

The opinion of Emilia Ferreiro on literacy

O pensamento de Emilia Ferreiro sobre alfabetização

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ABSTRACT

With the aim of contributing to the comprehension of an important moment in Brazil's literacy history, this paper analyzes aspects of Emilia Ferreiro's (1937 -) thoughts on literacy, emphasizing her theories about the process of constructing knowledge of written language by children. These theories are the result of her research on the psychogenesis of written language, based on Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology and on Noam Chomsky's psycholinguistics, both of which had significant repercussions in our country beginning in the mid 1980s. This paper's topic is approached from a historical perspective through the process of locating, gathering and organizing the available bibliography by and about Emilia Ferreiro and analyzing the textual configuration of the book *Psychogenesis of Written Language* (*Psicogênese da língua escrita*).

Index Terms: literacy – Emilia Ferreiro – constructivism – literacy history in Brazil – Education in Brazil.

RESUMO

Com o objetivo de contribuir para a compreensão de um importante momento da história da alfabetização no Brasil, analisam-se aspectos do pensamento da pesquisadora Emilia Ferreiro (1937 -) sobre alfabetização, com ênfase em suas concepções a respeito do processo de construção do conhecimento da língua escrita, por parte de crianças, que resultam de sua pesquisa sobre a psicogênese da língua escrita fundamentada na Epistemologia Genética de Jean Piaget e na Psicolinguística de Noam Chomsky e que tiveram significativa repercussão em nosso país, a partir de meados dos anos de 1980. O tema é abordado de uma perspectiva histórica, por meio da utilização de procedimentos de localização, reunião e ordenação da bibliografia disponível *de e sobre* Emilia Ferreiro e da análise da configuração textual do livro *Psicogênese da língua escrita*.

Palavras-chave: alfabetização – Emilia Ferreiro – construtivismo – história da alfabetização no Brasil – Educação no Brasil.

In the 1980s in Brazil, the results of studies conducted by Argentinean researcher Emilia Ferreiro and her collaborators were published, which contained a new approach to the process of a child's written language acquisition.

In Brazil, this new approach came to be known as “constructivist” and became the key theoretical reference point for educational discourse on literacy (MORTATTI, 2000). Given the importance of this researcher's thoughts, it is necessary to understand them from a historical point of view: what are their significance and what did/do they represent for the history of literacy in Brazil?

Motivated to become familiar with various aspects of the history of literacy in Brazil, I developed a documentary and bibliographic study, linked to the Research Group “The History of the Instruction of Language and Literature in Brazil” (GPHELLB) and the Integrated Research Project “The Instruction of Language and Literature in Brazil: a Republican Documentary Repertory” (PIPELLB)¹ both coordinated by Maria do Rosário Longo Mortatti and subdivided into five lines of research, one of which is literacy, understood as the instruction of reading and writing during the first years of school.²

In order to carry out this study, I initially developed a research portfolio that included, in addition to the researcher's biographical data, 127 bibliographical references of written texts by her and translated into various languages, between 1969 (the year of the publication of her first article in French) and 2002 (the year in which my documentary study was closed) and eight references of texts related to the constructivist thought of Emilia

¹ This project was carried out between August 1999 and July 2003 and received help and financial support from CNPq (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico - National Council of Technological and Scientific Development) and financial support from FAPESP (Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo – São Paulo Research Foundation).

² The five lines of research in which the GPHELLB and the PIPELLB are divided are: 1. The Development of Language and Literature Teachers (including literacy teachers). 2. Literacy. 3. Portuguese Language Instruction. 4. Literature Instruction. 5. Children and Young Adult Literature.

Ferreiro on literacy,³ produced in Brazil between 1990 (the year of the defense of the first dissertation on the topic) and 1999 (year of the publication of the last book located).

This research portfolio allows us to confirm that Emilia Ferreiro has a vast written production, translated into various languages, in various countries, among them Brazil. It is also possible to verify that there are few studies and minimal research done *about* the constructivist thought of Emilia Ferreiro on literacy. Even at the end of the literature review, it was only possible to find eight text bibliographic text references that discuss Emilia Ferreiro's constructivist thought on literacy, as no work could be found that details specifically the production *of* Emilia Ferreiro and her constructivist thought on literacy from a historical perspective. What was found were texts that brought forth proposals on how to apply the ideas of Emilia Ferreiro and her collaborators in the classroom, which is not the purpose of the study whose results I present here.

These findings confirmed my initial research interest and my selection as *corpus* the analysis of the book *Psychogenesis of Written Language (Psicogênese da língua escrita*, written by Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky and translated in Brazil in 1985.

The criteria for the selection of this book included the following: it was the first of Ferreiro's books translated in Brazil; in it are presented the research results on the psychogenesis of written language, conducted by Emilia Ferreiro and her collaborators, which had not yet been radically contested, merely being criticized on occasion. Perhaps for this reason, it is a poorly read book, considering the number of copies printed, when compared to other works by Ferreiro.

In analyzing the researcher's set of works that were translated and published in Brazil, I identified in the selected book characteristics that

³ When I use the expression "bibliography related to the constructivist thought of Emilia Ferreiro on literacy," I refer to texts in the form of books, dissertations and theses in which are analyzed various aspects of the thought, professional performance and work of Emilia Ferreiro. The complete bibliography can be found in Mello (2003).

permitted me to consider it as a sign of Emilia Ferreiro's constructivist thinking on literacy. It is worth emphasizing that, although co-written with Ana Teberosky, the book was known in Brazil as "Emily Ferreiro's book," and the ideas in it became known as "Emily Ferreiro's constructivism," due to the fact that the researcher's image had gained preeminence since the time of her first contact with educators from our country.

From the middle of the 1980s, the research results on the psychogenesis of written language developed by Emilia Ferreiro and her collaborators and grouped together under the denomination of "constructivism," were considered a theoretical reference point in, for example, the state of São Paulo, for basic literacy education (Ciclo Básico de Alfabetização = CBA).

From that time until now, this researcher's ideas remain present in the Brazilian discourse on literacy, whether in institutional documents, articles in specialized magazines, congressional annals, texts suggested to teachers to use in pedagogical practice, or academic books, theses and dissertations about literacy.

Emilia Ferreiro gained fame for developing, with her collaborators, empirical research that allowed her to develop a theory about the psychogenesis of written language, which was disseminated in various countries, including Brazil. Her professional performance also reveals her political commitment to contributing to the search for solutions for literacy-related problems.

This search for solutions aimed to modify the educational reality of Latin American nations, in relation to the literacy failure found primarily in children from the lower classes. This led Ferreiro to propose – particularly through the results of the study contained in the book *Psychogenesis of Written Language* – a new way of thinking about literacy, since, from the researcher's perspective, the literacy failure was related to the way that this process had been presented and practiced up until then.

In light of these considerations, Ferreiro defends having created a “conceptual revolution” in regards to literacy, for having “changed” the axis around which circulated discussions on the topic: of the debates concerning the methods and the tests utilized for the instruction of reading and writing, to the idea that it is not the methods that teach literacy, nor the tests that facilitate the literacy process, but rather it is the children who (re)construct knowledge about written language, through hypotheses that they formulate to comprehend the function of this object of knowledge.

In addition to this proposal for a “change in outlook” about the literacy process, the “conceptual revolution” proposal is also related to her vision of written language and literacy. For the researcher, written language should be understood as a system of language representation that opposes itself with that which views written language as codification and decodification of language.

Consequently, Ferreiro is opposed to the concept of literacy understood as learning two different techniques (written language codification and decodification), in which the teacher is the only authorized informant. Ferreiro thus defends the concept of literacy that tends in the opposite direction, as she considers it the process of learning written language. This learning is considered to be “conceptual learning,” accomplished through interaction between the object of knowledge (written language) and the cognoscente subject (who wants to learn).

From the beginning of the dissemination of Emilia Ferreiro’s constructivist thought on literacy in our country in the mid-1980s, the tensions resulting from the appropriation of this thought into the sphere of official proposals was related to the discussions about the meaning of “conceptual revolution” posited by Emilia Ferreiro. Although this tension appears to have eased and although there is no news that the results of Emilia Ferreiro’s and her collaborator’s research have not been refuted in their fundamentals and results, many related criticisms are levied, above all

on the role of instruction, school and the teacher as defined by the “conceptual revolution.”

These doubts are related to the fact that in the book *Psychogenesis of Written Language*, there is no didactic literacy proposal, nor “recipes” with the intention of guaranteeing literacy success of all children in the early stages of schooling.⁴

In this book one finds the results of a study about the process of the acquisition of written language by children, which can contribute to understanding how this complex process works. Such an understanding is particularly important for teachers and psychologists, the book’s target audience.

For teachers, the book can help in the interpretation of children’s responses when they are producing or interpreting texts, so that they take these responses into consideration during the process of construction, by the child, of written language understanding. The authors understand that, in providing teachers with this information, they are contributing to lowering the number of them who fail in this stage of schooling.

For psychologists, the book offers elements that facilitate understanding what happens during the process of written language acquisition, which, for the authors, aids the work of these professionals because when they interact with children, generally those that fail at the beginning of the literacy process do not understand how the process works, now being able to consider the children’s interpretations as an indicator of future ailments or pathological cases.

Taking into consideration the principal characteristics of the book – a presentation of a theory containing “new” interpretations of the reading and writing learning process, the result of a minutely and copiously detailed study – it is possible to conclude that her reading is not simply

⁴ Among the researchers who address this topic, I wish to highlight: Azenha (1993) and Ribeiro (1991).

understanding, because it involves other theories that support in building its foundation, demanding, on the part of the reader, a certain familiarity, above all, with the fundamentals of Piagetian theory and Chomskyan psycholinguistics. These characteristics, perhaps, also explain the relatively limited run of the book in Brazil, in comparison to the intense and extensive dissemination of Emilia Ferreiro's constructivist thought on literacy in the country.

Despite this, although the ideas contained in the book have been and continue to be widely distributed, through appropriations on the part of "official discourse" as much as academic studies and research on this topic, there are few that "master" Emilia Ferreiro's constructivist thought on literacy, contained in the discussed book. We can suppose that among these few readers are literacy specialists, pedagogical teams of official organizations, academic researchers, and a few literacy teachers.

An analysis of the book *Psychogenesis of Written Language* serves to confirm its relevance in regards to understanding Emilia Ferreiro's constructivist thought on literacy. This relevance derives precisely from the fact that this book contains what is known as the "invariant matrix" of this thought, considered a "conceptual revolution" in literacy by the book's authors and other researchers as well.

It is a matrix because it is understood as a key attribute, and is invariant because later it expands, while always maintaining its fundamental characteristics that confer upon it unity and continuity.

This unit is related to the influences as much of Piaget's genetic epistemology as Chomsky's psycholinguistics that constitute a common nucleus of anchorage of the theory on the psychogenesis of written language. In this sense, the key attribute of the invariant matrix of Emilia Ferreiro's constructivist thought on literacy consists in the fact that this researcher considers that the activity structuring the subject's activity makes it so he constructs interpretative schema to understand the nature of writing.

The fundamental characteristics of this matrix, in turn, consist in the substantiation of the fact that children possess capabilities both cognitive (capabilities of developing reasoning) and linguistic (capabilities of developing concepts about the writing system) and utilize them in order to understand the mechanism of the functioning of written language in the reading and writing learning process. In this process children re(construct) understanding about written language through a personal elaboration of various successive stages, each of which represent an important stage in the process. Thus, the interpretation of the process is explained from the point of view of the children who learn, keeping in mind the specific understanding that they possess before beginning school, which is knowing that writing does not only represent a streak or a mark, but rather a “substitute object.”

From this understanding, children follow a line of regular evolution until the acquisition of written language, elaborating hypotheses to understand the functioning of the written code.

The set of hypotheses elaborated by children, named “levels of conceptualization,” can be minimally categorized as: “distinction between the iconic and non-iconic”; “exigency of minimum quantity and variety of characters”; “syllabic hypothesis”; “syllabic-alphabetic hypothesis”; and “alphabetic hypothesis.” From the beginning to the end of this process occurs a process of (re)construction of understanding written language, which happens through the interaction of children with the object of knowledge.

In Ferreiro’s later written texts, one observes that the researcher expands this matrix of her thought. In it, the researcher amplifies and deepens the first formulations about the theory of psychogenesis of written language, conciliating accounts of situations and results of investigations developed about the learning of written language, whether on the part of children, adults or indigenous peoples.

Among these studies is also found the comparative ones, developed with children inserts in different linguistic contexts such as, for example, between Portuguese, Italian and Spanish, in which the researcher highlights the similarities and differences in the psychogenetic development of these children.

Expanding on this theme, the researcher tackles, in her later works, current topics such as the arrival of new technologies (computers and the internet) in schools and the discussion about “letramento,”⁵ confirming her contemporaneity in relation to the discourse on literacy. Despite all this, in all that she writes, that invariant matrix is always present.

Through what has been presented, one can conclude that the book *Psychogenesis of Written Language* became a milestone in the intellectual production of Ferreiro and in her constructivist thought on literacy. It is important to emphasize that, although this book was written in co-authorship with Ana Teberosky,⁶ the great majority of Ferreiro’s vast written production is the work of Ferreiro and is not linked exclusively to Teberosky, or to other researchers, to whom Ferreiro assigns other publications.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that, after initial tensions stemming from the dissemination of this thought, whose invariant matrix is found in the book analyzed here, of the questions of some experts on the topic, this thought remains alive today in discourses and practices on literacy in Brazil. However, did Ferreiro’s thought generate, through its appropriations,

⁵ In Brazil, a debate has arisen between two terms that both translate into “literacy”: the older term “alfabetização” and the newer term “letramento.”

⁶ Ana Teberosky currently develops her professional work as a professor for the Department of Evolutionary Psychology and the School of Education of Barcelona, Spain, where she developed studies in the area of language in partnership with the Municipal Institute of Education Applied Psychological Investigations (IMIPAE) and the Municipal Institute of Education (IME). In Brazil, other works by Ana Teberosky were translated and published, such as *Psychopedagogy in Written Language* (1990), in which the researcher presents a pedagogical proposal of literacy through the use of different types of texts, the inverse of what Ferreiro does, whose texts do not include pedagogical proposals.

“revolution” in the “doing” of literacy in São Paulo and in Brazil? I believe that this is a topic worth debating more than ever before.

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