

The notion of active responsive understanding in the teaching and learning process / *A noção de compreensão responsiva ativa no ensino e na aprendizagem*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the contribution of the notion of active responsive understanding to language teaching and to teaching in general, based on the experience with research and supervision of students' papers since 1995, in the study group entitled *Teaching and learning languages* (GP/CNPq). In such papers this notion is connected with other notions and with other studies related to the teaching and learning process. In this article, I reflect on the teaching and learning process in general, as well as on its needs in connection with the theme discussed. Then I address the notion of language from a dialogic perspective, and finally I analyze the active responsive understanding in several books of the so-called Bakhtin Circle. In the conclusion, I connect such reflections with theoretical and practical questions in the scope of the teaching and learning process, in relation to this analysis.

KEYWORDS: Active responsive understanding; Active responsive production; Teaching and learning.

RESUMO

Este trabalho tem o objetivo de refletir sobre a contribuição da noção de compreensão *responsiva ativa para o ensino de línguas e para o ensino de forma geral, utilizando uma experiência vivenciada com pesquisas e trabalhos orientados desde 1995, no quadro do GP/CNPq Ensino e aprendizagem de línguas, nos quais essa noção é articulada com outras e com outros saberes relativos ao ensino e à aprendizagem. Neste texto, partirei de reflexões gerais sobre o ensino e a aprendizagem e suas carências em relação ao tema abordado, retomarei a noção de língua/linguagem numa perspectiva dialógica, passando, em seguida, para um estudo da compreensão responsiva ativa em diversos livros do chamado Círculo de Bakhtin, concluindo com uma articulação entre essas reflexões e as questões teóricas e práticas no âmbito do ensino e da aprendizagem relacionadas com a discussão.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Compreensão responsiva ativa; Produção responsiva ativa; Ensino e aprendizagem*

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Introduction: the teaching and learning process and the reproduction

From the initial school years to university, the concept of teaching and learning, which underlies practices in different subjects, remains, in many cases and in several contexts researched, centered in the transmission and memorization of content. Even in institutions where research prevails¹, linguistic and pedagogical theories often seem to be detached from the daily practices in the classroom. The study group *Teaching and learning languages* (connected with the Federal University of Alagoas, and registered with CNPq) started in 1995 and has today research groups in different locations and in several institutional contexts, counting on researchers in different educational stages. The results of such research have been confirming this reality.

It seems useless to discuss any qualitative advances in the situation above mentioned, without improvements in teacher qualification programs. As a matter of fact, many teachers resent the lack of guidelines that would help them in their careers, without the usual internship/training practices and other fixed formulas for practices that are commonly “transmitted” to them. In fact, the very word “transmit” (DE CERTEAU, 1993) is the word used by students, teachers and future teachers to refer to knowledge as finished content, which unveils their concept of the teaching and learning process, often disguised as updated old clichés such as “one has to respect the linguistic variations of the students”. Many teachers do not feel prepared (ARAÚJO, A. C., 2011) to face the competitiveness that involves extracurricular and extra-academic interests which attract students today, in and outside the classroom. This happens because the teachers have been educated with theoretical certainties and few related practices which would effectively contribute to the quality of their education and to the quality of the teaching and learning process as social practice.

¹ «C’est à condition de soumettre à la critique théorique le point de vue théorique comme point de vue non pratique, fondé sur la neutralisation des intérêts et des enjeux pratiques, que l’on peut avoir quelque chance d’en appréhender la logique spécifique» (BOURDIEU, 1994, p.221). Translation: In order to understand the specific logics of the practices, it is necessary to submit, to the theoretical criticism, the theoretical viewpoint as a non-practical viewpoint, founded from the neutralization of interests and from questions that are at stake in the practices. (All translations from the French language are mine). Based on such reflection, I consider that this can explain why scholars, despite their good qualifications and good intentions, do not always understand the reasons of the practice. (The translations of the quotes herein have been done by the translator of this article into the English language, for the sole purpose of publishing it, except where reference is cited literally).

Due to lack of training rather than to a defect of their personalities or of their jobs, as some seem to believe, teachers with little experience of reading and writing – in their jobs and in life – often cannot prepare future readers and text producers to become citizens in different social situations.

Consequently, reproduction is also usual among students, both in oral and in written production. A well done paraphrase is considered, in some cases, an advance, as it is common for students to literally copy texts from the Internet (ARAÚJO, I. C., 2011). Comprehension questionnaires in textbooks and/or in classroom dialogues, as well as writing practices – even if they have new “appearance” – are frequently limited to perpetuating school practices of recognizing forms and meanings.

Nevertheless, the experiences of ethnographic observation and of action research in the study group (both in native language and in foreign language) have shown that the quality of understanding and production changes when practices in the classroom favor the students’ active response (VASCONCELOS, 2012).

Therefore, the action² of our group has been based on the idea of not only identifying and criticizing the “*consumption-as-a-receptacle*”³, as theorized by De Certeau (1996, p.259-273), but also observing, in discourse and in actions, signs of what I call active responsive production, formulated from the notion of active responsive understanding, addressed later in this article. Our group also promotes discussions between professors and their students (undergraduate/graduate students who work as teachers), on theoretical and practical issues connected with the teaching and learning process.

1 Resuming the notion of language⁴ in the Bakhtin Circle: dialogism and heteroglossia

Whether or not the Bakhtin Circle⁵ has worked in Western contemporary practices, I notice, even though I am not specialized in the history of the Circle, that its

² Here, the word action is employed with the meaning assigned by Bourdieu (2004), according to whom we would need a more active and less irresponsible definition of science, of culture and of the relations between science/culture and between science/society.

³ The ideology of *consumption-as-a-receptacle*, according to De Certeau (1996, p.262), is “the effect of class ideology and technical blindness (...), necessary in a system that distinguishes and privileges authors, pedagogues, revolutionaries – ‘producers’ – to the detriment of those who are not”.

⁴ Translator’s note: both words in Portuguese – *lingua* and *linguagem* – are translated into English as *language*.

basic ideas of language, which include dialogism and heteroglossia, are expressed in different ways in most of its texts which I have accessed so far⁶.

I understand that the fundamental theoretical basis of the notion of active responsive understanding is also found – in several of the texts I have read to write this paper – in the dialogic concept of language by Bakhtin and the Circle. Such concept refuses a notion of language as something uniform and abstract. Accordingly, I resume the Bakhtinian notion that language is subjected to historical, centralized, centripetal forces, which result from processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization. At the same time language is subjected to decentralizing centrifugal forces, which lead to heteroglossia or dialogized heteroglossia. This idea is in the essay *Discourse in the Novel*, in Bakhtin (1998). Linguistic heteroglossia is, in turn, intertwined with social plurality, in constant evolution. It does not exclude the subjective dimension, as all words evoke both individual and collective issues (BAKHTIN, 1998).

The volitive and intentional subjective dimension is more visible in texts such as *The Problem of Speech Genres* in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (BAKHTIN, 1986) and *Discourse in the Novel*, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (BAKHTIN, 1998)⁷ than in other texts. However, the dialogic proposal is in the basis of several reflections and of different notions in texts of the Bakhtin Circle. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (chapter *Verbal Interaction*) it is stated that:

Utterance, as we know, is constructed between two socially organized persons, and in the absence of a real addressee, an addressee is presupposed in the person, so to speak, of a normal representative of the social group to which the speaker belongs (VOLOŠINOV, 2000, p.85)⁸.

⁵ The name *books, works or productions of the Bakhtin Circle* refers to the group of texts usually attributed to such Circle in translations into Portuguese and French. In this paper, besides the central theme, I am interested in the concepts and notions that appear in different books and that are the basis for the reflections concerning the teaching and learning process.

⁶ Without aiming to conduct a broad and detailed study on the relation among several productions, I refer to more than one book, of several authors, and with more than one translation in some cases. I use the French versions as I have been working with them recently, and also because there are new books in French that are important for the mentioned confrontation, specially the 2010 translation of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

⁷ *Esthétique et théorie du roman* (BAKHTINE, 1978), in French.

⁸ Translations of the same book in French were compared (one of 1977 and a more recent one, of 2010, with attribution of different authorship). Hence I choose to quote the name of the book in French, in this footnote: «En effet, l'énonciation est le produit de l'interaction de deux individus socialement organisés et, même s'il n'y a pas un interlocuteur réel, on peut substituer à celui-ci le représentant du groupe social auquel appartient le locuteur». (French translation by YAGUELLO, foreword by JAKOBSON). In the

This posture that defends the dialogization of discourse is in the essay *Discourse in the Novel* in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*: “The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way” (BAKHTIN, 1998, p.279).

Among other reflections on the concept of language, the following is stated in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, chapter *Verbal Interaction*: “Language is a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers” (VOLOŠINOV, 2000, p.98)⁹. This idea is also present in *The Problem of Speech Genres*, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986), with the notion of utterance – and the adjectives that characterize it – and the notion of *area of human activity*. Such concepts are in the following reflection: “Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.60).

Therefore, I again defend the interpretation that language is defined in the concrete verbal communication, in dialogue. The notion of active responsive understanding – focus of this study – is based on such interpretation. So are other concepts in the texts of the Bakhtin Circle.

2 The notion of active responsive understanding in several books

It is not the purpose of this article to cover all discussions on the question of active responsive understanding, but I examine this notion in several texts of the Bakhtin Circle, aiming to show the coherence of the main focus of the thinking, despite differences in style and in postures, and despite difficulties concerning translations, authorship, and other issues already dealt with in the mentioned texts.

French translation by Patrick Sériot and Inna Tylkowski-Ageeva (VOLOŠINOV, 2010, p.297), it is stated: «C’est que l’énoncé se construit entre deux individus socialement organisés, et s’il n’y a pas d’interlocuteur réel, alors on le présuppose, pour ainsi dire, en la personne d’un représentant normal du groupe social auquel appartient le locuteur».

⁹ Italics in the translation into English. In both translations into French, there are: «La langue constitue un processus d’évolution ininterrompu, qui se réalise à travers l’interaction verbale des locuteurs» (1977, p.141). (Italics in the translation into French) «Le langage est un devenir continu, qui se réalise par l’interaction verbale des locuteurs» (2010, p.327). (Italics in the translation into French).

The definition of active responsive understanding is in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* in a diffuse way, in several passages that address understanding, for instance, in chapter *Philosophy of Language and Objective Psychology*, in the statement that the act of understanding is considered to be bound to generate, “sooner or later, a counter statement” (VOLOŠINOV, 2000, p.41).

Understanding and recognizing are, therefore, two different processes: the sign, always ideological, is understood, whereas the signal is recognized. Accordingly, when we learn a foreign language, the words we do not understand are not yet signs for us, and the language has not yet become a language completely.

When the questions of “*dead, written, alien language*” are dealt with in chapter *Language, Speech and Utterance* (VOLOŠINOV, 2000, p.73), it is clear that this language is mere an object of study for the linguist/philologist and that it corresponds to a passive understanding, only existing for linguistic reflections. When speakers use their native language, they do not actually use this form of understanding in their daily practices. Instead they use an active understanding that implies taking an active posture in relation to what is said and understood.

This means that active understanding is always present in social life, just like there is always dialogue. In the field of teaching and learning, I believe that an active posture is taken in what is called “student non-comprehension”. This non-comprehension is in the non-response, in the inadequate response or in any kind of attitude or action. It is in fact an unexpected understanding, which does not conform to the pattern of understanding expected in the subject studied, by the teacher, by the methodology, by the textbook, or by any instances of power that regulate school practices. It could also be a misunderstanding, but it is not a passive understanding or a non-comprehension. They are treated as passive by the school system, and by the *group of authors inscribed within a scriptural economy* (DE CERTEAU, 1996). I refer to this issue later in this article when I address the inadequacy of response in the teaching and learning process.

Still in VOLOŠINOV (2000), in chapter *Theme and Meaning in Language*, there is again the view of active understanding containing the germ of a response. This is a response that is capable of grasping theme, which is determined not only by linguistic forms, but also by extra-verbal elements of the situation. Hence “understanding strives

to match the speaker's word with a *counter word*" (VOLOŠINOV, 2000, p.102), as a reply in a dialogue.

Therefore, the active *understanding of the discourse of the other* is also necessary for using the words of the other in reported speech, according to chapter "*Exposition of the Problem of Reported Speech*" (VOLOŠINOV, 2000). Such understanding, also called *evaluative reception of another's utterance*, is expressed in the "inner speech" and it proceeds in two directions: one of a context of factual commentary and the other of a preparation of a reply. One of them is usually dominant. This must be considered, in order to understand the process of reported speech (VOLOŠINOV, 2000).

It is not the objective of this article to discuss the dynamic interrelation between the word of the other and the word of the author, so I do not address this issue in detail. However, when it concerns the understanding process, this discussion leads to and deepens the reflection of the notion of active responsive understanding, within the scope of reported speech.

The Problem of Speech Genres, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (BAKHTIN, 1986), resumes questioning monological utterance and passive understanding, which only exist in abstract moments. The listener and the speaker take turns (*alternation of speech subjects*), which radically differ from a linguistic and communicational scheme that gives them fixed positions, and attribute an active role to the speaker and a passive role to the listener. "Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive, although the degree of this activity varies extremely. Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker" (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.68). The response may be realized not only verbally, but also through actions. Besides, it may not be immediate: "sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behavior of the listener." (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.69).

What is said about the speaker and the listener is equally valid for the writer and reader. The genres would have been intended for the active responsive understanding with a delayed reaction. As for non-literary genres, I believe that several oral and written genres of the contemporary times – which did not exist in the past – admit the immediate or almost immediate response, not mandatory, evidently. This corresponds to

the immediacy of the discursive communication in our times, provided by new media, such as social networks.

In the same book, still in the essay *The Problem of Speech Genres*, the idea that the speaker is not the first “one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.69) appears in several passages (this idea is also present in more books), in the metaphor of Adam: “The speaker is not Adam, and therefore the subject of his speech itself inevitably becomes the arena where his opinions meet those of his partners [...] or other viewpoints, world views, trends, theories, and so forth [...]” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.94). Accordingly, dialogue is realized with a *higher superaddressee*. “The aforementioned third party is not any mystical or metaphysical being (although, given a certain understanding of the world, he can be expressed as such) [...]” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.126).

The meeting with the words of others is frequent in several books of the Circle, in different notions, such as *reported speech* and *polyphony*, understood in distinct phenomena and reflections, which are, however, connected by the notion of dialogue in the broad sense, involving a third party, present or not in the same chronotope. It is also found in other texts, such as in *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (chapter *Discourse in Dostoevsky*):

In the ordinary speech of our everyday life such a use of another's words is extremely widespread, specially in dialogue, where one speaker very often literally repeats the statement of the other speaker, investing it with new value and accenting it in his own way – with expressions of doubt, indignation, irony, mockery, ridicule and the like (BAKHTIN, 2003, p.194).

The Problem of Speech Genres, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (BAKHTIN, 1986) is one of the books that most explore questions related to activity and responsiveness in dialogue. In such book, the active role of the other in discursive communication is deeply studied. It thus questions perspectives on language that only consider the speaker's viewpoint.

The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays (BAKHTIN, 1998)¹⁰ – in the essay *Discourse in the Novel* – presents a discussion on the *internal dialogism of the word*, as a phenomenon that is present in all discourses and that has a double orientation: one directed to the discourse of the other inside the object, and the other directed to the response of the other, i.e., to a predicted reply/discourse: “it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction”¹¹ (BAKHTIN, 1998, p.280). Both facets of this dialogic orientation are essentially different and provoke different stylistic effects in the discourse. However, they may be closely intertwined and therefore difficult to distinguish in a stylistic analysis.

Again the relation with the other presupposes the addressee’s activity and responsiveness. In line with the previous discussions, the author states (in the essay *Discourse in the Novel* that every concrete understanding is active, whereas the passive understanding is abstract: “understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (BAKHTIN, 1998, p.282)¹². Also in this book, dialogue is not limited to the instance of the immediate utterance. It is extended socially and historically, as “social dialogue reverberates in all aspects of discourse, in those relating to ‘content’, as well as the ‘formal’ aspects themselves” (BAKHTIN, 1998, p.300).

3 Back to the teaching and learning process

3.1 The teaching and learning process in general

First of all, it is important to mention that a mere reduction and application of theoretical and/or philosophical notions in the teaching and learning process would be unfortunate for both the practical and theoretical viewpoints. Contemporary Applied Linguistics has been questioning such posture for decades, and has been trying to

¹⁰ *Esthétique et théorie du roman* (1978). The translation into French is added when there are differences between the translation into Portuguese and the one into French, which may entail some semantic changes, even if such changes may not seem to change the central idea.

¹¹ « [...] il provoque cette réponse, la pressent et va à sa rencontre» (BAKHTINE, 1978, p.103).

¹² «Compréhension et réponse sont dialectiquement confondues et se conditionnent réciproquement, elles sont impossibles l’une sans l’autre» (BAKHTINE, 1978, p.104).

connect theory with practice. However, it is necessary to look at the theory from the perspective of the practice, according to Bourdieu, quoted earlier in this article¹³.

The purpose of our study group is to examine such question inside the practice itself, i.e., with the subjects qualifying in pedagogical practices (which already connects practice with the established dialogues, and prevents it from being presented in a monolithic form), as many practices involve perspectives on language, understanding, grammar and mistakes that have long been perpetuated in daily activities at schools. Sometimes such practices coexist with more recent knowledge coming from studies in the linguistic and pedagogical areas and related studies. Therefore, viewing language from a dialogic perspective implies changes of posture towards not only the work performed and the subject in question, but also towards concepts of the world, of teaching and of learning. Moreover, it entails the need for qualification programs which do not indoctrinate people in ideas and models, but that provide, in the beginning of teacher qualification programs and inside their very practices, active responses in understanding and in production.

Accordingly, the dialogic concept of the active responsive understanding would already be necessary in qualification programs, which is indispensable for the integrity of the process. The production of responses would happen in discussions about actions already taken or actions to be taken, in practical teaching and learning contexts. However, this would not be viable in certain qualification initiatives, when the practical activities are fixed formulas.

The same reasoning can be applied to student qualification – the implementation of practices that favor an active responsive understanding, not only in reading texts in foreign language classes, but also in the knowledge related to the teaching of any subject. This would be the condition for the teaching process to go beyond memorizing and repeating fixed content.

Based on such considerations, I propose, as an extension of the notion of active responsive understanding, the notion of *active responsive production* (Zozzoli, 2002, 2008), which is defined as the continuance of the active responsive attitude that begins

¹³ It is important to add De Certeau's relation between teaching content and the student/teacher exchange: «Il s'agit de savoir si la relation est elle-même productrice de langage ou si elle est le canal par lequel on 'fait passer' un savoir établi par le maître» (DE CERTEAU, 1993, p.109). Translation: It is about knowing (it is necessary to know) if the relation is itself a producer of language or if it is the channel through which a knowledge established by the master (teacher) 'is transmitted'.

in understanding and then develops into the production of a new text. This new text is not considered a product. Instead, it is part of a process established in verbal and non-verbal interaction, and it does not finish with the materiality of texts.

This notion is useful to devise concrete activities for the production of oral and written texts, in the context of teaching and learning. Such activities can be categorized, according to the degree of active response they may presuppose. It can also be useful to analyze, from the linguistic-discursive perspective, productions of students in terms of *signals of active production*, for evaluation purposes in the learning process, or for research purposes.

This perspective is in line with reflections on error and correction, according to which the notion of inadequacy is used, instead of the notion of error, in order to examine an understanding or a production. Considering an understanding or a production as inadequate also means stating which linguistic and/or situational context relates to such inadequacy. (ZOZZOLI, 1985). Today I believe that it also means to take into account the social group and its culture¹⁴, the discursive genre, and the means of communication, where the case may be.

3.2 Teaching and learning the native language

As far as the teaching and learning process of the native language is concerned, the notion of active responsive understanding requires, in terms of actions in the classroom, reading activities that are open to dialogues, instead of fixed questionnaires. This entails the need for establishing an interaction which, despite being asymmetric¹⁵, provides the student with the role of enunciator, who integrates several kinds of knowledge of the world. Such integration would be, for instance, one between the culture of the literate and the culture of illiterate groups, to which some students may belong, in some cases¹⁶.

¹⁴ The concept of culture is defined, according to De Certeau (1993): «Plutôt que des ‘valeurs’ à défendre ou d’idées à promouvoir, la culture connote aujourd’hui un travail à entreprendre sur toute l’étendue de la vie sociale» (1993, p. 167). Translation: Instead of ‘values’ to be defended or ideas to be promoted, culture today connotes work to be carried out broadly in all scopes of social life.

¹⁵ This interaction is asymmetric, in its basis, because of the difference among the social roles and the difference in the power arising therefrom, and also because of the difference in the experience and knowledge between student and teacher.

¹⁶ See Vygotski’s proposal of integrating spontaneous concepts (daily life) with scientific ones (VYGOTSKI, 1997).

In the scope of oral and written production, it is in texts elaborated from a perspective that considers the active responsive production that one can find material to work on linguistic materiality, without detaching it from the discursive scope, with a grammar in its broad sense. Such grammar includes smaller language phenomena (micro level) and discourse phenomena related to the social use of language (macro level), at both an immediate level and at a broader level (ZOZZOLI, 1999).

Observations and actions in classes of native language and of foreign language lead us to defend the idea that the students are capable of constituting their own grammar reflections, their own rules, with the teacher's help (ZOZZOLI, 1999). In class, they make use of dialogue, and of active responsive understanding and production. This makes the linguistic knowledge also active, so new understandings and new productions can take place in the process. Such reflections and rules do not correspond to classifications or to formulations found in normative grammar books. This is the grammar that may actually be used by the students in their discourse in daily practical situations.

3.3 Teaching and learning a foreign language

In the field of teaching and learning a foreign language, I find it necessary first to consider the fact that, in beginner level courses, students need a longer period of comprehension activities (oral or written). Expression (oral or written) is limited to initial, brief, hesitating attempts, often modeled on reproduction. However, experiences in the classroom have shown that activities of understanding and production may be alternated, without the hierarchy expected in certain courses and in many teaching manuals, which follow a theoretical perspective based on dichotomies of skills (understanding/production) and of form (written/oral). Production activities can begin in the first contacts with a foreign language. Such attitude contributes to minimize the artificiality of the foreign language discourse in the classroom and it will gradually make the foreign language a live, less alien, foreign language¹⁷.

¹⁷ The word "alien" is used in reference to something that is not familiar. The word "foreign" is used in reference to something that does not belong to us, but belongs to another linguistic/cultural context. What is desirable is that teaching provides opportunities to progressively change this situation. This is also valid for the native language, when it is treated as "dead, written, alien language" (mentioned later in this paper).

Evidently, the teacher acts constantly in moments of doubt or of lack of knowledge, as it happens when students ask about new vocabulary. The challenge lies in finding out how to evolve from this initial situation of production difficulty. There is the risk that such difficulty may perpetuate along the course, if students are not given opportunities to escape their limited position, caused by lack of knowledge of the language. They should be given opportunities to evolve, by making attempts to produce relatively autonomous oral and written texts.

The mere prohibition of the use of the native language and the abrupt change to the obligation to use the foreign language all the time in the classroom are frequently misunderstood by students. Mainly in the early stages of the learning process, students often feel they are being pushed too far, or that they do not live up to performance standards expected from students at their level. In many cases this can generate discouragement, according to several studies.

Our study group also verified studies which confirm that the native language is used, in some cases, to express/confirm an active responsive understanding which cannot yet be produced in the foreign language. This does not mean there is no understanding. On the contrary, it is part of the learning process and it should be considered a preliminary phase, one that happens before students use adequate expressions in the foreign language. This connection between a native language and a foreign language is based on the theory by Vygotski (1997), who defends that the system of word signification developed at the moment of learning the native language is also the basis for learning a foreign language. Accordingly, resorting to native language is part of the process to learn a foreign language. This allows us to defend the non-systematic use of the native language, even though students should always be encouraged to use the foreign language whenever possible, depending on the level of their learning.

What makes the foreign language increasingly alive and more active for students is the experience with activities and themes which are meaningful to them, and which are related to their practical lives and to their interests. Furthermore, the variety of discourses, genres and social and cultural situations, which is presented and worked on, contributes to multiply the necessary experiences as to the linguistic materiality and to the language system – never separable from contextualization, evidently.

Final considerations

In order to support and conclude this reflection on the contribution of the notion of active responsive understanding to the teaching and learning process, I refer to *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, to the passage where the transmission of a deciphered language, in the teaching process, is criticized. From this perspective, the native language is also treated as a dead, written, alien language, by means of systematic formal reflections extracted from descriptions already elaborated about such language. However, the native language is perceived differently by the speaker/listener/student: as “one’s ‘kith and kin’; we feel about it as we feel about our habitual attire or, even better, about the atmosphere in which we habitually live and breathe” (VOLOŠINOV, 2000, p.75)¹⁸. Thus, the practical teaching of a language requires, differently from what has been done, the form to be presented and learned in the concrete structure of the utterance, which means not presenting it with phonetic, grammatical and lexical divisions. It is believed that such teaching can only be successful in the case of foreign language if, instead of adopting the perspective of passive description, it benefits from a perspective that associates and integrates dialectically the foreign word with the components of “contextual changeability, diversity and capacity for new meanings” (VOLOŠINOV, 2000, p.69). In other words, the foreign language should, rather than being “aseptic”, become alive to the student, through its contextual mobility and heterogeneity, despite the limits that are inherent in learning a foreign language and despite the formal situation of teaching such language.

In *The Problem of Speech Genres*, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (BAKHTIN, 1986), the idea that the native language is not learned with dictionaries is confirmed. It is learned with concrete utterances. “To learn to speak means to learn to construct utterances (because we speak in utterances and not in individual sentences, and, of course, not in individual words).” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p78). Accordingly, “we learn to cast our speech in generic forms” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.79) and such genres are

¹⁸ In *Le marxisme et la philosophie du langage*, (BAKHTINE/VOLOCHINOV, 1977, p.108): «Le Mot de la langue maternelle est ‘bien de chez nous’, il est perçu comme un vêtement familier ou, mieux encore, comme habituelle dans laquelle nous vivons et l’air que nous respirons. » In *Marxisme et philosophie du langage*, 2010, p.273: «Le Mot de la langue maternelle est ‘bien de chez nous’, il est perçu comme un vêtement familier ou, mieux encore, comme l’atmosphère habituelle dans laquelle nous vivons et l’air que nous respirons».

“diverse because they differ depending on the situation, social position, and personal interrelations of the participants in the communication” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.79). Hence I conclude that the process of learning languages, in general, is again viewed as contextualized and dialogized.

Therefore, once more I oppose the abstract and passive description of language. Instead, I defend dialogue, active responsive understanding and attitude, concepts always present in the texts mentioned in this article. As I have suggested, such perspective transcends the field of language teaching, and is important for the learning process in general. Increasingly active responsive students will make a great difference in the quality of education. Consequently, it will influence the actions of citizens in a country where there is still need for better education, especially in certain social contexts.

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