

The Use of Fake News as Multimodal and Pedagogical Resources in Portuguese Language Teaching: A Case Study from the Application of Thematic Workshops in Portugal

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to demonstrate the results of a research project that has focused, as scientific objects, on the phenomenon of information disorder and its impacts on the dynamics of the functioning: 1) of societies; 2) the spaces of interaction/communication that are social networks; 3) the processes of teaching and learning for life (formal modality), co-constructed and consolidated in the school training space. Background: The activities carried out are part of the CoMMiTTEd Project 2021, an Erasmus+ action that takes a close look at Fake News constructed in the context specifically shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic, and which relates the emergence of the disease (and its proliferation) to minority groups, stimulating, on the one hand, scenarios conducive to the spread of hate speech, and, on the other, structures of oppression and exclusion. Methodology: In this sense, using a qualitative methodology with an interpretative-constructivist paradigm and exploratory characteristics (Babbie, 1986), a focus will be placed on the results obtained from the application of three thematic workshops in Portuguese territory. With the help of Case Studies (CoMMiTTEd Project 2022) that show systematic attacks on ethnic-racial minorities, migrants and refugees, for example, working with a target audience made up of Portuguese students between the 5th and 10th grade, we will discuss the added value and potential of working with Fake News as a pedagogical and multimodal resource in the classroom. This is thinking about an education committed to the Ethics and Aesthetics of Knowledge and the Promotion of Critical Thinking.

Keywords

Information Disorder, Fake News, Pedagogical and Multimodal Resources,

1. Introduction

During 2021 and 2022, the Department of Education and Psychology and the Center for Research in Didactics and Technology in the Training of Trainers (CIDTFF), funded by the Erasmus+ Program, led a dense investigation into the problem of the so-called Fake News. However, the project was not interested in just thinking about a conceptualization of the phenomenon, which had already been described extensively by various authors (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bucci, 2018; Neves & Borges, 2020; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2017; Pinheiro, 2021). The intention was precisely and specifically to expand the understanding of these informational disorders that are presented as Fake News (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and to reflect on what kind of contributions research in education could provide to the field of science in order to transform them into instruments of added value, re-signifying their use [mostly (in terms of discourse and politics, Santaella (2018))] in favor of generating benefits for civil society that suffers, *per se*, from the evils caused by it.

Since the project's researchers belong to different, but interconnected, categories in the large area of education, which is fundamental to the formation and transmutation of the discernment that subjects will have of the phenomena that will pass through them daily in their daily lives, including, and especially—the flood of information, it was only right and proper to accept the challenge of investigating critical alternatives for using Fake News as teaching and learning tools in teaching and learning processes. In the meantime, the researchers decided to define some important frameworks, so that there would be no escapes or inaccuracies in the results they wanted to obtain.

First of all, they went on to carefully select some “fraudulent news”, one of the alternative expressions for the inaccurate and more popularized expression “Fake News”, which, according to Bucci (2018: p. 22), has gone viral and lost its meaning, which aimed to justify the emergence or worsening of the Covid-19 pandemic to minority groups (whether social, political, economic, gender, sexual, ethnic, racial, etc.), in short, using them as scapegoats.

Next, the resources that would be added to these false pieces of information were selected, giving them a pedagogical and multimodal approach, aimed at the learning of a specific target audience: in this case, Portuguese primary and secondary school students between the 5th and 10th grades were selected. These, in turn, would experience thematic workshops involving didactic-pedagogical experience, as well as multimodal and with the development of a critical perspective of knowledge—in the context of the subject of Portuguese Language.

As such, this study is structured as follows: 1) Introduction; 2) Theoretical framework; 3) Methodology; 4) Results and discussions; 5) Conclusion. Finally, there is an acknowledgements section and the references used in the study.

2. Theoretical Framework

Since the introduction to this article has already concentrated some notions about the phenomenon of Fake News, albeit in a superficial way, we won't go too far into this theoretical reference. In this sense, we'll just make a few extra contributions that can provide the reader with additional information. Therefore, since the processes and problems of Information Disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and Fake News (Teixeira, Freire da Silva Oliveira, & Gomes São Marcos Simões, 2024) have been chosen as the central object of the research of the author of this text, due to the articulation with the CoMMiTTEd Project, some concepts and developments of the phenomenon will be pointed out below.

According to Monsees (2021), Fake News can be understood as a symptom of the weakening of democracies, as well as the growth of authoritarianism and political polarization across the globe. Wang (2020) also provides another interpretative perspective, suggesting that such misleading news (one of the possible translations for the term Fake News) is configured as publications “[...] that contain erroneous or false information, but do not report the incorrectness of the information” (p. 148).

Providing more global reflections on the macro-phenomenon in which Fake News is embedded, Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) observations also fall within this threshold. According to these authors, “Information Disorder” emerges as an alternative conceptual structure to the term “Fake News”: either because of its greater lexical-semantic precision or because of its ability to better escape the intricacies of a possible discursive maneuver (Soares, 2023) with the intention of distorting, altering, adulterating or manipulating a fact (Bentes & Souza-Santos, 2023). It should also be said that, for Bucci (2018), Pinheiro (2021) and Oliveira (2023), it is naive to think that such news is only linked to the culturally established common sense of a construct of evil that aims to win and defeat good. In other words, a “false” that wants to stand out from a “true”.

This Informational Disorder also gains strength and solidity as a concept (in the face of the hyponym “Fake News”) by setting precedence for questioning the term “Information” (primitive of “Informational”), contained in its structure. Pinheiro & Brito (2014), recovering the postulates of Nehmy & Paim (1998), remind us that information does not only have a positive side, from which only benefits and advantages emerge. On the contrary: corresponding to the naturalness of things, it also has an imposing and inherently negative side, which is (or has been) intentionally overshadowed, due to the apparent surpassing that the results achieved with it produce over the damage caused by it.

For a long time hidden, but no longer controlled, the negative nature of information is what legitimizes the current concern with phenomena such as Disinformation and Fake News, since these are the fruits of a not so explored and publicized version of the feat of information, which should perhaps be experienced and felt through a challenge and sensory reflexivity: “If you close your eyes, does it almost feel like nothing has changed at all?” (Bastille, 2013) (Figure 1).

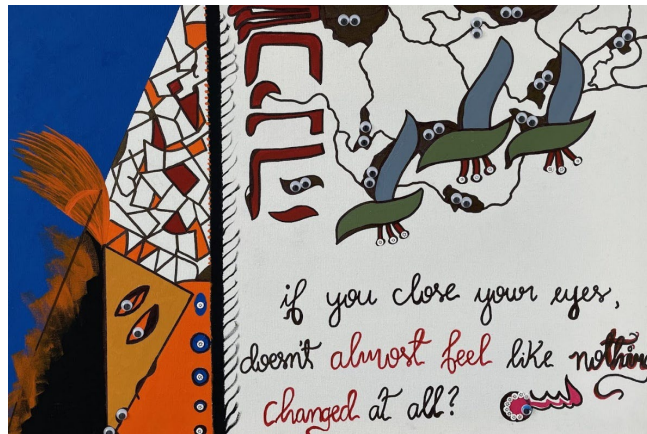


Figure 1. What you can't see | Source: Painting on canvas signed by the author of this article”.

3. Methodology

Although in scientific texts we often find sections dedicated exclusively to the methodological section of the work being proposed, or even that which has already been developed, we often come across textual flaws (in terms of text design) in relation to what should be covered in an excerpt dedicated to mentioning and justifying the methods used in such a scientific proposal, especially in the field of educational research (Colás Bravo, 2009). In this sense, sometimes we come up against methodological explanations that do not explain the basis of such a method, which generally consider one or more theories, and sometimes we are confronted with the lack of delineation of the contribution and limitation that any theories provide (or have provided) to the creation and/or use of such methods.

Having said that, we'll get straight to the point, thinking it's only necessary to mention the nature, paradigm and characteristic to which this work is linked and then briefly present the data collection process, which, in summary, will be nothing more than the contextualization of the applicability of the teaching project for the use of Fake News as a multimodal resource for the teaching and critical learning of the Portuguese language, based on previously structured thematic workshops (with specific materials, considering its target audience and the rest of its *modus operandi*).

To frame the nature of this study as primarily qualitative, we used the ideas of Gil (2008), who usually defines this methodological typology as an epistemological offspring of the social sciences. For him, it is in the process of human observation and contemplation, mediated by sensory stimuli, that we receive and deduce the information that the outside world reveals to us. Gil (2008), in this sense, is categorical in saying that “[...] observation is undoubtedly an important source of knowledge” (p. 1, translated by the author), and it is the basic assumption of a study that aims to analyze subjective and often intact data, since they start from human immateriality, requiring the subject's reflexivity to ruminate on phenomena or intercurrent actions.

As for the paradigm, we have linked this study to the interpretive-constructivist

one stipulated by Coutinho (2008) and Denzin & Lincoln (2018). Briefly, however, it should be said that we follow, for the idea of paradigm, the idea designed and consolidated by Thomas Kuhn. For the physicist, such a methodological breakdown would refer to “[...] what the members of a community share” (Kuhn, 1998: p. 208, translated by the author), making it known that “community”, in the context outlined by Kuhn in his work, would be equivalent to a group of individuals who share the same abstraction, the same way of thinking. It’s as if an entire community of subjects wore glasses that had the same numbered lenses, in terms of degree. In other words, they saw the world through the same lens; in the same way.

3.1. Preparing Resources

The preparation of the resources, which we can henceforth call didactic and multimodal materials, was systematized organically among the members of the CoMMiTTed project team, as the false discursive pieces were selected and turned into case studies, later published on the project website (CoMMiTTed Project 2022). **Figure 2** shows an example of one of the materials that was taken to the classrooms to make the workshops more dynamic for the target students.

CASE STUDY 1

The problem of refugees" - which M&M are you going to eat?

On the April 22nd of 2020, the Portuguese extreme right-wing party Facebook page "Ergue-te" (Rise-up) published the following content:

Partido Ergue-te
22 de abril de 2020

Um migrante ficou ferido na terça-feira à noite num desacato entre refugiados que estão a fazer quarentena devido à covid-19 na base da Ota, concelho de Alenquer, disse hoje um porta-voz da da Força Aérea.
Fonte: https://www.noticiasominuto.com/_/um-migrante-ferido...

O problema dos refugiados.

Temos aqui milhares de M&Ms. Somente 10 estão envenenados.

Qual deles é que vais comer?

The post translates to: "an Air Force spokesman said today that a migrant was injured Tuesday night in a disagreement between refugees who are quarantined due to COVID-19 at the Ota base in the municipality of Alenquer".

And the image points out "the problem of refugees". It is said that "there are thousands of M&M's here. Only 10 are poisoned". And finishes asking "which one will you take?".

Figure 2. Case Study 1, “The problem of refugees”, which M&M are you going to eat? | Source: CoMMiTTed Project 2021.

3.2. Workshops/Data Collection

In all, three workshop sessions were held, using the didactic and multimodal material prepared for the discussion and teaching and learning moments (it should always be remembered that this was in the context of the Portuguese language subject). Two of these sessions were held with classes made up of students from Portuguese secondary schools: on 29/03/22, in a school belonging to one of the Aveiro School Groups, and on 09/06/22, in a school belonging to one of the Algarve School Groups. The third and final session was held during the 2022 edition of the Summer Academy at the University of Aveiro, which took place on 20/07/2022 and was an adaptation of the work previously carried out in the other two workshops. As the target audience was different from that of the CoMMIT-TEd project, the corpus used to stimulate discussions needed to be slightly modified. In the first two sessions, the title of the workshops was “*Queremos (lá) saber!*” (the English equivalent of “We (don’t) care about that!”), with a questioning tone, since these were students with an age group that was more difficult to capture their attention, especially on more theoretical topics or those that seemed uninteresting. For the summer academy version, however, we used the expression “*CriAção em redes*” (the English equivalent of “CreA[c]tion in networks”), proposing something more dynamic, but which was still intertwined (intentional hook with the word “networks”) with the project proposal. The following section discusses the main results achieved through the workshops, which were able to count on a specific moment for data collection.

4. Results and Discussions

In this section, we will present the results, as well as their discussion, in an unusual way, considering the neural link model of discursivity in social sciences proposed by Gil (2008), for studies with experimental characteristics, which this work fits into, as already mentioned in the methodological section.

However, we would like to emphasize that the discursive path that guided the reflexivity of the discussion and the construction of the results was supported by studies and research into Critical Thinking (Franco, Mota, & Silva, 2021) and the model of education that considers the [more than ever] necessary Ethics and Aesthetics of Knowledge of eternal Freirean Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2013).

4.1. Workshop No. 1—Aveiro (March 29th, 22nd)

As strong points, we would highlight: 1) The participation of most of the students, who answered questions and asked others; 2) The interest shown by the three teachers present in the room in analyzing the examples of Fake News that were presented; 3) The willingness of the teacher to send us the (gamified) evaluation that we had left for the students to do, which, due to an internet failure, we were unable to apply.

As less strong aspects, we would highlight: 1) The length of the workshop. We think that if there had been more time, i.e. more than 45 minutes, there would

4.3. Differences between the Experiences of Workshops No. 1 (Aveiro) and No. 2 (Algarve)

The differences between the organization of the 1st Workshop and this one allowed us to confirm that it is essential to adapt the Fake News to be analyzed to the age group with which we intend to work. The 10th grade students (from the Algarve School Group) were more participative and involved than the 8th grade students (from the Aveiro School Group). The time factor, 90 minutes in the Algarve compared to 45 minutes in the Aveiro version, allowed for greater interaction between all those involved, and the reflections presented were more consistent. In both sessions, it is important to highlight that we obtained interactions from 29 students (17 in the dynamic version in Aveiro and 12 in the dynamic version in the Algarve). It is also important to note that the role of the teachers and teaching assistants in both places was slightly different. In Aveiro, we saw a more observant, more learning role. In the Algarve, on the other hand, the role played was more supportive of the facilitators, as well as intervening in some of the questions that were asked during the session, linking the discussions with the knowledge that had been built up throughout the course with the students, for example. Returning to the question of student involvement in the workshop dynamics, we believe that the material prepared may have been a catalyst for the involvement of a more “mature” audience, with more developed literacy skills and a broader and more critical repertoire for engaging with the topic. Our selection of materials, however, had considered that both audiences could already be at the same level of learning in terms of these language skills [in terms of the Portuguese Curriculum Framework, Essential Learning (AE)]. We recognize that this point, together with the inclusion of direct and indirect quotes from students’ discursive interventions during the dissemination of the workshops, may be areas for improvement in this work.

4.4. Workshop No. 3—Summer Academy, University of Aveiro (July 20th, 22nd)



Figure 5. Workshop No. 3 (Summer Academy of the University of Aveiro) (Source: Language Teaching Laboratory (LabELing) of the University of Aveiro). Highlight: Photograph digitally manipulated to meet the requirements of the General Data Protection Act (LGPD).



Figure 6. Student Productions Workshop No. 3 (Summer Academy of the University of Aveiro (Source: Language Teaching Laboratory (LabELing) of the University of Aveiro). Highlight: Photograph digitally manipulated to meet the requirements of the General Data Protection Act (LGPD).



Figure 7. Student Productions Workshop No. 3 (Summer Academy of the University of Aveiro (Source: Language Teaching Laboratory (LabELing) of the University of Aveiro). Highlight: Photograph digitally manipulated to meet the requirements of the General Data Protection Act (LGPD).

As this third and final workshop was an adaptation of the other two previously structured and energized workshops, which were aimed at a different target audience, already mentioned a few times in this article, we will let the photographic records (**Figures 5-7**) of the adaptation entitled “*Criação em redes*” (the English equivalent of CreA[c]tion in networks) speak for themselves. After all, what value would we give to images if we only let them surface under the tutelage of one or more words (Gradim, 2007)?

5. Conclusion

We can conclude that expanding the discussion of Fake News and Disinformation to niches other than just academic ones, with a focus on conceptualization or even political implications, provides great contributions to civil society. In this work, particularly, we can see the contributions that a teaching project aimed at organizing thematic workshops for primary school students in Portugal (linked to a scientific research project in higher education) has brought material and concrete results that can be seen in the short, medium and long term in the lives of each individual involved in the process.

Also noteworthy is the innovation of the project, its scope, and its ability to adapt between age groups during the course of its execution. It is well known that building and carrying out a teaching, extension or research project is no easy task, as it involves taking into account variables that may be beyond the control of time and space. But this project has shown results, even in the midst of the adaptation processes it has had to face, that are extremely valid and important for the educational environment. By visualizing the results, it is possible (as an educator, for example) to come up with alternative ways of getting around the challenges that contemporary phenomena bring to classrooms on a daily basis.

Bringing it into the area of languages, the contribution made by this endeavor becomes even more indisputable, as can be seen from the words spoken by the students and the way they weave their networks, in the results section above. Linguistically and critically, the development of these students' skills on these issues will be gradual, after all, every study has its limitations, it would be no different from this one. And this is where the suggestion to extend the study comes in.

It is suggested that it could be developed around other subjects and involve other skills and themes. It also raises the possibility of interdisciplinarity between disciplines, and that there could even be not just one workshop session, but a broader teaching project around the theme, opening up space for long-term monitoring of the knowledge that has developed about the object in question.

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To my parents, who never stopped believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself.

To science. To lucidity. To kindness.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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