

The inclusion of students with migratory experience: the tools needs for the educative assessment and intervention



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1. Research framework

It is important scientific and, above all, on a social perspective and to produce knowledge and suggest solutions enabling respond to the main problem of this research: "How to identify and thereby develop prevention methods regarding to overcome learning disabilities of second language (L2) learners, in school context, taking into account the premise of different cognitive performances (the highest level of "competence") and different psychosocial predispositions and thus, several verbal behaviours due to psychological, cognitive and linguistic factors?"

Method: 61 participants second language learners (Experimental Group) and 82 native and monolingual individuals (Control Group), aged between 7 and 30 years. It was developed a battery of 12 tests to observe, at different degrees of language development, the phonological awareness of the participants, according to the factors age, gender, nationality and native language spoken by individuals. The test appears to be programmed in an electronic format to determine the profile accuracy of sounds, control of recording the answers and report the time spent for each test. From the application of the tests battery, we found that the sample with migratory experience presents lower performance (with a lower degree of acceptability) toward the sample of native and monolingual (Portuguese) which suggests clear indication that L2 learners have the conditions that require school support especially given the differences in competence and performance among the age brackets. Naturally the L2 learners are students at risk regarding the literacy skills development, determining the academic performance and their inclusion.

Materials

Tests Battery of Verbal Behaviours Assessment in the context of SL: the purpose of this 12 test battery, prepared as a research instrument, is essentially to evaluate various levels of phonological consciousness (syllabic, intra-syllabic and phonetic) in the context of the Portuguese idiom (Second Language). The battery was developed in an electronic form, so its effectiveness, validity and data organization could be guaranteed, as well as to present the tasks in a dynamic and attractive manner. The test presents simultaneously the response options, the results, and the quotation, as if in a manual in paper form. It will be available online, with previous divulgation of its access and using rules. All the data (subjects responses and time used, in seconds, for each test) are registered safely in a database built for that purpose. An English version of the same test was built. The programming of the test (in ASP, depending on the server IIS installation, on only one laptop) occurred between October 2006 and January 2007. This battery, as applied to the sample, reveals and adequate internal consistency, with a *Cronbach Alpha* of 0.76 (number of items = 43).

3. Results

* After measuring the total notes based on the general classifications of the 143 tests, excluding the dichotic hearing test (8), , we observed that the case sample (total of 1548,5 points) present a higher mean (25,4) than control group (total of 1866 points and mean of 22,8). The maximum score of the test is 46 points, and the results gathered from the individual's performance vary between 10 and 39. The cut off level of the tests battery is 24,2. The individuals with a classification below that value present a negative performance. Below 24,2 is more frequent to achieve, into this study context, participants from control group (monolinguals), against what was expected.

4. Final considerations

According to the detailed analysis of the results (reporting to all data from the research) we found that there are particular situations where the control group stands out more positively toward the case sample. However, after the evaluation of global notes for each subject, the cut off of the tests battery shows that control individuals have the lowest performance and this conflicts with the statements of the report PISA 2006 (Commission of European Communities, 2008) toward literacy skills of high school students, seeking to justify the negative average of Portugal compared to OECD, "But there are disparities within the country. One of them is reflected in the difference in results between native and immigrant students (6%), particularly the first generation (...)." [Translation from Portuguese] (Leiria, 2007). Indeed, our study, developed in a region of the centre of Portugal, proves just another reality, discredit the skills of native ones compared to immigrant pairs. Furthermore, our goal is to assess specific skills, not only heads the literacy skills in the conceptual sense that they are generally given. Considering the cut off point as measure for the performance assessment in this test, we believe that the ratings were lower assigned to controls, while the higher notes were obtained by the sample of cases. Moreover, would be expected the monolinguals advantage compared to second language learners due to the fact that the first ones have more knowledge in Portuguese language and, particularly, regarding the phonemic level, the most predictive about the reading skills. Second language learners must face the decoding task in a context of several and different information based on sources of knowledge from first and second languages. Even is stated by previous literature that second language learners are threatened by the "crystallization" of mental structures (and of cognitive functions), this is not such a factor that enhances a lower achievement, considering the great performance of case sample, mainly regarding adults performance.

The results for each test should be carefully analysed to identify gaps in performance levels of discrimination of phonemics, syllabics, or intra-syllabics, and also should be reflexion on evidence of knowledge that students have about concepts such as "word" and "sound" in a certain language; finally, to identify other problems connected with the ability to discriminate in auditory, visual and/or memory perspectives. However, no major interest in the organization of the test is guided by the evolution of levels as typically met in the context of first language development: syllabic, intra-syllabic, and phonemic; and this is not the linguistic principle, once the tests must be directed not only to the mentioned levels, but also to the competence of individual toward syntax, reading, writing, lexicon, and phonetics (articulatory profiles). We believe that the tests battery it is more feasible for individuals with migratory experience and with the new learning of Portuguese as second language. The criterion for measuring the answers given by the participants is other consideration to be made: how to consider that stated answers are grammatical or acceptable? The notions of acceptability and grammaticality are not equivalent, which, according to Chomsky (1975), the acceptability applies to the area of performance while grammaticality relies to competence. There are degrees to be considered for both levels but "the scales of acceptability and grammaticality do not match" [Translation for Portuguese] (p. 92). In our study we must consider the perspective of acceptability because in fact we observe the performance and not properly the competence. This becomes the first inference, "therefore, although they can propose several operational tests for acceptability, it is unlikely that a necessary and sufficient operational criterion can be invented for the more abstract concept, the grammaticality" [Translation from Portuguese] (p. 92).

Thus, the tests battery developed for this research purpose opens up as an important tool for diagnostic evaluation directed more specifically to students who are starting the learning process of Portuguese as second language, insofar as it may provide indicators that enhances the practice of teachers in the process of assigning levels of proficiency according to the performance that the students show. The test can track the behaviour profile of oral, written or oral productions, thus contributing to the planning of learning activities, fostering a successful educational background, promoting the linguistic knowledge, and responding to one of the warnings of the European Commission: "will be required to dispose of new and well adapted pedagogical skills" (p. 8), and secondly, as a measure, " the Ministry of Education has to start (...) to improve the proficiency levels of students", which indeed they have proved extremely reducing in that it does not include devices for proper assessment and intervention, even in the context of preliminary studies research. The type of education is based primarily on the development of guidance documents and suggests measures that propose programs of intervention but that are not really defined. This type of test should begin with its application in the context of kindergarten to avoid the low knowledge on the part of educators about the skills of migrant children, since early time, which can avoid situations of discrimination between pupils. We must rely on the fact that children are the participants with lower achievement during our experimental study of evaluation. Moreover, according to the report of Commission of European Communities, the reality in portuguese education is other: "mandatory registration at school avoid differences between immigrant and native students [avoid really?] (...) in high school, the level of segregation stands out clearly (p. 8). The development of such tools within the research in Portugal, specifically appeals to the promotion of inclusion of all students and not prone to unevenness as those reported by the inadequacy and lack of strategies for pedagogical practice, that which must begin in the research laboratories of Higher School and seems does not reach the schools. The step is taken.

2. Method

Participants

Case sample: 61 subjects (Portuguese as a SL learners, with migration experience), with a mean age of 16,1 and standard-deviation of 6,3. 19 (31,1%) are children (ages 7 through 12 years old), 22 (36,1%) are adolescents (ages 13 to 18 years old) and 20 (38,2%) are adults (ages 19 through 30 years old). The subjects attend High School, Secondary School and Higher Education. The participants of this study present a total of 26 different nationalities. This variety of nationalities and spoken languages is intentional, although we do not intend to specify nationality or speakers groups for the research, as is the usual perspective of studies in this area. The sample selection was based on two important criteria, which define specific aspects of the migration experience we intended to have: date of arrival at Portugal and Portuguese language proficiency. The proficiency indicator to each participant was based on specific diagnostic evaluation performed by the schools. The proficiency levels intended for this study are A2 and B1 (European Commission, 2001). A1 was not considered, because the student might not understand the questions proposed in the test battery. We stress the fact that these levels (including A1) are considered requisite to have educative support on Portuguese learning referred by the orienting documents (2005) and legislation for the application of curricular measures in the schools. On the other hand, we considered only subjects that arrived at Portugal for the first time, without previous knowledge on the Portuguese language, no more than four years ago, relating to 2006. We noticed that in total there are 22 languages in the sample of which the subjects are active speakers. In what concerns the support they get on Portuguese Language discipline (as SL), 42 (68,9%) are receiving support as a curricular discipline. This kind of support is at an initiation stage, because students have not arrived, mostly, over a year ago. The remaining 19 (31,1%) are not getting any kind of support (those that have been in Portugal longer).

Identification of the tests: Alphabetical ordinance (test 1), identification of aleatory sounds (test 2), identification of minimum pairs (test 3), word spelling test and phoneme blending (test 4), attention test (writing text) (test 5), alliteration judgment (test 6), rhyme, onset and syllable judgement (test 7), dichotic hearing (test 8), lexicon identification (test 9), grammatical judgement and syntactical awareness (test 10), reading and self-evaluation (test 11), and letter/sound perception (test 12).

