Opinion text: an integrated pathway of writing and the perceptions of students

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Abstract: This article presents an exploratory study that focuses on the writing process through the creation of a didactic project which aims to understand how students deal with the specific learning of an opinion text. The aim is to i) present a pathway of writing involving practices for teaching and learning about opinion texts, ii) analyse the students' perceptions about writing activities and iii) present the students' views on the learning carried out. Regarding the methodological aspects, the writing method presented herein was implemented in a regular 9th year class (31 students), focusing on the linguistic, textual and discursive characteristics of the opinion text. Following the didactic activity, we interviewed the students as we needed to understand their views on the didactic method as expressed in their comments. The results of the interview analysis gives us an indication that the views of students on the didactic activity are positive and that they became aware of their own difficulties and improvements as a result of the skills developed in argumentative writing.

Keywords: didactics of writing, perceptions/representations, argumentative genres, opinion text

Résumé: Dans cet article, nous présentons une étude exploratoire qui se concentre sur le processus d'écriture à travers la création d'un projet d'implémentation didactique visant à comprendre le rapport entre les étudiants et un cours d'apprentissage spécifique. Il est destiné à: i) présenter un cours d'écriture avec des pratiques pour enseigner et apprendre le texte d'opinion, ii) analyser les perceptions des étudiants concernant les activités d'écriture faisant partie du cours et iii) présenter leurs réflexions sur les leçons apprises. En ce qui concerne les aspects méthodologiques, le cours d'écriture présenté ici a été mis en œuvre dans une classe ordinaire de 3ème (31 élèves), en se concentrant sur les caractéristiques linguistiques, textuelles et discursives du texte d'opinion. Après l'intervention didactique, les étudiants ont été interviewés, car il est important que les participants comprennent la perception qu'ils ont de la formation didactique. Les résultats de l'analyse des entretiens montrent que les étudiants ont une perception positive de l'intervention didactique, qu'ils ont pris conscience de leurs propres difficultés et des améliorations résultant du développement des compétences en écriture argumentative.

Mots-clés: didactique de l'écriture, perceptions/représentations, genres argumentatifs, texte d'opinion

Resumen: En este artículo, presentamos un estudio exploratorio que se centra en el proceso de escritura a través de la creación de un proyecto didáctico cuyo objetivo es comprender cómo los estudiantes se relacionan con un curso de aprendizaje específico de texto de opinión. Sus objetivos son: i) presentar un curso de escritura con prácticas

para enseñar y aprender el texto de opinión, ii) analizar las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre las actividades escritas del curso y iii) presentar las reflexiones de los estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje. Con respecto a los aspectos metodológicos, el curso de escritura que se presenta aquí se implementó en una clase regular de noveno grado (31 estudiantes), centrándose en las características lingüísticas, textuales y discursivas del texto de opinión. Después de la intervención didáctica, los estudiantes fueron entrevistados para, a través de la voz de los participantes, comprender las percepciones que tienen sobre el curso didáctico. Los resultados del análisis de las entrevistas revelan que los estudiantes tienen percepciones positivas con respecto a la intervención didáctica, han desarrollado una conciencia de sus propias dificultades y mejoras resultantes del desarrollo de la competencia de escritura argumentativa.

Palabras clave: didáctica de la escritura, percepciones/representaciones, géneros argumentativos, texto de opinión

Resumo: Neste artigo, apresenta-se um estudo exploratório que coloca o foco no processo de escrita através da criação de um projeto de implementação didática que tem como objetivo perceber como se relacionam os alunos com um específico percurso de aprendizagem de texto de opinião. Pretende-se i) apresentar um percurso de escrita com práticas para ensino e aprendizagem do texto de opinião, ii) analisar as perceções dos estudantes sobre as atividades de escrita integrantes do percurso e iii) apresentar as reflexões dos estudantes sobre as aprendizagens realizadas. Em relação a aspetos metodológicos, o percurso de escrita aqui apresentado foi implementado numa turma regular de 9.º ano (31 alunos), com foco nas características linguísticas, textuais e discursivas do texto de opinião. Após a intervenção didática, procedeu-se à entrevista dos alunos, uma vez que importa, através da voz dos participantes, perceber as perceções que os mesmos têm sobre o percurso didático. Os resultados das análises das entrevistas realizadas revelam que os alunos possuem perceções positivas relativamente à intervenção didática, desenvolveram uma consciencialização relativamente às suas próprias dificuldades e melhorias resultantes do desenvolvimento da competência da escrita argumentativa.

Palavras-chave: didática da escrita, perceções/representações, géneros argumentativos, texto de opinião

Resumen: En aquest article, presentem un estudi exploratori centrat en el procés d'escriptura a través de la creació d'un projecte didàctic que busca de comprendre com els estudiants es relacionen amb un curs d'aprenentatge específic de text d'opinió. Els seus objectius són: i) presentar un curs d'escriptura amb pràctiques per ensenyar i aprendre el text d'opinió, ii) analitzar les percepcions dels estudiants sobre les activitats escrites del curs i iii) presentar les reflexions dels estudiants sobre l'aprenentatge. Pel que fa als aspectes metodològics, el curs escrit que es presenta aquí es va implementar en una aula regular de novè grau (31 estudiants), centrant-se en les característiques lingüístiques, textuals i discursives del text d'opinió. Després de la intervenció didàctica, els estudiants van ser entrevistats per poder, a través de la seva veu com a participants, comprendre les percepcions que tenen sobre el curs didàctic. Els resultats de l'anàlisi de les entrevistes revelen que tenen percepcions positives pel que fa a la intervenció didàctica i han desenvolupat una consciència de les seves pròpies dificultats i millores resultants del desenvolupament de la competència d'escriptura argumentativa.

Paraules clau: didàctica de l'escriptura, percepcions/representacions, gèneres argumentatius, text d'opinió

Introduction

Students and writing: perceptions

Writing is a highly difficult skill, which means that for many students it is a problem when it comes to carrying out tasks that involve this skill. These difficulties are not limited to the scope of the Portuguese subject, but rather to all subjects, "with implication on the performance of students in terms of acquisition, preparation and conveyance of knowledge, with impact at school achievement level" (Carvalho, 2013: 187).

If we think about the meaning that students impart to writing, we realise that, in their minds, the writing activity is only practiced at school. According to Bazerman (2006a, 2009), this could lead them into thinking that writing, in general, is like the writing done at school, and that it is only supposed to be "used" in the classroom. As Pereira (2008) emphasises, writing is mostly a school practice in which, as shown in some research, working with texts – either reading or writing – is often regarded by students as a simple "school exercise", which does not seem to be very encouraging when it comes to the learning thereof. Students find it difficult to internalise the idea that knowledge of writing can be activated and used in contexts and situations outside of the school, do not recognise the social value of writing, and do not see it as a communication, professional, community instrument.

Therefore, students will always associate writing with school activities and, in connection thereto, with assessment. Their writing skills are of paramount importance in the assessment (Duarte *et al.*, 2016). Students write in order to be assessed, so that teachers can determine whether or not they have acquired the knowledge. This is not an issue typical of the Portuguese language subject, but rather of all the subjects in the curriculum. We could say that, as far as students are concerned, this is perhaps the predominant function of writing lessons – to write in order to be assessed.

To add to this idea of writing at the service of assessment, teachers are the recipients of the students' work (Camps, 2003: 21) and what they usually do to the students' written assignments resulting from the various activities is they erase, cross them out and jot down notes in a different colour. Against this backdrop, it is only natural for a student to regard writing as an activity that belongs to a special context of its own, in which he or she has something to say to the teacher alone, therefore the activity is devoid of content. In the student's mind, writing is of

no interest to anyone other than to himself/herself, the learner, and to the teacher, the assessor (Pereira, 2008: 8). Students are often afraid or embarrassed to have their textual production assessed[i]. But even more worrying is the fact that basic education school exercises in no way reflect the actual situations that students will face when they enter the job market, when they have to survive/live outside of the school. The school will, therefore, have to consider contexts in the learning and teaching process that resemble, as much as possible, the real world, and that what is learned at school is transmitted to students as something that is useful and essencial to their lives as active participants of the society in which they live. It goes without saying that students must be shown that what they learn can be applied to situations and contexts other than those of teaching and learning.

Antunes e Silva conducted a study on students' perceptions about writing at and outside of school, concluding that most students have no idea of the difficulties they have when it comes to building this competence, as they believe they have a god relation with writing and even write (quite) well, confusing the idea that to write well is to write a lot (2016: 52). Another study carried out with secondary education students (Antunes, 2014) found that one of the greatest problems that students have is the difficulty in starting to write, for lack of ideas or trouble in organising them. The two studies concluded that for many students, writing is no more than transforming speech sounds into graphic symbols, and that speaking and writing are not viewed as types of different languages, each with their own functions, structures and organisational patterns (Antunes e Silva, 2016; Antunes, 2014).

Students need to recognise the importance of writing for learning (Carvalho, 2011) and to find sense in the writing practices so that they may find strategies and effective procedures for producing texts in various communication situations. As such, it is necessary to build learning processes that take into account the needs of students so that these perceptions may be changed.

This exploratory study seeks to understand how students related with the specific learning of the opinion text, which was designed so as to be distinguished from the work they usually do in the classroom and from the work presented in textbooks (Sebastião, 2018), which, as we know, are of great importance in the teaching and learning of the mother tongue (Apple, 2002; Choppin, 1999; Castro, 1995).

Textual genres in a school context

Many activities are (re)created within the school that enables the use of writing and the production of texts. These activities can be created exclusively in a classroom context, but can also be taken outside its boundaries. The contexts thus (re)created are not entirely real contexts, but rather "representation forms of different realities" that do not "depend on social practices, rather on the actual reality" (Schneuwly and Dolz, 2004: 77), giving rise to what Schneuwly and Dolz (2004) call *school genres*. The latter are the result of the situation created for the specific purpose of teaching and learning. In other words, genres in a classroom context are not, as defined by Bakhtin (2003), relatively stable forms of utterances developed in each context of language use, but rather "transformations" of those genres, representation forms of reality with specific school purposes.

Showing students that the genres they deal with in the classroom and which are developed in the school activities play a role in society at various levels (Camps, 2003; Marcuschi, 2002) will contribute towards imparting a significant role to writing and, at the same time, will help students find significance in their activities, thereby assigning meaning to the writing practice. We agree with Bazerman (2006a) when he states that without student motivation little happens in a writing class. Motivation should always be considered as an essential part of learning.

Accordingly, understanding the genres and how they work within the system to which they belong and in the circumstances in which they are used may help students, as the writing subjects, to meet the communication needs and expectations of the speakers involved. Therefore, materialising the learning of writing (also) through genres makes good sense. If students are aware of this, they will be able to understand the communication situation, identify the reasons why a text produced in a communication situation may or not work, and understand what it takes for a specific genre to work in communication. Learning to write requires mastery and solving writing problems that become increasingly more difficult. Through teaching, we will be helping students to improve their understanding and production skills, providing them with the instruments that will enable them to have access to more elaborate texts, so that they can achieve a more substantial and deeper understanding and communication of their context (Bazerman, 2006a; Camps, 2003).

For a didactic of the genre

Working with genres, whether in writing, reading or grammar, implies a didactic decision that must take into account the learning objectives, being at the same time a genre to be learned and to be used to communicate (Schneuwly and Dolz, 2004: 81). In a socio-discursive perspective Dolz, Noverraz and Schneuwly (2004) regard genres as a didactic instrument useful for teaching a mother tongue. Learning about genres is also essential in other subjects, as they constitute vehicles of other specific learning (for example, a report in science lessons, a biography in history lessons).

In this text, the use of textual genres in class has implied the perspective of a didactic model of genre (Di Pietro, Erard and Kaneman-Pougatch, 1996), which is based on a research methodology consisting of a sequence of activities guided to the reflection on those activities and to student learning. This sequence of proposed activities assumes a work-by-project character (Camps, 1994), because it assumes characteristics of the modality of the natural production process: writing for audiences, giving attention to the process, active participation of students in the preparation and development of activities, interaction during the tasks (Camps, 1994: 153).

The activities proposed in this writing project have as guidelines the consistency of genres as per Bakhtin (2003): i) the contents and knowledge conveyed by the genre (thematic content), ii) the communication structures of the genre and the places where they can possibly exist (compositional construction), and iii) the specific configurations of the linguistic units that form the genre (style). They thus show the teachable dimensions of the genre under study: the characteristics of the production context, the typical contents of genre, how these forms can be expressed, the most common plan for organising the thematic content and style (specific lexicon, cohesion mechanisms, textual sequences, marks of the enunciative position). Taking all this into account, it was considered appropriate to introduce knowledge of the different text and discourse levels throughout the learning method (Camps, 2003: 9-10). In this process, is important to teach the leading to the production of the final text (Hayes and Flower, 1980), in a student-centered process guided by the teacher (Camps, 2003: 21).

Methodology

Methodology is divided into two stages, the first of which corresponds to the implementation of the writing process leading to the second stage: the analysis of students' perceptions of the didactic process.

The sample was defined for convenience, as it resulted from the researcher's challenge to the Faro school groups, to which two teachers responded positively showing their availability to collaborate. The implementation of the didactic method in the two schools in question was not exactly the same for both schools, since adjustments were needed due to their different contexts. For this reason, the class whose data is presented herein, consisting of 31 students, is the one that completed the project as had initially been planned with the teacher.

The main goal of the didactic method implemented is the phased study of the opinion text in 9th year regular classes, where it is introduced as part of the lesson planning. The class teachers participated in the development of all the stages of the proposed method.

Once the didactic method was applied, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and one of the teachers, which were later transcribed. Choosing this type of interview to collect information was based on the fact that it allows participants to express their perceptions and opinions more freely, thus obtaining more and diversified information. The organisation of this information was made according to a qualitative content analysis, as per Bardin (2014). In a first stage, we carried out a cross-cutting analysis of the contents of the interviews, resulting in categories and providing the identification "of consistencies, similarities, regularities" (Bardin, 2014: 90) in the interviewees' discourses; in a second stage, we identified and recorded the specific and relevant characteristics of each interview that met the goals of this study.

Contextualisation of the writing pathway

The purpose of this exploratory study is to test a teaching method created from theoretical assumptions in line with cognitive psychology (Bruner, 1983), in an interactionist concept of language based on Vygotsky (1998) and Luria (2010), which was applied to two 9th year classes and was gradually adjusted to improve the teaching method and be adapted to the teaching and learning context.

The main goal of this paper is to contribute to the students' ability to master the procedures required for an adequate textual, thematic and discursive development, gradually consolidating their knowledge of school genres, in particular argumentative genres (DGE, 2015). The one we have chosen – the opinion text – is one of the writing skills included in the 9th year school programme, and is often assessed in the national exams at this school level. The aim is basically for students to realise that arguments are part of their daily life, understand how an argument in favour of or against an opinion or fact is constructed, understand how the writing

of an argument is processed, and that there are different types of arguments, identify the strength of effective arguments and recognise the linguistic strategies to write a consistent and coherent argumentative discourse. As the writing of a text requires knowledge at different levels, the teaching method was designed to include various tasks and formats that activate different cognitive strategies.

The purpose of the method presented to students is specifically related to the final product. Writing an opinion text on a controversial subject – *The use of mobile phones in the classroom* – to be published in the school newspaper can trigger different opinions. The communication context to be created (the publication of the text), marked socially and institutionally, gives sense to the sequence of activities in that the topic is related to the students' experiences. The chosen genre and topic thus frame the intended writing process. According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1990), the communicative situation consists of markedly objective data and data resulting from representations internalised by the subjects and that are mobilised in the course of the interactive process. For Bronckart (2003), the factors with a *necessary influence* on this process refer to the physical world and to the social and subjective world. The social and cultural dimension influences the formation and composition of the language and, consequently, of the discourse to the made. In this work, we will use genre in respect of the idea of process, leading students to using the linguistic system available to them to convey a meaningful message and contextualised by all their knowledge resulting from their social-cultural context, showing them that knowledge of grammar is essential to perform better in the different tasks associated to the mastery of the language (Milian, 2014; Costa, 2008).

The writing pathway

The process started with the introduction to the writing project, during which we explained to the students the final goal of a sequence of lessons required achieve the production of an opinion text contextualised in a (close to) real situation: the publication of the text thus produced in the school newspaper. It was also explained that the activities would be interconnected and determined by the relation between the situation in which the interaction would take place, the organisation of the argumentative text and textual dimension, in other words, by the communicative context. It should be noted that although the activities systematically and thoroughly focused on the objectives of argumentative writing, the contents are explored according to the students' level and knowledge.

Stage 1

This stage was dedicated to exploring the relationship between the students' argumentation and experience. In this sense, the starting point consisted in looking at three situations that resemble daily life represented in three texts: two comic strips illustrating conversations in a school context, and a dialogue representing a family scene about school issues. The aim was for students to identify with the situations presented to them and understand how important it is to pur forward a good argument to reach their goals. From the analysis of these distinct communication situations and joint reflection, the aim was to make students understand that when they need to defend their viewpoint, the construction of their argument must be based on a three-pronged approach: the arguing subject, a proposal about the world, and a target subject. Thus the argumentation is the textual result of the combination of these three elements, which requires the arguing subject to provide an explanation, using individual and social experiences in a space and within a time of a situation for the purpose of persuasion, thus configuring the/a communicative event (Charaudeau, 2016: 205).

For this process to take place, the following are required:

- a proposal about the world that causes someone to question its legitimacy;
- a subject who develops a reasoning to show the acceptability or legitimacy of that proposal, aiming to establish a truth;
- another subject who, being related to the same proposal, questioning or truth, is the target of the argument. This is the co-enunciator to whom the enunciator speaks, who argues the with the purpose of leading the co-enunciator to share the same truth (persuasion process), knowing that he/she can accept (be in favour of) or reject (be against) that argumentation.

In connection with what has been said, the aim of this activity is to highlight the differences betwen the distinct communication situations represented: Who speaks? To whom? What is the intention? How does he/she do it?.

To enable students to organise the information arising from the debate, they were given a table to complete, shown below, for that purpose:

Table 1. Script for exploring the opinion text: communication context

Text	Communica-tion situation?	Who argues (against)?	Which argu-ment(s)?	Argument(s) (against)?	Why argue (against)?

By organising the information, students were able to use this structure to plan the second part of the exercise, which involved sharing, orally, with their peers and teacher a situation they experienced, showing a disagreement they had with someone and identifying the arguments used by each side. The purpose was to rebuild an argument situation. In this oral presentation, the student had to i) identify the parameters of the social and subjective context which contained the action reported in the first person; ii) select the argumentative textual sequences suited to the identified situation and iii) select the linguistic expressions typical of argumentation (for e.g., connectors, enunciation mechanisms, modality). Students then reported their opinion presented to an interlocutor and the arguments that justified/supported it. The discussion in a large group about the arguments presented and the proposal of others possible for each situation allowed to discuss the concept of negotiation.

Stage 2

Following the presentation of the different communication situations, with different interlocutors, students realised the communication's concept intentionality: the objective that triggers the communication act to be achieved. The intentionality refers to the attitude of the textual producer (Beaugrande & Dressler, 2005: 169). Therefore, to develop communication and discursive competence through the text, the interlocutor must be identified, as he/or is the image of the other, which will contribute to building the communication intentionality, (re)creating the social and historical situation framing the text, and selecting the information to be transmitted. The communication intentionality, an element of the discursive competence, does not lie solely with the locutor, but rather survives according to the image that the locutor builds of its interlocutor.

Thus, in order to understand the importance of the relationship between the discursive-textual operations made during the textual genre production and the suitability to different audiences and communication purposes for achieving the communication objectives (Bakhtin (2003), an activity was proposed so that students would understand that, to be convincing, one

needs to choose and substantiate our arguments well. Students were shown different adverts found in websites and had to identify the value highlighted in each of these adverts, so as to understand the relationships in the argumentation, based on linguistic and thematic choices and the interlocutor.

Table 2. Script for exploring the opinion text: suitability of the argument to the interlocutor

Interlocutors	Highlighted "value"[ii]						
	entertain-ment	beauty	cleanli-ness	healthy lifestyle	adventure	wealth	…
Children							
Youth							
…							

Students understood that the argumentation intentionality determines linguistic choices and text organisation, in that it selects textual sequences that constitute the argumentative structure: the thesis (product presentation) and the defense of the thesis, formed by arguments supporting the sender's position (the selling brand). Through this exercise, students were able to compare and analyse the variations in argumentation situations and realise that the argumentative text highlights beliefs and values (those that must be defended).

These two stages enabled students to observe, describe, analyse and compare different argumentation situations that vary according to the enunciator, co-enunciator, social context, intentionality and "subject" of the debate (thesis). Some specific linguistic elements typical of argumentative texts (connectors, modality, lexicon, syntax) were explored related with intentionality.

Stage 3

Based on a constructivist conception of the teaching and learning process, the activities of this stage were organised and linked so that the students could find the linguistic, discursive-textual and structural characteristics of the genre under study. This content is not entirely new to these students, since it is part of the 7th and 8th year school programme, meaning that students already have some knowledge of the argumentative text. The text *Social networks and their applications in young people's lives*[iii] served as the basis for working on the organisation of the opinion text.

First, the contextual parameters of textual production were analysed orally: the physical and subjective context that gives rise to the text and helped produce the inferences about textual support, thematic content, suitability of the genre chosen to convey the information, reliability of information, and social roles played by the subjects in the interaction. Then, students used a script for guided reading, learning about the thematic organisation and structure of the text through: i) prototypical textual sequences (Adam, 2001) that form the overall plan of the opinion article and ii) the identification of the hypothesis that generates the thesis defended.

In a dialogue mediated by the students, between the text provided and the script, the aim was for them to understand the thematic structure of the text, arranging the information of the table below:

Table 3. Script for exploring the opinion text: thematic content and types of arguments

Thesis	...	
Arguments		Types of arguments
Reasons for/against the thesis	Explaining the reasons	
...	...	
...	...	
Summary	...	

The chosen work methodology was that of collaborative work, in groups of two or three students. With the help of the script, students identified the way in which an opinion text is organised: positioning in relation to a topic (thesis), the reasons and explanations supporting this positioning (arguments) and a conclusion (synthesis). As regards arguments, they had to understand how these were constructed, that is, the subject's position before the controversial question presented (in favour or against) and the explanation given in support of the position taken and defended.

The purpose of the script was also to enable students to recognise argument types. Those that were identified were limited to those found in the text, which the students inferred from the construction of the argument and interpretation (citation, examples, authority, evidence). The identification of the type of argument and analysis of how it is constructed would achieve the objective of having students identify the construction of the argument as an argumentative strategy. The aim of this work stage was that students understood how arguments were constructed and related among each other, and that an argument is chosen depending on the

topic and explanation. Understanding these aspects led students to understand how the argumentative strength in producing such a text, using arguments that diminish the strength of the opposing ideas or strengthen the ideas in favour. The conclusions enabled students to identify and understand the role of specific linguistic elements typical of opinion texts (connectors, modality, lexicon, syntax) that ensure an adequate textual, thematic and discursive development. Moreover, to realise that the nature of these elements can be used to build a position, present the reasons justifying it, and building and relating arguments.

Inevitably, in the course of exploring the structure of the text, the students explored linguistic mechanisms such as enunciation marks, connectors, their semantic-argumentative value, and the purpose of relating arguments and the distinct parts of the structure of the text, as well as the modality in the enunciation position in the argument construction in relation to the interlocutor. Moreover, exploring the text using the script allowed students to make a gradually discovery from the macro to the microstructure level (van Dijk, 1997).

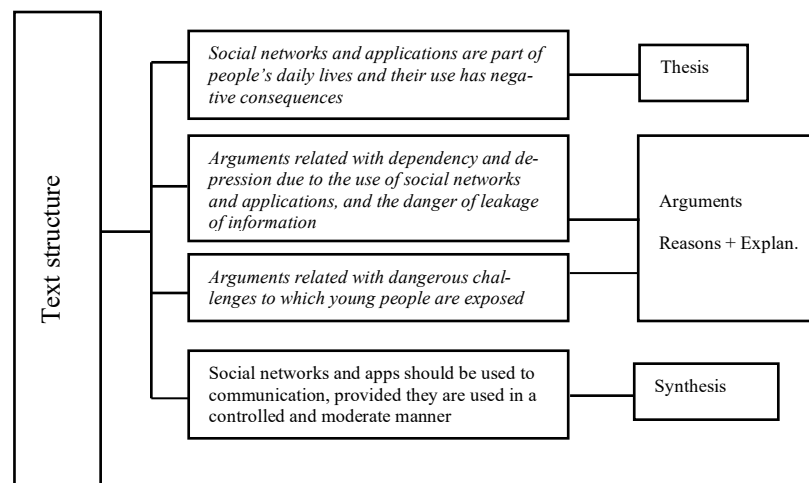The script also included an exercise for identifying the plan of the opinion text (Adam, 2001):

Figure 1. Script for exploring the opinion text: textual plan

By outlining the structure of the text the students were able to organise, view and summarise the information on the topic. It students are aware of the argumentative text's plan, they will understand the relationship between the different parts of the opinion text. Using this scheme optimises the work in that the structure is easily recognised and can be reused in other writing situations, in this case, argumentative texts.

Stage 4

Given the guidelines underlying this didactic process, the linguistic properties of the genre under study are a matter of concern. We share in Costa's idea (2008) that the applicability of grammar knowledge is, therefore, clear and should be explored, with benefits from grammar explanation to the contexts of language use, and that the application of grammar knowledge in the different use contexts will contribute to the quality of the learning thereof (2008: 165). The previous stages justify the integration of grammar in the classroom in verbal context situations (in this case, a written situation) and develop mental operations for the purpose of producing texts. The teaching of grammar is viewed as a process of production of meaning in context, as argued by Milian, in that "there are several reasons to structure an argument supporting the integration of grammar in the language teaching classroom: firstly, to highlight the role grammar plays in the process of language learning and acquisition and in linguistic and discursive use; secondly, to vindicate the role of grammar – considered the knowledge of language and its use – as part of the different kinds of knowledge offered by the school in order to prepare pupils as future citizens, allowing them to fully participate in social activities; and thirdly, the necessity of considering the relationship between grammar and thought processes." (Milian, 2014: 43).

It is important for students to be aware of the role played by textual organisers in the connection between the various propositions in the text. We, therefore, suggested two activities involving linguistic reflection related to connectors. In the first activity, students worked in groups of two or three and had to decide how to connect sentences related to the previous text to impart meaning to it, justifying why they chose one connector rather than another[iv]. The second activity – writing – presented a thesis and only the connectors that ensured the cohesion and coherence of the opinion text (in the original text). From here, and in groups of two or three, students had to (re)write the opinion text according to the meaning(s) which the connectors conveyed[v]. To make students aware of how the opinion text is organised means that they will take into consideration how the semantic-argumentative value of the connector limits the organisation of propositions in relation to the thesis. In our opinion, this exercise contributed to the creation of mental representations of the importance and values of connectors. In the end, students were able to present and discuss the results, and compare them with the original text.

According to Fontich (2016) and Myhill (2011), tasks that generate discussion, reflection and participation providing better student performance. The debate enabled by the two exercises contributed to the development of the ability to view language as an object and

to regard it as a reference to a context, allowing the development of the students' metalinguistic competences (Camps & Milian, 2017).

Stage 5

This stage of the process was dedicated to the debate – also an argumentative genre. There is a clear connection between the construction of oral and written production, with due regard to the specificities of the former in relation to the latter.

The planning, organisation, search for information and debate allowed the students to experience the distribution of roles in a communication situation that resembles real life. This assignment of positions concerning the topic under discussion triggered the communication intentionality, led to the construction of arguments, according to the positions taken, and to the manipulation of the argument's linguistic aspects, negotiation, enabling the teaching and learning of formal and public genres and of the grammar system in context. Debating is a complex textual genre that involves linguistic, cognitive, social and individual skills through the construction of identity (Dolz, Schnewly e De Pietro, 2010: 214). As this genre is relevant in the life of people, practising it allows one to develop argument competences in usage contexts. In addition to these, other skills specific of the genre, such as word management between participants, listening to the other, resuming the discourse during interventions, are also developed and can be applied in other communication situations.

As the students of this class had never held a debate, this stage had to be worked on in detail, which also ended up needing more time than initially planned. Note the different stages in Table 4 produced with the students during the preparation process:

Table 4. Plan for organising and holding the debate

Preparation	Presentation/Execution	Conclusion
• Search for information: .Content/working topic • Organisation of the group/group(s) **Social roles**: . of the moderator . of the participants	**Context**: Social place/ moment of execution **Social roles**: . of the moderator . of the participants . of the target audience • **Textual organisation and development of debate:** – Discursive structure (greetings, intervention/moderation, closing) – Content and individual arguments (viewpoint, presentation of arguments, expanding on arguments, adequate sequence of ideas, counter-arguments, refuting the argument, justification)	The moderator summarises the debate and presents the conclusions

. of the target audience • Distribution of tasks • Management of speaking time	• **Linguistic elements:** (lexical adequacy, forms of politeness, modalities, articulators...)	
	• **Prosody elements** (articulation, voice volume, intonation, rhythm, pauses, ...)	
	• **Non-verbal elements** (gestures, body posture, direction of the eyes, ...)	

The above stages do not occur at the same time in during the lesson. Before the formal debate, the preparation thereof will ensure that it will be effective. The purpose of the debate was to discuss the topic in order to execute the last stage: the writing of the opinion text. The underlying principle of this didactic decision is related to the fact that having good knowledge of the matters under discussion/defended is a sound basis for good argumentation performance (Bueno, 2017). Pedagogically, it is considered that this activity gave students the opportunity to put into practice all the variables in the argumentative pragmatic and communication situation (Moeschler, 1985). The performance of the different roles enabled the creation of representations for the argumentative text and the development of social, discursive and textual competences.

To complete this stage, the task of each student was to organise the arguments according to the position taking and to assess which group had defended the best argument, and their viewpoints, and also to choose the position they identified the most with. The aim of this writing assignment was to make students reflect on the process already achieved and to organise/plan the ideas for the next stage: writing the opinion text.

The debate enabled the students to learn that the use of orality (and writing) can affect the participants in the classroom, but also in the community. By focusing on the interaction created within the text – both written and oral – they easily come to the conclusion that the meanings and intentions worked on in the classroom can be transposed to the outside and, in entirely new situations (Bazerman, 2006b: 21), the knowledge acquired are transferable to other participants in similar or more unlike genres (Coutinho, 2003: 127-128).

Stage 6

The didactic process culminated in its initial proposition: the collaborative writing[vi] of an opinion text called *The use of mobile phones in the classroom,* without having to use the guiding text to which students are accustomed. This stage was supported by a grid that contained the information on the structure of the opinion text, to help students plan the text (define the text

according to intentionality, retrieving the information used in the debate; recognise the characteristics of the target audience and the dissemination format; construct the plan according to the already known scheme), produce a first version of the text, collaborative revision of the (self)regulation grid, re-writing and simultaneous revision of the writing and conclusion (Hayes & Flower, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Amor, 1993: 121). The intention was for students to put into practice the learning acquired throughout this process. The activities following textual production consisted in the selection, by the students, of two of the written texts to be edited and sent to the school newspaper editors. The opinion texts produced in this process have been published.

Perceptions of students about the didactic process

As the purpose of the exploratory study is to understand how students relate with a specific learning process of writing opinion texts, we find it relevant to hear them out and understand which perceptions they have throughout this writing process.

Although the analysis of student interviews is still in progress, we can already define some tendencies in the contents analysed, represented in the following categories:

> . didactic pathway implemented;
>
> . perception of improvements;
>
> . perception of difficulties;
>
> . collaborative writing.

When questioned about the didactic process, in general, students mentioned how easy it was to adapt to the type of activities proposed because of the various stages way in which the strategies and methods, the construction and the logic of the sequence are organised, as can be inferred from the words of one student who states that the activities were "rather useful, because as I have already said, the methods and data we were given made it easy for us to form an opinion, to argue and, obviously, to write a cohesive argumentative text with all the necessary characteristics" (A49AF). Among the activities carried out, text deconstruction seems to have been the one that students believed contributed the most to the mastery of the text structure. As the student (A39AF) refers: "it was when we had to do the opposite, we had the text and needed to separate, deconstruct it". The organisation of ideas also seems to have been one the fields in which students felt they had developed competences, as most of them considered that the process allowed them to build their knowledge of textualisation. They also refer that they understood the role of connections in the organisation of the opinion text and that they learned

how to use them in the text, as noted by (A39AF) when he says he learned to use connectors: "make more use of them to enrich and organise the ideas, because we have them in our minds, but then we forget to talk about this and that, and it get all mixed up". We realise that the students understood the grammar in context, to the extent that they give it meaning. An example of this is given by student (A59AF) who feels that the writing process "made me understand what I was doing wrong in writing and understand that by using connectors and types of arguments [...] understand how to write better". The aspects of planning, organisation and development of arguments oriented towards a conclusion were also highlighted by the students, as can be seen in this excerpt of an interview transcript: "Understand better what I was doing wrong in writing and understand that by using connectors and types of arguments realise how I had to write and plan better". (A19AF). These testimonies are a clear indication that students show an awareness of having improved in the identification of the structure of the argumentative text in their relation with the topic. Let us look at the opinion of student (A39AF): "the structure of the text, what I say in each paragraph and sometimes try to summarise a bit", or even student (A29AF) when he states "I have improved; before, I never used to give an explanation and didn't know about the types of explanations I could give, I often got all my ideas mixed up, I didn't have a direct path, and began to wander off track".

We can infer that the activities proposed by the learning process contributed to raise the awareness of the writing stages – planning, textualisation and revision (Hayes & Flower, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1981) – as wholly part of the textual production process, as agreed by student (A59AF) "in planning, when the teacher spoke about that part of the thesis, the arguments and types of arguments, it was right there" and also student (A19AF) "we learn to write drafts, to summarise everything and to write an argumentation text".

Concerning the awareness of difficulties, the opinion that the mastery of vocabulary is an obstacle to writing a text seems to be unanimous: "sometimes we don't have the words to express what we want to say in the text, because talking is much easier" (A39AF), an idea corroborated by student (A29AF): "especially vocabulary". It is interesting to note that the students themselves mentioned that overcoming this difficulty felt in the course and at the end of the process involves future work in reading.

In the category of collaborative writing, in general, students appreciated this work method through the sharing of ideas, enjoyed the discussions triggered by this modality, as they feel that "it helps a lot, because it's not only a viewpoint we're talking about, it's three or two, and someone has an idea and the next person has another idea, and if we joint all ideas it will

be better" (A39AF), or "in groups we can bring our opinion forward more strongly because we are two or three, and it is interesting to hear the opinion of the other and our own opinion, and it's easier to write a text" (A49AF).

Overall, the students' assessment of this experience is positive: "I think it was good, and it was an advantage for us because we learned and maybe even remembered things that we might not remember when we had to write an argumentative text" (A59AF). Interestingly, when questioned about how they would improve this pathway of writing an opinion text, one of the aspects they mentioned is the duration of the process, as they feel that they "need to write more [...] there should be more lessons" (A59AF).

Final remarks

The guideline of this work was to understand how students approached a specific process of learning about the opinion text. As we constructed this process, we gave priority to the parameters of the argumentative communication situation and those related with textual organisation and the writing of the opinion text. The activities provided and their articulation made room for students to reflect and construct representations about their performance in producing argumentative texts and about the process of their writing. Thus, according to the assessments made by students, the process created with characteristics different from those usually conducted in the classroom was stimulating and fruitful. Most students recognise that they have learned to argue or developed argumentative competences, in particular in relation to the writing process, text organisation and structure, and to the recognition of the importance and value of microlinguistic aspects in textual production. The writing process leading to the production of an opinion text showed that writing skills can still be improved through a didactic, theoretical and methodological substantiated process suited to the learning goals, as a methodology of the teaching of writing.

Although the aim was to develop a writing process in a systematic and thorough way, we are aware that not all contents were addressed in equal depth, and that no pathway can ever do that. We, therefore, feel that other writing pathways towards argumentative writing should complement what has been said above.

Some final comments on the study in progress, of which this paper is part. In future, it is important to develop the analysis of productions by students, so that it can be articulated in a more robust manner with the analysis of their perceptions, thus responding to the questions: How do the strategies and resources implemented throughout the argumentative writing

pathway influence the quality of texts produced by students? How does the (self-)perception of students about their performance relate with that of their texts? In other words, as this work progresses, we aim to strengthen the triangulation of data.

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[i] Regarding emotions and how they influence students, Bazerman (2006a: 15) argues: "It is no surprise that most students upon finishing their studies write very little beyond what their jobs require. Why endure the difficulties of writing and the anxiety of underachievement when they are no longer subject to assessment, if they have not identified a need that could be solved through writing?".

[ii] This activity was inspired by Camps, A., Camps, M., Colomer, T. & Milian, M. (1995). *Ull de Bou. Lengua.* Barcelona: Barcanova.

[iii] The text used can be found at http://iasaude.pt/index.php/informacao-documentacao/recortes-de-imprensa/919-a-influencia-das-redes-sociais-e-aplicacoes-na-vida-dos-jovens (adapted).

[iv] This activity was recorded in audio and will be analysed later.

[v] This activity was recorded in audio and will be analysed later.

[vi] This activity was recorded in audio and will be analysed later.

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