



Forums and The Reflection On Teaching/Learning The Mother Tongue: Conceptions Of Students

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Abstract

Students' conceptions on the teaching/learning process influence the way they learn. In a course we teach in a second cycle of studies of Bologna, they must engage in two on line discussion forums to co-construct knowledge on essential topics concerning the teaching of the mother tongue and deliver an individual essay, one of the topics being the expression of their views on their contribution to their training. To determine how these students conceive the teaching/learning process and the role ICT play in it and to discuss their probable consequences, we selected relevant phrases/sentences in the essays and submitted them to content analysis, concluding that they have a very traditional conception of the teaching/learning process, which prevents them from taking profit of an organization that places them at the center of it and affects negatively their ability to propose this kind of interaction to their future pupils.

Keywords: Teacher education; Mother tongue; Conceptions; ICT.

Introduction

This text discusses the results of the analysis of Higher Education students' conceptions on the way online discussion forums affect the process of learning they are engaged in while attending a course included in a second cycle of studies of Bologna centered in their reflection on several aspects of the process of teaching/learning the mother tongue.

Teaching didactics of the mother tongue, supervising teacher training and directing seminars on educational research within Bologna cycles of studies, along with coordinating LEIP/Laboratory for Research on Portuguese Language Education, led us to reflect on factors that may affect the teaching/learning process, namely in Higher Education.

Students' conceptions are one of them, as proved by research, either at national and international level (Pardal et al., 2011; Richardson, 1996). We have been doing research on the importance of students' conceptions to promote a teaching/learning process in which they must engage actively since 2010 (Sá, 2010). Some of these studies – focused on their views on assessment as a way to regulate the teaching/learning process – led us to conclude that they fail to perceive its formative nature, which affects negatively their performance and training (see, for example, Sá, 2013, 2015). Others – focused on their views on the competencies they develop during the training process – revealed that the growing attention they pay to the student centred methodology combined with a formative assessment system the teacher adopted in the courses helps them to develop more competencies essential to their future professional practice (see, for example, Sá, 2014).

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ICT are also more and more important in the teaching/learning process due to their omnipresence in the 21st century society. One must reflect not only on the role they can play in the teaching/learning process (see, for example, Sá, 2016), but also on their impact on teacher education (Macário, Sá & Moreira, 2014a, 2014b; Sá & Macário, 2014) and the promotion of a teaching methodology that places the students in the center of the process and leads them to develop critical thinking (see, for example, Sá, 2016). This interest on ICT is supported by international documents on educational policy, which underline their importance and place their adequate use among the transversal competencies essential to integration in the 21st century society (cf. European Commission, 2007).

In this text, we reflect on student's views concerning the role ICT play in their training.

Method

This study is focused on a course of didactics of the mother tongue we teach in a second cycle of studies of Bologna designed to train early childhood educators and primary school teachers. While they are attending that course, the students must take part in two online discussion forums, selected among the several we have conceived alone or with a coauthor. They are supposed to give the students a leading role in their training process and to help them to coconstruct knowledge on important topics concerning the process of teaching/learning the mother tongue. At the end of the semester, as a part of their assessment portfolio, the students must deliver an individual written essay expressing their views on the contribution of ICT for their training among other topics mentioned in the guidelines presented by the teacher.

In order to determine how the students conceive the role played by these online discussion forums in their training, we used documental analysis to collect phrases/sentences on this topic in their essays, which were afterwards submitted to content analysis (cf. Bardin, 2013) combined with descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies) when necessary.

Findings

We read 117 texts produced along five academic years (from 2010-11 to 2014-15) and collected 302 relevant statements (each one designed by S followed by a number corresponding to its order in the total sequence). We shall use some of them to illustrate aspects the data analysis.

In Table 1, we present the results of the analysis of the aspects of the teaching/learning process the students have related with the use of the online discussion forums:

Table 1. Pedagogical aspects mentioned in the reflection on the use of online discussion forums

Variable	N	%
Acquiring knowledge	199	35.2
Collaborative work	161	28.5
Reflection	122	21.6
Developing competencies	41	7.3
ICT and construction of knowledge	36	6.4
Future didactic use	6	1.0
Total	565	100



The table shows that the majority of the statements (83.6) concerns three categories: acquiring knowledge/collaborative work/reflection.

The most valued category is acquiring knowledge as referred in S21 – [...] The use of the interactive forums [...] reveals the importance of ICT to acquire knowledge and motivates us to assimilate more easily knowledge on reading/writing and other relevant topics.

The students believe that collaborative work has played an important role in this context, as mentioned in S197 – [...] the forums were a very important work device in what concerns the analysis of the contents of this course. As they allowed us to share our ideas with other students [...] we learned by reflecting on other people's views. According to them, collaboration promotes the coconstruction of didactic knowledge, as referred in S117 – [...] Moreover the interaction in the online discussion forums encouraged people [...] to share their ideas – often different – on several topics and thus allowed us to organize that knowledge and transform it into something we could use in our practice.

The use of these forums was also related to reflection, resulting not only of collaborative work, but also of individual analysis of the resources presented in them, as stated in S101 – During the semester I became aware of the important role played by the forums in the acquisition of knowledge. The topics dealt with in them were very interesting and they allowed us to begin by reflecting individually. [...] It was also strengthened by the comparison of the students' opinions with texts of expert authors presented in the forums, as mentioned in S65 – [...] After we had written down the ideas of the whole work team [on the topic of the forum] we were invited to read a document which presented information produced by experts on that topic. [...]

Some students (almost as much as the ones who mentioned developing competencies) explicitly referred to the role played by ICT in the acquisition of knowledge, as exposed in S53 – [...] the work done in the forums made me become aware of the importance attached to the use of ICT in the presentation of contents and the acquisition of knowledge and the development of competencies concerning the process of teaching/learning how to read and write.

Nevertheless, only a few students expressed the intention of using ICT with their future pupils. Those who did so, argued that this strategy allowed the pupils to engage more actively in the learning process and to develop collaborative work (S80 – After interacting in the forums during this semester I understood that they are very useful, because they allow the pupils to present their ideas, share them with their colleagues and discuss them. [...]) and the teacher to follow more closely his/her pupils (S80 – [...] Helps the teacher to follow the work the pupil does at home [...]) and made learning more appealing (S80 – [...] the use of a computer connected to the web makes the work more appealing, more interesting, because the pupils use them in their everyday life with great pleasure.)

In Table 2, we present the results of a further analysis of the statements related to the category ICT and construction of knowledge:



Table 2. Role of ICT in the teaching/learning process

Variable	Number	%
Student centered teaching	37	56.1
Presentation of contents	17	25.8
Motivation	6	9.1
Communication	5	7.5
Following the students	1	1.5
Total	66	100

This table reveals two opposite ways of conceiving the role played by ICT in education. For some students, they are mainly a way of presenting contents, as one can read in S13 – These forums [...] functioned as a kind of guides for research on relevant topics, as well as sources of information presented by the teacher, in order that we could compare our ideas with those of experts. Others present them mainly as instruments to promote a teaching methodology centred in the student, as referred in S39 – [...] forums were a means of making us think about our future practice and pay attention to what is really important, such as the competencies one must develop, the strategies one must adopt and the importance of teaching Portuguese. – or in S107 – [...] working with ICT [...] promoted collaborative work, based on permanent research and reflection, individually and in group, sharing knowledge and experiences. To me this is essential to our professional training and promotes interest in changes, adaptation to the moment and the needs, since everyone we deal with may become our teacher for a moment.

Results, Conclusions and Recommendations

The reflection of these results allowed us to characterize the way these students view the teaching/learning process they are engaged in and the role ICT plays in it.

We concluded that most of them reveal a very traditional conception of the teaching/learning process: the teacher is supposed to communicate knowledge that the student must assimilate. We relate this conclusion with the fact that they concentrate mainly on the acquisition of knowledge (putting aside the development of competencies) and tend to consider that collaborative work and reflection are essential to learn the contents of the course. ICT are viewed as ideal means to present the knowledge on the topics dealt with in the course to be assimilated, produced by the teacher, other students or experts.

But we also observed that some students pointed to a very modern conception of the teaching/learning process, where they were supposed to play the main role. Such conceptions were related to the importance of developing competences and the teaching methodology used in this course, as presented in S225 – In the course, the teacher has adopted several methods, such as theoretical expositions, practical work and interaction in forums. These different strategies made the classes more dynamic, productive and fruitful. In these statements, ICT tend to be viewed specially as means of putting the student in the centre of the teaching/learning process, as described in S265 – Among the distinctive features of this course, I must refer the interaction in the forums, which allowed a better understanding of some of the topics dealt with in it, mainly because we worked in team. [...] Consequently, there was place for mutual findings and feedback related to a frequent sharing of ideas. [...] there were also moments of individual work [...] and the other members in the team were able to accept the ideas expressed by each person.



Therefore there is much work to be done to make students aware of the importance of accepting to be at the center of the teaching/learning process, being able to take profit of that opportunity and reflecting on how to use that teaching methodology with their future pupils.

We believe that presenting them these studies and discussing with them their results and implications will help to solve the problem.

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