

# Exploring Beninese Preservice Technical Teachers' Difficulties and Possibilities in Academic Reading

Jean-Marc Gnonlonfoun<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>GRI-DiGeST/LARPET/ENSET/UNSTIM-A

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\*Corresponding author: Jean-Marc Gnonlonfoun

## Abstract

In this paper, the researcher presents some reflections on the importance of reading for teacher training with regard to aspects related to frequency, goals and interests of academic reading. For this, studies by Kramer (2002), Cavalcante Jr. (2005a, b), Freire (1993) and Matêncio (1994) are referenced as the theoretical background. Third year Technical Preservice teachers were invited to complete a questionnaire with questions related to their reader profile and the difficulties and possibilities of academic reading. The findings suggest to make the reading of academic texts compulsory for student-teachers to obtain new learning. In addition, the academic reading of texts that relate theory and practice must be constant so that the future teaching professional can base his teaching action on the knowledge elaborated and in reality given in order to form interlocutive skills in reading. Thus, instructors at teacher training institutions must prioritize texts of interest to student-teachers so that they can read them, establishing their reading objectives and also perceiving links with their professional practice, since the frequent use of metacognitive procedures is required when reading academic texts.

**Keywords:** Preservice technical teachers, Academic reading, teacher training, Benin context.

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## 1. PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

In the domain of teacher education, there is no dearth of literature related to reading. Indeed, interest in the issue has gradually grown. This is because understanding the relationships that teachers have been establishing with books, throughout their life and work trajectories, helps to realize that, during these trajectories, many people, especially close and extended family members (father, mother, grandmother, grandfather or even a brother) contributed, in a remarkable way, to the taste for reading. In the meantime, schools, as a rule (Kramer (2002, p. 135), provide a forced reading taken as a duty imposed.

This view of reading from an imposed perspective does not release the social and transformative dimension that reading can offer. Reading activity is to be seen as a means of building democracy as it provides the desire to read through the freedom of communication and expression of the reader (Cavalcante Jr., 2005, p. 47). That is to indicate that when the school denies this dimension, it is denying its own freedom of communication and expression, thus causing disgust for the activity. For this reason, talking about reading in the training of teachers is, according to Kramer (2002), to know stories of displeasure,

imposition, obligation, desire to not read; all of which originating, in the view of the researcher, from the school and academic vision of reading imposed by the school and by the university at the time when these teachers were students and/or university students.

In this paper therefore, the purpose of the researcher is to start a reflection on the difficulties and possibilities of academic reading in teacher education, in order to make this professional a teacher-reader and/or a reader-teacher. In this line, the main point of discussion is: *what is the reading behavior of preservice technical teachers in relation to aspects of reading such as frequency, objectives and reading interests?*

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Providing an answer to the research question noted in the preceding section equates to presenting and reflecting on the difficulties and possibilities of academic reading in teacher education, since scientific reading is something inherent to the teaching profession.

To construct the data necessary for this study, a questionnaire was used as data collection technique.

This questionnaire was completed by 60 preservice technical teachers enrolled in the third year at the National Technical and Vocational Teachers Training School of Lokossa. The data collection was carried out during the academic year 2019-2020. The return rate of this questionnaire was 96,66%.

### 3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND LITERATURE

In order to ensure an effective discussion of the findings, the researcher understands that an emphasis must be put on the value of reading in teacher training. Moreover, the aspects that interfere with reading comprehension and, thirdly, images of the teacher-reader in the academic discourse are subthemes explored. Finally, it is discussed whether it is possible to be a teacher-reader and reader-teacher. In this context, references from the literature such as Matêncio (1994), Kramer (2002), Cavalcante Jr. (2005), Pinheiro (2006; 2007), Kleiman (2000), Machado, Lousada and Abreu-Tardelli (2007) are used.

#### *Valuing Academic Reading for Teaching Training*

It appears paradoxical to address an issue such as academic reading in teacher education, considering that this issue is unquestionable and that the act of reading is intrinsic to this profession. However, some research shows that many factors contribute to these professionals not having the habit of reading. The contribution that academic reading may make to teaching practice is enormous. To start, there is a certain pleasure of reading, a feeling that can divide good and bad readers. This does not concern only reading fiction but also the pleasure of learning something through this act to become, thus, a more educated and better informed person in personal and professional life. This is evident because reading allows, according to Freire (1993), Smith (1999), Ruiz (1985), Campos Júnior (2003), Cavalcante Júnior (2005a, 2005b) and Pinheiro (2006), the knowledge of the world, the development of creativity and critical sense, the refinement of perception and reasoning, the immunity from manipulations arising from communication through the image conveyed by the media, the facility for oral and written expression and the ability to monitor the understanding of grammatical and textual aspects, the perception of the attitudes and intentions of the text writer.

In addition to all this, it also allows the relief of memory, the opening of new horizons of knowledge, the discipline of the mind, the widening of consciousness through contact with different shapes and angles under which the same problem can be considered and the construction of one's own science and cultural growth (cf. Freire, 1993; Smith, 1999; Ruiz, 1985; Campos Júnior, 2003; Cavalcante Júnior, 2005a, 2005b; Pinheiro, 2006).

Another factor worth mentioning in relation to teacher education is reading as an instrument for improving professional practice, which may be called *academic reading*. Thus, the teacher who is an avid reader can, through readings of academic texts, transfer the material read to his pedagogical practice and stop being just a repeater of contents. He is thereby ready to become a more critical professional, able to question the surrounding world and also the readings practiced. This critical capacity is integrated with the "intelligence of the world", i.e., the critical understanding of the world as, according to Freire (1993, p. 11), reading the world is learning the meaning of what surrounds us. In other words, it is learning the social and affective value of our reality and linking it to the experience of the reality of which it speaks. Thus, it can be affirmed, according to Cavalcante Jr. (2005a), that reading the world becomes an invitation to understand the culture of a society, which is represented through cultural assumptions, values, beliefs and modes of communication of a group of people.

In this way, the teacher may perceive that there is a considerable number of written material with a "beautiful" discourse, but with little applicability, also understanding that there are theories that apply to one reality and not to others, because the written materials are associated with diverse realities. On this issue, 24% of participants say that they would like to read texts that relate to their reality. For this, the critical reader and subject of his story must read it, understanding that it can be subject to criticism and / or not achievable, because if the pedagogy of democracy is taken into account, the exercise of reading the word associated with reading the world involves, in Freire's (1993) view, implications of aesthetics, of beauty and also of freedom of creation. This freedom of creation involves the ability to criticize what one reads, as reading, according to Campos Júnior (2003, p.1), is problematic: it induces reflection, raises hypotheses and makes one think. For him, even "reading is one of the last corners of intellectual freedom" because who reads creates as much or more than the author.

This capacity of the reader to create as much or more than the author resides in the fact that, with his imagination loose, the reader, depending on the textual genre read, mentally elaborates the scenarios, composes the profile of the characters, interprets dialogues, identifies personal affinities and lives, in his own way, the pleasure and the infinity of emotions potentially contained in the text. In other words, those who read do not receive ready-made, colored, finished images, but have to build them through the process of understanding and interpretation.

In this perspective, teachers redefine what they read based on their life stories, their teaching practices and the readings they carry out. As indicated by the data collected, more than 65% of participants would like to

read texts on unknown subjects to learn new things, that is, to obtain new learnings. In this way, this prospective teacher is a reader who is not limited to reading the textbook, not allowing it to reduce the teacher's role to that of a mere intermediary between the author and the students, thereby making the teaching proposal centered on the textbook (Matêncio, 1994, p. 96). This is because, for Matêncio (1994), with the reading of other materials, the teacher becomes the subject of his history, able to criticize, even, the authorized / conveyed knowledge in his area of knowledge. Indeed, when the teacher develops the habit of reading, he is in constant training, even if he does not participate in courses, congresses or other events considered to be training, thus being able to try to fill the gaps left, eventually, by his initial training or reporting on new studies in his area.

Regarding the reading of academic text, which has the function both of instructing the teacher on the content to be taught and on pedagogical issues that help him choose the best way to pass on these contents and manage his classes, it is to be emphasized its importance for pedagogical training. Therefore, these readings are important because they guide teachers on "what" and "how to teach" in each grade.

In this sense, knowing how students learn can help the teacher's action, in order to propose the most appropriate methodology to facilitate this learning, reducing the gap that exists between the reading tasks required in the context of secondary schools in relation to those requested in higher education, as pointed out by Carlino (2003), Costa (2007) and Farias (2009), as this "gap" has contributed greatly to the difficulty of understanding and inserting the undergraduate university student, prospective teacher, in the literacy activities that they are specific to the academic context (academic literacy).

### ***Interferences in the Reading Comprehension of Academic Texts***

There are many aspects that interfere in the reading comprehension, which may come from factors related to the reader or the text. Among them, we highlight the reading objectives that must be established by an external person or by the reader and the reader's interests. On this aspect, the purposes mentioned by the participants are varied: acquisition of knowledge / intellectual growth (31%), assistance of academic activities (21%), obtaining good results in evaluations (10%), assistance in professional practice (10%), enriching professional training (9%), improving classroom participation (5%), improving oral or written expression (5%) and other responses (9%).

It is worth mentioning that only 10% of participants consider that the texts they read serve to enrich professional training, which raises two hypotheses: the first is the fact that these readers cannot

relate some theoretical texts to teaching practice. And the second is that the texts requested from learners are not really related to their education.

However, regardless of the hypothesis, teachers need to review the texts that they submit to their learners in reading assignments, trying to relate them to teacher training or requesting other texts, because, based on the principle that the work of sciences, especially is a study of texts (see Bakhtin, 1992; Kramer, 2002), these should enable the construction of teachers' knowledge for their classroom practices. With regard to this aspect, Kleiman (2000, p. 30-31) states that the processing and memory capacity of any human being significantly improve when a goal is provided for a task since men selectively remember that information that is important to their purpose.

According to Martins (2003, p. 875), it is often observed that the teacher, when he arrives at the school, neither has a comprehensive theoretical view on the pedagogical practice, nor knows the reality of the school and its concrete practice. Instead of dynamically articulated theory / practice / theory, what the teacher acquires in universities, except in very few cases, are speeches and techniques. This picture shows the acute need for professional appreciation of the teacher, in addition to the reevaluation of undergraduate courses and a review of its structure, functioning and articulation with the secondary school and higher education.

In other words, when university students complete their undergraduate course, they arrive in classrooms without having a clear idea of the theories seen throughout the university courses and, therefore, much less of practices capable of rescuing the theoretical knowledge acquired during university training. Such situations occur because the readings practiced during graduation, most of the time, do not relate theory to practice, thus hindering the performance of future teachers in their classroom practice and because this type of reading [academic reading] demands from university students the frequent use of metacognitive procedures, which are not well operationalized by the university reader – prospective teacher - because he does not know clearly what is the objective that should guide his reading, thus not having conscious control in the sense of being able to say and explain the relationship that exists between the elaborated knowledge (theory) and the given reality (practice). In addition, Pinheiro (2007) also found that 76% of participants in his research, only sometimes have an interest in reading the academic texts requested of them. These two aspects, the objectives and interests in the material to be read, must be considered and reflected by the teachers when suggesting a reading, as these factors can condition the comprehension of the text or the lack of it.

Still in relation to the difficulties that affect the reader, an aspect that may imply in the comprehension of a text is the ignorance of words, expressions, whole sentences or paragraphs. In this case, the reader needs to identify its cause in order to try to resolve it.

Machado, Lousada and Abreu-Tardelli (2007, p. 71) present some reasons and attempts at solutions when the difficulty of understanding the text focuses on the ignorance of words, expressions or whole sentences. Among them are “the author's lack of clarity, lack of some necessary knowledge, unusual words, very long sentence and / or very abstract thought by the author”. Knowing what is not clear, the reader may try, depending on the cause, one of the following alternatives: search for the word in the dictionary or try to relate it to other words or to the general meaning of the sentence or text, follow the reading, in order to find out if there is any clarification given by the text itself or to try to relate the content with other texts already read.

Therefore, when asking participants about what procedures they perform when they do not understand texts or text fragments, 65% of them reported that they return to the segment they did not understand before completing the reading of the text, 58% continue reading until the end and, later, reread the text, 52% ask for help from teachers or colleagues, 52% look for the meaning of unknown terms. It can be seen, therefore, that the surveyed readers seek to resolve their doubts in order to fulfill the proposed objective for reading.

It is important to point out that no student opted for the option of giving up reading and only one student said he continued reading until the end without rereading what he did not understand, proving his efforts to understand the text.

### *Images of the teacher-reader*

One important principle is that the appropriation of academic discourse is only possible through the reading of texts that circulate in the academic environment. It can thereby be affirmed that knowledge will only be acquired and produced with the reading of several texts that circulate in society with their socio-standards - rhetoric, style and communicative purposes socially and culturally defined by society (Marcuschi, 2003).

This is justified because by marking learners' reading trajectory, language would appear to all teachers as a topic of central importance (Andrade, 1998, p.160), because its domain is inherent to teaching since this domain it is the gateway to the knowledge acquisition process, whether academic or not.

Furthermore, Motta-Roth (2008, p.2) posits that the way we appropriate the universe and the information that surrounds us and incorporate them into

our cognitive repertoire, representing, describing, evaluating through language, is a function of our own human condition. In other words, the way a given teacher takes ownership of the academic world is a function of his own condition of being academic.

However, this process of appropriation is shaped by the dialogical interaction with the world around us within the academic environment. Although the mechanisms of thought can be conceived as academic, the contents are socially constructed and, therefore, are historically and culturally determined. In these terms, it is worth saying that academic knowledge is built through the reading and production of various texts, such as, for example, records, abstracts, reviews, scientific articles, essays, academic memorials, papers, monographs, dissertations, theses, to quote some, circulating in the socially shared academic community. Thus, it can be said, following Coracini (1991), that the teaching of reading of the academic text has been guided by published articles and books, communications and lectures. But, not only through these genres, but also through reviews, abstracts, bookings, essays, course completion papers, monograph, internship reports, dissertations and theses, as these readings have academic repercussions as the knowledge materializes from the reading and production of these texts and from the uses made of that knowledge.

However, the frequency with which the participants of this study read the texts they are asked for leaves something to be desired, since only 24% of them read academic texts daily, 14% do so on the eve of evaluations, seminars, etc. and another 14% read them once a week. We know that academic discourse establishes an intersection with reading by working with the inclusion of academic aspects and relating them to teacher training when analyzing the elements capable of providing subsidies on how knowledge is produced through texts that circulate in the context of gym. Hence, access to the academy shows the need to read the texts produced within the academic context.

This need for reading within the academic context resides in the current academy model, as, according to Andrade (1998), the teacher's place is to transfer knowledge from research to solve some didactic needs present in secondary schools; scientific knowledge necessary for student learning; the weaving of observations about the place given to the teacher as a reader, specifically dealing with printed editorial material whose authors are members of the academy; the establishment of a critical description of the production of knowledge in the condition of literature of teaching professionals, considering it as the main responsible for the construction of a space for professional training; and the production of knowledge in the various areas of academic instruction, which is converted into training and teaching reading as opposed

to non-academic readings, such as those in the journalistic field, etc.

From this, the crucial points that emerge for the image of a teacher-reader are the following:

- The practical dimension of theory, in which there is a relationship between theory-practice and practice-theory, that is, between the elaborated knowledge and the given reality and vice versa;
- The revaluation of the teaching profession as a profession, given the character still preached today of a certain “priesthood” of teaching;
- Teacher training, an intermediate field between the university (a place of research) and the school (a place for the democratization of knowledge). In this, the teacher instructors are responsible for this democratization of knowledge.

These crucial points contribute to a better understanding of the interventionist practice and action of the teacher-reader, in the school field, as a concrete example of the receptivity that theories (elaborated knowledge) can have in practice (given reality), since the point of origin of the process of receiving the theories in practice prints an image of teacher-reader that the classroom practice produces. Therefore, the prospective teacher needs to base, according to Farias (2009), his teaching action on the elaborated knowledge and on the reality given in order to form 'interlocutive' reading skills.

In addition, the preceding analyses demonstrate the need for teachers to aim at their own academic reading by objectively addressing the forms of knowledge they use to speak about objects in the various areas of knowledge in which they have specific training such as Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Agricultural Sciences, Accounting sciences, Secretary, Restauration, Economic Sciences, etc.

They also lead to an in-depth exploration of the discourse uttered by the academy to take care of teaching issues. Therefore, the forms, the purpose, the skills, the types and strategies of reading used by the teacher produce an image of ideal reader foreseen in function of reader images that the theoretical production of reading puts into circulation, thus triggering formation processes in the prospective teacher. This is because the prospective teacher often has a main negative self-image of poor teaching quality which may or may not be modified depending on the images produced about this professional that are available in the productions intended for his own academic reading and the knowledge he has from these readings in the academic context. This is in order to raise the identification processes responsible for construction of a teacher-reader identity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The objective of this study is to reflect on the difficulties and possibilities of academic reading in teacher education. Such an objective was achieved considering that a series of factors that contribute to difficulties in academic reading in teacher education, such as, for example, the lack of legibility of the text, the difficult acquisition of books, the excessively technical language, the distance and / or non-relationship between theory and practice and vice versa was presented.

As for the possibilities for reading in teacher education, it is suggested the need to acquire knowledge capable of subsidizing the daily difficulties faced by teachers in their classrooms, although, according to Martins (2003), there are difficulties in putting theory into practice. These difficulties recline because there are many conflicts and, as heterogeneous beings, teachers can play the same theory or the same role in different ways, from person to person. In this sense, the data discussed in relation to the frequency, objectives and purposes of reading academic texts by preservice teacher participants to this study are relevant.

This common character is what unites the discourses around a discursive domain such as, for example, the academic domain. This makes possible the articulation between theory and practice and reflection-action. However, these will only be achieved if the teacher realizes that the purpose, habit, skills and reading strategies are a constant in his teaching practice, given that the image of teacher-reader is only achieved if the practical dimension of theory establishes a relationship between theory-practice and practice-theory; a revaluation of the teaching profession as a profession and teacher training that links academic discourse to school discourse.

It is *conditio sine qua non* that, at the very least, teachers are made aware that the educator can and must continue his training, in a process of continuous reflection and exchange with other professionals, because it is exactly this conception that leads to supply of gaps during the exercise of the profession, so that, in this way, he is a reader-teacher.

And with this reader-teacher identity, he can break with the failures that come from his pedagogical and academic training and those of the current education system, as these double images (teacher-reader and reader-teacher) seek and produce knowledge and not only reproduce the roles that have been / are attributed to it, since teacher education is an uninterrupted search process that starts from reading the word to reading the different forms of representation of the world for self-formation as self.

In addition, as Nóvoa (1992) points out, training is not built by accumulation, but through work of critical reflexivity on practices and the permanent construction and reconstruction of a personal identity, as the training process is constituted, then, from an educational back-and-forth, in a forward-backward direction, building on the relationship between know-how, being and creating. Thus, being a teacher means allowing oneself from being a simple transmitter, to a seeker, a disseminator of beliefs, a mediator of actions and a transformer of learners' conscience through reading.

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