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SLOVENE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN PORTUGUESE: COMMON CHALLENGES AND PATHS FOR IMPROVEMENT

1 INTRODUCTION

Writing in a second language is a difficult task, as the underlying process is multifaceted, requiring the use of higher order thinking skills. The cognitive competences of self-regulation and problem-solving, inherent to the stages of planning, writing and revising a text, are necessary to meet the demands of this task, in terms of format, information and linguistic dimension. Concerning grammar, when learners' native and target languages are significantly different then it is particularly useful for teachers to identify the linguistic areas that are the most problematic, and use them as opportunities for increasing students' language awareness. Ultimately, this can pave the way towards a broader linguistic knowledge among second language students, as, by learning how to put grammar at their service more effectively, they can better convey their intended messages in writing.

Within this context, it is this paper's aim to identify and explore some of the most common difficulties Slovene students face when writing in Portuguese, and specifically the European variant, as well as present didactic strategies tailored for mitigating them. In the first section of the article we provide a theoretical framework which, on the one hand, highlights difficulties in writing faced by learners of a second language in general and, on the other, contrasts linguistic domains in Portuguese and Slovene. The goal is to offer insights on the challenges Slovene students face with regard to attaining expertise in writing in Portuguese, while recognizing that written and linguistic competencies are deeply intertwined. As for the second section, we describe a pilot study conducted in a higher education setting, where 1st- and 2nd-year students were given written tasks of a predominantly expository nature.

The analysis of the patterns emerging in their productions allowed us to confirm our hypothesis that there is certain content in university-level curricula for Portuguese as a second language which poses problems for Slovene students, especially regarding some distinctive features that do not exist in their native language. Finally, we describe a series of didactic strategies centred on helping students master such issues, while developing self-regulatory, metalinguistic and creative problem-solving skills.

2 AN OVERVIEW ON COMMON WRITING DIFFICULTIES AMONG STUDENTS OF A SECOND LANGUAGE

Writing is a complex activity, which demands the use of higher order thinking skills, associated with gathering, organizing, and communicating information in written form (Coimbra 2011: 27). Because the interlocutor is an abstract entity, as one usually does not write for a particular reader, students need to exhibit good comprehension skills, complemented by creativity and problem-solving (Hyland 2021: 20).

From a cognitive standpoint, according to Hayes and Flower (1980: 366), rather than a product, writing needs to be perceived as a process, through which one plans, writes and revises a text, with these steps being iterative and non-sequential. Still, didactically, it is useful to divide writing activities into pre-writing, writing and post-writing moments. In practice, students tend to exhibit difficulties because not enough time is dedicated to the planning and revising stages. In the words of Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997: 73), “writing activities are usually self-planned, self-initiated, and self-sustained”. Disregarding such characteristics leads to texts lacking structure, with no clear division of the ideas into thematically coherent paragraphs, and, on a more foundational basis, into introduction, development and conclusion.

Other common issues pertain to a lack of knowledge about the world, as well as the lack of a wide lexical and syntactical repertoire (Duarte 2023: 82). This is conducive to texts not being properly informed by thematically relevant ideas nor formulated in a linguistically correct manner. One can infer from this that there is not enough contact between students and texts such as those they are expected to produce. Salvado (2011) notes the need for students to gain more exposure to texts of different genres, stating that it “favours the discovery of the principles governing the process of writing”¹ (p. 10).

Furthermore, self-regulation can be a problem for learners of a second language, especially when they are writing a text. It is necessary, in this respect, to improve not only their language awareness, but also their ability to constantly evaluate their writing production, ascertain what needs to be maintained or improved, and find strategies for overcoming difficulties (Pinho 2021: 53).

1 Translated freely by the authors from Portuguese into English.

After elucidating some of the common issues – not strictly linguistic – that students of a second language face in writing, it is important to identify and describe some of the specific linguistic domains where Slovene students of Portuguese may encounter difficulties, given the stark grammatical differences between the two languages in question.

3 LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SLOVENE AND PORTUGUESE

3.1 Some challenging linguistic domains

The topics presented under point 3.1 of this article are traditionally considered to be some of the most problematic areas in the acquisition of Portuguese by Slovene university students. The most notable differences between these two languages, which students tend to perceive as particularly challenging, are therefore briefly presented. Because this study does not aim to be exhaustive and since the subjunctive is a grammatical item which is taught at a later point in the curriculum, we chose not to address it here. Given that 2nd year students are significantly more exposed to this content, practicing it more often than 1st year students, we decided to keep consistency in our analysis and compare both groups in terms of the grammatical domains they had learned and extensively practiced in the classroom.

3.1.1 Determiners

In European Portuguese, noun phrases are usually specified by using a series of linguistic forms that belong to the class of determiners. In Slovene, there are no specific markers corresponding to definite and/or indefinite determiners.

In terms of morphology, Portuguese determiners encompass the articles *o*, *um*, the demonstrative forms (*este*, *esse*, *aquele*...) and the possessive forms (*meu*, *teu*, *seu*, *dele*, *nosso*, *vosso*...) or quantifiers – numeral, universal (*todo*) – and existential quantifiers (*algum*). All these forms may exhibit gender markers (masculine and feminine) and number markers (by adding “-s” to plural forms). It is mandatory that determiners agree in number and gender with the noun phrase they precede.

Determiners specify the noun in both Slovene and Portuguese, establishing the reference of the noun phrase. As previously mentioned, Slovene lacks specific markers for expressing the value conveyed by definite and indefinite articles. Therefore, the expression of the definite determiner is achieved through other means, such as demonstrative determiners (Correia in Markič & Correia 2013: 25).

In languages like Portuguese, noun phrases can be specified by using the indefinite article. In order to convey the article indefinite value in Slovene, it is possible to use either an indefinite pronoun (*neki*, *neka*, *neko*), or numeral pronoun (*en*, *ena*, *eno*), as stated in Correia (in Markič & Correia 2013: 25). This creates, as in Portuguese, a

certain ambiguity as to whether the determiner expresses a value of quantification or indefiniteness.

Determiners in Portuguese are also often merged with prepositions, resulting in different forms. Because of the high number of prepositions in the language and the consequent difficulty in differentiating between them, given a lack of knowledge regarding their semantic value, students may struggle to acquire them properly, as well as combine them with determiners when needed (Martins 2020: 13).

As for determination in Slovene, it can be conveyed through demonstrative determiners (*ta, tisti, oni*), as illustrated by Correia in Markič and Correia 2013: 22. However, in some cases, within a colloquial context, it is possible to combine demonstrative determiners with nouns, or noun phrases, to mark a non-deictic value of definiteness. Furthermore, as in Portuguese, in Slovene, noun specification can be achieved through possessive markers.

3.1.2 Pronouns

The pronoun system in Contemporary European Portuguese is quite complex, given its forms and placement, and this may constitute an obstacle for Slovene learners when learning and practicing their writing in the target language. Although Contemporary European Portuguese and Slovene share some characteristics in terms of pronouns, they differ in some respects, such as pronoun placement.

Just like in Portuguese, the Slovene pronoun system maintains specific forms that play the grammatical role of the main noun phrases in a sentence. In Portuguese, the personal pronouns can act as *sujeito* (subject), *complemento direto* (direct object), *complemento indireto* (indirect object) and *complemento oblíquo* (a prepositional phrase, different from the direct and indirect object and demanded by the verb) (Xavier, in Markič & Correia 2013: 36). One should note that the existing distinction between pronouns is based on the categories strong and weak pronouns, also referred to as clitics. Moreover, in Slovene's pronoun system we can also find strong personal pronouns (*naglasne oblike: jaz, ti, on, midva, vi...*), weak personal pronouns (*naslonske/nenaglasne oblike me, te, ga, je...*); and personal pronouns with a preposition or *complemento oblíquo* (*navezne oblike: zame, zate, zanj...*) (Xavier, in Markič & Correia 2013: 36).

Portuguese pronouns retain case information: some clitics correspond to the accusative case, functioning as direct objects, while others correspond to the dative case, functioning as indirect objects (Xavier, in Markič & Correia 2013: 41). In Slovene, pronouns – like nouns and adjectives – change their forms according to the case information they retain (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, locative, and instrumental). They also show variation in number, person, and gender.

The gender of personal pronouns in Slovene implies the need for a distinction among masculine, feminine, and – unlike Portuguese – neutral. Similarly, the number of

pronouns implies a distinction among singular, plural and – again unlike Portuguese – dual pronouns.

3.1.3 Verb paradigms

The distinctions among the indicative *pretérito perfeito simples*, *pretérito imperfeito*, *pretérito perfeito composto* and *pretérito mais-que-perfeito composto* in European Portuguese are a typical source of difficulties for Slovene students, especially considering that their mother tongue does not have the same verbal distinction in terms of temporal and aspectual values.

Both European Portuguese and Slovene have temporal verbal inflection. However, the number of verbal tenses in Slovene is lower than in European Portuguese (Müller, in Markič & Correia 2013: 83, 84). Furthermore, with regard to the past, the Slovene language only has one past tense, which is the *preteklik* (*pretérito*), contrasting with the Portuguese past tenses of the indicative, *pretérito perfeito simples*, *pretérito imperfeito*, *pretérito perfeito composto* and *pretérito mais-que-perfeito composto*.

In both languages, time is associated with the location of the situation, both in relation to the enunciation time and to another time marked linguistically. The aspect, in turn, concerns the internal temporal structure of the situation, as noted by Oliveira (2019: 509-553).

In languages like European Portuguese, some verbal tenses can convey both temporal and aspect information. As already pointed out, Slovene operates with only one paradigm of the past, the *preteklik*, which is supposed to mark all the temporal and aspectual nuances contained in the forms of the four Portuguese past tenses of the indicative. However, European Portuguese does not formally mark the verbal aspect, while the Slovene verbal system is characterized by the aspect as a morphological category. Slovene verbs, in principle, are either imperfective or perfective, and, therefore, uniaspectual (Markič in Markič & Correia 2013: p. 65). In line with this view, the Slovene *preteklik*, in terms of aspect, conveys the aspectual value, either perfective or imperfective, depending on the verb with which it is built.

In short, in contrast to European Portuguese, the Slovene *preteklik*, concerning the internal temporal structure of the situation, with relevant distinctions between the presence or absence of dynamism, telicity or duration, among others, marks the aspectual values, using the perfective or imperfective form of the uniaspectual verb and adverbial markers, both aspectual and temporal (Medvedšek & Müller 2020: 211-225).

Considering these observations, it is supposed that the difficulties in choosing the adequate past tense form for the Slovene students also appear due to the problem of perception associated with the temporal and aspectual nuances that each of the Portuguese past paradigm contains.

4 EMPIRICAL STUDY

This study took place in the second semester of the present year (from February to June 2024), in the Faculty of Arts of Ljubljana, in a Portuguese language bachelor's course. The participants were mainly Slovene students attending the 1st or 2nd years of the course, with ages ranging between 18 and 22. The levels they are expected to reach by the end of the year, according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) scale, are A2/B1 for 1st-year students, and B2, for 2nd-year students. The curriculum states that, in terms of written competence, students should develop their "writing skills, related to everyday issues and communication situations" (Filozofka Fakulteta n.d.: para. 3) and, in terms of linguistic competence, they should gain knowledge of different word classes in Portuguese, as well as common syntactic structures (Filozofka Fakulteta n.d.: para. 8).

4.1 Pilot study

For this pilot study, we conducted an analysis of the texts produced by seven 1st- and 2nd-year university students during the second semester of the academic year of 2023/2024, in the Faculty of Arts of Ljubljana. The texts were predominantly of an expository nature and covered themes pertaining to students' experiences and cultural identities. They ranged from national holidays in Portugal, Brazil and Slovenia, to the differences between these countries' political and educational systems. Significant societal events which happened in recent years were also explored. The 1st-year students' productions were titled (often with slight variations): "As duas primeiras décadas da minha vida"² and "A semana da cultura brasileira"³. As for the titles of the 2nd year students' texts, they were "O Carnaval na Eslovénia"⁴, "Resumo do discurso de Mariana Mortágua"⁵, "A semana do Brasil"⁶, "Uma lenda eslovena"⁷ and "O sistema educativo esloveno"⁸. These productions were formatively assessed in terms of format, relevance, and linguistic correction. Personalized feedback was provided to students regarding their texts' strengths and weaknesses.

4.2 Results

In terms of format, the students performed satisfactorily, respecting the communicative demands of the expository texts they were asked to produce. Nonetheless, most produced

2 English translation: "The first two decades of my life."

3 English translation: "Brazilian culture week."

4 English translation: "Carnival in Slovenia."

5 English translation: "Summary of Mariana Mortágua's speech."

6 English translation: "Brazil's week"

7 English translation: "A Slovenian legend"

8 English translation: "The Slovene political system."

paragraphs that were not clearly marked nor contained information relevant for the topic introduced in them. Structural problems – relating to the organization of thematically coherent paragraphs into distinct sections (i.e. introduction, development and conclusion) were also identified. Indeed, some students exhibited a good range of vocabulary and understanding of Portuguese grammar, but wrote their ideas in a sequential and unstructured manner, with no division of their topics into separate paragraphs. For instance, in the following text, the student described an interview between their professor and Brazil's ambassador in Slovenia in one paragraph, without using linking words or discourse markers for distinguishing between topics and examples, as well as ensuring the cohesion among ideas:

Na segunda-feira, 18 do março, houve uma reunião introdutória, onde nossa professora Blažka Müller fez uma entrevista com um convidado especial: o embaixador do Brasil na Eslovênia. Ele falou sobre suas impressões sobre a Eslovênia, sobre a cidade capital Ljubljana e depois falou sobre sua cidade natal, o Rio de Janeiro, e também contou uma anedota sobre uma menina chamada Eslovênia [...]. Mostraram-nos as suas obras mais importantes e conhecidas: a Catedral, os museus, o ministério, ... disseram-nos que ele foi criticado por preferir decoratividade e não enfocarse suficientemente na funcionalidade [...].⁹

With regard to pertinence, most of the texts were communicatively efficient, since they covered topics relevant for the proposed themes, with the most obvious problem being the lack of depth in some ideas. In the paragraph that follows, the student introduces an important topic, which would, however, benefit from being elaborated: “*Na terça-feira, 19 de março, às 19h, assisti a uma conversa sobre o livro Nove Noites, de Bernardo Carvalho, que teve lugar no MKL Šiška. O debate foi moderado pela tradutora Barbara Juršič.*”¹⁰

The text activity that presented students with the most evident issues asked them to describe the most impactful societal events they experienced in the first two decades of their life. This theme was misunderstood by some, as seen in the following example, as some students explored topics other than societal changes: “*Desde meu nascimento meu coração tem batido cerca de 826, 558, 224 vezes.*”¹¹

9 English translation: “On Monday, March 18th, there was an introductory meeting where our teacher, Blažka Müller, conducted an interview with a special guest: the Brazilian ambassador to Slovenia. He talked about his impressions of Slovenia, the capital city Ljubljana, and then spoke about his hometown, Rio de Janeiro. He also shared an anecdote about a girl named Slovenia [...]. They showed us his most important and well-known works: the Cathedral, the museums, the ministry, ... and told us that he was criticized for preferring decoration over focusing sufficiently on functionality [...].”

10 English translation: “On Tuesday, March 19th, at 7 pm, I attended a discussion about the book *Nove Noites*, by Bernardo Carvalho, which took place in MKL Šiška. The debate was moderated by the translator Barbara Juršič.”

11 English translation: “Since my birth, my heart has beaten about 826,558,224 times.”

Although students' lexis was sufficient for conveying their intended ideas, it would benefit from being widened. In our analysis, it was obvious that the students' lexis was often influenced by "false friends", derived from their knowledge on other Romanic languages, as well as English. For instance, in the sentence "*Ele falou sobre suas impressões sobre a Eslovênia, sobre a cidade capital Ljubljana e depois falou sobre sua cidade natal, o Rio de Janeiro, e também contou uma anedota sobre uma menina chamada Eslovênia*"¹², the student employs a word close to "anecdote" ("*anedota*") to mean story or narrative. In Portuguese, however, the word "*anedota*" is equivalent to the word "joke".

Concerning linguistic correction, the students showed syntactic difficulties in areas such as determiners, more precisely the distinction between them and prepositions, and the situations that require their contraction. In the example "*Em 2004 a Eslovenia entrou de União Europeia e de NATO [...]*",¹³ the student chooses the preposition that follows the verb "*entrar*" erroneously, opting for "*de*" rather than "*em*". They also fail to contract the preposition with the article that should precede singular phrasal nouns. The correct sentence would be: "*A Eslovênia entrou na União Europeia e na NATO [...]*". A tendency for omitting articles before nouns and using the Brazilian variant, which does not require the use of articles before possessive determiners, unlike European Portuguese, was also evident: "*[...] Senhora Milena falou sobre sua experiência, sobre Brasil [...]*"¹⁴

Likewise, students' knowledge of clitic pronouns and their placement proved to be an area in need of improvement. Some confusion between the European and Brazilian variants of Portuguese was also found. In the example "*[...] Me parece muito interessante que a expectativa de vida aumentou [...]*",¹⁵ the student placed the pronoun in a proclitic position, likely influenced by the Brazilian variant. Analogously, students exhibited difficulties in identifying proclitic-attracting elements in a sentence (e.g., "*não*", "*para*", "*que*"). The example "*O caçador utilizaria o chifre do animal para apoderar-se do tesouro*"¹⁶ shows the student organizing the words according to the typical sequence in Portuguese, with the pronoun "*se*" in an enclitic position, possibly overlooking the proclitic-attracting word "*para*". The correct wording would be "*O caçador utilizaria o chifre do animal para se apoderar do tesouro*".

Regarding past tenses, students used almost exclusively the *pretérito perfeito simples*, sometimes in passive structures, as seen in the following example: "*Nós ganhamos 42 medalhas nos Jogos Olímpicos de 2004 a 2024 [...]* *Em 2010 foi lançado o meu filme preferido esloveno, Gremo mi po svoje e em 2013 foi lançado a sequência, Gremo mi*

12 English translation: "He talked about his impressions of Slovenia, the capital city Ljubljana, and then he talked about his hometown, Rio de Janeiro. He also shared an anecdote about a girl named Slovenia."

13 English translation: "In 2004, Slovenia entered the European Union and NATO."

14 English translation: "Ms. Milena talked about her experience and about Brazil."

15 English translation: "It seems very interesting to me that life expectancy has increased."

16 English translation: "The hunter would use the animal's horn to seize the treasure."

po svoje 2 [...]”¹⁷ However, a few combined *pretérito perfeito simples* with *pretérito imperfeito simples*, showing a good understanding of their temporal and aspectual value (“*Achei a conversa bastante interessante e pouco usual porque se falava dalguns temas menos tradicionais para um embaixador [...]*”¹⁸).

Still, some issues were found. In the sentence “*Em 2005 o furacão Katrina era um dos furacões mais mortíferos dos EUA história*”, the student combines a concrete temporal reference (“*em 2005*”) with the *pretérito imperfeito* (“*era*”), commonly used with longer and more indeterminate time references. An example of a correct version of the sentence would include *pretérito perfeito*: “*Ocorrido em 2005, o furacão Katrina foi um dos furacões mais mortíferos da história dos Estados Unidos.*”¹⁹

Finally, analysing the overall syntax of the texts in our corpora, it is important to note that a reasonable number of students used Portuguese grammar competently, writing short, mistake-free sentences (“*O Carnaval não seria o verdadeiro sem os disfarces que se expõem no desfile que decorre pela cidade. As máscaras mais comuns são 'kurenti' que fazem parte da herança da UNESCO.*”). The problems we described are merely sources of information about what teachers can do to improve their students' abilities, without disregarding their pre-existing knowledge and potential.

4.3 Discussion

As stated before, students' written skills and linguistic competence are deeply interwoven (Rodrigues & Silvano 2015: 2). Given the impossibility of assessing the quality of a text based on grammar alone, we studied both non-strictly linguistic and linguistic issues.

The analysis of our corpora allows us to understand that, in matters of non-strictly linguistic dimensions related to writing, such as formatting, content and coherence, students can produce communicatively efficient texts, informed by pertinent ideas. Overall, they respected the demands of the exercises with which they were presented, opting for a descriptive approach, consonant with the expository nature of the texts they were asked to write.

Nevertheless, we identified some issues intrinsic to text formatting, which stem from difficulties in deciding what should constitute a paragraph, as well as organizing ideas into three distinctive, and clearly marked, sections – introduction, development and conclusion. This suggests that students do not have the habit of planning before writing, and thus they would benefit from being introduced to didactic strategies aimed at helping them dedicate time to such an important stage in the overall process. Pre-writing

17 English translation: “We won 42 medals at the Olympic Games from 2004 to 2024 [...] In 2010, my favourite Slovenian film, *Gremo mi po svoje*, was released, and in 2013, the sequel, *Gremo mi po svoje 2*, was released.”

18 English translation: “I found the conversation quite interesting and unusual because it covered some less traditional topics for an ambassador.”

19 English translation: “In 2005, Hurricane Katrina was one of the deadliest hurricanes in US history.”

exercises that are reliant on schema building – mind maps, tree diagrams and alike – may be a useful tool for helping students structure their thoughts into well-organized paragraphs and sections. In this regard, we argue that adding a digital element, by promoting the use of online resources like *Miro* and *MindMaster*, can potentially engage students in properly planning their texts, while developing their digital proficiency.

Indeed, in line with the framework presented by Hayes and Flower (1980: 366), teachers need to promote pre-writing, writing, and post-writing practices in order to cultivate good writing habits among students. In the planning stage, to better decide what to write and how to structure it, students should be exposed to good text models, like the ones they are expected to produce. Organizing reading workshops, dedicated to having students analyse texts of the same genre and derive from them and information useful for their own productions, is another strategy that is recommended for encouraging students to effectively plan their work before writing, while improving their lexis and syntax knowledge. This is also conducive to higher levels of language awareness and creative problem solving.

As for the post-writing stage, to ensure that students review their productions, paying special attention to any mistakes, teachers can provide them with checklists personalized in terms of the communicative and linguistic demands of the target text. By doing this, learners are encouraged to read their productions multiple times, in a focused and reflective manner. This process can help them to identify any linguistic issues in their writing, think about alternatives to structures in need of improvement, and change their texts' information or organizational devices (the connectors, for instance), if needed. Once again, we argue that providing checklists in digital form, or even having students digitally create their own checklists, may potentially increase their engagement in post-writing activities, thus allowing for more significant learning opportunities (Li et al. 2018: 1141).

Encouraging students to break down the writing process into achievable goals is also important for promoting self-regulation skills. Activities that help promote self-regulation include self-reflective writing and discussions, before and after writing a text, aimed at exploring the communicative goals students need to achieve, the characteristics and structure of the text genre they need to produce, the most appropriate language for it, and the linguistic mistakes they need to avoid (Pinho, 2021: 56). Discussing what areas need to be improved, once the text is finished, and passing it on to their peers to obtain their feedback, is also beneficial (Fan, & Xu, 2020: 1).

Linguistically speaking, apart from the strategies described above, one must be mindful of the specific grammar areas that present students with the most problems. With regard to prepositions and determiners, our analysis offers interesting insights into these problematic linguistic domains. As explained before, European Portuguese and Slovene differ in terms of the use and function of their prepositions and determiners. The literal translation of temporal and spatial prepositions, which is often the strategy used by students, it is not an effective approach in this context, neither is the use of an intuitive type

of logic. Slovene students, in the pilot study, seemed to not employ articles due to their absence in Slovene.

To address this issue, teachers can have their students identify prepositions and determiners in authentic Portuguese discourse, both written and oral, and identify patterns from which they can infer grammatical rules. In those situations where prepositions do not follow a rule, as their place in some phrases is defined by convention, it may be advantageous to introduce some of them in each lesson and challenge students to compete among themselves by attempting to integrate those phrases in their classroom dialogue as many times as possible. The results should be written on the board by the teacher or a student, so winners can be acknowledged at the end of the lesson.

In the specific case of articles, in order to avoid missing them, the students can learn simple feminine and masculine noun phrases in vocabulary exercises, which include the article and noun it precedes, rather than isolated words. If they get used to seeing words in combination and, in practice exercises, are encouraged to always work with those sets of linguistic elements, they may be more bound to internalize the importance of articles in the Portuguese language.

Addressing verb paradigms, the cause of the problems concerning the past tense can undoubtedly be attributed to the absence of a large number of past tenses in the Slovene verbal system compared to European Portuguese. Nevertheless, this study also reveals that another cause of these problems seems to be related to a weak perception of the temporal and aspectual nuances characterizing Portuguese past tenses. In sentences with no temporal and aspectual markers, choosing the appropriate temporal form of a verbal tense tends to be more difficult.

This suggests that the distinction between European Portuguese past tenses is not stabilized at the B1 level, which is understandable, given that the contrast between these tenses is yet to be improved at this level. Slovene students need a relatively large amount of training to master the use of the past tenses in European Portuguese, since there are significantly more of these than in Slovene. To do that, they need more practice to reach an acceptable level of knowledge. In trying to identify the problems related to the training of the selection of the correct form of past tense, the teacher must recognize the temporal and aspectual interaction between the mother tongue and the foreign language in question, preparing exercises aimed at establishing bridges and contrasts between those languages. In this sense, contrastive analysis can have an important role in students' awareness of their tense selection errors, and in improving their knowledge of the verbal system.

Likewise, pronouns correspond to an area that demands special attention, which must be well understood and practiced during the process of learning Portuguese, so that learners completely acquire the morphologic, syntactic, and semantic properties of Portuguese clitic pronouns. It may be useful, in this regard, to promote activities where students analyse authentic or semi-authentic texts or sentences, contextualized within a theme, to identify clitic pronouns and their syntactic purposes. Afterwards, they should rephrase the sentences by

including a specific word (an attractor of proclitic pronouns, for instance), as established by the activity's instructions. Students should use their own words and keep the clitic pronoun present in the original sentence, but reposition it to respect the structure demanded by the word or phrase the exercise asks them to use in their answers.

5 CONCLUSION

A number of interesting observations arose during the procedures described in this article. The general writing areas identified in the literature as problematic for second language students – and the specific linguistic domains where Slovene students learning Portuguese struggle the most – coincide with those identified in our pilot study.

The results also showed that the students had problems with properly formatting a text and informing it with sufficiently elaborated ideas while using appropriate syntax and lexis. This is due to a likely lack of contact with different texts and genres, as well as poor habits with regard to planning and revising texts.

Linguistically speaking, the absence of definite and indefinite determiners often results in the omission and misuse of this grammatical element. The need to make articles agree in gender and number with the noun they precede, as well as contracting them with prepositions, also jeopardizes their integration in texts written in Portuguese by Slovene learners of the language.

Regarding pronouns, the results showed that Slovene students have problems with their placement. They struggle to choose the correct position of clitic pronouns, based on the type of sentence they intend to produce, and the presence of certain words that determine this position. Despite some similarities between Portuguese and Slovene pronominal systems, the absence of dual and neutral pronouns in Portuguese can be a source of problems in this context.

As for the past verb paradigms, there is a tendency for the students to only use one tense, the *pretérito perfeito* of the indicative, without combining it with others, and this is due to the complexity associated with the aspectual and temporal values Portuguese verb paradigms exhibit, and thus students need more time to properly acquire and consolidate such content.

As for ways to attenuate such issues, didactic strategies that acknowledge writing as a process comprising of iterative stages, rather than just a product, can help students improve both their writing skills and linguistic competence. Furthermore, a contrastive analysis of Slovene and Portuguese, in a way that invites critical reflection, should be carried out in the Portuguese as a second language classroom, in order to increase linguistic awareness.

To attain expertise in writing in Portuguese, students should participate in pre-writing, writing and post-writing activities, aimed at understanding the genre of the text they are expected to produce, the related communicative demands, and the linguistic structures

they commonly present. This implies encouraging learners to come into contact with a variety of texts, plan their own productions, revise them and constantly reflect on what needs to be done and what needs to be improved.

The practices arising from such activities contribute to turning students into self-regulated writers, capable of resorting to language-contrasting and creative problem-solving to autonomously overcome any obstacles they may encounter during the writing process. Introducing a digital element into these practices may make them more engaging for students, while encouraging them to exercise their digital competencies in this domain.

In this regard, it is clear that the pilot study described in this article serves as a basis for the preparation of didactic material for future students of the Portuguese language. Moreover, this pilot study opens up some potential avenues for future research, dedicated to easing the acquisition and mastery of writing and linguistic competencies among students of Portuguese as a second language.

One limitation in this study research is that our selection of problematic areas may not encompass all the challenges faced by Slovene students learning to write in Portuguese. Methodologically, our choice of a qualitative analysis also means that our results may not be as rigorous as those typically obtained through a mixed-method approach. Nonetheless, they are still important pointers to the domains that should demand more time and attention from teachers of Portuguese as a second language, and the creative routes they can follow to make the process of learning writing as engaging and successful as possible.

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POVZETEK

VEŠČINA PISNEGA IZRAŽANJA SLOVENSКИH ŠTUDENTOV V PORTUGALŠČINI: IZZIVI IN MOŽNOSTI ZA IZBOLJŠAVE

Namen prispevka je identificirati ter z več gledališč osvetliti težave, s katerimi se srečujejo slovenski študenti, ko pišejo v portugalsščini, ter predstaviti didaktične strategije, ki bi utegnile biti ustrezne za reševanje teh izzivov. Ker se zavedamo, da je pisanje kompleksna in kognitivno zahtevna naloga, naša raziskava, umeščena v kontekst univerzitetnega jezikovnega programa ter univerzitetnih študentov, poudarja pomen spodbujanja njihovih pisnih in jezikovnih kompetenc, torej veščin, ki so med seboj tesno prepletene. Teoretični okvir, ki ga predstavljamo, izpostavlja splošne težave pri pisanju v drugem jeziku, primerja določena slovnična ter širše jezikovna področja v portugalsščini in slovenščini ter ponuja vpogled v izzive, s katerimi se srečujejo slovenski študenti. Pilotna študija, ki smo jo izvedli s študenti prvega in drugega letnika univerze, katerih naloga je bila napisati razlagalni zapis, je potrdila, da so težave pri pisanju, ki smo jih opredelili pri pregledu literature - glede formata, informacij, leksike in sintakse -, področja, ki zahtevajo dodatno pozornost in čas v učilnicah portugalsščine kot drugega jezika. Natančneje, kar zadeva slovnico, je naša analiza skušala pokazati, da v portugalsščini obstajajo določena slovnična področja, ki se dotikajo besednih vrst ter skladenjskih struktur, katerih jezikovno delovanje zaradi določenih razlik z njihovim maternim jezikom predstavlja izziv za slovenske študente. Na podlagi analize težav, ki izhajajo iz teh področij, predlagamo nekaj didaktičnih strategij, katerih namen bi bil pomagati študentom pri premagovanju težav pri pisanju, hkrati pa razvijati njihove avtonomne, metalingvistične in ustvarjalne veščine reševanja teh problemov. Naš znanstveni prispevek skuša prispevati k spodbujanju pedagoških dejavnosti, ki temeljijo na učinkoviti primerjavi med jeziki, ustvarjalni uporabi digitalnih virov ter ustvarjanju samostojnih avtentičnih gradiv.

Ključne besede: pisanje v drugem jeziku, slovenski univerzitetni študentje, portugalsščina kot drugi jezik, jezikovne spretnosti, didaktika

ABSTRACT

SLOVENE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN PORTUGUESE: COMMON CHALLENGES AND PATHS FOR IMPROVEMENT

This paper seeks to identify and reflect on the difficulties Slovene students face when writing in European Portuguese, in order to present didactic strategies tailored to address such challenges. Acknowledging that writing is a complex and cognitively demanding task, our research stresses the importance of fostering learners' written and linguistic competencies, abilities that are deeply intertwined. As such, the first part of our theoretical framework provides a description of general difficulties associated with writing in a second language. Subsequently, it contrasts linguistic domains in Portuguese and Slovene, while offering insights into common issues Slovene students encounter when writing in Portuguese. A qualitatively assessed pilot study, involving 1st- and 2nd-year university students, tasked with expository writing, confirmed that the issues identified in our review of the literature – concerning format, information, lexis and syntax – are areas that demand extra attention and time. In terms of grammar, more specifically, the analysis we carried out has proven that there are word classes and syntactic structures in Portuguese which pose challenges for Slovene students, due to their unfamiliar features. According to our results, problems with determiners, their contraction with prepositions, past verbal tenses and the placement of pronouns were particularly significant. Based on these domains, we suggest the use of didactic strategies which acknowledge writing as an iterative process, aimed at helping students overcome their difficulties, while developing self-regulatory, metalinguistic, and creative problem-solving skills. Our scientific contribution lies in the promotion of pedagogical actions based on the efficient contrast between languages, the creative use of digital resources and materials presenting authentic discourse.

Keywords: second language writing, Slovene university students, Portuguese as a Second Language, linguistic skills, didactics