THE USE OF SHORT STORIES TO IMPROVE LITERACY IN A BILINGUAL CONTEXT

O USO DE CONTOS PARA MELHORAR A LITERACIA NUM CONTEXTO BILINGUE

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Abstract

This study stems from an ongoing doctoral research project and presents preliminary results on the role of the short story in improving the literacy of 6th grade students in Angola, especially in a rural area characterised by bilingualism. The work involved 39 students, seven parents and two teachers. The central theme was the reading of short stories. We adopted a qualitative research paradigm complemented by a limited quantitative analysis. Content analysis and descriptive statistics were used as study methods. The study found a low level of literacy among the students, a lack of textbooks on literary texts, the students' mother tongue is not the same as the language of instruction, and a lack of teacher specialisation in the teaching of Portuguese. A preliminary conclusion is the lack of use of the short story as a teaching strategy, which has hampered the teaching-learning process.

Keywords: The short story, reading instruction, children's literature, bilingual literacy

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Resumo

Este estudo decorre de um projeto de investigação de doutoramento em curso e apresenta resultados preliminares sobre o papel do conto na melhoria da literacia de alunos do 6.º ano em Angola, especialmente numa zona rural caracterizada pelo bilinguismo. O trabalho envolveu 39 alunos, sete pais e dois professores. O tema central foi a leitura de contos. Adotámos um paradigma de investigação qualitativa complementado por uma análise quantitativa limitada. A análise de conteúdo e a estatística descritiva foram utilizadas como métodos de estudo. O estudo constatou um baixo nível de literacia entre os alunos, a falta de livros didáticos sobre textos literários, o facto de a língua materna dos alunos não ser a mesma que a língua de ensino e a falta de especialização dos professores no ensino do português. Uma

conclusão preliminar é a falta de utilização do conto como estratégia de ensino, o que tem dificultado o processo de ensino-aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: Conto, instrução de leitura, literatura infantil, literacia bilingue

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Introduction

This research presents a reflection on the promotion of literacy using short stories in a bilingual situation, carried out with 6th grade primary school students. The aim of this study is to understand the factors that hinder the development of reading and comprehension in these pupils. Our empirical base is made up of tests administered to a group of 39 pupils, 25 of whom were male and 14 females, all of whom were attending sixth grade in classes A and B; interviews with two teachers and seven parents and carers. In addition to an initial observation.

The choice of topic is justified by the fact that the short story is part of all the students' lives. In fact, the rural context under study retains a lot of oral literature, and one of the children's great entertainments is storytelling. When we went to the school, we realised that the short story was not explored much by the teachers; in a few cases, they used excerpts for reading and exploring narrative and grammatical categories. Our initial test revealed poor reading and comprehension skills on the part of the students; they couldn't, for example, find the main characters, let alone the paratextual ones. After the intervention, the students showed improvements. Considering this, we believe that the interaction between students in classroom contexts through short stories would be a bridge between prior knowledge and the new knowledge that the teacher is going to teach. Colomer and Camps (2002) emphasise that, during the teaching-learning process, the teacher must know how to value their students' ideas in relation to what they are trying to teach, both to find out if they have sufficient conceptual support to incorporate the new knowledge and to try to understand their way of proceeding and interpreting the writing, in order to guarantee the positive progress of the knowledge acquired.

Terra and Pacheco (2017) consider it important to work with the text, because it doesn't make sense to use fragments, as this can hinder comprehension. Since the text is a meaningful whole and the short story is a short narrative, it makes it possible to work on it in its entirety. Another major factor that leads us to use the short story when teaching is that it makes it easier to get children used to literary texts, as its attributes apply to other genres such as the novel and the novella. This means that all the components of the short story can be found in other genres, so teachers can explore these elements in other texts. On the other hand, the variety of themes that short stories present can also be an advantage when it comes to using texts of this nature in the classroom, because it gives teachers the freedom to

choose themes and their subgenres, which allows for interdisciplinary work. The authors also believe that the short story is a genre suitable for all ages; it can be for children, young people or adults.

In view of the above, we have defined the following scientific problem: how can short stories (and the reading of them) serve as a didactic resource that potentially favours the development of reading and comprehension skills in 6th grade primary school students? The study's main objective is to design, implement and evaluate a strategy for promoting literacy through the reading of short stories in a bilingual context. We therefore decided to investigate how the experience of immersion in fictional narratives can catalyse essential cognitive processes such as interpretation, inference and critical analysis. From this point of view, the work carried out, in general, has as its object of study: the LP teaching-learning process in a bilingual context.

Theoretical Framework

In Angola, as in any society, literature is an ideal means of preserving history, culture and identity. From the first literary manifestations in the colonial period to contemporary works, Angolan literature reflects the struggles, aspirations and experiences of the Angolan people over time.

According to Loureiro (2017), Angolan literature has a relatively recent history compared to other countries, and the scarcity of comprehensive studies on national literary history, especially about the short story, is intrinsically related to the country's own historical trajectory.

The short story is a short narrative genre of great relevance in the field of education and literacy. It stands out for its formal and stylistic characteristics, the pedagogical use of which is very necessary. It has a clear narrative structure, made up of successive moments: initial situation, conflict, development, climax and outcome, under which the progression of events is organised, with the aim of encouraging textual comprehension and discourse analysis.

These successions of events occur between the characters throughout the diegesis, as observed by Terra and Pacheco (2017), because the basic rule of narrative is who did what, since these changes of disjunction or conjunction are what they call narrativity. As for language, the short story is characterised by precision, which is why it includes underlying stylistic elements that require the reader to have a broader knowledge of figures and themes.

Terra and Pacheco (2017) point out that the short story is a literary genre made by humans, for humans and which speaks of human values. As such, the reader will emerge from the construction of characters and situations from their universe, whose representation leads to identification and reflection on values, conflicts and emotions. Therefore, the proximity between reader and text favours full immersion in the narrative world, awakening the exercise of imagination and ethical thinking.

In this way, the use of short stories as a pedagogical tool offers a school's advantages in the teaching-learning process of reading and understanding texts because, according to Cosson (2009, p. 17), 'reading has the major function of making the world understandable, transforming its materiality into words of intensely human colours, smells, tastes and forms, which is why literature has and needs to maintain a special place in schools'. All because, as Paz says (2015, p. 271):

> The literary text provides an awareness, a metalinguistic and metatextual dexterity that no other type of text can provide. Literary texts draw the reader's/student's attention to the phonological, syntactic, lexical, semantic and pragmatic levels of language, to the models and strategies of different discursive genres, to the richness and depth of textual memory (and culture, as memory, is preserved, radiated and transformed in the form of texts).

Reading in the Angolan educational context

The Basic Law of the Angolan Education System (Law no. 32/20 of 12 August), in its article 29, establishes specific objectives for Primary Education, which are relevant to understanding the legal basis that guides education in Angolan schools, including those located in rural areas with socio-economic difficulties. However, in the same article, point a) of the law makes it clear that its mission is to develop the capacity to learn, with the basic means of mastering reading, writing, among others. Learning to understand and interact with texts is a complex process that requires the development of intimacy between the reader and the text. From this perspective, Santos and Barrera (2015, p. 255) emphasise the need to start using stories at an early age, because "from a very early age children learn to tell stories, a particular form of narrative, and they do so spontaneously and naturally".

Reading comprehension has been the subject of study and reflection in many fields of academic knowledge, including psychology, linguistics and education throughout history. As the authors Viana and Teixeira (2002) describe, in the past the practice of reading was standardised, where the teacher was solely responsible for teaching and the student was seen as a passive actor who received the stimuli. In this way, reading, writing and counting were both essential acquisitions and instruments of action. The teacher's role was to select what the students would read. Hence, before today's vision, reading comprehension was often seen in a more passive way, where the text was the sole source of meaning and the reader was seen as a passive recipient of the information presented. Today the situation is different; these acquisitions must be seen as a means of the general formation of everyone.

New thinking in reading presents approaches that question this unidirectional view of comprehension. Cruz (2020); Duke and Cartwrigt (2021) place the reader at the centre of the comprehension process, pointing to their active participation in constructing meaning from the text. Cruz (2020, p. 143) adds that "reading

comprehension is defined as the act of perceiving and interpreting the information contained in the text, and successful comprehension requires the reader to interact deeply with the text, as it is more about constructing meaning than mere memorisation".

The three central dimensions for understanding texts are described by the authors Amado and Sardinha (2013), each of which is framed during the act of reading. The first is associated with the conditions of production, i.e. the socio-enunciative characteristics; the second with the physical and psychological context of the student, as well as the motivation for reading, while the third refers to the cognitive processes developed, i.e. the knowledge and beliefs about the reading process itself.
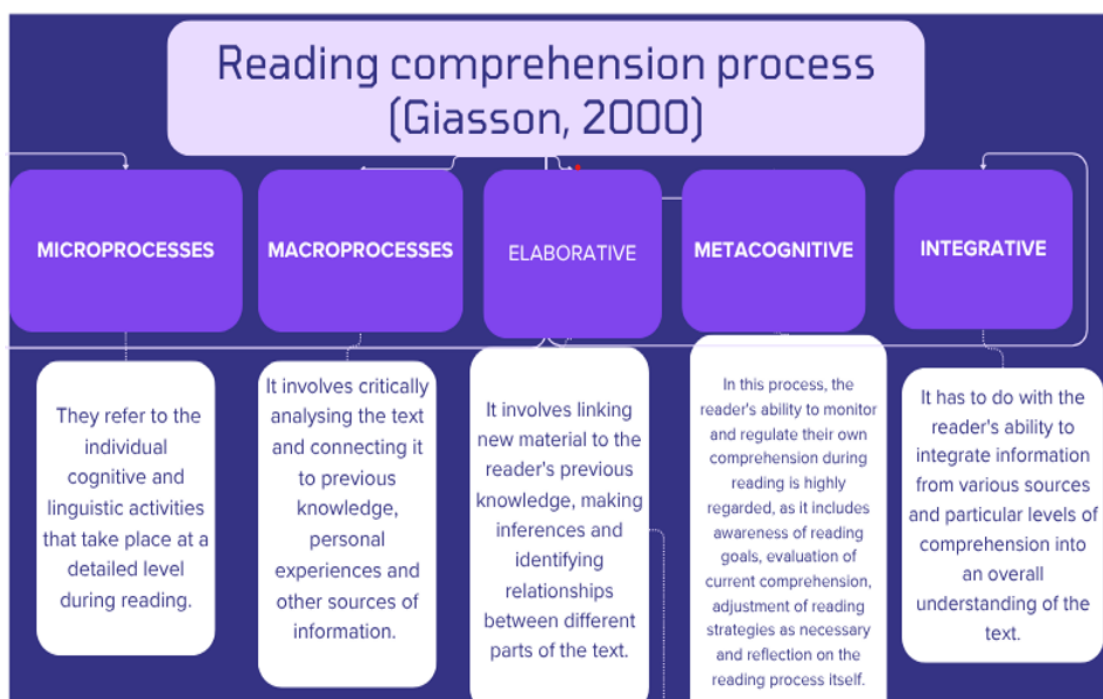

Illustration 1. Reading comprehension processes
Source: own elaboration based on the Giasson model (Giasson, 2000).

With the processes in illustration 1, we can assume that reading is about understanding and constructing meaning, as Giasson discusses, within what she calls the consensual model of reading. Therefore, it is important that we take into account that there are some indispensable processes that help readers interact with the text and attribute meanings to them, such as: microprocesses, integrative processes, macroprocesses, elaboration processes and metacognitive processes.

Along the same lines, Giasson (2000, p. 181) cites the following predictions for reading narrative texts:

1) Predictions of events based on:

a) the characteristics of the characters;

b) the motivation of the characters;

c) the characteristics of the situation;

d) clues present in the text:

  - the illustrations,

  - the title.

2) predictions based on structure and based on:

a) on knowledge of literary genres;

b) knowledge of narrative grammar.

This is why the process of teaching and learning to read and understand texts is extensive, but necessary, because when it is acquired, there is an expansion of knowledge through the incorporation of new words (expansion of the student's internal vocabulary that enables them to read and understand texts). In the same vein, regarding the complexity of the process of learning to read, Ramos and Silva (2014) point out that "as a social activity resulting from formal and specific learning, reading is the result of a slow and gradual process that begins, as we all know, long before the child starts school" (p. 149). For their part, Colomer and Camps (2002) add that the act of reading, more than a simple mechanical activity of deciphering graphic signs, is first and foremost an act of reasoning, since it involves guiding a series of reasoning processes towards the construction of an interpretation of the written message based on the information provided by the text and the reader's knowledge.

Reading, which appears to be different from the process of acquiring oral language, is seen as a complex skill, especially for pupils who have Portuguese as their second language (LS), as is the case in certain rural Angolan contexts and, more specifically, in the northern region of Angola, where our study focused, since Kikongo is the mother tongue of most of the children there, considered a bilingual context.

According to Finger (2015), the term bilingual is used to refer to an individual who has the ability to communicate in two or more languages and can naturally and easily access the lexicon of both languages, switching between them through the phenomenon called code-switching, without causing confusion or interference between the languages used, which even allows them to use both languages in the same sentence. It's worth mentioning that we're not focussing on the issue of bilingualism, but we couldn't help but mention it because there is a healthy coexistence between the two languages, which to a certain extent interferes with the assimilation of one language, i.e. LP (the official and only language of instruction).

It is still noticeable that in most schools, especially primary schools in Angola, the literary text is approached in a very restricted way, with an excessive focus on

the textbook, which does not give students the opportunity to interpret the statements as they should, limiting them. This situation is exacerbated in contexts where the children have the language of instruction and the text as their LS. Often, excerpts are taught to explore grammatical categories rather than critical recession, even in an incipient way given the age of the students. On the other hand, this teaching model can make students insecure about their ability to answer questions objectively.

In short, it is undeniable that the first few years of life are fundamental to the growth of children's reading interests and skills. In this period, exposure to literature in its various forms is opportune for training them to discover and understand the world around them, as well as expanding their linguistic repertoire. Including children's books in the classroom from an early age not only favours the academic environment but also stimulates cognitive development. By giving children and pupils access to diverse and stimulating narratives, educators can awaken an interest in reading and cultivate a love of books from an early age, laying solid foundations for a lifetime of continuous learning through ongoing reading activities both at home and at school.

Study methodology

This theoretical-practical chapter presents the methodological options that guided the development of the study, explaining the paradigms, methods, ethics, participants and techniques. We also highlight the main authors who guided our thinking: Vala (1987), Bardin (2021), among others.

Although the study also includes students' social issues, the main element of analysis is text reading. Given this reality, we considered Adam's Text Linguistics (TL) (2008) as the main theory of analysis, seeking to assess the students' reading and comprehension issues.

The research follows the qualitative paradigm, complemented by a limited quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were used as methods for analysing and interpreting the data, supported by the following techniques: class observation form, reading grid applied to students and interviews with teachers, parents and guardians. Data analysis tools included MAXQDA for qualitative data and SPSS for quantitative data.

We opted for action research because it is a mechanism that encompasses monitoring, evaluation, analysis and intervention to overcome the weaknesses identified in the initial phase.

The study involved collecting data by means of tests. Once the tests had been drawn up, they were to be administered to a group of 45 pupils, made up of 25 males and 14 females, all attending sixth grade in classes A and B, later unified into a single class, in one of the country's primary schools, during the 2023/2024 school year. Because the school is in a village and because of agricultural activities, there

have been many dropouts. At the time of enrolment, the classes were made up as follows: A with 39 students and B with 43 students, but over time the majority dropped out, which is why the school preferred to unify the two classes for class and teacher management reasons. Even so, we saw another situation related to absences, as there were days when the class was full and others with few students. That's why during the tests we recorded an attendance of only 39. The classes were heterogeneous, although gender was not the central element of analysis.

The selection of participants was deliberately intentional, taking into account the level of education of the students, with a focus on those who are in the finalist class, i.e., 6th grade and in the transition phase to the 1st Cycle of Secondary Education, where students are expected to have the reading and comprehension skills already developed as requirements for the transition.

In terms of type, our sample is considered non-probabilistic and intentional. According to Gil (2008, p. 94), purposive sampling is 'non-probabilistic and consists of selecting a subgroup of the population that, based on the information available, can be considered representative of the entire population'. And about its accuracy, the author considers that the main advantage of this type of sampling is that it is low-cost in terms of financial and material resources during its selection.

In order to take precautions regarding research ethics, we requested authorisation from the school management, which allowed us to establish a relationship with the teachers, students, parents and guardians to ensure transparency and respect for the study participants. All the participants signed informed consent forms, certifying that they were aware of and agreed to take part in the research freely and ready to provide the information required.

After receiving authorisation, we proceeded to implement the following instruments: participant observation, semi-structured interviews and written tests, which we used as data collection techniques. The instruments were applied in three different phases:

In the first phase, we watched the LP lessons using an observation grid. In the second phase, we interviewed the teachers, parents and guardians. The interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile phone recorder, which made it easier to transcribe the answers verbatim and analyse them. Finally, in the third phase, six tests were administered to the students. The information obtained was used exclusively for research purposes and may be destroyed once the period established by the rules and laws governing scientific work has expired.

The entire data collection process was conducted in a direct and participatory manner by us, in close collaboration with the teachers, students and community members, because from the very beginning of our study, the teachers and students as the main subjects involved were informed and made aware of the objectives and procedures, and they actively collaborated throughout the planning of the activities, the organisation of the reading sessions and the application of the evaluation instruments.

The instruments we used were validated to ensure that they were relevant and transparent in relation to the proposed objectives. Our observation guide contains the following components: the use of stories in the classroom, the possession of reading manuals and literary works.

We used semi-structured interviews to collect data from the teachers, parents and guardians of those students. We preferred to adopt this type of interview because of the flexibility inherent in it, as the interviewees shared their experiences in a more natural and fluid way, which was valuable for understanding the specific academic reality and unique challenges faced by the school. The questions were open-ended. We first carried out a pilot interview with some teachers from the School of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (ESCISAH), to test the clarity of the questions and the length of the answers, and if they were able to give us the desired feedback, parents in particular. We also had the support of the supervisor in the construction of the instruments, as well as the evaluation of the ethics committee.

The grid of activities with the students had been drawn up considering the language performance objectives laid down in the Portuguese curriculum for primary school level in Angola, i.e., comprehension and production skills. However, its validation depended on testing it with a small group of students outside the main sample, namely sixth graders from a neighbouring school.

As we have said, content analysis and descriptive statistics were used as methods of analysis. Vala (1987, p. 101) explains that "content analysis is today one of the most common techniques in empirical research carried out by the different human and social sciences. This interpretative and/or explanatory process is based on 'letters and other autobiographical documents in order to find out about the attitudes and values of their authors or the people they address".

The phases of content analysis referenced by Bardin (2021) were put into practice in our study by making it possible, in pre-analysis, to have direct contact with the generic information collected through the previously selected instruments and then organise them after reading them (so-called floating reading). We therefore read and analysed our interviewees' responses.

In the second phase of material exploration, we proceeded with the actual coding of the data, but first we read it carefully to get a comprehensive view of the content. Categorisation was initially based on themes that emerged from the results.

To guarantee the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, we adopted a system of acronyms that preserves the identity of those involved, a practice that complies with the ethical standards of scientific research, which makes the participants feel safe and respected when sharing their experiences and opinions. The acronyms representing each person, such as Pf1 and Pf2 for the teachers, PEg1, PEg2, PEg3 for the parents and carers, and GA1, GA2 for the students, were used instead of names, in compliance with scientific ethics. Coding was carried out vertically to facilitate dialogue between the different answers to each question throughout the corpus.

The questions applied in the tests were grouped into different reading processes, and to facilitate the process of analysing the data, we established another criterion for grouping the answers, the following categories were designated: correct answer, incorrect answer and no answer.

The tests administered to the students were designed to assess their literacy level in three distinct phases: initial, middle and final. Each phase was carefully structured to measure the students' progress and identify the areas that needed specific intervention. The main objective was to diagnose the level of reading comprehension of 6th graders. To do this, questions were designed in line with the five basic processes of reading comprehension according to Giasson (2000), already developed above: microprocesses, integrative processes, macroprocesses, elaborative processes and metacognitive processes.

Data presentation

This part of the research summarises the results of the quantitative data, starting with the students, teachers and ending with the parents and guardians.

Table 1.
Macroprocess-identify

Macroprocess-identify						
Items	Answer options					
	Correct Answer		Incorrect Answer		No reply	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
T1_1. Placing the story's action in time and space			26	74,3	9	25,7
T1_2. Explain the action of the story			22	62,9	13	37,1
T1_3a. Identify the main characters	1	2,9	20	57,1	14	40
T1_3b. Identify the secondary characters			21	60	14	40
T1_3c. Identify the main characters			20	57,1	15	42,9

Source: Author's own elaboration

About the identification macro-process, the data appears exclusively in the first test and in certain questions, as illustrated in the table above. The results indicate that most answers were incorrect. However, the high proportion of non-responses in the character identification tasks suggests limited engagement or difficulty in decoding elements of the narrative, which may be influenced by the

students' limited exposure to literary genres in their second language. According to Azevedo (2006), the literary text should occupy a central role in school, as it establishes an emotional connection between the reader and the text. However, it should not be forgotten that, as well as promoting productive socialisation, it also offers a wide range of elements of varying significance.

Table 2.

Integrative-inference processes

Items	Answer options					
	Correct Answer		Correct Answer		Correct Answer	
	Nº	%	Nº	%	Nº	%
T2_3b. Then rewrite the characters' lines in a few lines, using these words to add more detail and precision to the actions described.			39	100		
T2_3c. Reread the text and identify the main and secondary characters, then list them. Then create sentences using these nouns.	4	10,3	35	89,7		
T4_5. What was the main reason why the king was curious about the old man's braids?	6	17,6	28	82,4		
T4_6. Why did the king regret having mocked the old man?	29	85,3	3	8,8	2	5,9
T4_7. What did the old man's braids symbolise and how do they relate to the story?	28	82,4	5	14,7	1	2,9
T4_8. How do the attitudes of the old man's adopted son towards the coat reveal his character?	6	17,6	28	82,4		
T4_9. Why did the old man explain the meaning of the braids to the king?	5	14,7	29	85,3		

Source: Author's own elaboration

Here the questions are centred on the integrative processes of inference as presented in tests two and four. Incorrect answers continued to be evident, but there was a significant improvement in some questions associated with this process. To say that the increase in correct answers was due to our intervention. During this inference process, we worked with the students to increase their reading and interpretation skills. Azevedo and Sardinha (2013) define inference as everything that goes beyond literal comprehension, something that the text doesn't show in full, something that is implied through the knowledge already acquired by the reader and that goes in the opposite direction to the literal answer.

The interview with the 6th grade teachers

Below we present the results of the analysis of the interviews with the teachers, which was done manually because there are only two of them. Evidence of the teachers' responses is shown on the right, and the coding of the participants is shown after the table, with our comments highlighted.

Table 3.
Importance of reading in the educational process

Evidence	Participants
(…) it allows the child to interpret the letters that he realised when the teacher was teaching the alphabet.	Pf1
Reading is important because it develops students' memory.	Pf2

Source: Author's own elaboration

There is a consensus among the teachers about the importance of reading in the teaching-learning process, as they say that mastering this skill is an initial stage for learning all the content and knowledge in the various areas, as well as helping to develop memory. The observation phase revealed that the teachers did not adopt varied methods aimed at improving the students' learning levels. All because, in our opinion, the lack of specialised training in LP limited their teaching activity in this subject, as both teachers were unanimous in saying that they didn't have such training. This justifies the need for training and refresher courses (continuous training).

The challenge for schools is to train proficient readers and this is a task faced by educators all over the world. Because reading is the structural basis for both the school and social development of children, it deserves special attention and requires effort from educators and the students themselves. Reading activities should be carried out in a pleasant and stimulating way, with the aim of awakening in students the pleasure of reading and the formation of lasting reading habits. (Andrade, 2013)

Table 4.
Teaching reading in the classroom

Evidence	Participants
At first, as the predominant language here is Kikongo, which is the mother tongue, I've been using bilingualism. First, I'll speak in Kikongo and then I'll give the meaning in Portuguese.	Pf1
As a language teacher, I mean, after I've copied out the reading, I explain it and they do group work in the classroom to share knowledge.	*Pf2*

Source: Author's own elaboration

In the rural context of this study, where pupils arrive at school with a command of Kikongo, bilingual teaching could be an ideal way forward, and teachers are already pointing this out. It's important to note that this should be reflected in the textbooks to facilitate teaching, especially when teachers don't have a specialisation in LP. We realise that in these terms, SL should follow the LS teaching methodology because children don't have it as their L1, even though it is official. This reflects a code-switching strategy often used in bilingual environments to reinforce comprehension.

Table 5.
Use of short stories in reading lessons

Evidence	Participants
Yes, I do. For example, a narrative text, I can give an example of the dictionary text we have here in 6th grade. First, I read the text, I can repeat it three times, they follow along, and we do it together, then, when I see that they've reached a certain level, I start choosing. I choose a pupil who still has that weakness in reading, I choose them, and, with the help of their classmates, they make that breakthrough.	Pf1
No, no.	*Pf2*

Source: Author's own elaboration

Pf1 uses narrative tales, both in oral and written form, while Pf2 doesn't incorporate tales due to the demands of the curriculum. The first teacher's approach presents an incongruity in the sense that, during the lesson monitoring phase in the class, we didn't observe the application of these methods that he points out here.

Table 6
Parental information

Category	Sub-category	Answers
The importance of reading	Cognitive development	It's essential. Why is that? A student who can't read knows nothing. The first thing you must worry about is knowing how to read and write, that's why I said it's essential. (PEg5)
		Yes, because children learn more through reading. (PEg6)
	Professional development	Yes. Why? Because I can do something here for the future of my children too. It can also add to the development of parents and children. (PEg3)
		Yes, it's very important because one day the son could be a general, a doctor, a teacher, being born a wise son is very important and will help the Angolan population. (PEg4)
		Yes, because reading helps my children to read, because today anyone who can't read is very difficult because reading is very important today. (PEg7)
Availability of books	Presence of schoolbooks	Yes, there are books, at least we have seven books. And they're all textbooks that are distributed here at school (PEg2, PEg1, PEg3, PEg4, PEg6 and PEg7).
		Sometimes I make a budget, I buy books that cost me 20 dollars, 50 dollars, I buy that, it's for the sake of my children tomorrow, I don't know how much wealth I can leave them. (PEg5)

Source: Author's own elaboration

In terms of cognitive development, reading is considered essential. One of the interviewees said that a student who can't read 'knows nothing', emphasising that reading and writing are the first skills that someone must learn. Without these skills, the individual is perceived as lacking basic knowledge. Another interviewee complements this view by stating that reading allows children to learn more. Thus, reading is seen as a tool for acquiring knowledge and a means of expanding

students' understanding and learning. About professional development, the interviewees emphasise that reading is important for integration and success in modern society. One of them mentioned that the ability to read is indispensable, because today, those who can't read face great difficulties because it is a skill that allows them to navigate the contemporary world and thrive in it.

Regarding the availability of books, except for one interviewee who said he had a library at home with lots of books, the majority indicated that the only books the students have are those distributed by the school.

Discussion

This section is reserved for discussing the results of all the informants, from students to teachers, parents and carers.

Macroprocess: Identify

In the first test, in question 3.a, in the macro-process aimed at identifying the main characters in the text with the title 'The Neber Leopard', we found the following: 2.9 per cent of correct answers, 57.1 per cent of incorrect answers and 40 per cent of students who didn't answer the question (no answers). When cross-referenced with the data from the fourth test on question 6 relating to inference, we obtained the following: 85.3 per cent correct answers, 8.8 per cent incorrect answers and 5.9 per cent no answers.

Reading the results above, we can see that there have been improvements: in the first collection, only 2.9 per cent answered correctly, in the second case there was a very significant advance, rising to 85.3 per cent and with a difference of 82.4 per cent.

It's all down to the strategy we've implemented, above all by prioritising short story work in the classroom and guiding reading at home. As stated by PF2, who considered that he doesn't work much with short stories as a tool for developing reading and comprehension skills due to a lack of textbooks and a lack of specialisation in the area. Added to this is the role of the family and the student's own performance (of course they need to emerge in an environment of permanent contact with books, improve their skills and have a taste for reading).

In the same vein, Azevedo and Sardinha (2013) consider that the process of developing reading skills is a lifelong project and that the school should play a supporting role (providing books and other materials for teaching and learning to read). For the authors, sometimes students not only don't read because they don't like it, but it can also be because they don't know how.

In addition to the lack of textbooks and especially literary books, the context under study is immersed in a situation where the language of instruction is not the students' L1, which may be another factor that increases the students' difficulties.

For, in the authors' view, three aspects must be considered during the teaching-learning process of reading: the text, the context and the reader. The facilities that the text provides in terms of the type of language it uses, seeing if the students can quickly construct the meaning of the text, can arouse more enthusiasm for the text, and allied to this, the need for texts to present the students' cultural elements stands out (Azevedo & Sardinha, 2013).

Pimenta (2005, p. 27) also emphasises this aspect when he says that 'when reading, the reader must take an active role, forming hypotheses about what might happen in the text - predictions - based on the clues the text gives him and on his previous knowledge'. This exercise depends on knowledge about culture, language and reading more. However, this prediction can be confirmed or not.

Identifying words and phrases is the first step in the macro-process of identifying, as students need to be able to recognise them, understand their meaning and understand how they connect within the text. In a bilingual society, in our view, this skill is even more complex, as students need to navigate between two languages, often with different structures and vocabularies.

The gradual increase in the percentages described above has an interesting implication in that it prompts us to pay more attention to pedagogical-didactic significance, as it is an effective indicator that guided reading, especially of short stories, helps in the initial activation of the skills underlying literary reading, especially with regard to the construction of meaning and attention to the structuring elements of the narrative text, such as the characters, and this suggests that systematic contact with literary texts in particular with didactic mediation can have relatively rapid effects on students' literacy, even in a bilingual context, where linguistic fluency may not be fully consolidated.

As for teachers, we would say that focusing on the use of short stories can be particularly interesting due to their clear structure and engaging narrative. At first, it is important to explicitly and systematically teach how to identify key elements within the narrative (short stories). To this end, it is recommended that teachers provide explicit instructions on how to identify key words and important phrases, using concrete and contextualised examples in both languages if necessary.

Inference macro-processes

The results obtained in the tests applied to the students, specifically about the macro-process of inference, reveal a significant progression in skills over the course of the assessments. A thorough analysis of the data shows a continuous and substantial improvement in inference skills, which indicates that the pedagogical interventions implemented were effective.

From the fourth test onwards, specifically in question 6, there was a notable improvement, with 85.3 per cent of correct answers, 8.8 per cent of incorrect answers and 5.9 per cent of omissions. The high rate of correct answers at this stage

demonstrates an improvement and consolidation of the students' inference skills. We can say that there has been significant progress reflected in the effectiveness of the teaching practices implemented over the period of our didactic intervention. The marked reduction in incorrect answers and the slight variation in omissions represent the students' growing confidence and competence in making inferences. The evolution of the test results indicates that the educational strategies focussed on the macro-process of inference were not only appropriate but also effective.

Giasson (2000) considers inference to be the process of identifying and understanding referents and connectors to integrate meaning. It can be made from sentence connections and imagination. This means that the reader needs to go beyond what is in the text and find answers to some of the questions that the text raises. The author emphasises two types of inference: logical (based on reading the text) and pragmatic (based on logic).

In this case, teachers can model the process of inference through thinking aloud when reading short stories, showing students how to connect information and interpret implicit meanings. On the other hand, selecting appropriate texts, such as short stories rich in detail and narrative complexity, can also provide ample opportunities for practising inference. However, texts with ambiguities and implied elements encourage students to use their inferencing skills to fully understand the story.

As for the bias mitigation procedures, given the results of the study, which show a low level of literacy among the students, we saw a considerable improvement over the course of our intervention. Firstly, there was uniformity in the assessment criteria we used, i.e., we applied the same instruments at the beginning, middle and end of the didactic intervention, which helped us to make an accurate and reliable comparison. It's important to emphasise that we also systematically recorded the students' data for continuous monitoring, even though there were cases of dropouts, as we mentioned earlier. We are aware of all the socio-cultural factors that directly or indirectly contribute to the students' difficulties in reading and comprehension, but we were still able to control these situations by targeting our research at a certain heterogeneous group. Therefore, the qualitative analysis was complemented with simple quantitative indicators, which allowed us to cross-check evidence and strengthen the reliability of the results.

Therefore, we believe that the literature consulted for this study is in line with the results in those the students' reading skills, especially about character identification and full comprehension of the text, showed progressive increases in the rate of correct answers during the application of the tests. These data corroborate Giasson's (2000) findings that the use of active, engaging reading strategies, such as guided reading of short stories, enhances textual comprehension. It also confirms the ideas of Azevedo (2006) and Azevedo and Sardinha (2013) regarding the importance of teacher mediation as a facilitator of reading development in bilingual contexts. On the other hand, despite the improvements recorded, the very low initial results and the persistence of difficulties on the part

of the students reflect a mismatch between theory and practice, already pointed out by Pimenta (2005), Ramos and Silva (2014), where pedagogical practices centred on decoding limit the full development of reading competence. Finally, the data obtained reaffirms Sim-Sim's (2007) view of reading as a complex activity which requires diversified, ongoing pedagogical practices adapted to the students' linguistic reality.

Conclusion

In view of the above, we can conclude that the objective we have set ourselves has been achieved, as we can understand that the lack of school materials/manuals on literary texts, on the one hand; and on the other, the fact that the students' mother tongue is not the same as the teaching language, and the lack of teacher specialisation in Portuguese language teaching and literary education, are major obstacles in the teaching-learning process of reading and reading comprehension.

The study highlights that the under-utilisation of short stories as teaching tools, often due to curriculum restrictions and lack of training, hinders the development of reading skills in bilingual students for greater clarity. With the implementation of the strategy in the classroom, there have been improvements in the students' reading and comprehension. As stated by PF2, who considered that he doesn't work much with the short story as a tool for developing reading and comprehension skills due to a lack of textbooks and a lack of specialisation in the area.

As for teachers, we would say that focusing on the use of short stories can be particularly interesting due to their clear structure and engaging narrative. At first, it's important to explicitly and systematically teach how to identify key elements within the narrative (short stories). Teachers should particularly take the time to explain how to identify important key words and phrases, using concrete and contextualised examples in both languages if necessary.

In addition to the gains and difficulties observed, and as described above, the study was conducted in the context of a single school, which limits the generalisability of the results to other educational settings. Language interference, due to the coexistence of the students' mother tongue and the language of schooling, was a constant obstacle to interpreting the data. In addition, there was limited access to literary materials suitable for the bilingual context and it was difficult to gather more in-depth information from families, since not all the interviews with parents were completed since most of them were not proficient in L2. These limitations therefore reinforce the need to invest in specific teacher training for multilingual contexts, as well as to rethink curricula in the light of linguistic and cultural diversity. Future research could benefit from replicating the study with a larger and more varied sample, as well as longitudinal monitoring of students to assess the sustainability of learning over time.

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Bionote

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