Abstract

Writing involves skills that run throughout schooling, from language acquisition to the materialization of the written word through different textual genres. At the end of high school, students are required to write an argumentative essay in prose, in the cultured form of Portuguese, based on a topic of social relevance (this is one of the tests in the National High School Exam, Enem). Teachers are thus faced with the need to improve their students’ argumentative skills through written enunciation that involves an appropriate selection of the socio-cultural repertoire. This paper presents the experience of a project that aims to find out how literary literacy can help in the writing of Enem essays. Through participation in a book club and writing workshops, students experience the writing process mediated by literary reading.

Keywords: Writing. High School. National High School Exam. Literacy.

Literatura e Argumentação: a escrita da redação do Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio sob um olhar interdisciplinar

Abstract

O desenvolvimento da escrita envolve habilidades que permeiam a formação escolar, desde a aquisição da linguagem até a escrita propriamente dita, por meio de diferentes gêneros. Ao final do ensino médio, o aluno é solicitado a escrever uma redação argumentativa em prosa, em português padrão, a partir de um tema de relevância social (essa é uma das provas do Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio, conhecido pela sigla Enem). Os professores se deparam, portanto, com a necessidade de aprimorar as habilidades retóricas de argumentação dos alunos por meio de um texto escrito que envolva uma seleção adequada do repertório sociocultural. Este trabalho apresenta a experiência de um projeto que tem como objetivo descobrir como o letramento literário pode ajudar na escrita da redação.

1 Introduction

"Sometimes reading a book reveals a person."
(Milton Hatoum, Relato de um certo Oriente)

Here are the first results of the research project "Literature and argumentation: a look at the Enem essay", which has been running since May 2022 at the Salinas Campus of the Federal Institute of Northern Minas Gerais (IFNMG). The project involves the participation of three teachers from the languages area, as well as two scientific initiation scholarship students (a high school student and an undergraduate student in Pedagogy). Thirty high school students benefit directly: they have access to meetings organized by the project team and have their textual production stimulated, corrected (based on criteria that will be presented in due course) and commented on by the teachers. From the project's inception, it was based on a principle already set out by various experts - just to mention one of them, Alberto Manguel, in A History of Reading, a book originally published in English in 1996:

We all read ourselves and the world around us to get a glimpse of who we are and where we are. We read to understand, or to begin to understand. We can't stop reading. Reading, almost like breathing, is our essential function. [...] Reading [...] comes before writing." (MANGUEL, 2021, p. 24).

At the time, we already had a fruitful experience in this field: the organization and maintenance of a reading club dedicated to literary literacy (cf. ANDRADE; CAMPOS, 2021; CAMPOS et al., 2022). If, as Manguel also reminds us, a society can exist without writing, but never without reading (MANGUEL, 2021, p. 24), the fact is that, from a certain point onwards, the desire, if not the need, for an "extra step" arises: to work on constructing their own, authorial texts. This feeling can be understood from various perspectives, but two are worth considering. According to the first, writing is preferable to not writing because, when a society doesn't write, it is itself "written", that is, others will "think" it for themselves.
Not writing is therefore related to the loss of experience, identity and memory (cf. CAMPOS, 2013, p. 2). The second of the perspectives evoked here is pragmatic, but it certainly goes hand in hand with the first: writing is a language practice assessed in Enem - the National High School Exam, Brazil's main educational exam.

Attesting to the complexity of the relationship between language practices, it can be seen that, while writing is directly assessed by Enem, based on a framework of well-defined competences and levels, reading is also assessed, since this instrument makes it possible to identify a sample of the student’s sociocultural repertoire, as well as the way in which this repertoire is used - successfully? moderately? inadequately? - in writing their own arguments. We therefore had a good opportunity: to combine the work of the book club with intervention to improve writing skills, using digital technologies, many of which have become popular in our context since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The monthly meetings of the book club, which were already taking place virtually, remained online (these meetings are open, many of the participants don't live in Salinas), but were now interspersed with face-to-face meetings, restricted to previously selected IFNMG high school students (by registration and lottery). In these meetings, the discussion of the works selected for reading continues, but now in a targeted way: using the metaphor of anthropophagy, so dear to Brazilian modernism, it is the moment of "digestion", of making what is alien part of a common repertoire, always with the care of intellectual honesty and respect for the time in which each work is inserted (concepts such as plagiarism, citation, intertextuality and anachronism are often discussed).

This work would not be possible, of course, without an awareness of how much it involves an exchange of ideas, without which interdisciplinarity, let alone transdisciplinarity, is not possible. It couldn’t be otherwise, considering, with Roland Barthes, in his famous lecture in 1977, that literature is

truly encyclopedic, [...] it rotates knowledge, it doesn't fix or fetishize any of them; it gives them an indirect place, and this indirectness is precious. On the one hand, it allows us to designate possible knowledge - unsuspected, unrealized [...] On the other hand, the knowledge it mobilizes is never complete or ultimate; literature doesn't say that it knows something, but that it knows something; or rather, that it knows something about things - that it knows a lot about men (BARTHES, 2013, p. 19, emphasis added).
These are the two fundamental concepts of the project: literature and argumentation. How does literature help to develop argumentation? How can the latter elucidate the role of the former in the search for knowledge and, in particular, for a better understanding of issues pertaining to the Brazilian reality? We need to think about the role that Enem, especially in its essay section, plays in this relationship.

2 Considerations on ENEM and the Essay Test

Implemented in Brazil in 1998, the National High School Exam (Enem) was initially intended to assess student performance at the end of basic education, functioning as a public policy which, at the time, saw this assessment as a way of homogenizing education in Brazil. Over the years, the test has acquired different attributions, starting in 2004 to be used as one of the selection criteria for scholarships under the University for All Program - PROUNI and, in 2009, it became one of the largest selection processes and access to higher education, through the Unified Selection System - SISU (cf. AGUSTINI; FERNANDES, 2021).

Since its creation, the test has consisted of multiple-choice questions in the following areas: Human Sciences and their Technologies; Natural Sciences and their Technologies; Languages, Codes and their Technologies; Mathematics and its Technologies; and the essay test, which has taken on different forms over the years. In its current format, the Enem essay test asks candidates to write "a prose text, of the essay-argumentative type, on a social, scientific, cultural or political theme" (BRASIL, 2022, p. 4). The test is structured on the basis of motivating texts and a topic sentence, which guide the discussion to be held by the candidate, since they act as a cross-section of different thematic axes, such as education, health, technology and citizenship. You must also write a text of at least 8 and no more than 30 lines, in which you must defend a point of view based on consistent arguments, structured with coherence and cohesion. They must also
draw up a proposal for social intervention, respecting human rights, to address the problem set out in the text.

In order to award a mark for this text, criteria are stipulated based on competences which, according to the documents that regulate the exam, assess the knowledge about writing that students should have learned by the end of high school. In this sense, the aspects that will be assessed relate to:

1) Demonstrate mastery of the formal writing style (...); 2) Understand the writing proposal and apply concepts from the various areas of knowledge to develop the theme, within the structural limits of the argumentative essay (...); 3) Select, relate, organize and interpret information, facts, opinions and arguments in defense of a point of view; 4) Demonstrate knowledge of the linguistic mechanisms necessary for constructing arguments; 5) Draw up a proposal for intervention in the problem addressed (...) (BRASIL, 2022, p. 5).

All these competencies are assessed using previously defined criteria, and the final grade for the essay varies between 0 (zero) and 1000 (one thousand), when the maximum levels are reached in each competency, according to the exam’s reference matrix.

With regard to the situations that lead to the Enem essay being graded with a zero, we would draw attention to cases in which the texts do not meet the textual type requested (dissertative-argumentative) and those in which there is a departure from the theme, aspects related to understanding the theme, planning the text and the structure of the genre. These aspects, focused on competences 2 and 3, broaden the analysis of the Enem essay as a textual genre, insofar as it is organized based on its own structure and whose functionality applies to a specific socio-discursive situation (cf. MARCUSCHI, 2002), namely approval in a selection process for entry into higher education.

With regard to the analysis of competency 2, the assessment criteria include the need for the essay to present an argument in which the candidate shows that they are able to articulate in their text information and ideas on the topic that go beyond the motivating texts (BRASIL, 2022). For this analysis, the exam asks the candidate to make productive use of a socio-cultural repertoire, legitimized by the areas of knowledge, materialized through quotations, facts, data, historical allusions, as well as references to films, literary and artistic works.
As for competency 3, the exam determines the need to write a text that is organized based on a project (planning) and developed through the selection and organization of facts, information, opinions, arguments: all in support of a point of view. In this respect, there is a common thread that allows the ideas and arguments that make up the text to interlocute.

From our point of view, the textual organization and the presence of this repertoire in the text reveal more than a justification for the arguments defended, since it is through this process that the candidate is able to demonstrate in their writing the historical and social knowledge that comes from their experiences in and through language. In Benveniste's terms,

We therefore understand that the repertoire needed by the candidate to defend their point of view in a given text is based on language experiences, in the most different manifestations, among which we would highlight the reading of literary texts. In this respect, as the subjects of their writing, candidates/authors reflect in their texts a whole trajectory of studies, readings and interpretations of the facts that surround them. The writing of the essay thus becomes an enunciative act (cf. BENVENISTE, 2006), since the process of preparing this text involves the establishment of a discursive relationship: in it, the candidate/author "assembles" their essay in such a way that it meets the expectations of the assessor, i.e. the reader of the text, by means of pre-established criteria.

3 Literary literacy and the construction of a socio-cultural repertoire

Faced with an exam as wide-ranging as Enem, which consequently shapes everything from students' dreams to the methodological practices of educational institutions, questions arise about the role of literature and the mechanisms to help students
in the formative process and in preparing for the exam. The power of literary texts in human formation is well known and widely discussed. For Todorov, literature should not be restricted to a simple technique, but "can also, in its course, transform each of us from within" (TODOROV, 2010, p. 76).

This conception of literature as a participant in the evolution of individuals in the tangle of social relations is also described by Antonio Candido as "a factor that makes us more capable of ordering our own mind and feelings; and, as a consequence, more capable of organizing the vision we have of the world" (CANDIDO, 1988, p. 177).

As such, reading literary texts is commonly associated both with good performance in reading and writing practices, as well as with improving psychological and emotional aspects. For Rildo Cosson "[literary] reading leads to questions about what we are and what we want to live, in such a way that dialog with literature always brings the possibility of evaluating the values set in a society [...] and multiple possibilities for constructing our identities." (COSSON, 2014, p. 50).

However, in the construction of this research, in addition to the humanizing nature of literature, the aim is also to contribute to the construction of the socio-cultural repertoire of the students who are part of the project, so that they can articulate themes, facts and ideas present in the literary texts read and discussed in the reading club and workshops, with the problems present in contemporary Brazilian society and currently discussed in Enem.

In this way, we understood that literary literacy would be the best way to help students use their sociocultural repertoire safely in a variety of situations, especially in the Enem essay test. In competency 2 of the Enem essay, by the way, one of the aspects assessed is precisely "the presence of sociocultural repertoire, which is configured as information, a fact, a quotation or a lived experience that, in some way, contributes as an argument to the proposed discussion" (BRASIL, 2022, p. 11).

We won't be discussing here the conceptions of the term "literacy" which, from the 1980s onwards here in Brazil, came to be used as a counterpoint to the term "literacy", linked mainly to the use of writing in social practices and then unfolding into multiple
literacies and, with the discussions of the New London group, multi-literacies. These terms "from the simple individual practice linked to the ability to read and write, [...] today refer to complex competencies aimed at the process of constructing meanings" (PAULINO; COSSON, 2009, p. 66).

In a particular way, this research works with a specific type of literacy, as it seeks to promote literary literacy among its members. In this way, it aims to enable the appropriation of literature as a language (PAULINO; COSSON, 2009, p. 67), allowing those involved to access cultural goods, share their views on the texts read and feel like members of a collective (COSSON, 2006, p. 66).

It should be noted that this construction of literary literacy and, consequently, the improvement of the research audience's socio-cultural repertoire is not restricted to reading printed literary works. In fact, as we'll mention below, this month (November 2022) a musical production (album) will be analyzed. This is in line with Cosson's perception that we should not restrict reading to the written code or books, as reading "is a human competence and extends to various fields beyond writing" (COSSON, 2014, p. 162).

Based on the methodological approach chosen for this research, literary literacy is seen here as a skill that is constantly being built, which is not restricted to a specific moment, because it is "appropriation that is not just of a text, whatever its configuration, but of a unique way of constructing meanings: the literary" (COSSON, 2014, p. 25).

Based on the idea that "[reading] brings people together, calls them to dialog, offers provisions, words and more words, instigations, new and changing meanings, promoting interaction" (MARIA, 2016, p. 27), the intention has always been to achieve, through participation in the book club meetings and the proposed workshops, more than individual reading experiences, the formation of a community of readers:

defined by readers as individuals who, brought together in a group, interact with each other and identify in their interests and objectives around reading, as well as by a repertoire that allows these individuals to share objects, traditions, cultures, rules and ways of reading (COSSON, 2014, p. 138).

Thus, this community allows the individual to "broaden and improve the literary experience" (COSSON, 2020, p. 186) beyond the individual experience and contact with
the literary text, also through a greater number of intertexts perceived from the testimony of other members. This community of readers, therefore, contributes to building the student's repertoire based on awareness of the existence of a cultural heritage that involves, among other aspects, literary production and that articulates what is discussed in school activities with aspects of society and life (PAULINO, COSSON, 2009, p. 75).

4 Methodology or The Workshops

Having discussed the conceptual bases, it's time to present the methodology used in the workshops. In the first workshop, our proposal was naturally presented in the following terms: "to evaluate the relationship between engagement in a book club and performance in writing a dissertative-argumentative text". The five competencies assessed in the Enem essay were presented, as well as the relationship between these competencies and the use of a legitimized repertoire (i.e. relevant and productive). First, however, it was important to find out what the students already knew about the subject; the feedback we received was very positive, which was partly to be expected, as our audience was made up of students in the second and third grades of secondary school. For many of them, therefore, writing a dissertative-argumentative text to the Enem standard was already a reality in the classroom.

Some of the answers are worth noting. The idea of repertoire as something that is built up throughout a person's career was emphasized: "It would be a repertoire of cultural, social, economic, philosophical knowledge, etc. seen by us throughout our lives"; "it's something you carry with you, it's books, series, movies, everyday events from which you can absorb something (knowledge) and add it to your essay"; "works that build our life experience and worldview, as well as diversity in the areas of knowledge, being used in the justification or exemplification of something in the essay." Still on the use of repertoire, there were the following perceptions: "it's the citation or exemplification of something that fits in with the theme worked on, I usually use it as a guide, a way of introducing the subject or even arguing"; "information/knowledge from various areas for creating a conversation,
essay etc. We can use it to create the Enem essay, using it at the beginning of the text (quoting an author, for example), arguments..." Based on what the students themselves said, we were able to analyze essays produced in previous editions of the Enem, in order to identify the use of the repertoire and its relationship with the point of view defended by the author.

At the next meeting, we began to revisit the discussion that had already begun at the book club meetings. From May to October (2022), the following readings were proposed: the short story "Seminário dos Ratos", from the collection of the same name (1977) by Lygia Fagundes Telles; various short stories by Machado de Assis - "Luís Soares" and "O segredo de Augusta" (Contos fluminenses, 1869), "O caso da vara" (Páginas recolhidas, 1899) and "Pai contra mãe" (Relíquias de casa velha, 1906); the novella The Hour of the Star (1977), by Clarice Lispector; and the auto Morte e vida severina (1955), by João Cabral de Melo Neto. In November (2022), the album Gerães (1976) by Milton Nascimento will be discussed. Club members are free to suggest works, and an informal vote is taken. Due to the research project, preference has been given to works that dialogue with themes from Brazil's socio-cultural reality: these are the works that, in our opinion, can most easily be used to good effect in writing the Enem essay, since they are directly linked to themes that will possibly be proposed by the exam. In the case of Lygia Fagundes Telles' short story, for example, the following themes were worked on, among others: human hypocrisy, authoritarianism, disregard for the environmental agenda, social networks and press manipulation.

In the meetings in which the text is actually produced, we try, as far as possible but not strictly, to simulate the same context that the students will find on the day of the exam (maximum time for completion, use of black ballpoint pens, etc.). A special guideline is given: they can cite any repertoire they like in their text, but one of the references must necessarily be to a work already discussed in the book club. At the next meeting, the students are given their essays, already corrected according to the standard set by the exam. With the scores for the five competencies, they can check which aspects they can still improve on. The following topic presents the evaluation of one of the texts already
produced by the workshop participants. This text is considered to be representative of what the project has been working on.

5 Results and discussion

In the third workshop, a dissertative-argumentative essay was proposed, based on motivating texts along the lines of the Enem essay proposal on the following theme: "Social networks and image exposure: the cult of appearance in contemporary society". Below is the introductory paragraph of one of the students' texts research students.

You can see that the student builds his introduction from an explicit reference to the title and protagonist of the Machado short story discussed at the book club meeting on August 29, 2022, making the necessary correlation between the work and the theme of the essay proposal. It is clear that this is not just a reference that has been memorized or forced into the situation. The impression is that the student has really taken ownership of the reflection brought up by the work and has managed to establish the necessary relationships to put forward his thesis. This productive use of the socio-cultural repertoire is extended in the following paragraphs that make up the development of the text:
In this paragraph, there is a more precise description of an element of the character already mentioned. Augusta's fear of being a grandmother and becoming the target of social criticism is used to detail one of the arguments put forward by the author of the essay in the introduction: the quest to be accepted by the group. This idea is complemented by the following paragraph, which focuses on the student's second argument: the increased use of edits in posts. This way of writing and organizing, based on what is presented in the thesis, meets what is expected by the assessment board in relation to the text project, since the third paragraph explores and exemplifies attitudes of image worship in the comparison with the literary work.

This aspect is detailed through the reference to the short story "Seminário dos ratos", by Lygia Fagundes Telles, discussed at the book club meeting in June. The intentional use of the literary text to enrich the repertoire is noticeable here, as the reference
to another short story made earlier would be sufficient for what is required in competence 2.

The last paragraph, on the other hand, as well as presenting a conclusion with the necessary elements for an intervention proposal, as required by competency 5 in the Enem essay correction table, ends the text by once again mentioning characters from the two stories mentioned.

An analysis of the whole essay shows that there is the development of a text project that establishes meaning between the parts, presents the progressive development of the theme and defends a point of view through clear and convincing arguments.

In the document A redação do Enem 2022 - cartilha do participante, the text project is described as follows:

The text project is the planning prior to writing the essay. It is the outline that is used to strategically organize the arguments in the text. It defines which arguments will be used to defend a point of view and the best order in which to present them, in order to ensure that the final text is articulate, clear and coherent (BRASIL, 2022, p. 17).

It can be seen, therefore, that the text presented here presents the elements assessed in competency 3, since it makes the text project clear and uses precise arguments to defend a point of view defended since the introduction.

6 Final considerations

The epigraph of this work (HATOUM, 2008, p. 71) sums up our conclusions well, albeit provisionally, as the project is still ongoing: “Sometimes, reading a book reveals a
person.” We realized that when this reading is done in the context of a club/community and when the student has access to teaching support, the chances of “unveiling”, of showing something that was hidden, are even greater.

The aim now is to continue the workshops and see to what extent this work can be reflected in the students' productions. The challenges are numerous and include aspects such as the lack of individualized attention when correcting written activities, problems in literacy and literacy that culminate in high school and a lack of reading habits. According to the "Portraits of Reading in Brazil" survey (carried out by the Pró-Livro Institute and Itaú Cultural), 48% of those interviewed declared themselves non-readers (they hadn't read any books in the last 3 months) and, on average, Brazilians read less than 5 books a year. Another aspect that stands out in the first texts and that still needs to be explored is that, when writing the Enem exam, candidates/authors often use "ready-made recipes", or use a socio-cultural repertoire that has no relevance to the subject matter.

In view of these initial reflections, albeit based on provisional results, it has already been possible to see the power of sharing impressions and ideas, the profusion of intertexts and the interdisciplinarity that a community of readers can generate. Much more than a plausible argument, the literary text provides an incessant dialog between all types of knowledge.

References


---

i Alex Sander Luiz Campos, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8751-1724
Instituto Federal do Norte de Minas Gerais, Campus Salinas
Professor do Ensino Básico, Técnico e Tecnológico. Doutor e mestre em Estudos Literários pela Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.
Contribuição de autoria: escrita e revisão.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/7267778457978716
E-mail: alex.campos@ifnmg.edu.br

ii Daiane Silva de Andrade, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7954-0138
Instituto Federal do Norte de Minas Gerais, Campus Salinas
Professora do Ensino Básico, Técnico e Tecnológico. Mestra em Letras/Estudos Literários pela Universidade Estadual de Montes Claros.
Contribution de autoria: escrita e revisão.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/5626541278117306
E-mail: daiane.andrade@ifnmg.edu.br

iii Luana Aparecida Matos Leal Fernandes, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7654-2813
Instituto Federal do Norte de Minas Gerais, Campus Salinas
Contribution de autoria: escrita e revisão.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/1490458639205536
E-mail: luana.leal@ifnmg.edu.br

iv Erick Marlon Pereira, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3442-683X
Instituto Federal do Norte de Minas Gerais, Campus Salinas
Contriuição de autoria: coleta de dados e escrita.
Lattes: [link]
E-mail: emp8@aluno.ifnmg.edu.br

Responsible editor: Cristine Brandenburg
Ad hoc experts: Charliton José dos Santos Machado and José Gerardo Vasconcelos

How to cite this article with more than three authors (ABNT):
Available at: [link]