

***Cartilhas* (First Readers), do they effectively help or disturb the process of learning literacy?**

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INTRODUCTION

Many researchers are concerned with the development of oral and written modalities and the processes involved in this task (Barton, 1994; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Scliar-Cabral, 1995). The development of both modalities involves continuities and discontinuities, and is related to different skills and abilities. That means, it is not a simple and a unique process to be mastered. For instance, according to Snow (1991), even children considered very intelligent have had problems to master oral and written language. Therefore, it is very important to have well-prepared professionals and good materials to help children in this hard task: learning how to read and write. Having in mind then: a) first, the teaching-learning literacy process is not simple; b) second, the development of oral and written modalities can contribute to the academic success or failure of a child because almost all the disciplines need the oral and/or written language to be taught and c) third, a great number of Brazilians children fail to learn how to read and write, and consequently, many of them give up school; we begin wondering about the textbooks used to teach literacy. Are they really helping teachers to teach literacy? Do they observe linguistics and psycholinguistics principles in order to help children mastering literacy? In order to find answers to these questions we studied the main tool used in the process of teaching and learning how to read and write, in the first grade¹ of Brazilian elementary school, that is, the book called *cartilha* (First Readers).

A LITERATE PERSON

Reading the discussion presented by many researchers (Barton, 1994; Scliar-Cabral, 1995; Scribner and Cole, 1981), we realize that the literacy process is a *continuum*. From this point of view, a literacy definition is a matter of establishing a cut in the *continuum*. For all these reasons, in this research, we define as literate, in our society, a person who is able, first to understand, and later, to produce texts that are necessary to his/her life as a citizen.

SOME IMPORTANT POINTS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERACY

In order to help the construction of a competent reader-writer, the materials must pay attention to some important psycholinguistics points, such as: a) the peripheral system of processing

¹ First grade is usually a class within 30 students. They are 6 or 7 years old and come from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds

information takes part in the process of reading and writing, but the central system is in charge, for instance, for the (re)construction of meaning (Scliar-Cabral, 1991); b) metaphonological awareness can help the beginning of reading and writing development (Moraes, 1990); c) there are similarities and differences between oral and written modalities (Scliar-Cabral, 1995), and they need to be observed; for example, the different genres of each modality; d) the development of different oral abilities helps literacy (Michaels, 1986); e) texts and exercises need to observe the principles of new and given information (Athey, 1983) and cohesion and coherence; f) children's first hypotheses about the written system need to be observed and respected (Ferrero and Teberosky, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Using a psycholinguistic approach, we prepared a questionnaire with ten categories in order to find out in the teacher's manual and the student's book, the important aspects for the development of written language. Applying this questionnaire, we set out to determine, by a quantitative and qualitative analysis: a) whether the books develop the written and the oral modalities and how it is done; b) which kind of text genres are proposed; c) whether there is some balance between the new and given information; d) whether coherence and cohesion are both present within the reading task and between the texts and the pictures; e) whether credits are given when texts from others are quoted; f) whether there is any kind of prejudice, especially the linguistic one; g) whether the books respect children's first hypotheses about the written system; h) what information processing system is favored, the central or the peripheral one, in the exercises, i) whether the latter help children to develop creativity, and finally what learning theories guides the author's (authors') work.

The categories were applied to a random selection of eight books that belong to a list of the most used books in Brazilian public schools. This selection represents 30% of the books used, and all are supported by FAE (Fundacao de Amparo ao Estudante) – an institution of the Brazilian government that provides books for all disciplines in public schools.

RESULTS

The results showed that the authors ignore the differences between the oral and written modalities, and it would be unreasonable to think they would pay attention to the links between the modalities in the multi-media genres. From all proposed text genres for the reading task, we noticed the authors' preference for two genres that we categorized as *matraca* and *pretexto*. In the *matraca* texts the syllabic family of the unit is repeated exhaustively throughout the text. For instance,

A babá é a Biba.

O bebê é a Bia.

O bebê bóa.

– Oba! Eu bóio! (Passos, 1993)

The authors believe that learning happens through repetition. In the *pretexto* texts the syllabic families – taught before – are repeated, not so intensively, having as goal only the reinforcement. For instance,

Renato lê a história do trenzinho.
O trenzinho é barulhento.
Ele apita – tui, tui, tui...
O trenzinho sobe o morro.
O trenzinho desce o morro.
A fumaca sobe o morro.
A fumaca desce o morro. (Cunha et. al, 1972)

The principle of balance between the new and given information is not respected in 63% of the books. In the other 37%, the application is limited. It is mainly related to the repetition of some known words seen through the previous lessons. From the whole number of texts proposed to the reading task, only 20% of them are fragments of other texts. However, there is a great number of *pretexto* and *matraca* texts. It means that, even though they are not fragments, they are not coherent and cohesive. In fact, they are sentences that pretend being a text.

The pictures respected the children's cognitive level, and they usually are coherent to the texts they belong to. However, the poor quality of texts does not help the construction of auto-referentiality because a poor text can be easily covered by a good picture. For these reasons, the text just repeats what the picture shows. These texts do not help children to realize that the text needs to carry the necessary information to help the reader understanding. Eighty-seven per cent of the exercises have mechanistic-behavioristic roots. Two kinds of exercises are emphasized: copy and list exercises (lists of words to be read, to make syllabic analysis or synthesis, to be copied, and so on.). In addition, the cartilhas ignore the children's first hypotheses about the written system.

None of the authors presents clearly what (which) theory(ies) support their works. Only one *cartilha* presents some «reflections». In order to find out what theory gives support to the author's (authors') work, it is necessary to analyze the goals, the exercises and the bibliography. It is important to mention that throughout these three points we did not always find an agreement.

The text production and interpretation exercises were categorized as exercises with open answer (EOA) – exercises that allow children to express their opinion –, or exercises with closed answers (ECA) – exercises that accept only one answer as correct. These two categories of exercises were presented in the book with balance. However, the quality of the EOA is doubtful due to the exercises having problems, for instance, they do not observe the auto-referentiality principle, and restrain creativity.

We found mainly two kinds of prejudice: linguistic and racial. The first one because the cartilhas do not even mention the different Brazilian Portuguese dialects. Considering the Brazilian geographic extension, the privilege of only one variant, although it is the standard one, shows lack of respect to the others.

The books presented the author's (authors') name(s); however, there is no biographical introduction as to their degree(s), professional activities, academic works, etc. Besides that, when quoting, the authors usually do not follow the rules requested by ABNT – Brazilian Association of Technical Norms. Only 37.5% of the book follow the rules, the others 62.5% do not. Then, an excellent opportunity to teach the respect for the intellectual property is lost.

CONCLUSIONS

As we could see, the quality of these books are below the minimal acceptable standards. Many are the elements that contribute to it, some (as we have seen) are directly related to the quality of the books, others to the socio-political and educational contexts. As a result of the lack of clearness about literacy, we have books that teach reading and writing as decodification and codification, respectively, without thinking about the functionality of these skills and abilities of a person as a citizen (Finger-Kratochvil, 1997). The cartilhas should reflect, at least partially, what is demanded from a literate person. That means, although they are books addressed to the first grade, and they have some specific goals to reach, at the same time, they are part of a bigger context: the literacy *continuum*. For these reasons, gradually, they should provide the students the requested skills and abilities to a successful interaction with their daily literacy events. However, these changes are related to others, for instance, changes in editors, authors, teachers, parents and students' conception of didactic books. Especially teachers, parents and students need to make a careful assessment of materials. Together they can initiate a faster change. Then perhaps, step by step, the elaboration of any didactic material will be faced as a serious and scientific task in our society.

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