

Oral Genres in School / *Gêneros orais na escola*

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the use of the concept of genre in elementary school, focusing on oral genres teaching. It presents the basic Bakhtin's postulates and incorporates the contribution of Semiotics and the suggestions of the pedagogy of language teaching developed at the University of Geneva. It also offers an example of oral genre to be worked in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: Oral genre; Semiotics; (First) Language teaching

RESUMO

O artigo analisa a utilização da noção de gênero na escola fundamental, detendo-se sobre o ensino dos gêneros orais. Apresenta postulados teóricos de Bakhtin e incorpora a contribuição da semiótica discursiva e as sugestões metodológicas da pedagogia de ensino de línguas desenvolvida na Universidade de Genebra. Em seguida, propõe exemplo prático de aplicação do conceito ao desenvolvimento da expressão oral em sala de aula.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gênero oral; Semiótica; Ensino de língua materna

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It seems hardly old-fashioned to think that boys and girls go to school to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, even in the light of more sophisticated educational theories and, in particular in the case of Portuguese language education, the progress that has been made in the various fields of linguistics study. If the theoretical formulations offer teachers well-founded teaching strategies and solid ideas for reflecting on the language and language teaching, and if the digital technology provides teachers with tools that until recently would have seemed almost science fiction, then why do the spirit of convenience, the sense of impotence and cumbersome and obsolete institutional mechanisms insist in preserving a certain state of laziness, incapable of making a student progress beyond the level of precarious literacy and the repetitive tasks of the structural models.

Just think about those didactic books that relegate any oral expression exercises to the end of the lesson, so that the teacher may feel more comfortable in 'skipping' those, as an experienced editor recently explained to me. Or when we visit a school and still see boys and girls copying long lists off a blackboard. Or when we eavesdrop on the conversations of teachers at schools on the outskirts of our large metropolises and hear them talk about their daily routines of fear, aggression and insecurity, leaving no room for creativity or innovation. Our schools are deprived of an opportunity to reformulate themselves, as Ziraldo's anecdote so poignantly brings to our attention:

A guy fell asleep in the Middle Ages in the workshop of a carriage maker. He woke up in the 20th century and found himself in a BMW plant, surrounded by assembly lines and robots. Another guy fell asleep in a hospital, amidst the Black Plague. He woke up stunned to find himself in a modern ICU. Another guy fell asleep in a classroom. He woke up and immediately realized where he was: "Look, I am in a classroom". Everything is still the same: children sit at desks and the teacher stands at the front of the room. The teacher teaches the content and asks the children to reproduce it (1996).

This somewhat melancholic introduction serves to point out to the reader – especially to the elementary school teacher – that we understand and recognize the limitations and challenges of their work. It also serves to include the author in the world of seasoned teachers with over 30 years of teaching experience and some broken dreams. But above all it serves to persist in the stubborn expectation that we can intervene.

What is the point of accumulating knowledge and information if it will not serve in the famous `reality of the classroom`? What is this reality after all that it is composed of such impossibilities? Since when does being a teacher mean conforming to concrete conditions of behavior? Why do the theories take us way out there, if we give up in the face of rejection and misunderstanding?

The proposal you will read here is simple and viable, good and affordable, reasonable and necessary. After formulating some basic theoretical context, I will describe some recommendations for teachers and provide an example of an activity of oral expression. I will explain its great importance and suggest how to link this activity to the reading of texts and grammar exercises.

1 The concept of genre and its link to oral expression

When practicing oral expression, playful involvement and informality seem to dominate the activities conducted by schools, especially through the use of that which seems to have become the preferred lesson tool, the educational book. Vague and senseless assignments such as “discuss with your fellow classmate”, “express your opinion” and “discuss in your group” usually follow the recommended activities, generally at the end of a lesson, without any form of systematization or justification.

The mere oral nature of the activity does not qualify it as a pedagogic exercise of language use in formal and informal settings of oral communication. Here too, both in terms of the selection of texts to be read and produced and the grammar concepts to be practiced, the concept of genre could be quite beneficial. Oral communication is a verbal and somatic behavior, which exists in the realm of communication and serves specifically determined goals. The speaker skillfully uses the language in informal everyday settings, is capable of having a conversation, writes messages that possess traces of orality in social media and gives directions on the street. However, even these known activities can be systematized in a way that allows the student to perceive the rules that are present in each activity. A daily chat with a friend does not carry the same formality as a conversation with a new neighbor, nor does it have the reach of a social conversation in a formal setting or in more controlled situations, for example.

When we study a transcript of a free conversation we observe hesitations, reformulation and repetition as standard procedures. These are perfectly common and acceptable in this kind of setting in the realm of everyday communication, in which the informal register of the language dominates. However, this could be embarrassing in a formal setting, in which conversations follow a careful register and the themes evolve around issues of more general and broader interests.

The range between these two types of conversations exemplifies the variation of genre and reinforces the idea of relative stability, defended by Bakhtin (1986, p.60). Marked by theme, style and specific composition, genres vary to adapt to the social realms of communication and the intentionality of the participants in the interlocution. In a different level of variation, genres may interpose, alternate and incorporate themselves into a more comprehensive generic manifestation. A novel by Valêncio Xavier includes recipes, newspaper articles, photographs and letters, in a generic fragmentation that composes a novel that is formally centered on the theme of shattering and the multiplicity of events in contemporary life. It is also possible to write a poem in the format of a classified ad, as Roseana Murray did in a beautiful children's book, or a presenter's commentary on the television news that sounds like an intimate conversation, as Boris Casoy does on the program *Jornal da Noite*, for the Bandeirantes network. Whether it is a semblance, a parody or a form of expression, the assimilation of one genre by another, together with the internal differences in the framework of realizations of a genre, refers to the notion of variability.

The oscillation between regularity and instability allows for the understanding that, alongside the unstable, variable and changeable nature of the genre – as with any linguistic activity – there are recurrences and invariabilities that render the discursive interaction somewhat predictable and institute a shared universe of expectations between the enunciator and enunciate.

The productivity of the concept of genre is connected to understanding its elasticity. This concept recently made its way into the schools, entering with great force and little theoretical-methodological consistency. There is an awareness that one must discuss genres, teach genres, practice genres, but without knowing exactly for what purpose, why or how. This is most likely because of a fleeting theoretical connection to the concept, which serves both the analysts who focus on the semantic relationships that

insert the text into a socio-historic context, as well as the text linguists, concerned with the internal relationships between cohesion and coherence, mechanisms of articulation and the connection between words and periods. It also serves those who repeat formulas, who tend to absorb and reproduce the latest pedagogical fashion, which dictates a certain consensus that they do not quite understand well. Thus the concept comes from Bakhtin, but it has been diluted into various theoretical bodies that may either emphasize the themes that are characteristic of a cake recipe, for example, or the rules for composing a literary tale. In either case, we lose the global aspect of the concept, which is based on two equally important aspects: the balanced connection between the three components of the genre (theme, composition and style) and the tension between regularity and instability that is present in every genre.

For the suggestions that I will provide in the article, I will consider both the conception of the text and the discourse of semiotics, which serve as the basis for important contributions to genre studies (FIORIN, 2006; DISCINI, 2003; GOMES, 2009), as well as the methodological contributions from pedagogues who expand the scope of the concept by refining it in practical situations (SCHNEUWLY and DOLZ, 2004).

From semiotics in particular I will take the concept of enunciative praxis, the practice that regulates "the presence of discursive grandeur in the field of discourse" (FONTANILLE, 2007, p.271), in contemplating both a repertoire of stereotypes as well as an innovative action of discourse appropriation that destabilizes the predictability of discursive formulas. The degree of surprise with the innovation may range from wonder, identified with a tonic intensity along an axis of atonic expectations, to a more simple bewilderment that does not disturb the expected structures. A thesis that was presented in the form of an installation was recently rejected in a Post-Graduate Communication Program, as it completely deviated from the expectations for the genre and the characteristics permitted in the academic realm. Yet, in a Liberal Art Program the translation of a novel was accepted as a substantial part of a thesis. In the first case, the realization of the project reached the maximum level of intensity that was unacceptable to the university, and as a result subverted even the conditions of its acceptance. In the second case, a certain amount of rebelliousness was able to

incorporate the material into the academic field and contributed to breaching the narrow boundaries of the understanding of genre.

If the intensity of a rupture may distinguish a manifestation and cause a collision and risk to the expected structure of the genre, restricting its circulation and hindering its understanding, the opposite procedure will be the diffusion of a genre, reiterating the regularity of its characteristics, and the practical outcome will be the expansion of the extensiveness of its circulation. As Gomes (2009, p.580) affirms, “the impact of the novelty may surprise and restore the meaning of genres that have been *desemantized* in the same way that their diffusion and reiteration may outwear a genre”. Genres that circulate in official or academic environments tend to preserve the constraints of style, theme and composition more rigorously, whereas genres with a more aesthetic purpose tend to be more open to novelties and ruptures. That is why an installation is not accepted as a thesis and why e-mails, which are widely spread and adhere to certain composition norms, now form a substitute for official communication and tend to exhaust themselves as a genre for daily communication, replaced by faster and more immediate communication forms, such messages exchanged in social networks.

This tension between intensity and extensiveness is the core of the mechanisms that produce meaning and the genres, which gather in abstract families of concrete texts, are an example of the vibrant power of language, of the contradictory and restless directions that discourses may take, a tightrope balancing between innovation on the one end and repetition on the other end, a path between one point and the other, which possesses gradations that are never completely predictable.

However, at school it is necessary to start with stability, with texts that contemplate the genres particularly in their power of repetition, to systematize the components, define the rules and establish patterns. The locution of a written message, for example, has formal regularities, such as the resource of intonation and the formality and clarity of reading, which can be trained and systematized. An interview, even when based on an agenda, becomes more interesting when one takes advantage of the interlocution and incorporates the digressions into a more broad and comprehensive theme in terms of to the specific events initially expected.

To understand genre not as a magical formula, but as a basic notion for teaching language means recognizing its theoretical fertility and the possibilities that it offers in

expanding the discursive activities developed in school. It is the understanding of the concept of genre that allows us to notice in a news report, for example, recurring elements of composition, such as the enunciative shifting out of a person and space (third person), associated with shifting out in time (the present), creating an effect of distance and presence, in one specific moment of time. There are also resources for anchoring space, time and actors, such as by quoting places, dates, times, names, ages and professions of people and exploring a discursive heterogeneity, by incorporating different voices and points of view, which enrich the impact of impartiality and, at the same time, create an effect of the narrator's presence at the scene. The issue of a theme, which is not a topic that is universally present in all manifestations of genre, but corresponds to the “realm of meaning addressed by the genre” (FIORIN, 2006, p.62), may be defined by the semantic procedures of themes and figurativeness. A news report would address everyday topics or issues on international politics, economics, arts, football or health; all of these topics may be labeled as news items of collective interest. The style, which also does not refer to a specific author, but to a recurrence of elements in a series of texts, is characterized, in the case of a news report, by the use of the third person, objectivity, sparse use of adjectives and a lack of digressions, narrative, logical cause and effect relationships, anteriority and posteriority, etc.

These assumptions create the conditions for the use of the concept in all activities of a Portuguese language class. In terms of oral genres, the teacher initially counts on the capacity of each speaker to communicate orally in situations of common social interaction. Therefore teaching should expand the interlocution opportunities for the student, increasing his awareness of linguistic variations and the different situations in which language is used. In informal situations, rules such as knowing how to listen, respecting the other person's words and expressing oneself in a courteous manner will foster a more lively and interesting interlocution as well as prepare the student for more formal language use situations in which he must develop the skills to debate, explain, present, state an opinion or narrate.

Oral expression is neither a complement nor an addition to Portuguese language classes, and it should be awarded the same level of importance as skills in speaking, reading and writing. Developing the use of oral language that is appropriate for formal and public settings, which requires a more sophisticated use of urban norms, will

contribute greatly to the formation of conscientious and critical citizens, who are capable of expressing themselves to request, move, appeal, judge and intervene. Similarly, oral expression activities develop social skills such as courtesy, respect and tolerance, and teach students different gestures and body language that contribute to their social integration and historic understanding of the time in which they live.

2 Oral expression in school

If theoretical knowledge of the concept is key for the teacher to be able to define goals and determine teaching methods, there is very simple recurring question: what to teach and how?

I believe that we should teach everything: from informal conversation to organized debates, from group discussion to formal oral exposition. To do so requires the creation of concrete communication situations, recommending lectures, exposing the student to interact with the genres concerned, practice argumentation structures, narrative formulas and resources for appeal and emotional impact, in an increasing complexity of activities.

To construct the oral as a teaching-learning goal means understanding that orality manifests itself in texts associated with genres that are ruled by their own style, composition and thematic regulations. It requires an appreciation for intonation, considering its roles and taking turns, express emotions, mark the completion or continuity of the verbal flow and notice that "taking your turn to speak is closely associated with our body" (SCHNEUWLY; DOLZ, 2004, p.159), and therefore facial expressions, postures, looks and gestures are included in the activities of oral expression. According to the Swiss authors, oral activities vary between two poles, ranging from the spontaneous oral expression to oral productions restricted by a written order. The apparently chaotic aspect of spontaneous communication, marked by pauses, hesitations, stuttering, rephrasing, rewording, breaks, interruptions – all of which is normally regarded as the dregs of communication – may only be relegated to a secondary plan in school if "judged according to the norms of standardized writing" (SCHNEUWLY; DOLZ, 2004, p.159), which would be entirely counterproductive. Pointing out the characteristics of orality "produced by the speaker without intent or awareness" as marks of rules for spontaneous oral use may signal to the student that his

speech also has rules, that every use has rules of organization and realization and that it will thus be necessary to learn new rules, related to new uses that will expand his command of oral expression. To direct a conversational activity towards a specific theme, for example a chronicle read in the classroom, could be a first step in proposing a debate on this theme. Spontaneous commentaries about a painting may also move in the direction of an oral exposition and group discussions on a controversial issue may result in a seminar. The definition of the rules for each one of those genres will help the student to compare them and understand the difference between each interlocution.

On the other hand, more specific and rigid coercions of oral literature in written texts may also entail gradations and open up many opportunities for intervention. All reading is a matter of interpretation. Reading a poem provides as many different realizations as the readers want to assume. There are certain known resources, such as ascending and descending intonations, longer or shorter pauses, or a more cadenced or freer rhythm. But there is also the body of a reader intervening in the reading, the timbre of the voice, more or less intense gestures, a containment or enthusiasm imbedded in each reading.

So whether communication is more spontaneous or more regulated, there are oscillations, gradations and differences to consider and respect, and only then will the concept of genre be maximized. The use of spontaneous activities will lead to the teaching of genres of formal public communication: exposition; presentation of a report; interview; group discussion (those that serve the learning experience) and debate; negotiation; witness statement for an official entity; theatre, etc. (public life experiences in the greater sense), as “students usually master the daily forms well” and the role of the school is to lead them to “go beyond the ways of everyday oral production and confront them with other more institutional forms that are mediated and partially regulated by exterior restrictions” (SCHNEUWLY; DOLZ, 2004, p.175).

It would also be motivating and interesting to pursue more playful activities, in situations in which genres emerge that are geared towards games of oral expression, such as tongue-twisters and riddles, or ways in which the narrative capacity is developed more freely, through telling jokes or by completing a story by reading relevant texts as a warm-up exercise on the theme. This combines what is being taught with that which is already known. It demands a formal approach in what to include in

the realm of everyday colloquial communication and the oral expression gains density, diversity and complexity. Furthermore, it is by speaking that we develop procedures for listening to the other that result in rules of politeness and courteousness.

3 An example

Teaching an oral genre requires a definition of the principles, mechanisms and formulations that compose the learning objectives of the students (SCHNEUWLY; DOLZ, 2004, p.180-181). We will use as an example a regulated debate, developed during a class on the theme of “Cities” (cf. DISCINI; TEIXEIRA, 2009, p.199-201). To have a well conducted activity and conclusion it is essential to explain to the student what he will do, the objective he must meet and the expected result. The example involves a debate based on rules that determine who speaks, on whose behalf they speak, how long people may speak, how to listen to counter arguments and how to prepare a rebuttal. After defining the rules there will be four main stages for the development of the activity that may be presented by the teacher and receive suggestions from the class.

The first stage is to define the theme. The initial step is to expose the students to a series of motivating texts, either newspaper articles, letters to the editors, paintings and photographs, excerpts from a novel, a poem or a chronicle. We cannot offer a theme as broad as “Life in contemporary cities”, but it is essential to describe a problem that, in delimiting a key question that is relevant to the world of the students, will allow a manifestation of different points of views. These could be productive themes, such as the installation of a factory on a large empty lot on the outskirts of the city (environmental damage versus job creation), the construction of a parking lot instead of a public square (pragmatic transportation needs versus tradition, leisure and environmental preservation), the demolition of historic houses to widen an avenue, in order to accommodate the increase in traffic (tradition versus progress), etc.

After the problem has been defined, we move to the stage of preparing the debate. This involves looking for information, defining a script and planning the positions. The students will be divided into groups and will research the issue involved, consult reading materials and add information by consulting the Internet, books or

articles recommended by the teacher of that subject or related subjects. The students should take notes, which will allow them to relate to the textual production, teaching them to take reading notes or make cue cards, two genres that are quite necessary in developing argumentative events. Next is the creation of a script, another written genre that will support the oral debate. After exchanging their notes, the students, in groups, will prepare a script with a list of arguments in favor of a certain point of view. They should record data, numbers and cases that illustrate the argumentation. Then the arguments must be organized in order of presentation. We can start with a general argument, create an impact, then present the facts and conclude with another general argument to summarize. One can also study different forms of articulation, connecting the arguments and linking them by progression, cause and effect, or anteriority and posteriority. The choice of connectors that are appropriate for establishing these connections will link the activity of oral expression to a relevant grammatical issue.

The position that one expects to assume in the debate is of great importance at this stage: without intense passion, but also not without emotion. In groups, students may discuss the best way to find a happy medium between these two poles that are so common in opinion debates.

Then the actual debate begins, defined by the previously established rules as to who may speak, how long they may speak, how to make a counter argument and a rebuttal. These rules should be announced beforehand and should be attached to the blackboard or a wall in the classroom. A moderator should be appointed to enforce the rules.

At the end of the activity there will be an evaluation stage, which should not so much explore the question "who has won the debate?", but focus more on the learning from a situation in which everybody gained from the expression of diverse opinions and respect for diverging points of view. One should also encourage a discussion about the relationship between the debate and the formation of conscientious and active citizens. This will stimulate the development of the ability to argue, as well as link this ability to acquiring a political and socially committed position.

The oral activity could culminate in a written essay-type production, with texts from predominantly argumentative or opinionated genres, such as letters to the editor, petitions, op-eds, etc. In such manifestations of written expressions, we will find

grammatical issues such as those generate textual coherency, consolidate logical relationships of cause, consequence, concession and more, as well a suggestion of formulas for initiating, developing and concluding ideas, without the speaker losing sight of the previously developed theme and points of view.

Conclusion

The student will identify himself as an enunciator when the definition of his voice may find other converging and diverging voices, in order to make the practice of oral genres a privileged opportunity for establishing discursive spaces, which contemplate the constitutive controversy of the word in its use.

In this sense, oral genres should not act as an accessory at the end of a lesson. As the ability to speak, read and write are considered to be essential for the harmonious development of active and conscientious citizens, endowed with a critical sense and the capacity to intervene, we cannot create a hierarchy of the activities that compose the education curriculum and the Portuguese Language programs in elementary schools. Contrary to a hierarchy, we must promote the linkage of all activities— reading, writing, oral expression and grammatical knowledge – to allow the boys and girls to overcome the outdated trilogy of reading-writing-arithmetic, and push them towards a full command of the language, which some day they will see as their home, contradictory and definitive, harsh and welcoming, as philosophers and poets discovered such a long time ago.

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