

A DEFINITION OF LITERARY LITERACY: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE SYLLABUSES AND INTERVIEWS WITH PORTUGUESE LECTURERS OF LITERATURE

Rita Baleiro

School of Management, Hospitality and Tourism, University of the Algarve
(Portugal)

rbaleiro@ualg.pt

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present a definition of literary literacy in the context of majors in languages, literatures and cultures, in Portugal. A definition of literary literacy was deduced from a content analysis of primary data sources and from the theoretical underpinnings of the transactional theory of reading. The primary data sources are fourteen Portuguese and English literature syllabuses from four Portuguese universities (Lisboa, Nova, Coimbra and Porto) and twelve interviews with Portuguese university lecturers of literature. Based on the findings of a content analysis of both syllabuses and interviews, from the lecturers' point of view, a literary literate student doing a major in languages, literatures and cultures must, above all, be able to contextualize literary texts and their authors both historically and culturally, must be able to present an interpretation as a coherent text, and must be able to do and organize bibliographical research.

Keywords: literary literacy, higher education, Portugal.

Introduction

In Portugal, research into literacy has expanded fast over the last two decades with an emphasis on reading literacy (Lages, 2007; Santos, 2007; Sim-Sim and Viana, 2007) and information literacy (Malheiro et al., 2010). The majority of these studies have focused on how elementary or secondary school students read, on adults' reading habits, on the system of adult education, and on the role played by university and public libraries. The few studies with a focus on higher education students often fall within sociological theoretical frameworks, and examine students' social and cultural background, students' leisure practices, attitudes and representations of the world, i.e., political systems, family, labour market (Almeida et al., 2003; Balsa, Simões, Nunes, Carmo, and Campos, 2001; Guerreiro and Abrantes, 2004).

As a result, in Portugal, investigations into literacy and literary reading in higher education are scarce; and investigations that examine literacy and literary theory jointly, such as the study presented in this paper, are even scarcer. And, apparently, the same happens outside Portugal, as Lisa Eckert (2008) acknowledged in an article on the study of the intersection of reading strategies in secondary and post-secondary education.

Despite David Barton's observation that 'literacy and literary have grown apart in an almost deliberate distancing of elite culture and mass culture' (2009: 167), literacy theory and literary theory are associated research fields, as both are concerned with the meaning production process and with individual responses to texts (Kern 2002; Kern and Schultz, 2005). The operations involved in the act of literary interpretation are described in the transactional theory of literary reading (Iser, [1978] 1980; Rosenblatt, [1938] 2005), and demand the activation of a cluster of skills that can be presented under the heading 'literary literacy'.

Regardless of the acknowledged importance of the reader's role in the meaning making process of a literary text, in the university context, many of the literary literacy skills that students activate in a given situation, in order to interpret a literary text, are not determined only by their individual choices, motivations and interests. Instead these skills are determined by various contextual

elements, with the student being just one of those elements. As a result, in the process of defining literary literacy in the context of majors in languages, literatures and cultures (LLC), in Portugal, this study focuses on two of the elements of the context that often determine these skills: literature syllabuses and lecturers of literature.

Considering that literary literacy is not a one-dimensional concept, in this study, the concept is presented according to the three-dimensional model of academic literacy by Bill Green (1999) and Bill Green and Cal Durrant (2001); this is a model that includes a critical dimension, a cultural dimension and an operational dimension.

Taking into account that the design of any research project depends to a large degree on the researcher's underlying theoretical assumptions about the concepts that he/she is dealing with, in the next section the theoretical underpinnings of the main concepts of this study are sketched out, i.e., literacy, skills and literary reading.

Literacy

A definition of literacy must account for the nature of this concept which is situated, contextual and, consequently, relative and culturally bound. Literacy is much more than 'the individual capacity of processing written information in daily life' as it is commonly defined. As David Barton (2009) argues literacy is above all of a social nature, it is culturally sensitive, and it is always embedded in a specific situation and context. This is why definitions of literacy are so broad and heterogeneous. However, by assuming that literacy 'is a stable, coherent, identifiable configuration of practices' (Barton, 2009: 38) serving a specific purpose in a specific context, it is possible to present a definition of literary literacy in the context of majors in LLC, in Portugal.

Therefore, in this study, literacy equates to the continuous and creative processing of the written word that occurs in a given situation and in a given context. This continuous and creative processing of written work can be revealed when reading a literary text or writing a job application letter, for instance. The common goal is always to produce "something" with meaning, taking into account the conventions of the context in which the literacy skills are activated. Transferring this definition of literacy to the context of the majors in LLC, the context this study focuses on, one can merge it with the concept of 'interpretative communities' presented by Stanley Fish (1980), according to whom communities/contextes define the reading and interpretation strategies of literary texts. From Fish's point of view these strategies are imposed on the reader who, as a consequence, does not act independently. In my opinion, it is not just the community the person belongs to, but the different contextual dynamics, that influence *literacy events*: 'the particular activities where literacy plays a role' and *literacy practices*: 'the general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in a literacy event' (Barton, 2009: 37). If the community could fully determine literacy activities, then every student in a given university class would present the same interpretation of a particular literary text. Thus, although context shapes literacy activities, it does not totally determine them; other dynamics interfere, such as the individual's character, the individual's attitude or the type of task to be performed. In sum, literacy implies the activation of specific skills, which are determined by a configuration of practices in a given situation and context. In the next section I will focus on a concept often associated with literacy: the concept of skill.

Skill

Due to the ambiguity of the concept of skill, it is important to clarify how this term is used in this paper. Skills are personal constructs that need to be activated in order to perform a given task. This activation depends on the adoption of a certain attitude. In other words, the person needs to make a rational decision to activate certain skills according to the task that he/she has to perform. Therefore, skills emerge from actions and are permanently reconstructed and recontextualised from clusters of

processes that the person needs to undertake: the activation of prior knowledge, a focused comparison between prior and new knowledge, an analysis of the data gathered in a situation – reading a literary text, for instance – and the performance of a number of mental operations, such as, reasoning, making decisions and hesitating, amongst others.

Literary Reading

This study approaches literary reading from the transactional theory of reading. Thus, it is assumed that the reader plays a vital role in the dynamic process of meaning production. This, however, does not mean that readers should respond to texts exclusively from an over subjective standpoint. As Wolfgang Iser ([1978] 1980) claims, although reading is the basis for all interpretation processes of a literary text, there is a difference between an ‘innocent’ reading and reading as a conscientious act that has the potential to turn itself into interpretation by involving the creation and confirmation of hypotheses in a permanent interaction between reader and text. I have taken this theoretical approach to literary reading for two reasons. The first is connected to the fact that the meaning of a literary text is unstable. Therefore, only the intervention of the actions performed by the reader fix a certain pattern of meaning. The second reason is a consequence of my own understanding of the act of literary interpretation: I consider it to be an idiosyncratic act wherein the reader chooses to activate certain literary literacy skills and not others, while paying close attention to his/her emotional response to the text, to the textual material – the words and sequences of words in the text – and to the conventions of the community he/she belongs to.

When reading literary texts, the reader has to be reflective, attentive and select information in order to confirm hypotheses in an ongoing interaction with the literary text. This is a type of text which is most often characterized by ambiguity, offering multiple possibilities for meaning and, as a result, imposing resistance on the process of meaning production. In the act of literary reading, the reader has to adopt an aesthetic attitude in order to inhabit ‘*the proposed world*’ created in the text wherein the reader can project his/hers possibilities for meaning (Ricoeur, 1991: 86; emphasis in the original). During this process, the reader fills in the ‘blanks’ in the text and, after producing several units of meaning, he/she is able to produce a meaning that renders the literary text coherent. For this reason, reading equates interpretation.

After this brief presentation of the transactional theory of reading relating to the act of the interpretation of literary texts, one of the assumptions of this study is further clarified: the importance of the reader’s role and his/her attitude to the act of literary interpretation.

David Barton acknowledges the existence of different types of literacy, when he states that: ‘when different practices cluster into coherent groups it is useful to talk in terms of them as being different literacies’ (2009: 38). As far as reading literary texts at university is concerned, a number of practices are shared by academia; therefore, one can talk about one of those different types of literacy: literary literacy.

A good starting point to define literary literacy is to identify the skills that should be activated when reading a literary text in a higher education context. This observation leads to the methodological framework of this research.

Methodological Framework

The main research question is: How do Portuguese university lecturers of literature define literary literacy? Figure 1, below, shows how this question is complemented by two exploratory research questions, and which data sources and analysis method are used to answer each question. In order to address the first of these questions – (i) What literary literacy skills should students be able to activate at the end of a literature course? – content analysis was conducted on fourteen Portuguese and English literature syllabuses from four Portuguese universities (Lisboa, Nova, Coimbra and Porto)

between the 2007/8 and 2009/10 academic years. To answer the second exploratory research question – (ii) Which literary literacy skills must be activated by a student doing a major in LLC when writing an essay about a literary text? – interviews with twelve lecturers of literature from two Portuguese universities (Algarve and Nova) were conducted.

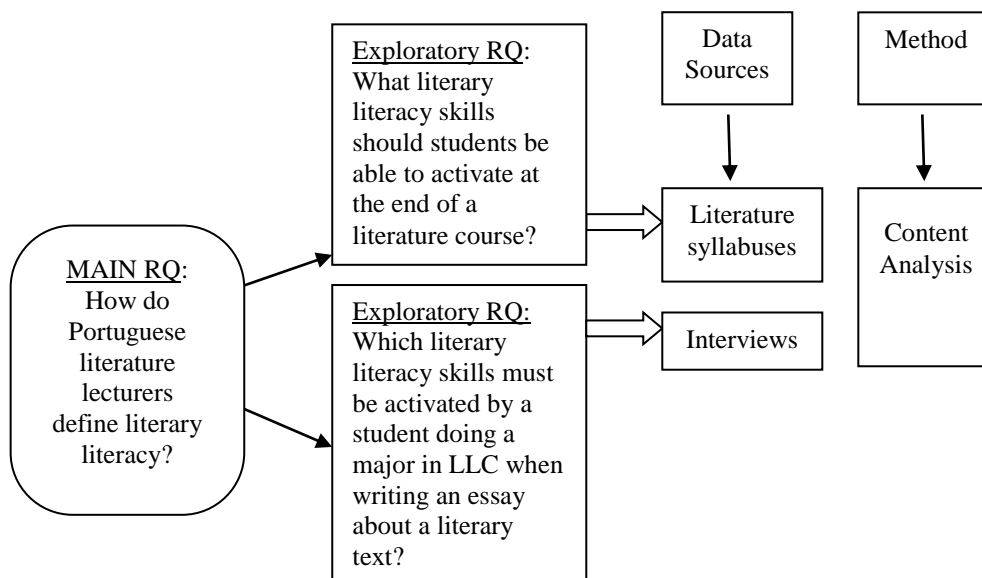


Figure 1: Research questions, data sources and method of analysis

Considering that the act of literary reading cannot be studied without taking into account the context where it happens, for the reason that context influences students (as well as students influencing context), this study focuses on lecturers, because they are one of the elements of that context that shapes ‘literacy practices’ and ‘literacy events’. The reason why the second exploratory research question asks lecturers in literature about the literary literacy skills that should be activated in essays, results from the fact that essays are one of the most common ‘literacy events’ in majors in LLC. They are a regular repeated activity at university and an assessment instrument with a long tradition in higher education.

Concerning the procedures to collect the data for this research, syllabuses were retrieved from the universities websites and interviews with the lecturers were conducted via email. The main objectives of using such an interview technique were to minimize the possibility of a refusal, which would be more likely to happen in a face-to-face communication situation, and to allow more time for lecturers to reflect on the question. Given the overall orientation of this research, i.e. ‘exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive’ (Mason, 2002: 24), it falls within the qualitative paradigm. Moreover, its procedures, methods and sample are characteristically qualitative. As is the case with many qualitative studies, the sample was small (twelve participants). This can be justified because the study was not set up to generalize the incidence of its findings onto the wider university population. The criterion underlying the choice of sample was defined prior to selecting the actual participants: they had to be literature lecturers working at Portuguese universities. The reason why the

interviews were conducted with lecturers working at the University of the Algarve and at University Nova (Lisboa) was exclusively one of convenience.

To sum up, a definition of literary literacy was deduced from the content analysis of both syllabuses and interviews and from assumptions about the transactional theory of reading. The definition is presented according to the structure of three-dimensional academic literacy by Green (1999) and by Green and Durrant (2001), which includes a critical dimension, a cultural dimension and an operational dimension.

Green's Three-Dimensional Model of Academic Literacy

Since Green and Durrant's model is about academic literacy, its content is not considered in the definition of literary literacy presented in this paper. Instead, only its structure has been adopted and adapted in order to fit the concept of literary literacy. Therefore, in this section, the three-dimensional model of academic literacy is briefly presented. In Green's own words: '[...] the operational refers to turning 'it' on, knowing how to make it work; the cultural involves using 'it' to do something meaningful and effective, in particular situations and circumstances [...]; and the critical entails recognising and acknowledging that all social practices and their meaning systems are partial and selective, and shaped by power relations.' (1999: 43). Although Green (1999: 43) clearly points out that each of the dimensions is not to be understood independently, as they always intercept one another, in this paper, for analytical and presentation purposes, they are shown separately.

Findings

Elaine Showalter points out that lecturers of literature often do not define, in their syllabuses, the skills they hope to teach and to be learned by the end of a literature course: 'By and large, we [lecturers in literature] are not accustomed to defining our objectives as actions or competencies – what students will be able to do, as well as understand – or as transferable skills. As one lecturer comments, "Literature instructors often define their courses by the text on their syllabi...not acts that students will be able to perform."' (2003: 24). Despite Showalter's observation, the task of identifying literary literacy skills in Portuguese syllabuses was not difficult. Probably, this was due to the implementation of the Bologna Treaty, in 2006. For the sake of student mobility inside Europe, the Bologna Treaty established that syllabuses would explicitly present their skills and, as a consequence, this has changed the scenery presented by Elaine Showalter.

In fact, most of the syllabuses analysed have a section entitled either 'objectives' or 'learning outcomes'. In these sections lecturers present what students should be able to do at the end of each literature course; information which reveals the literary literacy skills that students are supposed to be able to activate at the end of each course. Although the information under the heading 'objectives' is sometimes vague (e.g. 'the students should be able to analyze a literary text'), the content analysis makes it possible clearly to identify the literary literacy skills lecturers expect students to activate.

Consequently, the content analysis of the fourteen Portuguese and English literature syllabuses reveals that within the:

Critical dimension – Lecturers expect the student to interact actively, attentively and reflectively with the text in order to create a hypothesis of meaning that will render coherence to the text and bring forth an interpretation: he/she 'must be able to do textual analysis'; 'must be able to read critically'; 'must be able to read primary and secondary bibliographies critically' and 'must be able to read key-texts critically' (these sentences were taken from the syllabuses and translated into English).

Cultural dimension - Lecturers expect the student to be able to contextualize literary texts and their authors both historically and culturally and to carry out intertextual readings: he/she ‘must be able to place texts in an historical and cultural context’, ‘must be able to place the authors in an historical and cultural context’, ‘must be able read in an intertextual and comparative way, attending to several art and cultural expressions’ (these sentences were taken from the syllabuses and translated into English).

Operational dimension – Lecturers expect the student to be able to look for and organize information from reference bibliographies: he/she ‘must do and organize bibliographical research’ (this sentence was taken from five of the syllabuses and translated into English).

The following table displays the most frequently stated skills that students should be able to activate at the end of a literature course as well as the total number of mentions. The skills are presented according to Green and Durrant’s three-dimensional model.

Dimensions	Skills	Mentions N=14
Critical dimension	To read critically and to do textual analysis	4
Cultural dimension	To place literary texts and their authors in an historical and cultural context	7
	To compare literary texts with other texts and art forms	3
Operational dimension	To do and organize bibliographical research	5

Table 1.1: The most frequently mentioned abilities in the literature syllabuses

In five of the fourteen syllabuses it was clearly stated that these skills should be activated when students respond in writing to literary texts. These written assignments were explicitly described as ‘essays’ or ‘short essays’. This confirms that essays are one of the most common ‘literacy events’ in majors in LLC, in the sense that they are a regular repeated activity at university, as mentioned before. Concerning the content analysis findings from the twelve interviews, the following tables disclose the skills the twelve lecturers of literature pointed out, as well as the number of lecturers that mentioned each of those skills:

Critical dimension of literary literacy	Mentions N=12
Present an original theme	5
Comment and/or place hypotheses to explain events and characters’ behaviour	3
Identify the literary genre, the theme and the author’s intention	2
Avoid too much paraphrasing	2
Avoid plagiarism	2
Describe and analyze the textual structure	1

Identify the uniqueness of the text	1
Present a small number of quotes	1
Avoid the common-places	1

Table 1.2: Critical dimension literary literacy skills identified in the lecturers' answers

Cultural dimension of literary literacy	Mentions N=12
Establish and/or identify connections between literary texts and other texts or works of art	5
Place the literary text in an historical and cultural context	4
Refer to the author's biographical data	2

Table 1.3: Cultural dimension literary literacy skills identified in the lecturers' answers

Operational dimension of literary literacy	Mentions N=12
Write a coherent essay	7
Present bibliographic references according to academic formal conventions	4
Avoid grammar and spelling mistakes	2
Avoid ambiguity	1
Use recent and reliable reference bibliographies	1

Table 1.4: Operational dimension literary literacy skills identified in the lecturers' answers

A definition of Literary Literacy

In this section the findings of the analysis are brought together in a final discussion in order to present a definition of literary literacy according to Portuguese lecturers of literature. Based on the number of mentions the most frequently stated skill that students should be able to activate is placing literary texts and their authors in an historical and cultural context. The second most frequent skill is to do, organize, and display the results of bibliographical research. The third most often mentioned skills are: to establish connections between texts or works of art and to write a coherent text to bring out an interpretation of a literary text for a literature class. The fourth most often stated skills that students should be able to activate are to read critically and to do textual analysis.

Taking into account the most frequently mentioned skills, literary literacy can be defined as the competency to amplify individual self-reflective interaction with a literary text in order to produce an interpretation. In this process, the student must activate a web of specific skills that reflect the literacy practices of the context of the majors in LLC. These specific skills can be divided into three dimensions that should always intersect one another:

Critical Dimension:

a) To read critically. This means that students must read a literary text in an attentive, informed and creative way (Coelho, 1976). They must recognise that a literary text is brought into existence by the convergence of reader and text; a convergence that is regulated by a set of instructions: some of these

are determined in the text, and others (the ‘blanks’ or ‘gaps’) are to be determined by the student/reader during the reading process. As a result, when reading a literary text, the student must make predictions about future events and also recognise those predictions, as well as other thoughts and emotions, regarding events, characters and the plot. In this continual process the student creates units of meaning that must be considered in order to produce an interpretation (Iser, [1978] 1980). The skill to read critically also means that the student must draw upon extratextual interpretative strategies (those that the lecturer and the academic community have established to perform the act of interpretation). These strategies must be taken into account, though they do not define entirely the interpretation of a text. This happens because the act of interpretation is always idiosyncratic and the student is not ‘a puppet in the hands of some mythical, external power called the environment of culture’ (Rosenblatt, [1938] 2005: 148);

b) To do textual analysis. This means students must be able to decompose the whole text into its components. The student must be able to pay close attention to the words chosen by the author, the order in which they are presented, their rhythm, their sound and the effects they produce in the reader (Rosenblatt, [1938] 2005). It is important that analysis of the textual components is not utterly overshadowed by the reader’s subjectivity. The student must be able to recognize that a literary text is a creative construction of a universe, with unique rules, in which sequences of words may acquire new and multiple interpretations; thus, it is up to him/her to expand what is explicit and what is implicit in the text, in order to transform the text into a coherent whole. Iser defines this as the ‘consistency-building process’ (1993: 63). This also means that although interpretative operations are individual, they cannot be arbitrary (Culler, 1980). Therefore, the student must be able to identify the text’s literary genre, its thematic nucleus, its unique features and, eventually, the authorial intention (Showalter, 2003).

Cultural Dimension:

a) To place literary texts and their authors in an historical and cultural context. Firstly, this means the student must be able to recognize, identify and reflect on ‘the system of living ideas systems’, i.e. the culture the text belongs to. Secondly, it means the student must appeal to his/her ‘background material’ (Rosenblatt, [1938] 2005: 250) or extratextual information (such as biographical data);

b) To establish connections between texts or works of art. To do this the student must set in motion his/her previous knowledge.

Operational Dimension:

a) To do, organize, and display the results of bibliographical research about the text, its author, its context and/or prior interpretations of the literary text. This means the student must be able to select, interpret and present such information and its bibliographical references according to academic conventions (Showalter, 2003);

b) To write a coherent text to bring out an interpretation of a literary text for a literature class.

Conclusions

From the analysis of the findings of this study, it seems obvious that the traditional stress on textual analysis and close reading is decreasing in favour of the skill to analyse the social, cultural and historical forces that ended up shaping the writer’s vision and his/her literary work, in favour of the skill to convene other artistic works to the process of literary interpretation, in favour of the skill to

write a coherent literary analysis essay, and in favour of the skill to use effectively the information brought together by the bibliographical research process. As a consequence, literary interpretation is currently not confined to the words in text, their order, their sound, and their rhythm, but rather to take into account the reciprocal relations of readers, authors, texts, and context (Barton, 2009).

The concept of literary literacy presented in this study is associated with a set of skills that is activated in the interpretation process. However, it is important to state that the student is not expected to activate the whole range of these skills in a single interpretative act. This would be both unlikely to happen and unwelcome, considering that each reader accesses the text from a different perspective, emphasizing certain aspects of the text and forgetting others. In fact, it is the options formed by the reader that will determine the activation of certain literary literacy skills and not others.

As previously stated, the definition of literary literacy is presented as a stable group of skills; however, it is important to emphasize that these literacy skills are not transversal to different contexts and times. As a consequence, this definition fits only the Portuguese university context of majors in LLC at a particular time: the first decade of the 21st century.

In the near future, it would be interesting to repeat this study and to ascertain if there are any changes in the types of skills that lecturers of literature expect their students to activate in the process of interpreting a literary text. It would also be interesting to develop a comparative study, involving lecturers in literature from another European country, or countries, and then to analyse differences and similarities.

References

- Almeida, J.F., Ávila, P., Casanova, J.L., Costa, A.F., Machado, F.L., Martins, S.C. & Mauritti, R. (2003). *Diversidade na universidade: Um inquérito aos estudantes de licenciatura*. Oeiras: Celta.
- Balsa, C., Simões, J.A, Nunes, P., Carmo, R. & Campos, R. (2001). *Perfil dos estudantes do ensino superior: Desigualdades e diferenciação*. Lisbon: Colibri.
- Barton, D. (2009). *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. Oxford, MA: Blackwell.
- Coelho, J.P. (1976). Como ensinar literatura. In J.P. Coelho, *Ao contrário de Penélope* (pp.45-67). Venda Nova: Bertrand.
- Culler, J. (1980). Prolegomena to a theory of reading. In S. Suleiman and I. Crossman (Eds.), *The reader in the text: Essays on audience and interpretation* (pp.46-66). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Eckert, L.S. (2008). Bridging the pedagogical gap: Intersections between literary and reading theories in secondary and postsecondary literacy instruction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(2), 110-118.
- Green, B. (1999). The new literacy challenge. *Literacy Learning: Secondary Thoughts*, 7(1), 36-46.
- Green, B. & Durrant, C. (2001). Literacy and new technologies in school education: Meeting the l(IT)eracy challenge. In H. Fehring and P. Green (Eds.), *Critical literacy: A collection of articles from the Australian literacy educators' association* (pp.142-164). Canada: International Reading Association e Australian Literacy Educators' Association.
- Guerreiro, M.D. & Abrantes, P. (2004). *Transições incertas: Os jovens perante o trabalho e a família*. Lisbon: Comissão para a Igualdade no Trabalho e no Emprego.
- Iser, W. ([1978] 1980). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Iser, W. (1993). *Prospecting: From reader response to literary anthropology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Kern, R. (2002). Reconciling the language-literature split through literacy. *Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Spring Bulletin* 33(3), 20-24. Retrieved from <http://www.lrc.cornell.edu/events/past/2008-2009/papers08/Kern.pdf>

Kern, R. & Schultz, J.M. (2005). Beyond orality: Investigating literacy and the literary in second and foreign language instruction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89 (3), 381-392.

Lages, M.F., Liz, C., António, J.H.C. & Correia, T.S. (2007). *Os estudantes e a leitura*. Lisboa: Ministério da Educação.

Malheiro, A., Marcial, V. F., Martins, F., Pereira, J.M. & Pinto, M.M.G.A. (2010). A literacia informacional no espaço europeu do ensino superior: Estudo da situação das competências da informação em Portugal. Retrieved from <https://docs.google.com/fileview?id=0B82BZNWh6ZIBOTFkYjZkMDQtM2UxNC00Nzc0LWl3NWItZD0yMDFkYWZIMjQw&hl=en>.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching*. London: Sage.

Ricoeur, P. [1986] 1991) *From text to action: Essays in hermeneutics, II* (K. Blamey & J. Thompson, Trans.). London: Athlone.

Rosenblatt, L.M. ([1938] 2005). *Literature as exploration*. NY: The Modern Language Association.

Santos, M.L.L. (Coord.) (2007). *A leitura em Portugal*. Lisbon: Ministério da Educação.

Showalter, E. (2003). *Teaching literature*. Oxford, MA: Blackwell.

Sim-Sim, I. & Viana, F. L. (2007). *Para a avaliação do desempenho da leitura*. Lisbon: Ministério da Educação.

Sousa, M.C. (2001). A escrita no ensino superior: Contributo para uma reflexão. In F. Sequeira, J. A. B. Carvalho & A. Gomes (Orgs.). *Ensinar a escrever: Teoria e prática: Actas do encontro de reflexão sobre o ensino da escrita* (pp. 113-126). Braga: Universidade do Minho.