excellence that enables a new sign to approach other signs that have already been internalized. Understanding occurs when one sign encounters others. From this perspective, the activity proposed by the teacher would fulfill its role as a hypothesis for reading activity if she were concerned with the student's understanding of the images rather than their description.

This practice is not without reason. It stems from a failure to understand reading as a dialogical practice. By saying, “Now I am going to read the text, and you must follow closely to understand it,” the teacher conveys the idea that reading and understanding are separate moments in the act of reading, which is not true. Reading is a process of understanding the text being read. Reading is a dialogical process that is established between the reader and the author, mediated by the text. The teacher's insistence on asking whether the students understand the text, based on her oral presentation, shows that the objective will not be achieved because, as Arena (2015) states, readers read out of their own interest and not out of the interest of others. This is the position taken by Vygotsky (2018), who states that language acquisition is a process driven by motives. It is true that teachers create motives for students. However, these are not relevant to the reading exercise from the perspective of our study; what matters are the motives created by the child-reader themselves.

Reading led by the teacher, although it is not worth calling it reading, is more coercive than reading aimed at student development. It is the teacher who looks for reasons for the child to listen to what she says. From this point of view, the school prevents the student from taking ownership of the act of reading the graphic text. This type of school assumes that reading is the act of vocalizing the text or extracting meanings that are common to all. In this type of school, if the student can pronounce fluently, he or she will be considered an excellent student.

For Arena (2015), it is necessary to distinguish between oralization practices and speech practices. Both are done aloud; however, in oralization, the reader is not concerned with the attribution of meaning, that is, the reader does not understand what they read. Speech, on the other hand, occurs after an act of comprehension. But in this case, the act of vocalizing would not be beneficial to the student because it would not be the act of reading.

Similarly, when leading the dialogue in the Portuguese class, teacher Sarneta instructed the students to copy the text. Two anomalous situations occur in this dialogue. In one, the teacher uses the text read as a model for writing (copying), and in the other, she guides the reading in the service of another activity,

that of evaluation. In both cases, there is no act of reading because the intention is to achieve good pronunciation, clear fluency, and speed.

Teacher Sarneta's Class – Portuguese Language, 3rd class

Open your book to read [...] Let's read. I'll read first. After reading, we'll copy the text. Do you understand? Does anyone not understand? If you don't finish the exercise, you'll have to copy it at home. I'll grade it. Okay? That's why you have to copy it very carefully. (Note: July 15, 2019)

The teacher's declarative attitude, expressed in the instruction “Open your books to read [...] Let's read; I'll read first,” clearly shows her position as a role model for her students. Once again, from this perspective, a good reader is one whose pronunciation is close to that of the teacher. Foucambert (2014) harshly criticizes this practice. For him, this type of reading oriented toward the sound captured by the ear is undesirable because it skims the surface and does not reach the essence of comprehension.

The assimilation of written language is a complex acquisition because it mobilizes various abilities, various resources that do not involve pronunciation, but rather thought. The methodology of language teaching is multivariied. Written language is more a process of thought than of pronunciation.

Like Sarneta, teacher Isabel understands reading as an activity that serves other activities. For her, reading is a path that leads to answering questions whose answers are previously given by the author of the didactic textbook, and writing is an activity of transcribing someone else's text.

3rd Class (June 11, 2019) – teacher Isabel – Citshwa language, 4th class

[...] now, let's read so we can answer the questions [...]. The answer to each question is in the text. Open the text, but I'll read it first.

4th Class (July 18, 2019) – teacher Isabel – Portuguese language, 4th class

Did you do your homework? asked the teacher. After a silence, the teacher concluded that the students had not done their homework and said: *Since many of you did not do the homework I assigned, you will copy the text again. Until everyone has copied it, you will repeat the exercise. But now, in addition to copying it, answer the questions in the text and bring it to the next class. Okay?*

All the forms of reading and writing announced here by the teacher do not meet the needs of the student. Written language is not a mere transcription because it has its own structure and functioning. If today we know that the acts of reading and writing have their own structure and functioning, it is necessary for teachers to change their attitude. It is necessary to preserve the everyday acts of reading and writing in life. The difficulty that students have in relation to reading and writing lies in the fact that schools do not create real-life situations for students that lead them to need to read.

Students only progress in their appropriation of the act of reading when they know how to ask questions about the text, using clues available at the beginning and those that arise during reading. However, this is only possible in the approach discussed in this essay, when schools and professors encourage students to interact with others and culture is seen as a catalyst for human development.

Conclusion

This article, drawing from a particular classroom scenario established by two bilingual education instructors at a primary school in Mozambique, underscores the imperative for a paradigm shift in the conceptualization and methodologies employed by reading and writing instructors in Mozambique.

By evaluating the prevailing research in Mozambique and examining the discourse among educators, this study unveils attitudes that do not align with the centrifugal forces, defined as the forces that counter official recommendations. In essence, they exhibit a reluctance to embrace divergent perspectives, as they

perpetuate the prevailing official discourse. Their approach to the pedagogy of reading and writing is reductionist, aligning with the understanding of the creators of educational policies that emphasize reading and writing as decoding activities.

However, even within this paradigm, there exists the potential for a struggle that centrifugal forces may be able to mount, given that, while centripetal forces claim to be dominant, they are not invincible. The shift in perspective on language and on the role of the subject as a participant in their actions in the construction of knowledge poses significant challenges with regard to the adoption of new methodologies for teaching reading and writing that lead to the creation of responsive attitudes in subjects. However, this challenge is not insurmountable; it merely necessitates the capacity to heed the perspectives of other interlocutors.

Russian authors of the philosophy of language address the issue of language from the perspective of the exchange of verbal and nonverbal signs. These authors postulate that it is in these exchanges that humans constitute themselves and form their responsive consciousness. These postulates, ostensibly elementary, can serve as a foundational point of departure for researchers and pedagogues of written language engaged in the formulation of sociological, anthropological, and philosophical methodologies.

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