

The Portuguese Language Teaching and the Large-Scale Assessment Prova Brasil: some thoughts about a partnership between university and basic education

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Abstract:

This paper, that focused on a set of actions carried out by its authors – professors of a state and public university in Paraíba state, in a partnership with the Education Office from a town located in region close to the campus where those professors work, was guided for two questions: I) What partnership have high education and basic education established concerning the large-scale assessment known as *Prova Brasil*?; and II) What reflections on Portuguese language teaching and on teacher education have this partnership led to? The theoretical framework included studies that focused on the historical development of the Portuguese language teaching in basic education (SOARES, 2002; PIETRI, 2003; BUNZEN, 2011). Based on these studies, we highlighted the relation between the *Prova Brasil* and the discourse for changing in the Portuguese language teaching, which emerged in the 1970s. The analyses showed the importance of the teaching, research and extension actions carried out by the higher education system in reducing the impacts of the neoliberal policy underlying the large-scale assessment *Prova Brasil* on the Portuguese language teaching and on teacher education.

Keywords:

Large-scale assessment *Prova Brasil*. University. Basic Education.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper sought to document the teaching, research and extension actions developed by its authors – professors who teach at a Portuguese Language & Literature program at a state university in northeastern Brazil – in cooperation with basic education¹ schools centered around the Portuguese language section of the large-scale assessment known as *Prova Brasil*. Specifically, our intent was to answer two questions: I) What partnership have high education and basic education established concerning this large-scale assessment? and II) What reflections on Portuguese language teaching and on teacher education have this partnership led to?

Created in the context of neoliberal² policies, which theoretically should focus on the quality of education, measured according to numerical grades (UFMG, 2011), *Prova Brasil* is administered every odd year with the purpose of evaluating the 5th and 9th grade students' knowledge of Portuguese language and Mathematics. As government discourse goes, the main objectives of this exam are twofold: “a) to contribute to improving quality of education, reducing inequalities and democratizing the way public education is managed” and “b) to foster the development of an evaluative culture that can give society control over educational processes and results” (BRASIL, 2008, p. 8).

Student performance in this assessment and what is called the “school flow”, a metric measured by the percentage of students who are promoted and retained, comprise the two indicators used to determine the Basic Education Development Index (or *IDEB*), intended to identify the municipalities and schools where education finds itself the weakest.

The data analyzed in this paper were collected and generated³ between 2015 and 2019 within the framework of the teaching, research and extension actions we perform as professors at Human and Exact Sciences Center (*Centro de Ciências Humanas e Exatas*, or *CCHE*) at State University of Paraíba, in Monteiro, a town located 305 kilometers from Paraíba's capital, João Pessoa, in Northeastern Brazil. These were actions developed in partnership with the Education Office from a municipality in the region where the CCHE is located.

In order to answer the questions posed above based on our analysis of the data, we have organized this paper into six parts. After this introduction, based on the contributions made by authors who have devoted themselves to studying forms to institute Portuguese as a curriculum subject, we draw a parallel between the introduction of *Prova Brasil* and the “discourse for changing the concepts of language and of teaching a mother tongue” (PIETRI, 2003, p. 9). Next, we initiate the analysis of the actions from our observation of teaching experiences centered around *Prova Brasil* as had by two teachers-in-training and as documented in internship reports.

¹ In Brazil, the term “basic education” comprises early childhood and elementary education.

² Arbitrarily speaking, neoliberalism can be understood as an economic position that champions the free market and reduces state intervention. This position reverberates throughout numerous facets of everyday life, such as education (GENTILI, 1999).

³ Certificate of Ethical Conduct: 87863018.3.0000.5187.

The analysis continues in the next couple of sections. In “The university goes to the public school in times of large-scale assessments”, we reflect on a process that took place in 2017, where teachers were trained on how to approach *Prova Brasil* in the classroom. This process was administered by the authors of this paper at the request of our partner municipality’s Education Office. Then, in “Strengthening the Partnership”, the analysis moves into actions related to such assessment and which were developed in 2019 as part of a Teacher Education Scholarship Program (*Programa de Bolsas de Iniciação à Docência* or *PIBID*) and Pedagogical Residency (*Residência Pedagógica* or *RP*). Lastly, we present our reflections on the relations between our actions and Portuguese language teaching and teacher education nowadays.

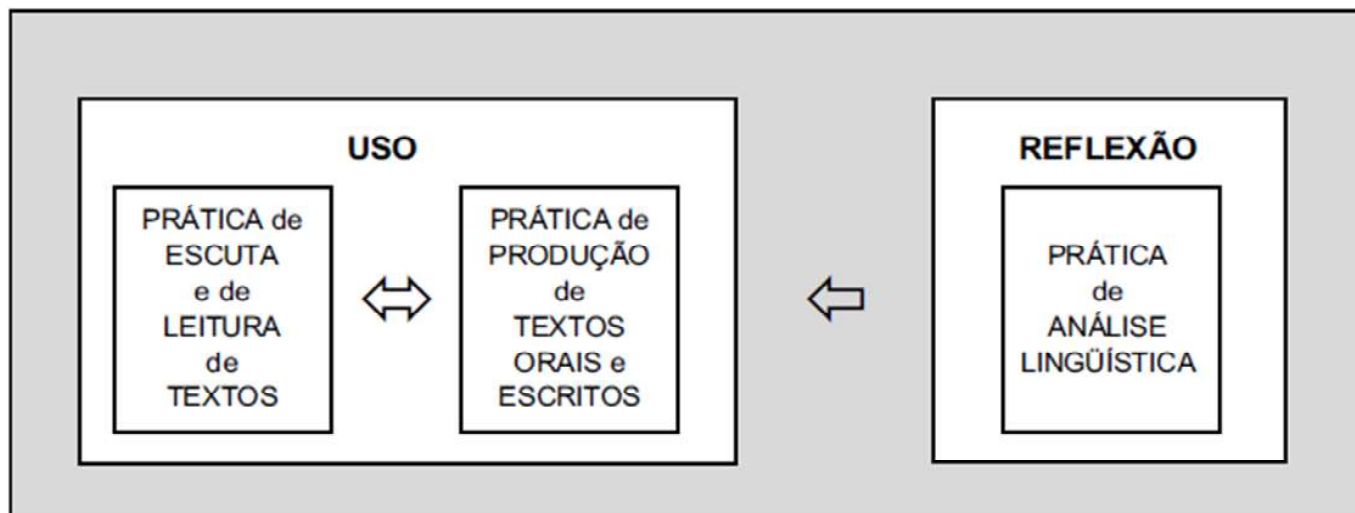
THE PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE TEACHING FROM THE LATE 20TH CENTURY UP UNTIL THE PRESENT

In this section we seek to present, based on the works of Bunzen (2011), Pietri (2003) and Soares (2002), the parallel that can be drawn between three aspects related to the way Portuguese language is taught throughout basic education: The “*discourse for changing the concepts of language and of teaching a mother tongue*” (PIETRI, 2003, p. 9), emerging in the late 1970s, the comprehension that academia and government have of the teaching of this subject in current days, and the reference matrix that *Prova Brasil* uses.

According to the aforementioned works, between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the organization and the foundations of Portuguese as a discipline stemming, respectively, from the military dictatorship period and from Communication Theory, began to be met with extensive criticism. It was at this point that the discourse for changing gradually came into existence. It, in a context where political democracy was being reintroduced, proposed that Portuguese as a discipline be reconfigured, predicated on the concepts of language as the various fields of linguistics (Discourse Analysis, Textual Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and so forth) understood them to be. Such understandings surfaced, during that period, in academic production, one example being a collection called *The Text in the Classroom (O Texto na Sala de Aula)*, organized by renowned Brazilian linguist and professor João Wanderley Geraldi, first published in 1984.

A highlight from this collection is a text titled “Basic units in the Portuguese language teaching”, whose first published version was written by Geraldi himself in 1981. In it, Geraldi advocates a proposal for Portuguese language teaching in the later years of what is called in Brazil “fundamental education” (5th through 8th grade, following the nomenclature being used then) from an interactionist perspective. Geraldi’s proposal would have the text as its centerpiece and would be divided into three axes: the “practice of reading texts”, the “practice of writing texts” and the “practice of linguistic analysis”.

Over a decade later, in 1998, the Brazilian government put out a directive named the *National Curricular Parameters (Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais, or PCN)* (BRASIL, 1998) which explicitly circles back, as demonstrated in a footnote, to Geraldi’s contributions to propose that the content taught in the discipline of Portuguese language spring from two axes: “Using language” and “Reflecting on language”. As Figure 1, reproduced from *PCN*, below shows, the “Using language” axis would encompass the practices of listening, reading and writing texts, while the “Reflecting on language” axis would cover the practice of linguistic analysis. In this manner, the discourse for changing had become government discourse as well.



Source: Brasil, 1998, p. 35.

Figure 1 – The government discourse about the Portuguese Language Teaching organization⁴

It was after the *PCN* were issued that this axis-based method of teaching Portuguese language would finally become commonplace in academic studies, in teacher education, in textbooks, and even in other publications put out by the Brazilian Ministry of Education. Amid this process, in both public and academic circles, an idea began to take form which postulated that the axes for teaching Portuguese were in fact four – reading, writing, orality and linguistic analysis – rather than two –, Using language and Reflecting on language. It became so widely embraced that the Very National Basic Curriculum (*Common Curricular National Base*, or *BNCC*) (BRASIL, 2017), published in late 2017, went on to propose four axes for teaching the subject at hand: “reading”, “writing”, “orality” and “linguistic/semiotic analysis.”

As Bunzen (2011, p. 904) stressed, the publication of *PCN* is related to another process that impacted the teaching of Portuguese language between the late 20th century and the present days: “The systematic introduction of evaluation exams in basic education schools”. The opening pages of the government-issued document outlining the reference matrixes, topics and descriptors used in the *Prova Brasil* exam: *Prova Brasil – ensino fundamental: matrizes de referência, tópicos e descritores* (BRASIL, 2008) make several mentions to the *PCN*. By historicizing this large-scale assessment, the document is confirming that the 1997 reference matrix was repurposed to suit the *PCN* in 2001. In a following passage, the document introduces concepts derived from the discourse for changing, such as teaching languages from a discursive-interactionist perspective, and text and genre as the object and unit, respectively, of Portuguese as taught in basic education.

This matrix for Portuguese established in the fundamental education section of *Prova Brasil* is split into six parts or, as the document calls it, “topics”, as shown under the *Prova Brasil* Topics column in Table 1. Each of these topics comprises a group of descriptors, defined as “an association between curricular content and mental operations carried out by students, which translate competencies and skills” (BRASIL, 2008, p. 18).

It is possible to associate topics and, consequently, the descriptors with particular fields in Linguistics, which Soares (2002) refers to as being theoretical perspectives that influenced the institution of Portuguese as a discipline in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Therefore, once more the influence of the discourse for changing can be seen in *Prova Brasil*. In the table below there is a summary of the organization of the matrix used by this exam.

⁴ *Uso* (Using language); *Reflexão* (Reflecting on language); *Prática de escuta e de leitura de textos* (Listening and reading practices); *Prática de produção de textos orais e escritos* (Oral and written production practices); *Prática de análise linguística* (Linguistic analysis practices).

Table 1 – Theoretical perspectives underlying Prova Brasil Topics and Descriptors

<i>Prova Brasil</i> Topics	Numbers of descriptors in the matrix for the 9th grade	Underlying theoretical perspectives
(I) Reading procedures	5	Reading in an interactional perspective
(II) Implications of the genre-support-media, the genre and/or the enunciator on the text comprehension	2	Textual Linguistics
(III) Intertextual relations	2	
(IV) Cohesion and coherence in textual processing	7	
(V) Relations between expressive features and meaning effects	4	Discourse Analysis
(VI) Linguistic Variation	1	Sociolinguistics

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Underpinning topic I in the matrix, titled “Reading Procedures”, is an interactionist perspective on reading, which recognizes that readers reconstruct the meaning or meanings of a text using the markers left in it by the writer him or herself (KOCH; ELIAS, 2008). Out of the five descriptors in this topic, number 6 is the one that includes the identification of the topic of a text.

Three topics, “Implications of the genre-support-media, the genre and/or the enunciator on text comprehension”, “Intertextual relations” and “Cohesion and coherence in textual processing”, which together cover a little more than half of the matrix descriptors, can be associated with Textual Linguistics, a field concerned with phenomena involved in how texts are produced and received (SOARES, 2002; BENTES, 2011).

Descriptor 12, belonging to topic II, explores ways to identify the purpose of texts within different genres. The two descriptors in topic III entertain the notion of intertextuality, so crucial for studies delving into Textual Linguistics. Reference and connection can be found in the topic IV descriptors.

Topic V, containing four descriptors, is influenced by Discourse Analysis, which, in general terms deals with the meaning effects related to linguistic choices (MUSSALIM, 2012). Finally, Sociolinguistics, the study of language in relation to society (ALKMIM, 2011), is the field serving as foundation for the sole descriptor under topic VI, “Linguistic Variation.”

In the following sections, we will discuss how the discourse of changing relates to *Prova Brasil* in terms of the teaching, research and extension actions carried out by as part of the partnership between high and basic education.

TWO TEACHERS-IN-TRAINING AT THE FRONTLINE

This section depicts the two interventions developed by two teachers-in-training, named Rosa and Margarida⁵, for 9th grade students at public schools in 2015 and in 2017 respectively⁶. At the time these actions were being developed, the two of them were taking a course called Supervised Internship II as part of the Portuguese Language & Literature program at *CCHE*, taught by one of the authors of this text. Moreover, they were recipients of an extension scholarship program coordinated by the same professor and author.

⁵ These are fictitious names.

⁶ For a more extensive analysis of these interventions, see Silva, F. (2019).

Our main interest here lies in describing the interaction projects or the didactic projects mobilized by Rosa and Margarida as well as their creation process. Borrowed from *The Study of Spoken Language and Mother Tongue Classes: a processual approach to teacher-student interactions (Estudo da Língua Falada e Aula de Língua Materna: uma abordagem processual da interação professor-aluno)* by Maria de Lourdes Meirelles Matêncio (2001), the term *project* is understood as a set of didactic-discursive strategies used to determine the purpose of one class or a group of classes. As for strategy, it is defined as “what a teacher does or requests discursively” to achieve such purpose (PEREIRA, 2011, p. 18).

To describe these projects, we initially relied on the reports that Rosa and Margarida wrote as assignments in the Supervised Internship II course. These reports focused on the intervention during the later years of fundamental education. Next, we prepared synopses⁷ that could allow us to identify those didactic-discursive strategies that comprised the projects of both professionals.

Before introducing the strategies that were mobilized, we must first describe the process by which Rosa and Margarida prepared their didactic projects. The two of them administered practice tests of the Portuguese language section from *Prova Brasil* to 9th grade students in public schools. These practice tests were part of their actions in the extension project they were participating in. Their purpose was to identify which were the descriptors students were the most and least knowledgeable about. With this information, Rosa and Margarida planned out interventions whose goal was to foster the development of skills associated with the descriptors that proved the most problematic for both those 9th grade students from public schools and the particular students in the classes in which these professionals would teach.

Rosa, who did her intervention in 2015, focused on the column genre, news article and news report plus four descriptors: numbers 2 (compare and contrast the parts of a text, spotting repetitions or substitutions that contribute to text flow), 6 (identify the topic of a text), 13 (identify the linguistic markers that point to the narrator and interlocutor of a text) and 20 (find different forms of treating a piece of information when comparing texts dealing in the same topic based on the conditions surrounding their writing and the conditions where they will be received). Margarida, who had her educational experience in 2017, advanced two genres, news article and news report, plus two descriptors: numbers 6, in common with Rosa, and 15 (draw logical-discursive parallels found in the text indicated by conjunctions, adverbs, etc.).

Table 2, next page, shows the didactic-discursive strategies which comprise the interaction projects for developing an approach to *Prova Brasil* in the classroom.

Rosa’s project went on for 13 (thirteen) classroom hours and mobilized 6 (six) didactic-discursive strategies, some of them used more than once. From her project, we chose, to give as an example, the development of the strategy called “identifying different forms of examining the same topic in different texts”, which was mobilized in intervention class number nine.

Rosa began by discussing the characteristics of the type of language used in less-monitored interactions on the Internet, and then addressed descriptor 13 (identify the linguistic markers that point to the narrator and interlocutor of a text). Next, Rosa brought two texts into the classroom: A news report that she took from the Internet: “*Uso do Internetês pode prejudicar futuro profissional, diz especialista*” (or “Using internet language can compromise your career future, a specialist claims”) and a column genre titled “*#s de comunicssaum*” off a book titled *Estive pensando*, by Antonio Prata.

After going over the texts, Rosa guided the students through identifying the main topic and the styles of languages. This allowed them to recognize that one given topic, in this case internet language, can be approached at least two different ways: using humor and Internet language, as Prata did in his piece, or in a

⁷ Created by researchers from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, this synopsis is a methodological instrument used to gain an overview of a group of classes (SCHNEUWLY; DOLZ, 2009).

more formal way, like the news article. Over the following classes, Rosa continued to mobilize the strategy by reading and discussing the column genre and news article, and by doing so addressing descriptor 20, namely: find different forms of treating a piece of information when comparing texts dealing in the same topic based on the conditions surrounding their writing and the conditions where they will be received.

Table 2 – Didactic-discursive projects by two teachers-in-training developing an approach to *Prova Brasil*

Rosa	Margarida
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading and discussing a sample of the column genre; • Reading and discussing four samples of the column genre and identifying their topics and styles of language; • Lecturing on the topic of linguistic variation and reading and discussing a sample of the news article genre; • Reading and discussing a sample of the column genre and identifying the topic and the language style of the text that was read; • Identifying the different forms to discuss the same topic in different texts; • Reading texts and identifying topics and language styles; • Lecturing on the process of repeating and substituting words in the text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading and discussing a sample of the news report genre; • Reading and discussing samples of the news article and news report genres and identifying the characteristics of these genres; • Reading and discussing a written news report and identifying the topic of a text; • Reading and discussing samples of the news article and news report genre, identifying the characteristics of these genres, and identifying different ways to handle the same topic in different texts; • Reading and discussing samples of the news report genre and writing a summary; • Discussing the characteristics of the summary and rewriting a sample of this genre, and discussing the logical-discursive relations established by connectors; • Dynamics exercise about the logical-discursive relations established by connectors.

Source: Adapted from Silva, F. (2019).

The strategies mobilized by Rosa, specifically, reading and discussing different genres and identifying topics and language styles of the texts read, show an attempt at combining together the practices of reading, by identifying intertextual relations and linguistic analysis, by observing the relation between linguistic markers and the narrator/interlocutor in the texts.

Out of Margarida’s project, which spanned 19 (nineteen) classroom hours and mobilized 10 (ten) didactic-discursive strategies, some of them employed more than once, in the same vein as Rosa’s experience, we opted to take two strategies utilized concomitantly as an example, “reading and discussing samples of the news report genre” and “writing a summary”.

For intervention classes 11 and 12, Margarida brought two news report genres that originally ran in print magazines and that addressed the topic of violence against women. After reading and discussing the relation existing between the texts, Margarida split the class up into two groups and assigned each group to write a summary of one of the stories. Her instructions read: “Suppose you have to get the core information of the stories you read across to someone that is far from. Think about this and write a summary (10-15 lines) about the subjects these stories talk about”.

In both of these classes, it was possible to see that Margarida was working with descriptor 6: identify the topic of a text. Unlike *Prova Brasil*, which tests this skill by applying multiple choice questions, Margarida instead decided to explore it through the practice of writing, by having students write a summary. In doing so, Margarida merged the practices of reading and writing, revealing that she had appropriated the discourse for changing (GERALDI, 2011; PIETRI, 2003).

Observing Rosa and Margarida’s didactic projects enabled the identification of two proposals for teaching Portuguese which involve the *Prova Brasil* descriptors, from a perspective that starts with the text, as preconized by academic and government discourses on how to teach this subject. By observing not only the projects themselves but their creation process as well, we were able to witness how the university’s teaching,

research, and extension actions – specifically those dealing with teacher education – work to the benefit of basic education.

As demonstrated in this section, while this process of collaboration started out, in 2015, with just a few participants – an intern and a university professor –, it eventually grew in number and in intensity, as described below.

THE UNIVERSITY GOES TO THE PUBLIC SCHOOL IN TIMES OF LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENTS⁸

In the first month of 2017, *CCHE* was asked by the aforementioned Education Office to organize a process for training Portuguese language and Mathematics teachers that would help them develop an approach to bringing up *Prova Brasil* in the classroom. We agreed to do it and commenced the project with a lecture called “*Prova Brasil: What Does This Have To Do With Me?*” during one of the educational conferences known as “pedagogical journeys.” There, we talked with teachers from all grades working in that district about how *Prova Brasil* is organized and the impact it can have on classrooms. Furthermore, we presented the results of two surveys on the Portuguese language descriptors that the students from that district knew the most and the least, collected from our research and extension projects, which included the interventions by Rosa and Margarida described in the previous section.

Over the following weeks, following an agreement with the Education Office, the Portuguese language teachers who taught the later years of fundamental education would be given training every 15 days, from 7 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. This organized the collaboration process anew. To paraphrase the title of this section and of a book organized by Backes and Pavan (2018): The university goes to public schools in times of *Prova Brasil*. While our attendance at municipal schools predated 2017, from that particular journey on, our visits increased in both frequency and quality.

We set up the first three meetings so as to introduce the theoretical-methodological bases of the evaluation exam (cf. 1 The Portuguese language teaching from the late 20th century up to the present) and get a feel for the expectations and demands of the group, made up of approximately 20 teachers. From the meetings following this process of getting acquainted, we picked out three moments to discuss in this section.

The first concerns the relation between the planning of classes and the descriptors in *Prova Brasil*. During our first meetings on Thursday evenings, we asked the teachers if we could watch one of the class preparation sessions that took place on Thursdays which were not dedicated to *Prova Brasil*. This was intended to understand their planning process and discuss, during our meetings, the dialogue that was being established between this process and *Prova Brasil*. While watching them, we found that the classes being taught in the later years of elementary education essentially followed the proposal in the textbook chosen by the municipal administration for the 2017-19 period. In addition to the content that they were to give over the following week of classes, the teachers, at the request of the Education Office, would also indicate which descriptors from *Prova Brasil* would be explored.

As we watched them prepare these plans, we noticed some practices that proved problematic. One of them was the incompatibility between content and descriptor. As the material used to introduce the reference matrix for *Prova Brasil* outlines (BRASIL, 2008), some genres are more suitable for exploring a particular descriptor than others. Poetic genres, for example, work quite well with descriptors 17 (identify the meaning effects resulting from punctuation and other notations) and 19 (recognize the meaning effects from exploring orthographic and/or morphosyntactic resources). Conversely, using such genres for a systematic examination

⁸ This section is named after the book organized by José Licínio Backes e Ruth Pavan and published by Mercado de Letras in 2018 (*A universidade vai à escola pública em tempos de avaliação em larga escala*).

of descriptor 15 (draw logical-discursive parallels found in the text indicated by conjunctions, adverbs, etc.) would be ill-advised.

This relation between content and descriptor was not something teachers would pay particular attention to during the plan preparation process. Accordingly, *Prova Brasil*, it seemed, was viewed as “additional content” to the subjects found in the textbook. Not only that, some descriptors would appear repeatedly whereas others would see no mention at all.

Watching them also allowed the identification of two methodological recommendations that were being put forward at that school district with respect to how to approach *Prova Brasil*. The first was something called “*aulão*”, literally a “big class” that had teachers, following the instructions of the Education Office, use a projector to show students questions usually taken from *Prova Brasil – ensino fundamental* (BRASIL, 2008) or from Internet sites. Teachers would read these questions out loud and students had to hold up a sign showing letters “a” to “d” which they thought was the correct answer. The second of these recommendations would have students take in the classroom practice tests with multiple-choice questions focusing several descriptors.

These two recommendations are a testament to the belief that students could master the skills and competencies relevant to the descriptors merely by examining questions, during the “big classes” and in practice tests, and based on the comments teachers would make when they were able to discuss the students’ answers. This is a configuration of Portuguese as a discipline that steps away from the discourse for changing (PIETRI, 2003) to draw closer instead to the practice of teaching to the test (VOLANTE, 2004). In lieu of a methodology that uses and reflects on language via texts (GERALDI, 2011), which would require dialogue-based lectures and reading/listening/writing, linguistic analysis, students essentially were being encouraged to develop “gimmicky” devices that would make it easier for them to answer questions in a short amount of time.

After making these remarks, we used some of the initial meetings to discuss the problems found in the plan. We were able, at least, to go over the incompatibility between content and descriptor. That was when we felt the preparation for *Prova Brasil* had to take another step. While they would not speak up, the teachers showed signs that they would like to see examples of activities other than multiple-choice questions that they could do in the classroom to work on the descriptors. For a discussion of this moment of the training process, we produce below example 1.

Example 1

D6 – Identify the topic of a text

First, after looking at the pictures on the news report titled “Cowboys” from our textbook and based on the titles and subtitles found in this text, complete the “My hypotheses about the subject being discussed” column in the table below.

Titles and Subtitles	My hypotheses about the subject being discussed	Subject being discussed
Cowboys		
Trucker hat and shirt		
Pickup men		
Recon		

Now read the news report on pages 108-112 to find if the hypotheses you have proposed about the subject being discussed can or cannot be confirmed. After you have read all five parts of this text, complete the column titled “Subject being discussed.”

To conclude, write two to four lines on the subject discussed in the news report. [...]

Source: Authors’ collection.

Example 1 shows a section from an assignment prepared in the context of one of our extension projects and which was later discussed during one of our training meetings. It was adapted from a reading activity recommendation available in the 9th grade textbook, in a chapter about the news report genre.

In it, students were supposed to propose hypotheses about the subtopics of a long news report titled “Cowboys” after looking at the images and the subtitles. After reading it, students had to tell if those hypotheses did or did not hold by indicating the subject being addressed in each of the text’s sections. Lastly, the exercise required students to write a summary of the text. The goal of this activity, which could probably spread across three classes, considering the sheer size of the news report, was to work on strategies for identifying subtopics in a text as a way for students to comprehend the topic thoroughly – a skill mirrored in descriptor 6: identify the topic of a text.

The idea of this and other activities was well-received among teachers. They were able to realize, perhaps for the first time, that there were different ways they could explore the *Prova Brasil* descriptors other than those methods suggested by the federal government in 2008 in *Prova Brasil – ensino fundamental: matrizes de referência, tópicos e descritores*.

The third moment we chose to discuss in this section concerns the production of questions, by the participant teachers, that would be used in evaluation exams at these public schools. As of 2017, especially the first three two-month periods – which precede the administration of *Prova Brasil* – teachers would give at least two different types of tests: One of them they called evaluation exams, the other they called practice tests. The first editions of the latter consisted essentially of multiple-choice questions they took from materials published by the federal government and from Internet sites (cf. SILVA, D., 2009). Aware of this fact, we asked teachers to spare some of the time intended for training on Thursdays for them to write questions that could be used both in the practice tests and in the evaluation exams. Below there is a section of one of such question produced by the teachers.

Example 2

- 2) In the following sentence: “**If** not enough people participate in quantity and especially in quality, which will give it body and soul, a gathering of virtuosi, or pseudo-virtuosi will parade”, the highlighted conjunction expresses the idea of
- A) comparison.
 - B) conclusion.
 - C) condition.
 - D) consequence.
- 3) In “We doing him wrong”, the type of language that is predominant is
- A) colloquial
 - B) erudite
 - C) scientific
 - D) non-verbal

Source: Authors’ collection.

Example 2 contains two of the six questions taken from one of the evaluation exams prepared for 9th grade students of these public schools. They were devised based on the standard established by *Prova Brasil* – multiple choice and the correct answer used to fill in the blank. Questions 2 and 3 above explore, respectively, descriptors 15 (draw logical-discursive parallels found in the text indicated by conjunctions, adverbs, etc.) and 13 (identify the linguistic markers that point to the narrator and interlocutor of a text). The sections between quotation marks indicate that they were part of texts found in the textbooks which were partially reproduced in the exams.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to take some time during the training meetings to create activities that could be used in classroom interactions, and not just evaluation exams and practice tests. Despite not reaching this goal, we concluded that the moment intended to create questions such as those reproduced above was rather productive. During this process, teachers would display if they had truly understood the theoretical-methodological aspects that underlie the *Prova Brasil* and were the subject of discussion in the previous meetings. Writing those questions then also served to inhibit the practice of copying content available on the Internet.

The possibility of discussing *Prova Brasil* in the classroom but no longer referring to it not as “additional content” was not something that could be achieved during the training meetings and would only be experienced later in 2019, as described in the following section.

STRENGTHENING THE PARTNERSHIP

In 2018, we took over the coordination the Portuguese chair under the Teacher Education Scholarship Program (*Programa de Bolsas de Iniciação à Docência* or *PIBID*) and Pedagogical Residency (*Residência Pedagógica* or *RP*) at the *CCHE*. Each of those programs was being attended by 24 (twenty-four) teachers who were still in training and 3 (three) basic education teachers who acted as supervisors of the former. All of them were scholarship recipients. Following a process that lasted from August 2018 through February 2019 by which we studied and observed the school reality, we set about planning the interventions that the teachers-in-training would carry out.

At that point, we found that 5 (five) of the 6 (six) basic education teachers participating in the aforesaid programs worked in schools from the district that had been a partner of ours actions since 2015, and that they would teach classes to 9th grade students. In light of this situation, we realized we would be able to continue the new relation that had been established by *Prova Brasil* years before, especially with respect to rethinking the configuration of Portuguese as a discipline, thus shying away from the way teachers had treated *Prova Brasil* in the past based on recommendations of the Education Office.

We undertook a new survey to find the descriptors students were the least knowledgeable about by administering a practice test that assessed their reading skills (CARVALHO, 2018). In possession of the results, we proposed that these five teachers distance themselves from the perspective that held textbooks as the organizers of the content students learn throughout the year. In its stead would come a configuration which, over the course of that year and consistent with the discourse for changing, would shift the focus onto those descriptors that students still found difficult to grasp. All five teachers agreed to follow the proposal on one condition: We, in our capacity as professors from the university and coordinators, had to present this new configuration to the Education Office and wait for it to give the go-ahead, which they gave us after a few meetings.

On a February afternoon in 2019, we gathered together teachers-in-training who would teach 9th graders and some of the teachers from basic education to design a plan following the perspective being defended in this paper and which the Education Office had agreed to. Presented in Example 3 below is a portion of the final draft written for the 1st two-month period and in keeping with this perspective.

Example 3

Descriptors	Skills	Objects of Knowledge	Date
D12 D13 D4	Identify the purpose of texts belonging to different genres as well as the linguistic markers that show who the narrator and interlocutor of a text are / Identify implicit information	Purpose of different genres and linguistic variation	18/03 to 22/03 (5 days/class)
D20 D4	Find different forms of treating a piece of information when comparing texts dealing in the same topic based on the conditions surrounding their writing and the conditions where they will be received / Identify implicit information	Intertextuality	25/03 to 29/03 (5 days/class)
D9 D4	Differentiate from the main and secondary parts of a text / Identify implicit information	Topic sentences in a text/ Opinion piece	01/04 to 05/04 (5 days/class)
D21 D4	Find the different positions between two or more opinions related to the same fact or the same topic / Identify implicit information	Argumentation/ Opinion piece	08/04 to 12/04 (5 days/class)

Source: Authors' collection.

The portion reproduced above plans shows the plan for four weeks of the 1st two-month period focusing six descriptors. One such descriptor, number 4 (identify implicit information), would ideally be explored whenever possible as it is a crucial skill in any process to produce meaning and whose exploration is not associated with any particular written genre.

Responsibility for the first couple of weeks fell on the teachers-in-training. During the first one, the proposal consisted of working on the identification of purpose and style in different texts (descriptors 12 and 13). When these interventions were carried out, we saw these teachers bring out at the classrooms' samples of different texts in different oral and written genres to provide reflections on aspects related to the context of production (author, intended audience, topic, purpose, etc.). In week two, they explored the topical relationship between different texts (descriptor 20).

In the first week of classes taught by basic education teachers acting as supervisors of teachers-in-training, they continued the efforts to identify topics and subtopics in text, in particular by exploring the ability to differentiate primary from secondary sections (descriptor 9). In week two, they started examining op-eds and, with it, different descriptors, such as number 21, listed in the example above.

The work done with this genre over the following weeks marks a new relationship that was built with the textbook and which must be highlighted here. Opinion pieces were not an initial component included in the material and hence probably would not be taught early in the school year. However, on the day when the first version of the plan was being created, as descriptor 21 (recognize different positions between two or more opinions related to the same fact or the same topic) was being written in as one of the priorities for the 1st two-month period, we asked those attending the meeting to identify which genre in the book could be used to allow them to work with that descriptor. After some productive discussion, it was established that the activity would revolve around an opinion piece. As such, the common logic found in the plan was inverted: Whereas before content was defined by the textbook, now, based on the identification of a skill that the students did not have a grasp of, a descriptor, they found that the content in the material could very well be explored in the classroom.

In the months that followed the weeks shown in example 3, they reviewed some of the descriptors which students did not understand yet. In addition, some changes were made to the way planning was done. One example was an increase in the amount of time dedicated to a given piece of content from one to two weeks.

Under this new configuration, and at the Education Office's request, practice test kept being held every month. We at times threw into question the theoretical-methodological argument used to define this

particular frequency, but these were met with inconsistent answers. This fact demonstrates that some practices that go against the discourse for changing, as far as language education is concerned, are still kept in place despite opposing efforts by virtue of being a tradition long held by people or institutions that exert power (SIGNORINI, 2006).

One important aspect in the context analyzed by this section and which leads us to believe in and stand up for a new configuration for education concerns the increasing number of people involved in our teaching, research, and extension actions and the working conditions they were provided with, which, albeit not perfect, did enable them to at least participate. As mentioned above, both the teachers-in-training and basic education teachers were receiving financial assistance in the form of a scholarship for them to participate in programs and, accordingly, attend the weekly meetings where they would discuss theoretical-methodological aspects of teaching Portuguese in this day and age and plan out their interventions. Without this scholarship, neither the full-fledged teachers nor the teachers-in-training would have been able to take some of their time for the actions being analyzed in this paper.

By then end of 2019, 16 (sixteen) teachers-in-training – 8 (eight) out of each program – had planned and taught classes to 9th grade students from municipal schools for at least one two-month period, thus experimenting the pleasures and pains of discussing *Prova Brasil* in a classroom. Along this process, 5 (five) basic education teachers had the opportunity to plan, teach and supervise classes in addition to reflecting on situations that drew inspiration from the discourse for changing and were not bound up in the *Prova Brasil* descriptors – a notion some possible have never even entertained.

FINAL REMARKS

A product of neoliberalism, *Prova Brasil* is capable of triggering, in teaching process and in teacher training, actions that are typical of this economic model. In Portuguese taken as a discipline, for instance, the practices put forward by the discourse for changing and involving use (reading/listening/writing) and reflection (linguistic analysis) may find themselves being replaced by a type of training oriented towards answering multiple-choice questions. Consequently, this could cause activities in this discipline to become compartmentalized, and a failure to integrate the axes which provide the basis for its educational aims and objects.

Within this context, of neoliberalism, teachers will usually be held as the sole people responsible for student success (or failure) in large-scale assessments. For this reason, they are viewed as professionals who, by their own individual effort, are required to invest in their own training and background to be able to offer, at least in theory, quality education in their classroom. What this does is to create veiled competition between schools, and emotionally affect teachers who may think test grades are the absolute indicative of the quality of their work. It also causes students to be, even if indirectly, segregated into those who are strong and those who are weak, in a process that disregards a series of factors such as their personal motivation and social condition, which in turn affect the role played by teachers over the course of basic education.

Still in this context, education offices often presume that teachers are incapable of investing in their own training and will get into agreements with private companies for advising services usually intended to sell didactic materials and standardized training activities. By doing so, they display a lack of sensitivity to the several different realities of schools across Brazil, as though quality were to abruptly improve by merit of standardization alone, as opposed to being the result of long-term investments in teacher qualification, improving schools, and creating pleasant educational environments for teachers and students alike.

The data that we have shown show that partnerships between high education, education offices and public schools not only are needed, but must continue and must be solidified further, as they are capable of

contributing significantly to improving education offered at schools and improving the level training and education offered to teachers. There are three reasons for this. First, because we noticed a marked deficiency in public schools in terms of actions geared towards the way activities are planned with a view to enhancing student performance in Portuguese language, as opposed to having them take the *Prova Brasil* exam so as to drive school numbers up. This does not necessarily mean better quality in education. Second, because we spotted the need for universities to have spaces for its teachers-in-training to be able to experience real education situations and think of alternatives to the demands arising in these spaces. This will contribute to training professionals who enjoy greater autonomy when reflecting on and executing didactic actions. Third, the partnership between universities, education offices, and public schools brings about positive outcomes which have direct effect on the reflections on and the potential changes to the curriculum followed by schools, on lending new meaning to practices, on the part of teachers, on changes to didactic planning, on the creation of activities, and on stepping away from the idea that textbooks are the only instruments available to teachers.

With respect to the way teachers are trained, from the perspective we are defending, it is imperative that universities and basic education join forces as this allows a diversity of views and efforts to produce more consistent results. Amid this process, the barriers to communication and conflicts are deemed to be aspects that constitute the interaction between the two of these institutions (SIGNORINI, 2000). In order for this partnership to continue to exist, we will need to defend the teachers, who are seeing some aspects of their jobs suffering from precariousness.

In this regard, it is vital that university research and extension activities continue to be fostered, including in the financial sense, and that they continue to be considered part of the job of educators. In the past few years, some sectors of society and of politics have advanced this grossly fallacious notion that a teacher's job is limited to what they do inside a classroom. The actions that are presented in this text demonstrate how inseparable the teaching, research, and extension activities promoted by university institutions are. Furthermore, the continued education of basic education teachers must be promoted by state and municipal administrations as being part of these professionals' working hours, and not as a side activity they engage in their after-hours.

With respect to teacher education and to the teaching of Portuguese language, we must reconsider the educational aims of this discipline in a manner that more clearly and more objectively distinguishes that which is essential from that which is accessory. This will make teachers realize once again that the work they do in the classroom must serve the students, not the neoliberal interests which have turned education into a rather lucrative commodity for those who have the conditions and the means to exploit the industry and, consequently, exploit the teachers themselves. Raising awareness about this matter might arm teachers with the means to escape market standardization and gain back the autonomy and the place of authority to be able to choose, organize, and socialize the process of knowledge without having to resort to private institutions which churn out "standardized workbooks that relegate teachers to a position of 'knowledge deliveryman/deliverywoman'" (FRIGOTTO, 2012, p. 9). This drive towards autonomy was one of the most important things, in our opinion, gained by the teachers whom we worked with. Nevertheless, the upkeep of being autonomous requires that the actions stemming from the partnership between high education and school be made permanent, lest all the work done so far be undone.

In conclusion, the teaching, research, and extension actions that we have developed and analyzed in this paper do not endorse putting an end to *Prova Brasil*. Rather, they seek to lay out a new logic that is capable of accommodating this exam. As evidenced, the goal of the approach developed from 2015 through 2019 was to show that Portuguese language can be taught from a holistic perspective, in the same vein as the proposal initially conceived by an academic circle in the late 1970s and which was later incorporated into official government discourse (BRASIL, 1998, 2017). This logic, which opposes the neoliberal perspective, postulates

that the purpose of teaching should not be solely teaching to the test (VOLANTE, 2004) and believes that a good grade in *Prova Brasil* will come as consequence of actual quality education instead of it being an end in and of itself.

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