

# “IT IS A PROBLEM FOR EVERYONE”: CONCEPTS, METHODS AND PRACTICES IN TEACHING PORTUGUESE TO REFUGEES

“É UM PROBLEMA DE TODO MUNDO”: CONCEITOS, MÉTODOS E PRÁTICAS NO ENSINO  
DE PORTUGUÊS PARA REFUGIADOS

“ES UN PROBLEMA DE TODO EL MUNDO”: CONCEPTOS, MÉTODOS Y PRÁCTICAS EN LA  
ENSEÑANZA DE PORTUGUÉS PARA REFUGIADOS

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article, we discuss the conceptual and methodological network that support our refugee reception practices. Based on the theoretical assumptions, we started making our own teaching material and supervising classes given by volunteers. A multidisciplinary and inter-institutional team was formed to question the conceptual, ethical and political implications of the language teacher who works in the reception of refugees. The team was set up to guaranteeing discussion about concrete demand

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for actions, supervision of the preparation of materials and ongoing evaluation of the use of the material and other course-related actions. The notion of rights and the assurance of access to public services that guarantee such rights, the non-linearity of content, the active participation of refugees and volunteering teachers in indicating topics and contents as teaching material and classes were the crucial axes of our practice.

KEYWORDS: Language teaching for refugees. Refuge. Human Rights.

RESUMO: Neste artigo, problematizamos a rede conceitual e metodológica que sustenta nossas práticas de acolhimento a refugiados. A partir dos pressupostos teóricos, iniciamos produção de material didático próprio e supervisão das aulas ministradas por voluntários. Foi constituída uma equipe multidisciplinar e interinstitucional que tem problematizado as implicações conceituais, éticas e políticas do professor de línguas que atua na acolhida a refugiados. O objetivo da criação da equipe é garantir o espaço de discussão em torno da demanda concreta de atuação, supervisão da elaboração de materiais e avaliação permanente da aplicação do material e das demais ações relativas ao curso. A noção de direitos e garantia de acesso aos serviços públicos que os asseguram, a não linearidade de conteúdos, a participação ativa dos refugiados e professores voluntários no apontamento dos temas e conteúdos do material didático e das aulas constituem eixos fundamentais de nossa prática.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino de Línguas para refugiados. Refúgio. Direitos Humanos.

RESUMEN: En este artículo, problematizamos la red conceptual y metodológica que sustentan nuestras prácticas de acogida a refugiados. A partir de los presupuestos teóricos se inició la producción de material didáctico propio y supervisión de las clases impartidas por voluntarios. El equipo multidisciplinario e interinstitucional fue constituido y ha problematizado las implicaciones conceptuales, éticas y políticas del profesor de lenguas que actúa en la acogida a refugiados. Nuestro objetivo con la creación del equipo es garantizar el espacio de discusión en torno a la demanda concreta de actuación, supervisión de la elaboración de materiales y evaluación permanente de la aplicación del material y de las demás acciones relativas al curso. La noción de derechos y garantía de acceso a los servicios públicos que los aseguran, la no linealidad de contenidos, la participación activa de los refugiados y profesores voluntarios en el apunte de los temas y contenidos del material didáctico y de las clases constituyen ejes fundamentales de nuestra práctica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Enseñanza de idiomas para refugiados. Refugio. Derechos humanos.

## 1 INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

I believe that what happens in Congo is not a problem for Congo alone; it is a problem for everybody.<sup>1</sup> Our article starts with this statement from an International Relations professional, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Brazil, from a recent event that took place in the Institute of Social Medicine (IMS), at the Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ). This wording delivered in a lecture during the event is highlighted for a number of reasons, including the possibility it provides us to access the force field in which we are involved, and which he has been thinking over, since we began our supervision of the course Portuguese for refugees, by Cáritas-RJ, in partnership with UERJ.

In this article, we problematize the conceptual and methodological network that been supporting our practices to welcome refugees, considering the actions to supervise and prepare the learning materials, undertaken by a multi-disciplinary team. Specifically we wish to think over the meanings and values present in the welcome practices and policies, in order allow us to criticize the hegemonic view in the media discourse that points to a hierarchizing and assistance-based concept of these actions.

Along the way, we counted on a team made up of: teachers with Language, Literature and Pedagogy degrees; an educator in charge of the academic coordination; volunteer teachers from several fields of professional training and undergraduates, scholarship holders in the extension projects designed to formalize the initiative. This multidisciplinary team was set up to ensure space for

<sup>1</sup> All direct quotations not originally in English were translated by the author (Editors Note).

discussing the specific requirements for action, for supervising the learning materials, and for the ongoing assessment of how the materials are utilized and the actions that are done in relation to the Portuguese course.

In fact, our required actions, as professors in the area of youth and adult education and in the area of language teaching, already included the need to overcome the limitations of a learning material generically intended for foreigners, as well as the imperative for welcome and social, cultural, economic and affective integration towards people who travel from their countries and go to Rio de Janeiro through the streams of forced migration. In other words, the profile of a foreign speaker prevalently underlay the reading texts and exercises appearing in the learning materials did not match the basic needs of the early welcoming moments.

Under these circumstances, we highlighted the characteristics of the context as being a complex process that cannot be reduced to the simple exposition of data and information regarding independent and external events. Without a doubt, data supplied by the official bodies already show that we currently face the greatest migratory crisis in history, for the the numbers of World War II are exceeded. Currently, over 65 million people (ACNUR, 2016) are refugees, seek refuge or have been displaced within their own countries under the fear of being persecuted by reasons of race, religion, nationality, social group or political opinion (Refugees Convention, 1951). The significant majority (40.8 million) includes the internally displaced; that is, those who are unable due to security reasons to remain in their households, who also cannot cross frontiers in search of better conditions of life. Moreover, for those who do manage to leave their countries, most of them go to a neighboring country. The so-called refugee crisis, which is shown on mainstream media as the stream of refugees towards European countries, is only the tip of an iceberg that maintains invisible millions of people displaced from their homes and precariously settled people, sometimes secretly and illegally, in sub-human conditions, in the fringes of the civil-military conflicts that notably affect the African continent and the Middle East. In some places, this has been going for 30 years. According to UNHCR data, in 2016, 51 percent of the refugees were children, 46 percent were adults, and 3 percent were older people.

Given the singularity of the experience, we propose to invert the conventional sequence theory-method-analysis as we discuss the characteristics of the field we have been working on. Next, we present the conceptual tools that we adopted in our activities, their interdisciplinary nature in promoting converging spots between references from the fields of study of discourse, youth and adult education and welcome in health services. As we see it, the type of welcoming work we have been doing drives us into a micropolitical perspective, according to which the refugee condition does not merely involve the other person who we want to include. Including a refugee involves a network of social assistance that is not fully provided for everyone (ARANTES; DEUSDARÁ; BRENNER, 2016, p. 1200). Finally, we discuss some of the lines of work that have been developed as a result of the meetings and shared reflections, highlighting the conceptual, ethical and political implications of the language teacher who welcomes refugees.

As a result of this journey, we understand this article may contribute to highlight the complexity of the field of studies and actions in the teaching of languages, singling out the work with refugees. Such singularity is exactly characterized by the primacy of the critical thinking about welcome practices and policies over the methods and concepts that will uphold the work to be developed.

## **2 THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT IN WELCOMING REFUGEES: LEGAL GUARANTEES AND NETWORK OF ASSISTANCE**

In this aspect, we intend to present the legal framework that makes welcome practices feasible in Brazil as well as its political implications in close conjunction with the networks of assistance in which professionals involved with refugees are enmeshed. Thus, we introduce at first some basic issues concerning the legal conditions for welcome actions and also the peculiar situation that professionals dealing with refugees have to face, in an effort to engage into a dialogue related to the following problem, which anticipates elements of macropolitical status:

Teaching a welcome language to youths and adults who are refugees or are seeking refuge has specificities that are not the same of teaching a foreign language, either because the condition of being a foreigner is excessively generic, or because this multifaceted status of the refugee is seen as fading away, in the welcoming country, intertwined by tensions of different orders. (ARANTES; DEUSDARÁ; BRENNER, 2016, p. 1202).

As a way to reinforce the argumentation towards the impossibility of postulating this condition of being a refugee as just a specific group of foreigners, we at this point retrieve a set of characteristics of the institutional network mobilized in the practices and policies of integration.

It is through a network of social institutions in partnership with the Department of Justice that welcoming refugees takes place in Brazil, in compliance with the guidelines given by national and international norms, subscribed by Brazil, and also the representatives of UNHCR – the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – in the country.

In this context, the body in charge of receiving and reviewing requests for refuge and to prepare or combine existing policies in order to welcome and serve refuge seekers and refugees is CONARE – the National Committee for Refugees. It includes representatives from the Departments of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Labor and Employment, Health, Education and the Federal Police; the committee has also a representative of a non-governmental organization dedicated to offering service and protection to refugees (currently *Cáritas Arquidiocesana* takes this seat) and a representative of UNHCR, the latter has the right to speak but not to vote.

Data provided by CONARE (2016) indicate the number of refugees in the country acknowledged as such increased 127 percent between 2010 and 2016; most of them are between 18 and 59 years old. In total, there are 8,863 refugees in Brazil today, from 79 nationalities (BRASIL, 2016). The highest number includes refugees from Syria, Angola, Colombia, Congo, Lebanon, Iraq, Liberia, Pakistan, and Sierra Leone. São Paulo has 2 refugee reception centers, and can serve 415 people. There are plans to implement other centers of the same kind in the cities of Porto Alegre and Florianópolis. Rio de Janeiro has no similar public facilities and has only improvised lodging in parishes and churches, with absolute no official support from the government.

In addition to the increased number of regular refugees, CONARE had a strong expansion in the requests for refuge. Over the last five years, these requests rose by 2,868 percent, going from 966, in 2010, to 28,670, in 2016. Such growth is directly associated with the armed conflict in Syria, but also with the persistent and reaffirmed conflict that plunges the Democratic Republic of Congo in a civil war that lasts more than 30 years. In Rio de Janeiro, the years when an election in Congo took place are the ones with an enhanced flow of Congolese in search of refuge in the city and / or its surrounding area.

Brazilian law and regulations provide the refugee or refuge petitioner full social rights, including immediate right to work. Accounts by refugees served by *Cáritas* and participants in different festivities and academic events repeatedly emphasize the importance of this right: work makes it possible to perform productive tasks and look for professional reintegration, giving new meanings to lives devastated by violence suffered in territories of war and it also allows for the autonomous support of oneself and the family, when necessary. Few countries give work permits to refuge seekers, who have not yet been granted the right to stay in the country. This is a positive aspect of the refuge policy in Brazil.

Our country has a broad and comprehensive juridical-institutional framework to ensure that citizens born and cared for – by migration or forced displacement – enjoy social rights in Brazil. Our Federal Constitution, enacted in 1988, establishes that it is one of its fundamental objectives [...] to promote the good of all, without prejudice of origin, race, sex, color, age and any other forms of discrimination. (BRASIL, 1988, article 3, subsection IV). And Art. 6 states [...] social rights are education, health, food, work, housing, transportation, leisure, safety, social security, maternity and child protection, assistance to the helpless, in compliance with this Constitution. From the definition of what social rights are stemmed complementary laws such as the Child and Adolescent Statute – ECA (Act No. 8069/90), the Organic Law of Social Assistance – LOAS (Act 8742/93), and the Law of Guidelines and Grounds of National Education – LDBEN (Act 9394/96). They establish guiding principles, guidelines and the actions necessary to guarantee the rights of children and adolescents, social security policies and the nationwide education system, respectively.

Act 9474/97 is known as the Refugee's Act as it ensures a refugee will have the right, under the terms of the Convention on the Statutes of Refugees, of 1951, to an identity card that is a proof of his or her legal condition, work and social security card, and a travel document (Art. 6). By holding an identity card and the work card access to the health system, public schools and other services that guarantee (or should guarantee) the basic rights of all citizens and residents is ensured.

Here again the question raised by the Congolese speaker comes up. If, on one hand, one wonders whether what is happening in Congo is a problem only for the Democratic Republic of the Congo or for all, on the other hand, the care and guarantee of the rights of refugees are precisely guaranteed by rights and public policies appropriate to all citizens Brazilians. The struggle for our country to welcome refugees and refugee seekers is, therefore, the historical struggle to secure public policies, including policies on health, education, housing, transportation, employment and income. The inclusion of refugees and refugee seekers in programs, projects, public initiatives, makes us recognize the network of social protection that has been achieved in the last decades in the country and also recognize the persistent fragilities of the various systems (health, education, social security, for example) that need to be overcome. Inclusion actions demand to pay attention to principles that include the right to health, the universality of access to health goods and education, equality in the offering of these goods, the integral care system and citizen participation; solidarity, cooperation, justice and non-discrimination. And all these are guiding principles of the historical struggles of social movements, civil society forums, researchers, and activists in many areas fighting to reduce social inequalities and build a more just and democratic society in Brazil.

As can be seen, the discussion proposed in this point highlights not only the impossibility of applying for refugee status as a specific type of foreigner, but also proposes to advance and provide elements for professional action towards the refugee group. Thus, it seems pertinent to consider a way of conceiving inclusion. Such a concept allows us to move from the macropolitical plane of the categorizations established by the law and the institutional government networks to the micropolitical plane, where concrete life inhabits the intensities and (re) elaborates and updates in a singular way the legal-state categories.

Indeed, the challenge posed to those who propose to work on the integration of refugees calls us to go beyond common sense, according to which inclusion would be including differences into a given order (as an identity). When we consider the struggles for expanding refugee assistance networks as part of the struggles to extend assistance to all, we consider that their presence does not provide us with indicators and clues that refer to the other only (seen as someone unlike me). We prefer, taking another direction, to dialogue with the perspective of inclusion, as expressed below:

Inclusion, in a democratic perspective, means accepting and including differences, putting diversity side by side. Diversity of the manifestation of the living, the heterogeneity and the singularities of the human. To include the other, the one who is not me, to whom I am strange, and who in me produces strangeness, provoking contentment and joy as well as malaise. Inclusion produces, therefore, the emergence of ambiguous and contradictory movements, which must be sustained by management practices that support the conviviality of differences and from it are capable of producing what is common, and this can be translated as a collective project. (PASCHÉ; PASSOS, 2010, p. 426)

This perspective concerning inclusion call us to interrogate the routines and habits in the classroom and challenges us to displace the direction of our practices in a more flexible way. In the next item, we characterize the controversies underlying refugee reception practices.

### 3 REFUGEE CRISIS OR HUMANITARIAN CRISIS: CLUES TO CONTEXTUALIZE DEADLOCKS AND CHALLENGES INVOLVING REFUGEES

We start this item by summarizing the words of the Congolese speaker: "I believe that what happens in Congo is not a problem for Congo alone; it is a problem for everybody." Between reports of horror episodes of the war and their devastating effects on families, a statement emerges that explicitly inscribes a viewpoint taken by the speaker. The power of this statement seems to lie precisely in

its multiple movement of causing an opinion to break through, of re-signifying the presented narratives, of addressing the listening public so that people will get enmeshed in the fabric of reception and care.

Considering it is necessary to offer the reader a brief context, we indicate that the speakers report sought to locate the reasons that led her to the forced migration, starting with the traits of her professional activity in the official reception to people in a vulnerable and contrasting it with the successive news of the horrors of war, emphasizing especially the devastating effects of physical and sexual violence when domestic spaces were burst into.

In her narrative, episodes, techniques and impressions were highlighted, which at first glance refer to a particular historical experience – that faced by the civilian population of a certain nationality, in the last twenty years. The duration in time of this military conflict already underlines the seriousness of the situation referred to. To give substance to the situation, it is enough to imagine that the young people of that country only know it as the setting of extreme violations of basic rights and of all forms of expression of dignity of the human life.

When she was speaking, a first effect in the audience could have been estrangement: someone is speaking of a reality that is not mine. Through this effect, the other can emerge as a figuration that would be inscribed in feeling distant from that, both because of the geographical dimensions and by the horrors that, apparently, had not been experienced. In this effect, the encounter with otherness could perhaps be inscribed as referring to the order of contact with a life experience quite different from mine, in other words, some kind of otherness that could be defined as not me, to whom I could direct affections of sadness, solidarity and indignation. In these terms, the encounter with the otherness would be expressed by affections moved by a greater degree of passivity, highlighting simultaneously something that I would direct at the other and something in relation to which my possibility of action could be conceived as restricted.

This may have been, however, just one of the many possible effects on the listeners. As it turns out, the prominent statement seems to offer an important articulation: digging the sadness and horror of everyday dramas of the Congolese people, in the context of a devastating civil war, the speaker gently tweaks a thread that implies us all.

At that moment, the fabric of the dramas shows the plots that support it and involve us all. The current war conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo has strong economic motivation: it is a dispute over the exploitation of gold, diamond and coltan (a combination of *columbite* and *tantalite* ores) used in the production of electronic equipment such as cell phones and tablets. It is no longer just for humanitarian solidarity that we assume ourselves involved with the narrative given by the speaker. Now we are also summoned as consumers of the mentioned electronic equipment, whose origin of what we consume and the irreparable distress and damage imposed by the trajectory of its production we seem to ignore.

From this viewpoint, the narrative is perceived as an act that summons us to inhabit a force field, in its paradoxical dimension:

The power of the narrative act is to generate meanings capable of weaving new affections, hopes, transgressions and elaborations. It does not deny the loss and suffering – constituents of the human condition – but is faced with them, since narrating allows us to find other movements with the threads of the lived plot. (DUARTE, 2015, p. 134)

The power of the act of narrating shifts between sufferings, pains, complaints and the calling towards the listeners. The strength of narration gains materiality in the polemics that are inscribed in the speaker's statement. Let us see how this set of forces mentioned earlier is also expressed in the statement highlighted in the beginning of this article. Unable to reproduce in printed form the strength with which it was originally uttered, we recover its materiality to circumscribe a polemic suggested in it. In a discursive approach to language practices, we recognize in the denial of a polemical sort<sup>2</sup> the ability to easily lead us to an underlying assertive point of view, namely, what happens in Congo is a Congo problem only (viewpoint 1). Opposed this view, we would have another, which can be

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the phenomenon of polemic denial (negation polemique), see Ducrot (1987).

apprehended both in the statement that expresses a denial what happens in the Congo is *not* only a Congo problem, but in another statement, which is overlapped [what happens in Congo] is a problem for everyone. Both statements are assumed as correspondents of the same viewpoint (viewpoint 2).

Indeed, viewpoint 1 (VP1) seems to add to the picture a nationalist enunciator, whose viewpoint would be characterized by a prior and determining consideration of national borders. Such VP1, which is characterized by the prior assumption of the borders of the national states against any supranational humanitarian demand, seems to find resonance in several headlines of the Brazilian press.

For the sake of illustration, we have recovered two recent headlines regarding the deactivation of the refugee camp in Calais, France: France begins to transfer 1,500 children and young people from the Calais camp (FRANÇA..., 2016); After closing the camp in Calais, refugee children are homeless (APÓS..., 2016). In these headlines, the element France is personified and acts on 1,500 children and young people. Even though they are already in French territory, it is suggested the 1,500 children and young people still retain foreigner's status and remain passive in the face of transfer actions. In the next headline, the words refugee children explicitly introduce the specification mark. They are not just "children", but "refugee children", to whom other implicit meanings seem to emerge. The absence of the element "refugees" in "children are now homeless", can activate implied meanings of a different kind, leading the reader to have other ideas in mind. Probably the degree of responsibility can be understood as different in the two groups in how VP1 is comprehended, which would state, according to analysis above, that what happens in Congo is a Congo problem only.

Another example of statements that can be assigned to this nationalist enunciator is found in a post whose purpose is quite specific: to present themes defined as current topics to students in preparation for the admission exams to enter the Universities. Here is a paragraph from a short text, which deals with the Assimilation of the mass of immigrants by the State:

The fact is that the decisions of each European country to accept or not refugees generate a crisis of ethical and political content at the same time. Many are the questions raised by experts accompanying this migratory flow. One is the ability of countries in the midst of an economic crisis, such as Greece, to accommodate, employ and provide social security to thousands of refugees. (FERNANDES, 2016)

In the first sentence, the perspective put forward is that of "each European country", which "may or may not accept refugees". In the second sentence, the term "refugees" is associated with this migratory flow. In the third sentence, the ethical and political crisis mentioned in the first sentence is finally presented: it concerns the ability of countries in the midst of an economic crisis, such as Greece, to accommodate, employ and provide social assistance to thousands of refugees. Thus, what is meant in this paragraph is an argument that seems to find resonance in VP1, while the issue in question is precisely the concern around the assimilation of refugees, ignoring the perspective of the people themselves, who due to major threat to their survival and dignity, are forced to migrate from their countries.

Replacing the terms of the controversy initially presented in this item, we would add that VP2, characterized by the possibility of articulating the statements what happens in Congo is not only a Congo problem and [what happens in Congo] is a problem for everybody, strongly resonates in reflections such as those that undertaken by authors like Agamben (2002) and Butler (2009).

In order to illustrate that, we retrieved extracts from both authors, as they seem to support VP2, as a speaker that we have chosen to call humanitarian-internationalist, since what is sustained is based on the humanitarian condition that precedes any national delimitation. On the contrary, the circumstances involved in the flows of forced migration go so far as to question the founding promises of the national states.

Let us take a look at what Butler says about the effects of war activities on the selectiveness of the meanings to apprehend the events and the conditions in which they were yielded:

War sustains its practices by acting on the meanings, making them apprehend the world in selective ways, attenuating the commotion caused by certain images and certain sounds, and intensifying affective reactions to others. That is why war acts by undermining the foundations of a sensible democracy, restricting what we can feel, making us feel revulsion or indignation at an expression of violence and react with justified indifference to another. (BUTLER, 2009, p. 83).

According to the author, the practices of war produce modulations in the ways of perceiving and feeling reality, which can lead to a bond with the other sustained in indifference. Faced with such modulations and the risks that indifference offers to democracy, the author proposes to assume as a principle the precariousness of human existence as a possibility of aggregation: “Although not all forms of precariousness are produced by political and social arrangements, it remains a political task to minimize the condition of precariousness in an egalitarian way. War is precisely an effort to minimize the precariousness of some and maximize it for others.” (BUTLER, 2009, p. 86).

Indeed, the recognition of precariousness as a generalized human condition – although not every form of precariousness is affected by political-social vectors – can be a potent principle towards otherness. This principle, proposed by the author, seems to reverse what is usually established in reception practices, when, in the possibility of acting towards the other, I perceive myself in better conditions. In the conception presented above, the bond builds on the recognition of generalized precariousness and gains strength precisely in the sense of, hence, acting with the purpose of minimizing such condition, in an egalitarian way.

Otherwise, the perspective supported by Agamben (2002) relates the growing forced migratory flow to the modern state project.

If the refugees (whose numbers have never ceased to grow in our century [the 20th century], to the point of including a not insignificant portion of humanity today) represent such a disturbing element in the ordering of the modern nation-state, breaking the continuity between man and citizen, between birth and nationality, they put in crisis the original fiction of modern sovereignty. (AGAMBEN, 2002, p. 138)

As one can see, for the author, the intensification of refugee numbers challenges what he calls “the original fiction of modern sovereignty”, suggesting that the grounds for such include the continuity between birth and nationality. In other words, it is the relation between the biological dimension of life (birth) and its inscription in the political order (nationality) that presents itself fractured. An example of such fragmentation was seen earlier when we retrieved the headlines about the deactivation of the refugee camp in Calais, France. The action of the government on the individuals is totally dependent on their nationality:

The transformation of what exists is not limited to the creation of conditions or means adequate to yield a potential, but refers to a micro-politics that requires the intensive, the plan of the processes to shape realities, which opens what is current to the plurality of forms of existence and qualifies transformation as the creation of what is possible. (ROCHA, AGUIAR, 2003, p. 70)

We chose to go through the intensive elements present in the narrative of those who experience the process, trying to inhabit the way the story is constructed and how one creates an experience of overcoming the horror towards the other. Our wish was, therefore, to suspend, even if provisionally, the delimitation between the teaching of Portuguese as mother tongue and as a foreign language, to allow the emergence of other questions.

#### 4 CHALLENGES FOR TEACHING PORTUGUESE TO REFUGEES

In this item, we will discuss issues that turned out to be essential in the preparation of the proposal for refugee reception, understanding its emergence as a defining aspect of the singularity of this type of work in relation to that developed with foreigners. We dedicate this part of the article to discuss the core elements of teaching the language to refugees, starting from our experience with the extension course Portuguese for refugees, registered in the Extension Department of UERJ.



We continuously receive more than 250 students per semester, and currently the number of refugee women has changed the composition of the classes, which were once mostly male. The female population in the course now represents 50% of the total number of students, and this scenario has pointed us to very different needs, paths and demands, even because women are in situations that are often more vulnerable than men and, for the most part, take responsibility for their children, which requires communication needs involving the language that have to do with everyday situations, such as enrolling their children in schools, taking the children to the doctor, taking the children for leisure activities in the city, using public transport and the public health network. As can be seen, the course offers us a permanent range of questions and challenges to be problematized. This way of taking the questions leads us to a proposal for institutional intervention:

Let us not forget that intervention is “being amidst” and “assist”; therefore, it is linked to an ethical dimension that, through care actions, allows supporting the development of the institutional network. To be amidst and assist is to think with the other, not for the other, to the other, about the other, under the other. (DUARTE, 2015, p. 142)

The proposal of a Portuguese course for refugees conducted by *Cáritas* through the partnership with UERJ is strongly based on the idea of welcoming and including as thought by Pasche and Passos (2010). The construction of solutions, although provisional and in permanent discussion, is guided by the inclusion as a working method. In this regard, we consider the following indication:

The method of inclusion does not propose naive and uncritical adherence to what the other brings, but bets on a generous attitude, to accept these manifestations, and immediately confront it with the multiplicity of the interests of the other, of the collective, to enable the composition of contractual arrangements considering ethical guidelines. (PASCHE; PASSOS, 2010, p. 427).

In fact, the demand brought by *Cáritas* to UERJ teachers was related to making a Political/Pedagogical Project for the Portuguese course that was already offered, with volunteer teachers of various backgrounds, using photocopied handouts. From the meetings with professors and assistants of *Cáritas* emerged meanings for learning Portuguese, especially as a result of reports of experiences by refugees who had been living in the city for the longest time. The need to access social rights policies by refugees using the language was obvious, and it was based on this insight that we decided to develop our own material, with the help of the students of the course, volunteer teachers and scholarship holders of the project.

In the perspective adopted for pedagogical analysis and intervention, we consider it fundamental to resume two key elements of Bakhtin’s concept of language (BAKHTIN, 2011). In this regard, we propose the following principles: i) every statement is understood assuming its dialogical relationship with previous statements; ii) the comprehension of any statement occurs when a new statement is produced.

Thus, without rejecting an effort to systematize linguistic-grammatical knowledge, what seems fundamental to us in understanding this kind of linguistic phenomena lies precisely in the premise that every linguistic element refers to concrete contexts of enunciation, in which they are anchored. As a conceptual direction of the supervisory work, we consider the importance, whenever possible, of restoring the interactional contexts from which the analyzed elements emerge.

This guideline is then in line with what has been discussed previously. In these terms, language learning is a basic necessity to promote the inclusion of refugees in the Brazilian society and, in the specific case, the state and city of Rio de Janeiro. And being a basic need, it is necessary to ensure to refugee learners that their daily context is where the contents to be learned are taken from. Not only the contents of everyday life, but also its forms: the ways of speaking, dealing with neighborhood affairs, children’s schools, looking for jobs, and moving through the city; and also the contents of the cultures that are placed in coexistence, the one they come from and the new one they are now in contact with. Cultural confronts and proximities need to be said and discussed, the different ways of caring for children, the different meanings of schooling, the diversity of cooking, the various ways of understanding the world that are determined by the histories and cultures of the societies of origin. The possibility, for example, of getting the ingredients of that favorite dish that inhabits the most joyful of memories and can, who knows, be produced, now in Brazil, as in wistful moments that definitely seem to have remained in the past.

We understand, as already indicated in Arantes, Deusdará and Brenner (2016) the dimension of institutional intervention that such issues potentiate, since the type work that we were requested also contained complaints about the insufficiency of the teaching/learning materials available for the classes and, consequently, about the rituals, habits and beliefs associated with teaching the language that contributed to crystallize or were being questioned.

With regard to these impasses, it seemed productive to us to recover here part of the debates that we have already mentioned about the reflections on the dynamics we were invited to interact with. Concerning the complaints to the perspective adopted by the textbook and the erasing of a specific profile of refugee speakers, we highlight the following aspects:

We observed the teachers practiced a prescriptive teaching of the Portuguese language, based on a linear grammatical progression suggested by the adopted textbook. In the speeches of the volunteer teachers, as well as in the reports of some students, one could see a clear need the learners had to communicate in order to solve daily questions, such as: go shopping, taking a bus or filling out a form. In addition, the students seemed to establish a more fruitful bond with the teachers who gave them a voice, who were interested in knowing their habits of life, their motivations for leaving the country of origin, their relations with and strangeness to Brazilian habits, among other things. (ARANTES; DEUSDARÁ, 2015, p. 48-49)

As an illustration of the discussion that the previous fragment proposes, we suggest as follows an example taken from a Portuguese textbook to teach refugees. This example seems to highlight the type of work with the language that we wish to point out. Language is used as a tool, as some manuals still insist on doing so: word lists are intended to learn the vocabulary of the lesson, organized according to a priori categories that do not make sense, as we attested in the arrangement below.

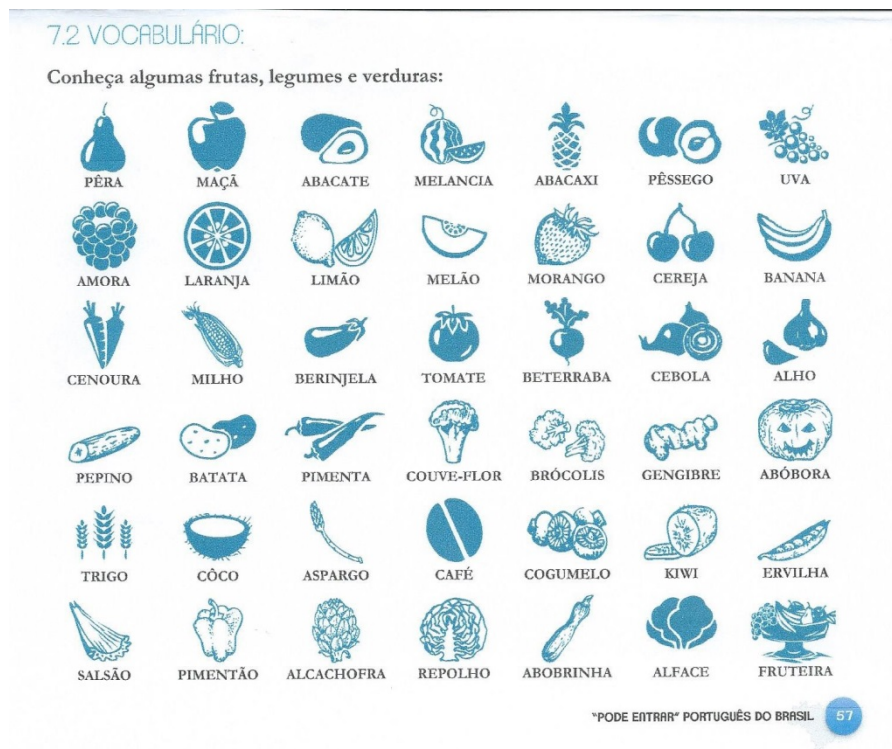


Figure 1: Vocabulary

Source: Feitosa et al. (2015)

We see that an inventory of vegetables, greens and fruits is presented to the students as an input to the lesson on food, with no mention of the context in which they are used and, also, objects are presented that do not belong to the categories vegetables, greens and fruits as is the case of fruit bowl. Our experience in supervising the preparation of materials has made it possible to observe that mentioning elements that refer to habits and forms of daily organization – such as cooking and other everyday uses – raise various comments, questions and reports connected with previous experiences. Such experiences lead us to inquiries of the following kind:

how important is it to classify these elements without first discussing in which situations they are used? How can we not anticipate issues that legitimize these previous experiences?

With that, we want to think about the need to learn things around classifications by categories, out of their context: what does a Portuguese learner need to know if a tomato is a fruit or vegetable, without having access to the way it is used in local cuisine? Thus, we question the way of dealing with the impasses and limitations found in practices of teaching language to foreigners.

Another aspect that has already deserved consideration lies in the criteria that had already been adopted to sort out the groups of students in course on Portuguese for Refugees. Taking into account the linguistic diversity, the groups of students were defined according to the mediation language. About this issue, we have already emphasized the following:

The criterion to sort out the classes seemed to us quite adequate, since it was not oriented by stereotypes that are often seen in a traditional school ambience such as age or level of schooling. The fundamental choice was to distribute the different groups, selecting languages that were native or of shared communication. The group was then arranged in two classes of native speakers of French, a class of Spanish speakers and a group of native or foreign speakers of English. (ARANTES; DEUSDARÁ; BRENNER, 2016, p. 1203)

Based on these comments, we considered teaching Portuguese is closely related to the access to rights, the same rights any Brazilian person, male or female, is entitled to. This is why teaching must be based on the needs and demands of this group in terms of accessing rights and public policies in the city and in the country as a whole.

Besides this perspective that looks at the political consequences of the professional care in the context of welcoming refugees, the making of a pedagogical proposal has also addressed the specific difficulties of the group: i) the intense turnover of students, as upon arrival, refuge seekers need to be immediately attended by the course and by Caritas-RJ social assistance service; ii) absorbing the emergency topics, considering the insufficiency resulting from an excessively generic characterization of being a foreigner in the materials available and the need to add and politically support the distresses, impasses and challenges faced by refugees on a daily basis; iii) the impossibility of a linear sequencing due to the fact that new students are always coming in and due to the diversity of demands that were brought up in the meetings for academic supervision of the classes.

Indeed, we believe therefore in teaching the language that is not based on the imposition of content that was previously selected by a team of experts who dictate which topics will be studied and how fast, mainly because, in the case of refugees, it is not desirable that the first question to be asked in the classroom be “what’s your name?” and “where are you from?”, as in most handbooks for foreign language teaching.

Telling one’s name and where he or she comes from means, for this group of students, a return to the persecution they were living in the original countries and, sometimes, a reproduction of some conflicts due to the presence in the same classroom of refugees from different groups in conflict in the same area. It becomes clear, therefore, the need to know the specific traits of the group of learners in order to build upon the elements for teaching/learning Portuguese, not as a foreign language, but as welcome language,<sup>3</sup> which respects the differences, that listens to the demands and works on them and develops its planning horizontally, in direct contact with the community that is learning the language.

Making decisions horizontally allows us to question the power markers that lie behind the norms and prescriptions in the teaching of foreign languages, which take the words as tools, often associated with schemes of synonyms based on stereotyped view of arrangements.

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<sup>3</sup> A respeito do conceito Língua de Acolhimento, ver Grosso (2010).

Words are not tools; but we give children language, pens and notebooks, as well as we give workers shovels and pickaxes. A grammar rule is a power marker prior to being a syntactic marker. The order is not related to previous meanings neither to a previous organization of distinctive units, it is rather the reverse. (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1997, p. 12)

Thus, we collect, together with the refugees, everyday situations in which they need to use Portuguese in the city and so we formulate the guiding themes for the preparation of materials. Such guiding themes directed the making of materials and they do not comply with linear grammar progression and do not depend on each other.

The concept in the making of materials is that the teacher may use any activities produced around the guiding themes, with no need to follow the chronological or progress order. Grammar, syntactic and modal contents are repeated, exactly because the flow of students is continuous, since refugees are admitted to the course as soon as they get to Rio de Janeiro. Contents are repeated in thematic variations: the use of imperative, for example, is introduced in a lesson on food, in an exercise about the *feijoada* recipe, and in a lesson on health, in a doctor's prescription.

Structural contents (verb, noun, adverb, verbal tenses and modes etc...) are not the focus of any activity, but rather the topics and oral production around the situations of interaction in their contexts: in the bakery, when buying a public transportation ticket, looking for a job in classified ads and presenting oneself in job interview, filling out a form etc.

The guiding theme on urban mobility had the purpose of facilitating the access to the transportation system by refugees in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Thus, the use of maps with subway, train and bus lines were the input materials utilized. Based on that, we phrased dialogues and everyday situations the refugees had had contact with and, afterwards, they themselves created their dialogues simulating daily situations of how to buy a ticket, looking for information on public transportation in the area they live (by means of maps, signs, asking people on the street) etc.

This kind of semi-structured production has had good acceptance in the classes, especially because in many times students end up recalling situations they went through and had doubts about how to act, how to look for and what to ask, so they produce their oral contents triggered by this motivation. As the topic of mobility has the adherence of all, as refugees use public transportation on a daily basis, the motivation to understand more how it works, its possibilities of moving around all over the city and have access to cultural assets is enhanced.

Access to public transportation guarantees the right to occupy spaces in cities which frequently are segregated, inhabited only by people of certain classes, ethnicities and genders. For us, therefore, granting access of the population of refugees to areas of cultural production, plazas, beaches and places of art also results in integration and provides these new residents of the city with the conditions to produce new references and subjectivities also in search of a new citizenship in their place of refuge.

## 5 CLOSING REMARKS

The discussions we engaged in this article lead us to (re)think the inclusion of refugees in a democratic perspective capable of granting rights, including the right to education, to health, to a job, to urban mobility, to occupy public places.

This perspective problematizes the imbalanced way the population of refugees has been seen in Brazil, mainly through the eyes of the mainstream media: a population that needs charity and compassion. This view, in addition to being prejudiced, does not consider the refugee as a key player in this history and does not assign the responsibility of welcoming refugees as a humanitarian issue, after all the causes people seek for refuge are not discussed and much less fought against (in some cases, it is even encouraged by major global powers).

This hierarchical view of a paternalistic social assistance ends up setting up a scenario of social piety that seems to work as driving force to reassure the good social consciousness that is committed to fight the social inequalities caused by forced migration. However, this type of practice has not contributed to improve the welcoming process, quite the contrary, it disregards the other as an equal, as someone entitled to rights as much as any other non-refugee. These issues, therefore, cannot go unquestioned in the classroom, mainly because the refugees should be able to occupy spaces not only as learning individuals but also as learners with rights. Perhaps it is worth reminding the phrase: I believe that what happens in Congo is not a problem for Congo only, it is a problem for everyone.

In order to fulfill this objective that is very dear to us involving the methodology we have been developing to teach refugees, we inverted the regular theory-method-analysis way by investing in the field of micropolitics as a way of deterritorialize the manners and practices commonly utilized in the teaching of languages and which, unfortunately, is being repeated systematically with scarce reflection and analysis of meager demands.

This work outlines our endeavor to address learning and teaching Portuguese to refugees as an area that deserves special attention in order to meet demands and promote the access to human rights.

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