

The "battle of the literacy methods" in Brazil: Contributions to methodize the debate

A "querela dos métodos" de alfabetização no Brasil: contribuições para metodizar o debate

La "querelle des méthodes" de l'alphabétisation au Brésil: les contributions au débat de suivre la méthodologie

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ABSTRACT

With the objective of contributing to the debate on literacy methods in Brazil and as a result of documental research on the topic, this paper presents and renders problematic one of the most recent proposals for teaching literacy to children: that centered on the phonic method. The key characteristics of this new proposal will be analyzed, including their elements of error. The proposal will be compared with other literacy proposals and methods that have emerged over the course of the history of the teaching of reading and writing in elementary education in Brazil since the end of the nineteenth century.

Index terms: the history of literacy, literacy methods, phonic method

RESUMO

Com o objetivo de contribuir para o debate em torno dos métodos de alfabetização no Brasil e como resultado de pesquisa documental sobre o tema, é apresentada e problematizada uma das mais recentes propostas para alfabetização de crianças, a centrada no método fônico. São apresentadas as principais características dessa proposta recente assim como os principais equívocos nela contidos, inter-relacionando-a com as demais propostas e métodos de alfabetização apresentadas ao longo da história do ensino inicial de leitura e escrita no Brasil, desde o final do século XIX.

Palavras-chave: história da alfabetização, métodos de alfabetização, método fônico.

RÉSUMÉ

Afin de contribuer pour le débat sur les méthodes d'alphabétisation au Brésil et comme résultat du recherche documental, c'est présentée et discutée une proposition actuelle pour l'alphabétisation de l'enfants, cette fondée sur la méthode phonique. Ce sont présentés les caractéristiques principales de cette proposition et ses principaux défauts ainsi que ses relations avec autres propositions dans l'histoire de l'alphabétisation au Bresil, à partir du XIXe siècle.

Mots clés: histoire de l'alphabétisation, méthode d'alphabétisation, méthode phonique.

Opposition between old and new is one of the conflicts through which societies live out their contradictory relationships with the past, always intensifying when having to fight against a recent past, a present felt like the past, or when the quarrel of the old and new assumes the proportions of settling a score between parents and children.
(Jacques Le Goff)

The past is a lesson for reflection, not for reproduction.
(Mário de Andrade)

Introduction

How do we teach literacy? Where to begin? With the names of the letters, the sounds of the letters, syllables, key words, sentences or stories? These are the first and most urgent questions asked by those whose job it is to teach reading and writing to children.

In the case of Brazil, however, these questions are a sort of echo of another “matrix” question: “How do we confront both the difficulties of our children in learning to read and write and those facing teachers who are instructing the children?” In more recent and comprehensive terms, “How do we confront the serious problem of the failure of our schools and education in our country?” This matrix question refers to a seemingly similar and persistent political and social problem and the search for answers to this problem has

marked the history of school and instruction of early literacy in the Western world and particularly in Brazil, since at least the end of the nineteenth century.

The purpose of presenting and rendering problematic the principal aspects of one of the most recent responses to this question – the proposal centered on the phonic method – and comparing it with the other proposals that have been made throughout the history of literacy in Brazil, with the objective of contributing to methodize the debate, created by this specific proposal, regarding literacy methods in Brazil, these are the procedures and objectives of this article.

1. The historical “battle of the methods”

Particularly since the last two decades of the nineteenth century, efforts to establish a new political and social order in Brazil, which would culminate in the installation of a republican regime, were accompanied by efforts to organize a public school system in accordance with the ideals of the new political regime. Therefore, the role of the school became that of an institution for preparing new generations, promising access to all to the literate culture by means of learning how to read and write. Literacy instruction became a fundamental component of compulsory, free and secular education. Reading and writing “definitively” became objects of school-based teaching and learning or, in other words, they became subject to systematic organization, technical instruction, and demanded special professional development of literacy teachers. From this point of view, literacy was the most evident and complex sign of the problematic relationship between education and modernity, becoming the principal indicator of the efficiency of school-based education.

After more the one hundred years of implementation of the republican school model and significant changes in the political, social and cultural order

throughout the twentieth century, today in Brazil (although not only in Brazil), the failure of the Brazilian public school system is a point of consensus among the debates and denunciations related to education, in regards to its historical and fundamental role and thus its role in responding to the social and political urgencies that sustain it. The reoccurrence of this failure has been presented as a strategic problem that demands urgent solutions, mobilizing public administrators, legislators, intellectuals from various fields, educators, and teachers and thus generating serious discussions regarding initial teaching of reading and writing.

The most visible face of these discussions was that of the question of literacy methods¹ or the “battle of the methods” as it became to be known. In different historical moments, different subjects moved by different social and political urgencies, always claiming to be based on the “latest scientific truths,” went on to present versions of their present and (recent) past, accusing methods used until then of being “old” and “traditional” and proposing in substitution “new” and “revolutionary” (literacy) methods.

In every historical time period, change required (and continues to require) of the subjects promoting this battle operations of qualitative differentiation, by way of a synthetic reconstitution of the past (and, in particular, of the recent past, felt as if it were the present, because it operates on the level of concretizations), in hopes of homogenizing and emptying it of qualities and differences, identifying it as a carrier of the old – undesirable, decadent and an obstacle to progress – attempting to define the new – better and

¹ Literacy methods can be classified into two basic types: synthetic (from “part” to “whole”) and analytic (from “whole” to “part”). Depending on what linguistic unit was considered the starting point for literacy instruction and what was considered “whole” versus “part,” throughout the history of literacy in Brazil, the following classification subdivision of these methods was formed: synthetic methods: alphabetic, phonic, syllabic; and analytic methods: words, sentence, history, and story.

more desirable – now against, now independent of the old but always and inevitably a product of it.

To make change viable, it becomes necessary to produce a version of the past and disqualify it as if it were an uncomfortable inheritance that imposes resistance to the founding of the new, especially when the affiliation deriving from active tradition in the present (although often not assumed) threatens to bring back the same characters of the past, whose heirs would prefer to forget, revise, or improve them.

As a consequence of these disputes, in every historical period, a “new tradition” is founded, centered on a meaning that became hegemonic for becoming official, but not singular, homogenous or even exempt from resistance, mediated especially by the vigilant utilization of old literacy methods and practices, by way of the use of a primer (*cartilhas de alfabetização*), this privileged and perennial instrument of concretizing literacy methods.²

The history of literacy in Brazil is characterized, therefore, as a complex movement marked by the discursive reoccurrence of change, indicative of the constant tension between permanence and rupture in the environment of disputes for hegemony in political and education projects and for a modern meaning and purpose of literacy.

These are the principal conclusions of the unedited documental research and bibliography whose results I present in the book *The meanings of literacy: São Paulo – 1876/1994* (MORTATTI, 2000a). With the objective of contributing to the production of a history of literacy in Brazil that aides in understanding current problems, I present in this book a history of initial teaching of reading and writing in Brazil, with emphasis on the situation of São

² In regards to this role of the *cartilha* in literacy, see in particular Mortatti (2000b).

Paulo State from the end of the nineteenth century through the modern day. With a foundation in procedures of localization, recuperation, gathering, selection and analysis of the extensive set of primary documentary sources produced by Brazilians, I propose the division of this complex historical movement into four “moments” that I consider critical, each one marking a new “meaning” attributed to literacy as a result of the “battle of the methods.”

These historical “moments” and their principal characteristics are, briefly: first “moment” (1876-1890) – dispute between advocates of the then “new” method of words and the “old” synthetic methods (alphabetic, phonic, syllabic); second “moment” (1890 until the mid-1920s) – dispute between advocates of the then “new” analytic method and the “old” synthetic methods; third “moment” (mid-1920s through the 1970s) – disputes between advocates of the “old” literacy methods (synthetic and analytic) and the “new” ABC tests to verify the level of maturity necessary to learn reading and writing, which leads to the introduction of the “new” mixed methods; fourth “moment” (mid-1980s to 1994) – disputes between advocates of the then “new” “constructivist”³ theory and the “old” maturity tests and the “old” literacy methods.

As the year 1994 simply marks the closing of that particular era of literacy research – since this fourth historical “moment” of the history of literacy in Brazil is still ongoing, in other books and articles (MORTATTI, 2004; 2007) I present some more recent characteristics of this 4th “moment.” In addition, as I have already announced, in this article I present and render problematic the key aspects of the response centered on the phonic method

³ “Constructivism” is the name of the theory based on studies of Jean Piaget and formulated by the researcher Emilia Ferreiro to explain how children learn to read and write.

through analysis of the principal aspects of the textual configuration⁴ of the book in which is presented this proposal.

2. The current phonic method proposal

At the beginning of this century, supported as much by the results of evaluations by national and international institutions and organizations (undergone with the objective of verifying the academic performance of our students at the K-12 level), as by the results of developed countries, Brazilian researchers began to search for new explanations and solutions for the “literacy crisis” in Brazil.

Among these proposed solutions, that presented by Alessandra and Fernando Capovilla began to gain prominence, especially in the book *Literacy: the phonic method*.

The authors are psychologists, university professors and researchers with schooling and experience in the area of experimental psychology. Alessandra has a post-doctorate in Experimental Psychology from the University of São Paulo (USP) – Brazil, and Fernando has a PhD from Temple University – USA and is an Associate Professor of Neuroscience through USP. When the book was published, both worked in the Experimental Cognitive Neuropsycholinguistic Laboratory of USP as Associate Researcher and Director, respectively. Apart from their other activities and publications, they are authors and co-authors of books and articles in which they present the findings of their research related to the phonic method and various other themes in the area of “Fundamentals and Measures of Psychology” and “Evaluation of

⁴ This expression designates a concept that I coined with the hope of contributing to the approach of the set of aspects that should be considered in seeking to understand the meaning of a text. In regards to this topic, see especially: Mortatti (2000a).

Development and Disturbances of a Cognitive and Linguistic Nature with Preventative and Remedial Intervention.”⁵

At the time of the writing of this article, the book in question had four editions: the first in 2002, the second in 2003, the third in 2004 and the fourth (revised and expanded) in 2007. Since the first edition, the book has been published by Memnon Scientific Editions Ltd., headquartered in São Paulo and founded relatively recently, from what can be ascertained from available information. This book is in first place on the list of bestsellers by this publisher, which has published 39 books in the area of phonoaudiology, psychology, psychopedagogy and education, “focused on the theme of infant development” and among which can be found various works published or organized by the authors of the book under consideration.

In the third edition (2004), the book *Literacy: the phonic method* is physically large with two book jacket flaps with photos and information about the authors. In the middle of the cover, with a yellow background, are the names of the authors, the names of the four collaborators, the title of the book and the name of the publisher. In the header and footer, there is a sequence of reproductions that are probably illustrations of old books, shown in two horizontal stripes and suggesting the evolutionary sequence of the learning of reading and writing. This sequence and placement of images are repeated on the back cover and in the middle is a text with a summary of the contents of the book and the logos of the agencies and institutions that financed the research and/or publication – Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), the Support Foundation of USP (FUSP), the Support of Research of the State of São Paulo Foundation (Fapesp), the National Council

⁵ Information available at *Plataforma Lattes – CNPq* < <http://lattes.cnpq.br/> > and in the front and back flaps of the book jacket of the third edition of the book in question.

on Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) – and the publisher, Memnon.⁶

On the cover of the fourth edition (2007), which was supported by the Anísio Teixeira National Institution of Educational Studies and Research (Inep), radical changes were made. Apart from the title of the book, there are only the names of the two authors and the logo of the publisher. This information is placed over the illustration, with bright colors and more modern features that represent a classroom painted in various shades of green, in which there is a teacher and many young students of various ethnicities, sitting in desks, with pencils and notebooks out; all are wearing yellow shirts and blue pants and are smiling and look happy; they are all looking at one of the students who is holding up a sign that says “fourth edition revised and expanded.”⁷

As an epigraph, the authors present an excerpt from the letter of St. Paul and right afterwards offer thanks to: the agencies that provided financial support to the research, university institutions, education secretaries, the mayor and one city councilmember of the city of Marília in São Paulo, colleagues and member of the research team and elementary schools, teachers and students.

In the second edition (2003), another preface (p. 2) was added, in which the authors highlight the “clear superiority” of the phonic method, demonstrated by the “review of the entire bibliography published on literacy over the last eighty years,” from which comes their official recommendation of renowned “international organizations” and their successful official adoption in countries

⁶ The original Portuguese names of these agencies and institutions: Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Capes), Fundação de Apoio à USP (FUSP), Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (Fapesp), and the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq).

⁷ Due to the page limit of this article, it will not be possible to address in detail all of the characteristics of the fourth edition of the book.

“that are recognized globally for the quality of literacy and elementary education, such as France, the United States, Canada, England, Italy, Australia, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, Finland, Chile, Cuba, Israel and Portugal” (CAPOVILLA; CAPOVILLA, 2003).⁸ They share that the book’s purpose is to be utilized as “a teacher’s book and it explains all of the scientific foundations of the phonic method, as well as the theoretical-conceptual models and the most recent national and international scientific findings upon which the method is based.” It even includes instructions and explanations for implementation of “phonic activities” in the classroom: “[S]ystematic introduction of graphophonemic correspondence,” described in the two volumes of “the Student’s Book” – and “metaphonological activities” – “exercises for the development of phonologic awareness” (CAPOVILLA; CAPOVILLA, 2003).

In the third edition (2004), the authors add another, longer preface entitled, “Why Brazil needs the phonic method more than ever” (p. 26), in which they highlight the editorial success of the book and reaffirm the pioneering nature as well as the audacity of their proposal in regards to their defense of the phonic method. To accomplish this, they update and render problematic data about the Brazilian educational failure in literacy from 1995 to 2004 and reiterate criticisms of the National Curricular Parameters (PCN) (1997) and “constructivism,” and re-present the results of international experiments and national and international studies on literacy.

They also explain that the chapter “Why Brazil needs the phonic method,” presented in the first edition of the book, remains “valid” for being “pioneering, audacious and of great historical importance” and for tackling the

⁸ In this and future citations of this book, I will no longer present this information because the pages are not numbered in the original version. I will proceed in the same manner in the rest of the cases in which there is no numeration of the pages of the book in question.

“omission in correcting and updating the PCN in the area of literacy...which continue to be scandalously erroneous and against history, as well as the terrible consequences of these errors and anachronisms for the Brazilian school population,” always reiterating very successful examples of developed countries (CAPOVILLA; CAPOVILLA, 2004).

The authors emphasize that this preface in the third edition ends with a “note of hope, anchored in the growing recognition of our theoretical positions and their effective and growing implementation,” harshly criticizing “constructivism,” denouncing “the clear fissure of the constructivist establishment” and praising what they consider a “*mea culpa*” of the “exponents of dominant constructivism,” in the face of the substantiation of the “literacy crisis” created by it (CAPOVILLA; CAPOVILLA, 2004).

In the development of their argument, the authors present the “leading lines” of what they consider to be a “historical perspective,” which “sheds light on the phenomenon and permits a quick glimpse of the escape from the ditch that Brazil has gotten itself stuck in recently” (CAPOVILLA; CAPOVILLA, 2004).

In addition, in attempting to justify their proposal, the authors reiterate harsh critiques for “constructivism” because they consider it to be the literacy model adopted in Brazil in the PCN and “constructivism” is therefore responsible for the country’s failure in literacy during the last several decades. These critiques are emphatically directed to what they call the “global or ideovisual method endorsed by the constructivist PCN of literacy,” which they consider to be an “incorrect, anachronistic and counterproductive” document responsible for the “functional illiteracy of our children” and not just of public schools. According to the researchers, with the adoption of this “global or ideovisual method” (*whole language*), our children “were deprived of

metaphonological and phonic instruction that are explicit and systematic” and “do not have sufficient phonemic awareness and understanding of grapheme-phoneme relations to map speech through writing and to recuperate internal speech... from this writing” (CAPOVILLA; CAPOVILLA, 2004).

After repeated and detailed explanations of their theoretical position and examples of the “ministries of education of civilized nations,” written in the form of a challenge and in the tone of a religious sermon, the authors conclude the presentation of the third edition with an exhortation to the Ministry of Education of our country and with an ask for a blessing from God.

Among the 95 bibliographical references that follow the “Preface to the third edition”: 42% are articles, chapters or books that have A. Capovilla and F. Capovilla as authors, co-authors or organizers/editors; 25% are official Brazilian and foreign documents; 23% are other foreign publications; and 8% are publications by other Brazilian authors.

In the fourth edition (2007), another preface is added (40 pgs.), in which the authors reiterate their critiques and emphasize the provocative tone of the previous prefaces.

The content that follows these prefaces has characteristics that oscillate between research accounts and a teaching manual/student workbook and is organized into two parts entitled, respectively: “Why Brazil needs the phonemic method” (98 pgs.), and “Implementing the phonic method” (295 pgs.).

In the first part, the authors inform the reader that the book was a result of a “collaboration between researchers at the University of São Paulo and first-grade public school teachers” and the book “makes available for Brazilian education advanced and effective procedures to promote literacy that come from the most recent developments in international research on the acquisition of reading and writing skills” (CAPOVILLA; CAPOVILLA, 2004, p. 9).

In addition, they share justifications of their proposal, with repeated emphasis on “examples of the curricular parameters of developed countries with high performance in reading,” and the scientific foundations of the phonic method, with repeated emphasis on criticism of “constructivism,” according to the bibliographical references.

In the second part, there is a detailed explanation for teachers for implementing the phonic method, with 130 “daily literacy activities.” In this part, the size of the letters is increased even more than they were in the first part, which themselves were larger than those of the prefaces that preceded the summary.

It must also be highlighted that throughout the editions of the book, it becomes increasingly evident not only who the audience privileged by the authors is – the Brazilian education authorities who in the political world *should* officially adopt the proposal to be applied by literacy teachers, as executors of the didactic-pedagogical world – but also through insistent repetition and an increasingly incisive tone, the objective of persuading this audience that the proposal contained in the book *should* substitute what they consider the current “literacy politics” in our country, based on “pedagogical beliefs of the third world.”

3. New old errors

From a historical point of view, inter-relating what is synthetically exposed in the two previous topics, it is possible to conclude that despite the good intentions expressed by the authors of *Literacy: the phonic method*, many of the affirmations upon which they attempt to base their proposal lack technical rigor and scientific legitimacy; and the principal arguments that they use to defend their proposal can also be used to question it.

Even though the authors present their proposal as “good news,” this is not a “new” or “pioneering” or “effective scientific solution” proposal, with “demonstrated efficacy, scientific rigor, and modernity.”

As I have already mentioned, the phonic method is a synthetic method known in Brazil since the mid-nineteenth century. Since the second “moment” in the history of literacy in Brazil, the synthetic methods were vehemently criticized and fought against by those who proposed and defended analytic methods. The main criticism that until now was aimed at synthetic methods is that they prevent the child from learning the meaning of what is presented to him at the very beginning of learning to read; because of this, “[the synthetic methods] doomed the learning process of our ancestors and led to the brutal affirmation of ‘with blood, the letter enters’” (KÖPKE, 1896, p. 30). One must also remember that during the twentieth century, the focus was no longer on the predominant tendency of proposing and applying purely synthetic or analytic methods, but rather mixed methods (analytic-synthetic or synthetic-analytic).

This information permits us to consider as false many of the authors’ affirmations, in particular: “[T]he alphabetic-syllabic method [is] (the grandfather of the phonic method)”; and “The review of all of the public bibliography about literacy during the last 80 years demonstrates the clear superiority of the phonic method.” They also allow pointing to the lack of familiarity with and the wrong contents in the presumptions of the authors related to what they call an “international and recent survey of the History of Literacy,” which they reaffirm, many times, as proof of the scientific nature of their proposal.

For these reasons, the authors’ affirmation that a “national crisis of functional illiteracy...descended upon Brazil in the last quarter of the century” is also unfounded. As I have already noted, this crisis is not merely one of the

“last quarter century,” even though it has taken on specific features during that historical period. Contrary to what the authors assert, their criticism of “constructivism” only considers part of the “scientific understanding of the last decade,” exactly what serves to demonstrate and confirm the presumptions that the authors consider self-explanatory, which they insistently repeat, in hopes of convincing their audience, omitting – perhaps by ignoring them – other important results of internationally recognized scientific studies that are funded by equally renowned Brazilian agencies of research development.

Even though the authors make an effort to “demonstrate with clarity and solidity the entire historic responsibility of constructivism for the disorganization of reading and writing instruction in the last quarter century,” this discursive effort results in phrases whose arguments are effectively not clear nor solid at all, such as: this situation is due to an “obscure pre-scientific time,” the result of the “abandonment of tupiniquim⁹ pedagogy for mass media constructivism,” of “25 years of tupiniquim unanimity in regards to constructivism” and “its obtuse incomprehension of the importance of literacy methods.”

Equally unsustainable is the claim that responsibility for the “functional illiteracy of our children” is the result of the “global or ideovisual method endorsed by the constructivist PCN of literacy.” As is known, even though “constructivism” is the theoretical basis for the PCN, its endorsement did not make constructivism “universal in literacy practice.” This is because, from a theoretically rigorous point of view, there is no “constructivist didactic” nor a “constructivist literacy method” and also because, despite the hegemony of

⁹ “Tupiniquim” is a term that Brazilians use to refer to being Brazilian/from the land of Brazil. “Tupiniquim” is literally a reference to the indigenous people of the same name, but is now often used by Brazilians in a self-deprecating manner when referring to the disorganized or inefficient nature of Brazilian society.

constructivist thinking in Brazil, schools continued to use primers that, new or old, always contained the accomplishments of literacy methods (synthetic, analytic, or mixed), which, therefore, were never not used by literacy teachers, not even in the “last quarter century.” Furthermore, neither the PCN or “constructivist” theory proposes or endorses the “global or ideovisual method.”

Finally, one of the weakest arguments presented by the authors is that contained in the second affirmation: “[T]he solution found by the countries that suffered a crisis similar to Brazil’s is perfectly valid for Brazil as well.” This affirmation is based on sophismatic reasoning, according to which what works for certain developed countries at a specific historical time and as a response to their specific needs, works for all underdeveloped and developing countries as well, independently of historical, political, social, cultural and linguistic differences between these countries and their specific needs. This reasoning merely attempts to imitate models resulting from studies and the necessities of others, as if we were dealing with universal, identical problems, with equally universal and identical solutions.

These particular arguments in turn lead to the following affirmations: “[T]he constructivist daydreams are revealed to be, in fact, a nightmare suffered by generations and generations of Brazilians incapable of filling unemployment lines” and with the official adoption of the phonic method, “Brazilian education was able to overcome past difficulties and thrive without having to wait decades until macroeconomic and sociocultural factors improved.” In accordance with these affirmations – which are also based on sophismatic reasoning and which synthesize the political objective of the authors – literacy is limited to a question of methods (synthetic or analytic) and the possibilities of Brazilians finding employment depends *only* on the option of one or the

other literacy method, even though, contrarily, they also assert that education does not depend on “macroeconomic and sociocultural factors.”

In synthesis, from the historical point of view that I propose here, the key errors of the authors of *Literacy: the phonic method* can be thus summarized:

- The phonic method is *not* the “grandchild” of the alphabetic-syllabic method, but rather its younger brother, if we stick to the parental metaphor; the phonic method, therefore, is *not* a *new* literacy method, is *not* “light years ahead of the alphabetic-syllabic method of the past” and the similarities between them are much greater than the mere “emphasis on the sound of speech.”
- The 130 “daily activities” presented by the authors for implementation of the phonic method do not present significant differences in regards to the historical pattern of traditional primers that are based on synthetic methods.
- The (re)presentation of this methods and accompanying activities as something “new” represents, from a historical point of view, an *anachronism*.
- The proposal centered on the phonic method is *not* the only one currently offered for literacy and its supporters are not the only ones to affirm in the present, or have affirmed in the past, to be based on “scientific evidence” especially in the foundations of psychology and its various subdivisions, in particular experimental and Piagetian psychology.
- The review of the “entire bibliography published about literacy in the last 80 years” does *not* “demonstrate the clear superiority of the phonic method.”

- If there is a “Brazilian literacy crisis” it has *not* occurred in only the last quarter century and its cause can *not* be simplistically attributed to the “tupiniquim unanimity about constructivism,” which itself did *not* occur.
- Moreover, one can *not* accuse the “constructivist daydreams” for being responsible for “generations and generations of Brazilians incapable of filling unemployment lines,” just as the phonic method (nor any other literacy method) is *not* the miraculous solution to Brazil’s problems.
- For as much as the authors insist on treating literacy as a merely technical question, one can *not* consider education, literacy and “macroeconomic and sociocultural factors” as totally unrelated.

4. The new old discourse

Considering the search for prophetic moral, religious and political authority that is convinced it was inspired by divinity, in whose name the truth, good news and the advent of a new era is revealed to us and considering the grandiloquent and messianic tone as well as the tautological, sophismatic, and sometimes completely inelegant argumentation – with a profusion of disqualifying adjectives, lacking critiques that are substantive and duly founded in “constructivism” and another profusion of qualifying adjectives with explicit self-praise – one can conclude that the authors of the book in question (and their replicators and/or acolytes in academia and in the media) present their proposal as if it were *the scientific truth revealed* and they accomplish this through a discourse characteristic of “pulpit rhetoric,” and as such ideological, authoritarian, and pseudoscientific.

This is a discourse with no room for discussion because the reversibility of the roles of locutor and interlocutor are not tolerated. While claiming to be non-polemical, the locutor holds exclusive power by the “illusion of reversibility” and by the tendency towards monosemy that attempts to control its meanings.¹⁰

This is a discourse that serves an ideological purpose whose author, as a god or a representative of a god, defines himself as a subject that names but does not admit to being named or at least as a repetition of names authorized by him. As such, it is an authoritarian discourse that has its condition of existence identified as the presupposition of the fundamental un-leveling of the locutor-audience relationship: the locutor is on a spiritual plane (or scientific, in the case at hand), and because of this, presents itself as infallible, infinite and omnipotent; the audience is on a temporal plane (or secular in this case), and because of this is fallible, finite and gifted with power dependent upon the goods distributed by the locutor.

This asymmetry founded on the principal of non-reversibility is the motive for salvation and faith, respectively, *for* and *in* science identified with religion. Such as in religious discourse the voice of a god is spoken as a prophet-preacher, in pseudoscientific discourse the voice of knowledge is spoken in the voice of the pseudoscientist-propagandist who mystifies reality as revealed, at the service of real ends that cannot be made explicit under the penalty of invalidating this discourse and its supposed effects.

As language is used to act above the audience and unleash on them certain practical actions, it is therefore required of the audience merely a willingness to change in the direction of salvation and faith in the revealed

¹⁰ The considerations in this and the next four paragraphs are based on Orlandi (1987) and Althusser (1974).

scientific truth. It is not required that the audience reflect or ask questions, since the definition of actions and the forms of their execution are the domain of god or his representative, the prophet-preacher/pseudoscientist-propagandist, whom the audience should obey.

This is, therefore, a discourse mobilizing silent obedience whose most characteristic function is not to prevent people from speaking or acting but is above all to obligate them to say and do what they do not wish to or could not say or do without faith.

With all this in mind, it is possible to understand the discourse contained in *Literacy: the phonic method* as it has been understood by other Brazilian and foreign researchers, critical of this method and of the affirmations and arguments that support the authors' proposal.

It is even possible to confirm that the audacity and pioneering spirit that the authors of *Literacy: the phonic method* attribute to themselves consists, in fact, in presenting as “new” and as an “effective scientific solution” what is not, in supposing that the repositioning of the discourse about the efficiency and scientific nature of the phonic method could confuse and silence all those that are familiar with it and produce studies in the same field that are flouted by the authors just as they dismiss the necessity of dialogue with the Brazilian academic community directly involved in the problems related to literacy in Brazil.

The exception made, especially for religious marks and the point of view centered on “experimental cognitive neuropsycholinguistics,” related to scientific, social and cultural conditions of this historical “moment” what we are dealing with is a type of discourse already widely known and used throughout the history of literacy in Brazil, by those who in each one of the four historical “moment” that I propose, tried to convince their contemporaries that

they were carriers of the new, scientific and definitive solution for the problems of literacy in the country.

Final thoughts

The risks are great when studying the present. Even greater, however, is the responsibility to do it, when one considers that history is characterized neither by cycles of apogee and decadence nor for “eternal returns,” neither for linear trajectories of progress in the direction of the end of evolution and that the historical approach in the scientific environment aims above all to understand without disputing judgments of aprioristic value. Even greater is the responsibility to do it with the objective of offering a portion of contribution to a debate that should be above all rigorous and consequential. These risks are added to many others when the historian himself is a participant of the present that he is studying historically and does not make himself available to stuffing rows of crusading saints.

As I have already elucidated in other publications, in my role as professor and researcher I come presenting and defending proposals for literacy (which I consider to be the initial stage of *teaching the mother tongue (Portuguese language)*, centered on linguistic interactionism and not on methods (synthetic or analytic) of literacy nor in the “constructivist” perspective. Because of this, contrary to what can be deduced through simplistic reasoning, I should warn that the focus of my questions in this article is not only on the phonic method in and of itself as if I wanted to contribute to the “battle of the methods” but also in the proposal for the official adoption of this method as defended by the authors of *Literacy: the phonic method*. My inquiries cannot, furthermore, be automatically reverted into arguments defending neither “constructivism” nor any other literacy method as if I was

defending a place in this battle. In addition, my objective to understand historically this proposal does not mean that I applied, benevolently and tolerantly, the popular-religious refrain of “everything understood, everything forgiven”; it also does not mean to omit myself or to attempt to silence the debate as some type of final word, like someone who places themselves above the debate, pretending to ignore it.

With the explanation of these risks and safeguards I can reaffirm that the phonic method today, (re)presented as new and especially the arguments in its defense have already proven ineffective for more than a century in Brazil. Because of this, the current discussion about literacy methods provoked by the presentation of the proposal of the authors of the book in question, is producing erroneous conclusions and decisions, with many other disadvantages for our children and Brazilian people. Particularly because one cannot accept that, in isolation and with salvationist objectives, one method can solve all literacy problems or that we should resuscitate one or some of them. In addition, in the way that it is presented and defended, it is not a dispute or a “war of the literacy teachers”¹¹ nor a discussion promoted by these teachers or of a discussion in which they participate as interlocutors. This is a dispute about hegemony in public policies promoted by the authors of the book in question, sponsored by research development agencies, replicated by some of their peers and/or acolytes in academia and for disclosing information to the media, whose privileged audience are the Brazilian educational authorities who in the political realm must be persuaded at whatever cost (including lobbies) to officially adopt the proposal for the purpose of its application on the part of literacy instructors.

¹¹ This expression (*guerra dos alfabetizadores* in Portuguese) was used as the title of an article in defense of the phonic method, written by the economist Cláudio Moura Castro and published in the magazine *Veja* on March 12, 2008.

These strategies and objectives are not new and characterize disputes occurring in each one of the four critical historical “moments” of literacy in Brazil that I synthesized at the beginning of this article. And perhaps because of this the expression the “battle of the methods” has subsided in reference to this discussion.

The erroneous conclusions and decisions are, therefore, consequences not only of the proposal for the utilization of the literacy method with which I and others disagree but above all the way that this proposal has been defended, of the type of discourse that drives it and of the supposition according to which in the historic realm (not only in that of literacy), it is possible to “turn pages” by ministerial decree or individual will as if the (recent) past could simply be discarded, starting from the version they would like to impose.

This does not mean, however, that we should teach reading and writing “in any which way.” In order to be a systematic and intentional process, this instruction (as is the case with all school subjects) cannot function without a method or in other words a sequence of steps planned and organized for the teacher to teach and the students to be able to learn how to read and write. If the question of methods is important it is not, however, the only question nor the most important one and cannot be treated with pyrotechnic effects, diverting attention from what is essential: the fact that a teaching method is merely one of the aspects of an educational theory related to a theory of understanding and with a political and social project. We must, therefore, think more seriously about all of the aspects involved in this complex and multifaceted process that is literacy and it is in this that our greatest challenge lies: the search for rigorous, consequential and relatively long-lasting solutions in order to confront the difficulties our children face in learning how to read and write and those faced by teachers in teaching the children.

For all of these reasons, the proposal in the book analyzed has done a historical disservice to literacy in Brazil, persuading perhaps only the unaware or those of good faith or those of bad faith, whose expectation is to partition off political and financial gains.

Furthermore, since this is not a matter of choosing between pleasing God or men, responsible decisions about the direction of literacy of our children need to be based not in revelations, prophecies or personal interests, but in scientific contributions for which we all, as researchers, are responsible because this is the duty of our profession. We assume the social obligation and the ethical responsibility of justifying with reliable results the public investments that finance our studies and of contributing to respectful and productive dialogue on the one hand among peers in the scientific community (including by means of evaluation of solicitations of financing of research) and on the other hand with educational authorities and literacy teachers who cannot be treated as mere executors of someone else's proposals, above all when the research involves aspects central to human life.

Here is registered my contribution to methodize this debate.

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