# *Innovative Language Teaching: Teachers' Beliefs And Practices*

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## Abstract

In the context of language education and language teaching, the issue of grammar is particularly problematic: grammar instruction is still connected to prescriptive approaches, which are outdated, disconnected from linguistic theory, and ineffective at improving students' communicative skills. Nevertheless, the recent *Portuguese Language curriculum* (Reis *et al.* 2009) embodies a new paradigm towards grammar teaching, assuming, from a constructivist standpoint, that the promotion of *explicit language awareness* (ELA) sustains the development of students' speaking and writing skills.

Research has revealed that to endorse real changes in teaching practices it is important to act upon all the dimensions of teachers' professional knowledge, including tacit phenomena, like beliefs, by means of professional training and development. Therefore, it is relevant to know how teachers handle this new paradigm and how what they think about teaching grammar affects their practices.

Throughout the brief description of a multi-case study focused on 10-12 years-old L1 teachers' beliefs and practices regarding grammar teaching[1], significant inconsistencies arise in the comparison between teachers' speech and teachers' practices and, more importantly, between the curriculum guidelines and classroom activities, leading to the conclusion that teachers have difficulties facing the required adjustment to the emerging paradigm.

Although the nature of the study does not provide enough data to support teachers' profiles, it points out a possible path to conceive an effective teacher-training program in the context of life long learning.

Key words: Grammar teaching, Teachers' Beliefs, Teachers' Practices, Explicit Language Awareness

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[1] The study presented in this paper: Ferreira, P. (2012). Conceções e práticas dos professores de Língua Portuguesa em relação ao ensino e à aprendizagem da gramática: um estudo exploratório no 2.º Ciclo do Ensino Básico (Master's thesis). Lisbon: Escola Superior de Educação, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa.

**Introduction**

The subject of teaching and learning grammar has been widely debated, and is still a prolific issue. Although research has shown the lack of effectiveness in the traditional way of teaching grammar, most teachers still use strategies coherent with a deductive or expositive approach to grammar, delegating to students the role of simple receivers of rules, structures and examples to be incorporated by training (Mohamed 2006).

The epistemological shift towards grammar teaching, that is taking place all over the western world – e.g., teaching grammar in context (Weaver 2008); grammar didactic sequences (Camps & Zayas 2006; Pereira 2010); new grammar (Nadeau & Fisher 2006); grammar discovery activities (Hudson 1992; Tisset 2008; Cardoso 2008; Costa *et al.* 2011), implies an inductive approach to grammar, recognising that students play a decisive role in their learning process through reflexion and discovery.

In the *Portuguese Language curriculum* (Reis *et al.* 2009), the competency that integrates the development of grammar knowledge is *Explicit Language Awareness* (ELA), differently from the designation used in the 1991 curriculum, Language Functioning, (cf. DGEBS 1991). This change is a reflection of deeper changes that go far beyond the choice of words. Following Costa *et al.* (2011), figure 1 presents the main differences between both perspectives:

| 1991 Language curriculum | 2009 Language curriculum |
|---|---|
| • no relation between the implicit knowledge of students and teaching and learning grammar; | • implicit knowledge considered as the root of and the starting point for most activities for teaching and learning grammar; |
| • focus on the correction of errors during communication activities; | • focus on the detection of regularities of the language with mobilization to several contexts of use after systematization; |
| • contents organised as a result of the context of communicative use. | • contents organised accordingly to the mobilization and to the stages of the development of linguistic knowledge. |

Figure 1 – Two curricula: two perspectives

The new Portuguese curriculum has emphasised a close link between explicit knowledge of language and reading / writing skills, stating that "mobilisation of the categories of explicit knowledge (elements, classes, relations, operations, linguistic and textual structures) to solve practical problems improve performance and make patterns and criteria of language explicit." (Reis *et al.*, 2009:151 our translation).

This is precisely one of the central problems of language didactics both at the theoretical and practical levels. First of all, articulation between these two dimensions is limited to occasional examples. Teachers do not have a coherent model of the basic grammatical points to be presented which would allow them to mobilise the students'

grammatical knowledge in the reflection about written and oral texts. Secondly, the definitions and procedures of prescriptive or traditional grammar still predominate in educational resources (grammar and text books) as well as in the classroom (Pinto 2002; Ribas 2010). Thirdly, investments in knowledge transfer are a low priority (Tardif & Presseau 1998).

In order to change this situation it is imperative that the shifting paradigm has real effects on classroom practices and teachers have to embrace it and spread it if they want that to happen. Otherwise, the changes will take place only on paper.

Considering the need to implement the new curriculum, it was certainly relevant to ascertain if teachers' practices and beliefs regarding teaching and learning grammar are coherent with the guidelines of the document. To put these guidelines into practice teachers must implement teaching and learning paths distant from traditional and expositive practices and create a structural framework of mobilization of grammar knowledge into other competencies.

**Overview of the research and its purpose**

This research was motivated mainly by a combination of three factors:

a) Students' results in standardized tests - serious difficulties in exercises involving grammar knowledge or its explicit description, and its permanence through basic education, are evidenced by several studies (Delgado Martins *et al.* 1987; Ucha coord. 2007; Duarte coord. 2008b; Costa 2008).

b) Teachers' positioning towards grammar teaching and learning - the results of the only previous study on teachers' positioning towards Portuguese Language teaching (Duarte coord. 2008a) have revealed that most teachers declared to favour strategies of a deductive nature.

c) The new (and innovative) curricular and terminological guidelines - in the school year that preceded data collection, a new Portuguese Language curriculum entered into force.

Despite the complexity of learning and of the different influences involved in the process, the transformation of teachers' practices is definitely a relevant issue to these problems. Research has revealed the influence of deeper and tacit phenomena on teacher's behaviour, enhancing the need to discern these implicit aspects in order to make them explicit and to act upon them by means of professional training and development. These psychological and social phenomena, such as beliefs, correspond to the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think." (Borg 2003, p. 81).

The study here presented was conducted taking into account the double dimension of teachers' actions (Zabalza 1994), in which thinking and behaviour are involved. Data were collected through class observation and interviews, attempting to discern some

of the Portuguese Language teachers' beliefs and practices towards teaching and learning grammar through the analysis of their actions and their speech.

The design of a multicase research study, that focused on six Portuguese, native language, teachers and on six 5$^{th}$ or 6$^{th}$ grades classes (10 to 12 year-old students), from three schools in the district of Lisbon, in the academic year 2011 – 2012, is sketched in Figure 2:
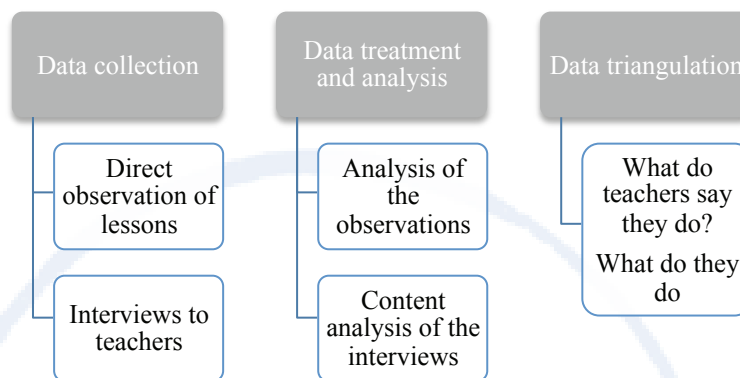
Figure 2 – Data collection, treatment, analysis and triangulation

The four research questions that guided the collection, the treatment, the analysis and the triangulation of data were:[2]

- What beliefs towards the process of teaching and learning grammar do 5$^{th}$ and 6$^{th}$ grades' Portuguese L1 teachers hold?
- What are 5$^{th}$ and 6$^{th}$ grades' Portuguese L1 teachers' views regarding the new curricular and terminological guidelines?
- What are 5$^{th}$ and 6$^{th}$ grades' Portuguese L1 teachers' practices regarding teaching and learning grammar?
- What are 5$^{th}$ and 6$^{th}$ grades' Portuguese L1 teachers' needs for training as far as Explicit Language Awareness is concerned?

In the following section the results and the conclusions formulated through the crossing of the data obtained from both techniques, the supporting theory and the investigation goals initially defined will be presented.

**Teachers' beliefs towards grammar teaching**

Considering the first question defined, *what beliefs towards the process of teaching and learning grammar do 5$^{th}$ and 6$^{th}$ grades' Portuguese L1 teachers hold*, we conclude that all the participant teachers recognise relevance to grammar knowledge, an importance which has been traditionally recognised. Similarly, all the teachers have indicated the influence of this knowledge on the success on other written and oral competencies. However, none of the teachers indicated the concept of

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[2] The questions were reordered to favour the presentation of the results and the conclusions of the study.

mobilization to other contexts of use, which is one of the guide stones that support the new *Portuguese Language curriculum*.

According to the analysis of the interviews the teachers' considerations don't seem to be informed opinions, based on the results of recent research, which evince the interdependence between metalinguistic development and other competencies (Gombert 1990; Sim-Sim 1997, 1998; Duarte 2008).

In fact, the interviewed teachers' considerations seem to represent the continuity of one of the dimensions of the traditional conception of grammar, the grammar of the written language, of prescriptive nature.

All teachers declared their motivation to teach grammar and only one of them said that her students aren't motivated to learn grammar. This affirmation of the motivation of teachers and students towards grammar is clearly contrary to the common notion most disseminated: the uneasiness felt by teachers and students towards this subject (Pereira 2010).

Taking the complexity of grammar teaching into account, two teachers indicated the high level of difficulty of this dimension of the language to teachers and both of them emphasized the need to properly prepare the practices in this domain.

Apart from one of the teachers, who remember diversified strategies and resources during the course of learning grammar when she was a student, the participants declared to have been taught grammar through the presentation and the repetition of contents and the repetition of exercises. They also recalled the focus on a memory-based learning and declared that the teaching method followed by their teachers were quite similar. Apart from one of the participants, teachers recognised the influence of the way they have learnt grammar on the way they currently teach it.

Focusing on the data which resulted from the content analysis of the interviews, teachers pointed out the existence of modifications on their scientific approach to grammar during their professional activity, mainly due to the observation of students' responses, to a long-term teacher professional development programme (National Program for Teaching Portuguese Language) and to professional experience.

Two teachers positioned themselves towards the role of memorisation in the learning process, valued by one of them, while the other affirmed that that skill plays a minor role on learning grammar. Memorisation is, surely, necessary for the apprehension of certain rules and paradigms and plays an important role on any learning process. Nevertheless, as Duarte (2000:56, our translation) affirms, "(...) reflecting on the linguistic structure and functioning isn't a simple task of presenting labels and rules one expects students to memorise. On the contrary, it's an organised and progressive work of observation and systematisation of the great paradigms and regularities of the language."

It is possible to conclude that, for the interviewees, how they were taught grammar as students is influential on how they teach it as teachers. This realisation can be

considered as an alert to teacher training, as it evinces the need to deconstruct one's learning processes before any approach to the grammar didactics.

**Teachers' views regarding the new curricular and terminological guidelines**

As far as the second question of the research is concerned, *what are 5ᵗʰ and 6ᵗʰ grades' Portuguese L1 teachers' views regarding the new curricular and terminological guidelines*, the participants indicated the importance of using metalinguistic terms, having all of them declared to use the new grammar terminology. However, it was only possible to confirm the use of the metalanguage accordingly to the *Terminological Dictionary* in four of the observed lessons and there was terminological and scientific accuracy in just one of them. These considerations enhance the existence of difficulties in the use of the new terminological guidelines, as well as some failures in their scientific background, particularly regarding the morphological, the syntactic, and the word class levels. In fact, three teachers declared their insecurity in using the new terminology.

Regarding the use of *Terminological Dictionary*, three teachers declared to use it to clear some questions, one said she uses it indirectly when she reads the new curriculum, other considers unnecessary to use it and other declared not to use it and explicitly affirmed her resistance to the new terminology.

As far as the sections of the *Terminological Dictionary* are concerned, three teachers declared that most of them is easily understood. The areas qualified by the participants, as the least difficult are morphology, in general, the phrase and the word classes.

On the other hand, the syntactic functions are the areas of difficulty most indicated by teachers, followed by syntax, in general, coordinate/ subordinate clauses and connective adverbs.

Other conclusion is the coexistence of two grammar terminologies in the same level of teaching in the school year 2011 – 2012. Teachers working at the three participant schools declared to have been instructed to use the previous terminology and curriculum when working with 6ᵗʰ grade students and the terminology and the curriculum in force when working with 5ᵗʰ grades. In fact, it was possible to confirm the use of previous curricular and terminological guidelines with a teacher working with a 6ᵗʰ grade class. This situation can be confusing, as four teachers in fact, indicated it.

Considering the teachers' views regarding *Explicit Language Awareness*, the opinions of the participants are divided. On the one hand, three teachers consider it appropriate. On the other hand, a teacher indicated that there has only been a switch in labels, other finds it inappropriate and another declared she doesn't understand why that designation was chosen.

As far as the relevance of *Explicit Language Awareness* is concerned, four teachers attribute the same importance to the five Portuguese Language nuclear competencies (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking and Grammar). On the contrary, two teachers declare that some competencies are more important than others, highlighting Reading and Writing.

It's relevant to point out that one of them declares that *Explicit Language Awareness* is the least important linguistic competency. This information, although coherent with the results of the questionnaire applied to teachers in one of the preliminary studies which based the construction of the new curriculum, are, to some extent, surprising, because early in 2001, the *National Curriculum for Basic Education – Essential Competencies* (DEB, 2001) recognised the status of nuclear competency to *Explicit Language Awareness,* on equal terms with the others, status reinforced by the current curriculum. One could expect that those who promote their teaching and learning had already incorporated the levelling of the five nuclear competencies.

Taking the articulation of the competencies into account, four teachers declared that they usually teach grammar in articulation with the other nuclear competencies, while two indicated that they prefer to teach it independently. Actually, these statements reinforced the data obtained from direct observation, despite the fact that in the four accounted cases there were different tones of attempts of integration. There was no situation of real articulation procedures in any case, as one can notice in the following chart
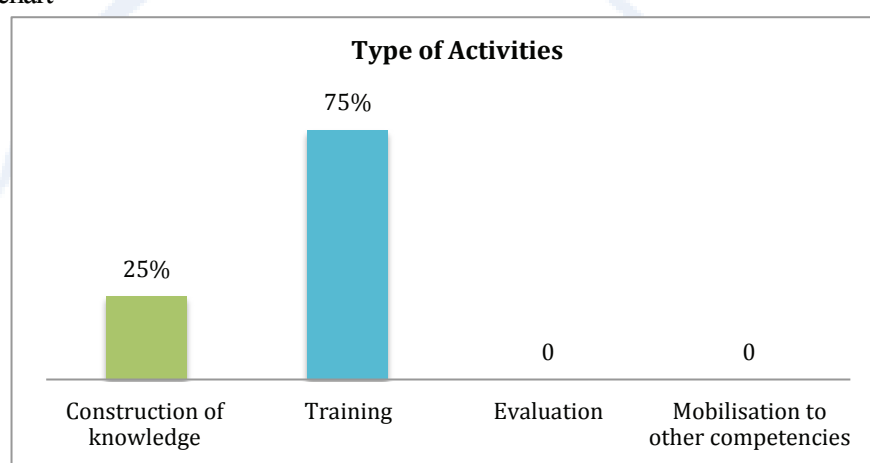


Figure 3 – Type of activities observed (percentages)

The mobilisation of grammar knowledge into other competencies, one of the major keys of the new curriculum wasn´t indicated or observed in any context. Apparently, there is a widespread belief in the importance of grammar to improve speaking and writing, but it doesn't seem to reflect an informed opinion supported on the knowledge of why and how that influence takes place.

**Teachers' practices**

Considering the third research question, *what are 5th and 6th grades' Portuguese L1 teachers' practices regarding teaching and learning grammar*, the most evident conclusion is that, despite the different individual beliefs and practices in this field, all the participants teach grammar. This is coherent with one of the conclusions presented by Neves (2005) in a study conducted in Brazilian schools. The author declares that teachers "maintain systematic grammar lessons as a ritual, indispensible to legitimate their role" (p. 48, our translation) although they feel "it isn't serving any purpose" (p. 47). Similarly, Sousa (2010 *cit in* Pereira 2010) and Castro (2001, *ibidem*) declare that teachers assume grammar as a characterising feature of Portuguese Language teaching, as a curricular subject, and that any content can be taught provided it is recognised and legitimised as grammar.

In fact, one of the participants, teacher P3, considered Grammar the least important of the five nuclear competencies, but she declared it is the competency to which she reserves most of the time, alleging "moral" reasons to justify this apparent incongruity, because of the presupposed emphasis on grammar on the examinations students take.

Four teachers assumed the use of methodologies consistent with a deductive or expositive approach to grammar. This was coherent with the data obtained from observation. One of the participants declared to favour strategies consistent with an inductive or reflexive approach, particularly the operationalization of grammar workshops. Again, this was, in fact, observed. Despite another teacher had declared to follow an inductive approach to grammar, it wasn't possible to confirm the use of strategies of that nature in a structured way in the observed lesson.

One of the teachers declared to rely little on the students' ability to learn through reflection and discovery. On the other hand, five participants mentioned they stimulate the discovery of grammar rules and structures by students by themselves. Three of them presented the work around grammar as a space of discussion and reflection on language by students. However, the only context where a minimally structured work of reflection on language was observed was in case 2 (teacher T2 and Class C2).

It was only possible to confirm the involvement of students in the process of decision making in case 2. Actually, the role of students in their own learning was little valued by the participants, except in this case.

Considering the classroom dynamics, the large group was the most favoured modality in the observed lessons. In five of the cases, there were also moments of individualised work. The promotion of pair or group work wasn't observed in any case. Teacher T5 while interviewed made the only reference to cooperative work.

Syntactic analysis and identification of the classes of words were the most frequent instructions, a realisation coherent with the data collected through observation, which evinced an importance attached to the syntactic and word class levels. It is also important to state that the majority of the exercises involved classification, corresponding to more than 51% of the total of the tasks. It is interesting to verify that one of the conclusions that emerged in the study conducted by Neves (2005), previously quoted, was precisely the focus on the identification and classification of word classes and syntactic functions.

The charts presented next allow the systematisation of the results related to the type of exercises proposed by teachers:
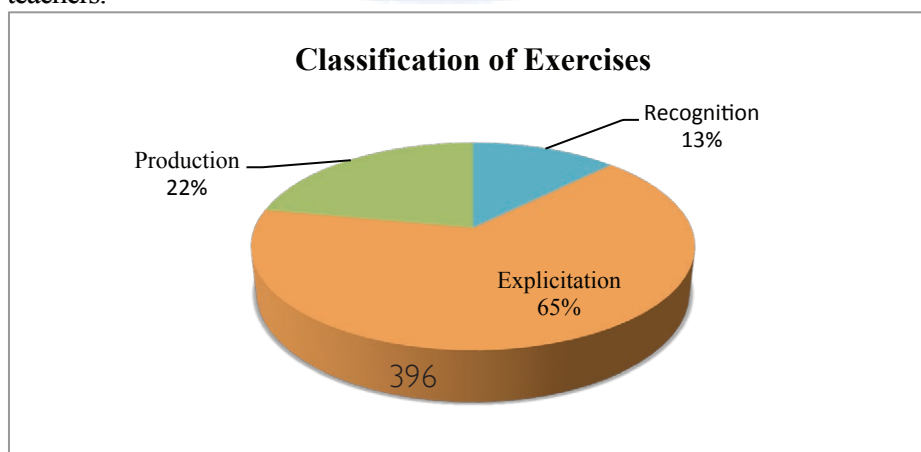
### Classification of Exercises

- Recognition 13%
- Production 22%
- Explicitation 65%

396

Figure 4 – Classification of the exercises proposed by teachers (global percentages)

**Activities of Explicitation**

| | |
|---|---|
| Generalisation/ conclusions | 2.4% |
| Explicitation and verification of hypothesis | 1.2% |
| Comparison of data through observation/ manipulation | 1.2% |
| Justification or explanation of rules or definitions | 13.3% |
| Explicitation of linguistic value | 1.2% |
| Definition/ rule | 2.4% |
| Classification | 78.3% |
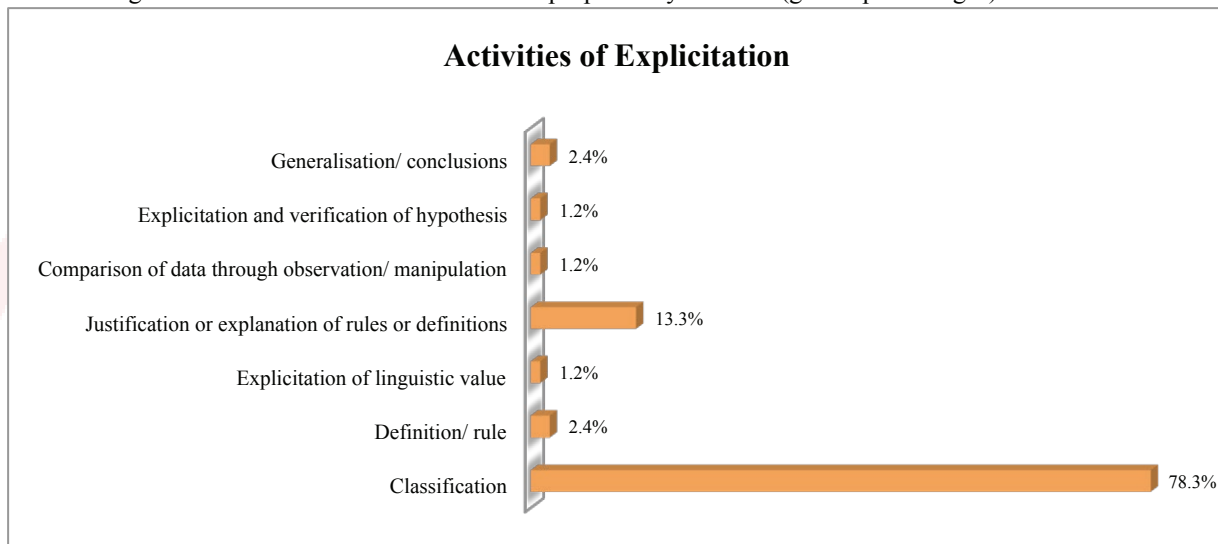
Figure 5 – Classification of the exercises of explicitation (percentages)

**Activities of Production**

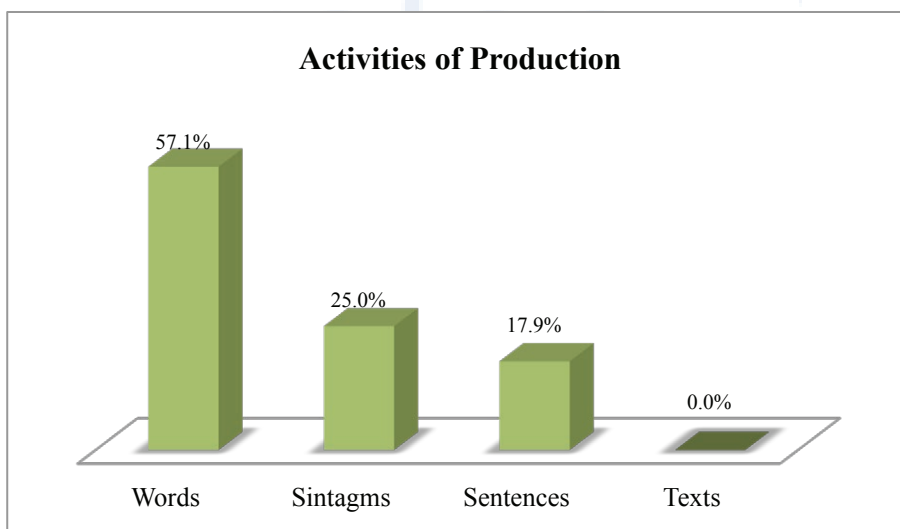| Words | Sintagms | Sentences | Texts |
|---|---|---|---|
| 57.1% | 25.0% | 17.9% | 0.0% |

Figure 6 – Classification of the exercises of production (percentages)

The most frequent unit of contextualisation in the teachers' speech and action was the sentence. In the four cases in which the work was contextualised from text, no real integration of grammar knowledge in the exploitation of the text occurred, perhaps with the exception of case 1, in which Reading Comprehension and Grammar were developed simultaneously, although there was no explicitation of the literary and textual value of the grammar contents implied. In case 2, the text was merely the motivating element and the starting point for the sequence. In cases 4 and 5, the text was the source of the linguistic data to analyse, constituting a pretext to do grammar exercises. The text as an initial context meant nothing but the source to collect units (sentences or words) from to analyse and catalogue. In four of the sessions, there were also moments of contextualisation from the unit *word*, isolated from any linguistic context.

All the participants recognised the importance of training and conducted activities of this type. Except from teachers T2 and T5, the participants propose the realisation of exercises of training and application after the presentation of rules or structures by the teacher.

The most used resources in the lessons observed were the board (whiteboard or blackboard) and the students' notebooks, used in the six cases, the textbook, worksheets and literary texts, used in two cases each, and *powerpoint* presentations and music, used by a teacher each. Data analysis also indicates the use of other materials, especially grammar books.

Summarily, the results are consistent with the *grammar tyranny* affirmed by authors like Pinto (2002; 2004), Figueiredo (2004) or Neves (2001), as all the participants teach grammar and, globally, reserve a high percentage of time to this competency.  Contrarily to what might be supposed, the problem doesn't lie on the little amount of time dedicated to grammar nor in the refusal to work this curricular area, but on the conceptualisation of grammar and of how the process of teaching and learning in this field should take place.

In spite of some individual differences, a prevalence of traditional and expositive methodologies, coherent with a deductive approach to grammar, were evidenced. The most favoured model of instruction was clearly one of transmission. This seems to point to some shortcomings in teacher's training and development. In fact, teachers seem not to have deviated from the more traditional grammar oriented approaches.

**Teachers' needs for training**

Regarding the fourth question of research, *what are 5ᵗʰ and 6ᵗʰ grades' Portuguese L1 teachers' needs for training as far as Explicit Language Awareness is concerned*, it's important to stress the insecurity affirmed by four of the participant teachers towards their scientific preparation. Three of those teachers present constant training as a demand of the profession, what may consist on a solution to the indicated lack of confidence.

The teachers declared to feel the need for training, two of them in order to update, four to deepen their knowledge on the contents they teach and two to strengthen their knowledge on specific didactics.

The most frequently referred fields in need for updating were the latest spelling agreement and *Terminological Dictionary*. Two teachers declared to feel the need to deepen their scientific knowledge, two affirmed that their professional development would benefit from a wide training action which would include both scientific and didactic knowledge, a teacher expressed her will to strengthen her scientific knowledge on syntax and another stated her need for training focused on didactic knowledge. One of the participants in the study emphasised the importance of spreading studies on teaching and learning grammar in order to support teachers' work.

Direct observation revealed the need for training regarding scientific knowledge, particularly in the types of sentences, direct object, indirect object, oblique object, nominal group, contraction of prepositions with determiners and the degrees of adjectives.

As far as the specific didactics is concerned, teachers evinced difficulties regarding the new curriculum, particularly the operationalization of strategies and methodologies coherent with a learner-centred perspective. The principles that underlie the inductive approach were, actually, rarely enacted in the classroom.

Despite the existence of guiding documents to implement the new curriculum, aimed at supporting teachers in the work of each competency accordingly to the new curricular and terminological propositions, none of the participants declared to use the document reserved to grammar in their practice, what can be noticed in the following chart:

**Contact with the New Curriculum Implementation Guide - ELA**

67%

33%

0%

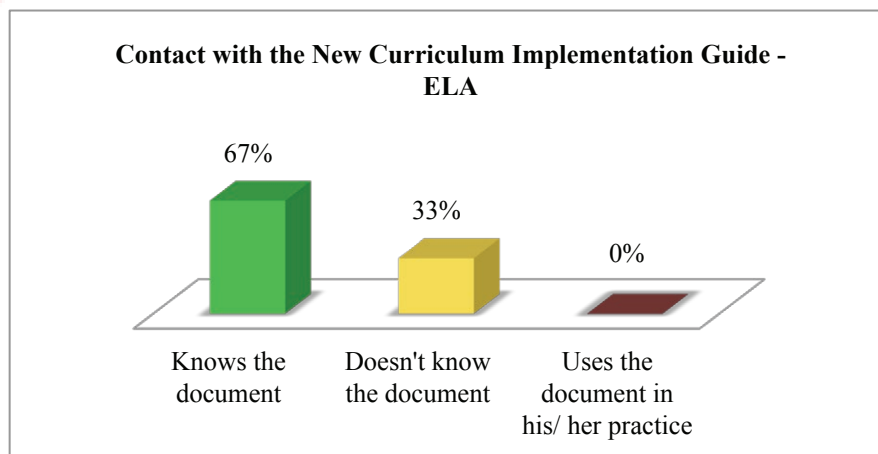| Knows the document | Doesn't know the document | Uses the document in his/ her practice |

Figure 7 – Contact with the *New Curriculum Implementation Guide - ELA*

Considering the needs for training in specific didactics, besides the previously stated difficulties in the operationalization of activities stimulating reflection and discovery and the mobilisation of that knowledge into other competencies in a structured way, one of the participants revealed she didn't understand the differences between the processes of acquisition and learning of first language and learning foreign languages. This could explain the use of strategies to teach language as if it was something strange and external to students.

Although teachers recognise the need for constant training, they do not seek it, nor do they know the guiding and supportive documents recently published.

Taking the previous considerations, specifically formulated regarding each of the investigating questions defined *a priori*, and despite the fact that the considerations we present can't be generalised, there are some transversal conclusions regarding the participants in the study one can indicate.

**Final remarks**

Although the study conducted had the merit and the originality of contributing to the investigation of some items related to teachers' practices and beliefs regarding grammar teaching, a subject very little investigated in Portugal, it's important to be aware of its insufficiency to the strong understanding of the equation, both due to the impossibility of generalisation of the conclusions of the study, a frequent limitation of using a convenience sample composed of few participants, and to the need of complete the results with data resulting from other studies on influential items in this scenery. This study is exploratory, in nature, meaning that it could constitute a starting point to other longitudinal and transversal studies, in which some of the aspects we focused or other

collateral could be investigated.

Teachers are performing their tasks in a transitional time, what requires constant adjustment and updating skills. In fact, the new curriculum consists of a structured and organised manner of fulfilling real changes in teachers' practices, rooted on some principles and pre-conditions that, though they can't be called innovative, since they were enounced long ago, they haven't been systematically put into practice in most of the classrooms.

Focusing on grammar, the curriculum reinforces the status of nuclear competency recognised, in 2001. In spite of the innovative guidelines, classroom teaching seems to be unaffected by theoretical and research progress. The following figure presents a comparison between the curricular guidelines and the observed practices, which are unequivocally distant from each other.

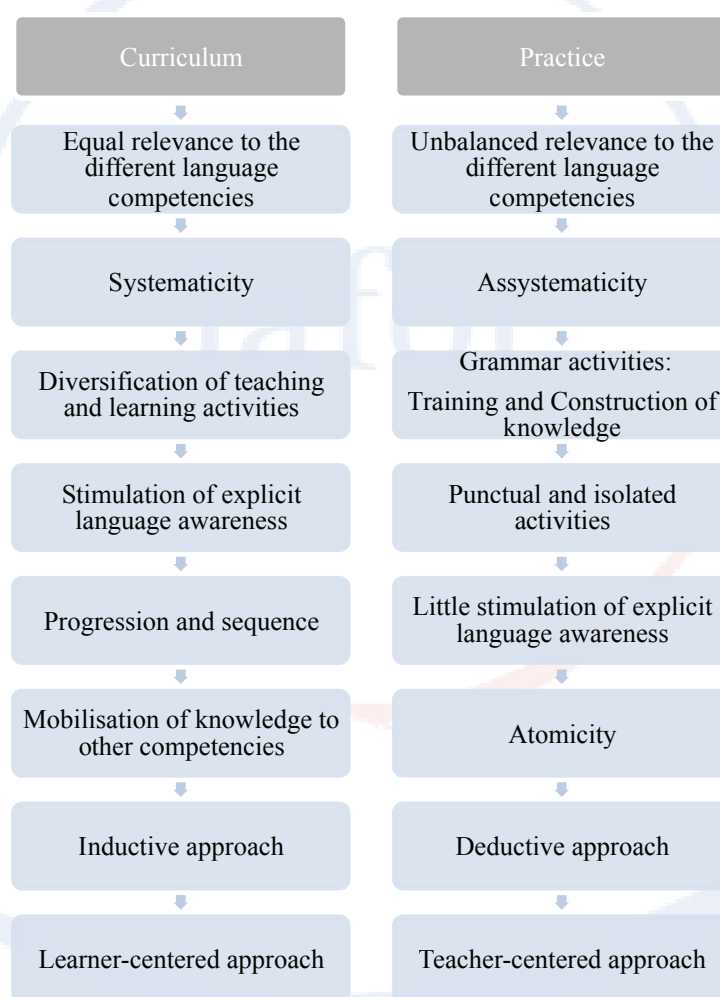| Curriculum | Practice |
|---|---|
| Equal relevance to the different language competencies | Unbalanced relevance to the different language competencies |
| Systematicity | Assystematicity |
| Diversification of teaching and learning activities | Grammar activities: Training and Construction of knowledge |
| Stimulation of explicit language awareness | Punctual and isolated activities |
| Progression and sequence | Little stimulation of explicit language awareness |
| Mobilisation of knowledge to other competencies | Atomicity |
| Inductive approach | Deductive approach |
| Learner-centered approach | Teacher-centered approach |

Figure 8 – Curricular guidelines and observed practices

Secondly, professional training and development are still a long distance apart from the individual needs and contexts, not only in terms of adjustment, previously stated, but also due to some fragilities concerning scientific or didactic background indicated by the participants or evidenced through observation. Therefore, some questions emerge, namely on the role of initial training in this situation. It would be relevant to investigate the teachers' practices and beliefs, namely

focusing on teachers who teach subjects in the areas of linguistics and specific didactics to pre service teachers. Likewise, it would be interesting to study the courses of advanced training and in force training actions and programmes in this domain. Admitting the thesis defended by Lima (2007), that although beliefs are relatively stable structures, they can be altered, and in spite of the considerations stated by Borg (*cit in* Birello, 2012) about the impossibility to program teachers to behave in a certain way, it would be important to study how training, initial, in force and advanced influences the transformation of teachers' beliefs and practices in this field.

It's interesting to state that teacher T2, participant in this study, declared having changed from an expositive perspective into a constructivist and inductive approach after her involvement in a long term in force training program (National Program for Teaching Portuguese Language), thus indicating a transformation in terms of thought and behaviour. It's important to state that this program was little focused on grammar, but it implied a reconceptualization of the roles played by teachers, students and students' previous knowledge and experience on the teaching and learning process, reflecting on every competency. The chart that follows illustrates some of the differentiating aspects of this teacher comparatively to the others.
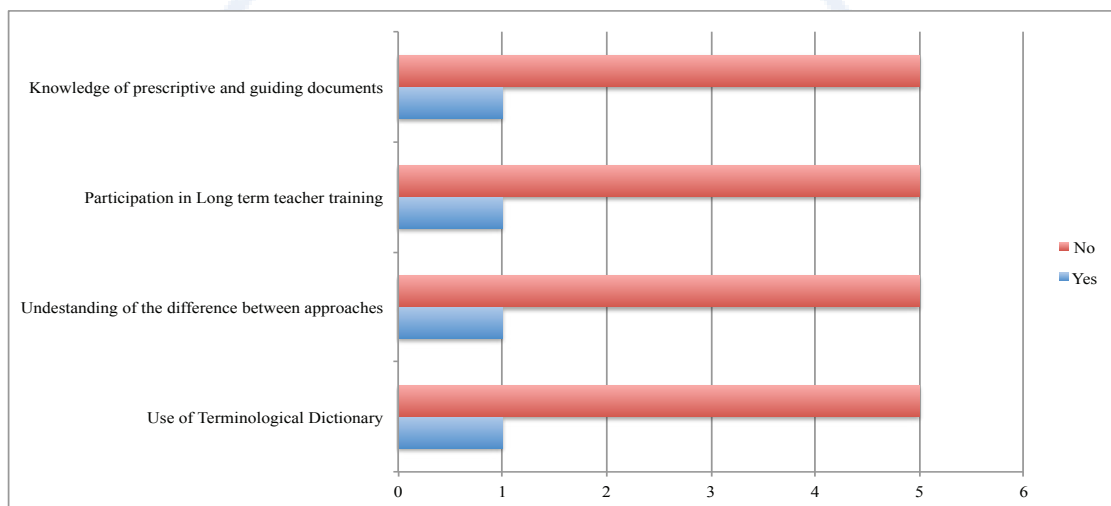


Figure 9– Some differentiating points

The data analysis evinced an incoherency between the new paradigm of grammar teaching, the curricular (and terminological) guidelines and the teachers' practices. The lack of preparation revealed by most teachers and the transformation of beliefs and practices observed with the teacher involved in a long term in force training program may highlight a solution to change the scenery, as it points out a possible path to conceive an effective teacher-training program in the context of life long learning.

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