

REVIEW

The need of an integrated literacy process on initial learning of written language

Vicente de Souza CARDOSO JR 

Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)

ABSTRACT

At the lecture *Alfabetização e Letramento – TeoriaS e PráticaS*, which integrated the program of the online event *Abralin ao Vivo – Linguists Online*, Professor Magda Soares presents the concept of literacy that has been guiding the strategies used in the Preschool and first grades of Elementary School in Lagoa Santa (MG, Brazil) and has led to the city's successful experience. This review presents fundamental aspects of this conception, which, according to Soares, is centered on giving attention to the child's cognitive and linguistic development while guiding their process of learning the written language. The lecturer presents some of the main psychological and linguistic theories that offer important scientific evidence about the initial learning of written language. Soares argues that children must learn the alphabetic writing system whilst assimilating the social uses of reading and writing. Some of these theories are recovered in this review. It also highlights divergences between the conception of literacy presented by Magda Soares and the one currently proposed by the Brazilian federal government.



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Raquel Freitag

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RESUMO

Na conferência *Alfabetização e Letramento – TeoriaS e PráticaS*, que integrou a programação do evento *Abralin ao Vivo – Linguists Online*, a professora Magda Soares apresenta a concepção de alfabetização e letramento que tem orientado o trabalho na Educação Infantil e nos anos iniciais do Ensino Fundamental na bem-sucedida experiência do município de Lagoa Santa (MG). Esta resenha apresenta aspectos fundamentais dessa concepção, que, segundo Soares, é centrada na orientação do processo de aprendizagem da língua escrita pela criança, com atenção a seu

desenvolvimento cognitivo e linguístico. A conferencista apresenta algumas das principais teorias psicológicas e linguísticas que oferecem evidências científicas importantes para a alfabetização e o letramento, defendendo que esses processos sejam sempre integrados. Algumas dessas teorias são recuperadas nesta resenha, que também destaca divergências entre a concepção apresentada por Magda Soares e a que é proposta pela atual Política Nacional de Alfabetização do governo federal.

KEYWORDS

Initial learning of written language. Literacy. Child's cognitive and linguistic development. Magda Soares.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Alfabetização. Letramento. Desenvolvimento cognitivo e linguístico da criança. Magda Soares.

Reflecting on the value of the conjunction “e” [“and”] in the title of a lecture for linguists and language teachers is a good way to remind us that meaning is not only built on the so-called spontaneous uses of language, but also in its analysis. With this gesture, Professor Magda Soares starts her presentation *Alfabetização e Letramento – TeoriaS e PráticaS*, at the end of *Abralin ao Vivo – Linguists Online*, on July 31, 2020, after three months of a daily program. The lecture was held in Portuguese; the quotations below were translated by the author of this review.

For those who are not familiar with these concepts in Brazilian Portuguese, the word “literacy” has two main translations in this language: *alfabetização* refers to the learning/teaching of the alphabetical system and *letramento* is used for literacy when regarding social uses of written language. The same roots also form two verbs: *alfabetizar* and *letrar*. When the lecturer highlights the role of the first additive conjunction “e” [“and”], she invites us to understand “*alfabetização*” and “*letramento*” as processes that “go together”, or even as parts of the same process – the initial learning of the written language. Soares also leads us to reflect on the relationship between “theorieS” and “practiceS”: “it is not ‘theories applied to practices’, nor ‘practices supported by theories’ – they are theories and practices combined, interacting”. Both those capitalized plurals will be very significant throughout the lecture.

Since the beginning of her lecture, Magda Soares emphasizes that the conception of “*alfabetização e letramento*” that she presents is the result of a collective construction, which arises precisely from the interactions between theories and practices. Two places in particular have enabled these interactions in Soares’s work:

- the municipal school system in the city of Lagoa Santa (MG, Brazil), where she has been a volunteer for 12 years, coordinating *Núcleo de Alfabetização e Letramento*, which has one teacher from each school of the municipal system as members;
- the *Centro de Alfabetização, Leitura e Escrita – Ceale* [Center for Literacy, Reading and Writing] – from the Faculty of Education of UFMG, in Belo Horizonte (MG, Brazil) –, which was founded in 1990, based on the research *Alfabetização no Brasil: o estado do conhecimento* [Literacy in Brazil: state of knowledge], started by Soares in the 1980s and still in progress (coordinated by Francisca Maciel, from UFMG).

Another landmark in Soares's work is the publication of *Alfabetização: a questão dos métodos* [Literacy: the issue of methods] (SOARES, 2016), elected the Non-Fiction Book of the Year of 2017 Jabuti Award, the most important literary award in Brazil. In this work, she focuses on the main studies on the initial learning of written language produced internationally. Based on her reference work in the area, the researcher warns us: “We have repeatedly asked the question: what is the best method? That is not the question. That question is the wrong one.” She proposes, as being the right question, the following: “how should we guide the learning process of the alphabetical writing system and the skills of its use, respecting the scientific evidence given by the theories of the child's cognitive and linguistic development?”. By changing the question, the focus is no longer on teaching, but on guiding the child's learning process.

Still situating the conception presented, it is important to mention another one that it opposes: “what we built as a conception of *alfabetização* and *letramento* diverges fundamentally from the one assumed by the national plan of *alfabetização* that the current government is proposing”, says Soares. To understand this divergence, two ideas presented in the *Política Nacional de Alfabetização – PNA* (BRASIL, 2019) must be highlighted. Firstly, the understanding of the alphabetical system as a code. “If someone is literate, it means they are able to decode and encode any word in their language” (BRASIL, 2019, p. 19). Secondly, the proposal for teaching this code, emphasizing “systematic phonics instruction” (BRASIL, 2019, p. 16), “in an explicit and systematic way, in an order which starts from the simplest to the most complex” (BRASIL, 2019, p. 18).

The policy presented above – to which, as said before, the lecturer opposes – recommends teaching the alphabetical principle based on strategies of codification/decodification, while Magda Soares argues that the child should be guided in learning this principle as a system of representation. An essential difference lies in taking into account the concepts about written language that child is able to construct at each moment of his/her cognitive and linguistic development. In this sense, many theories that indicate the stages of this development are relevant. Soares highlights studies by Vygotsky (1935) and Luria (1929), on the prehistory of writing; Read (1970) and Bissex (1980), on invented spelling; Gentry (1982), on stages of development; Frith (1985) and Ehri (1997), on the development stages of reading; and, finally, by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1986), on the psychogenesis of written language.

The last one of them has the greatest influence in the field of initial literacy in Brazil. According to Soares, its relevance is related to the fact that “it focuses on the child, and not on the system itself – it is the child interacting with the alphabetical system”. During her lecture, Soares explains how the stages of conceptualization of written language described by psychogenetic theory (scrabble; writing with letters; syllabic without sound value; syllabic with sound value; syllabic-alphabetic; alphabetic; and orthographic) have been articulated with the literacy practices in Preschool and in the first grades of Elementary School in Lagoa Santa.

And why is it possible to consider the stages from the psychogenetic theory as relevant scientific evidence for initial learning of reading and writing in Portuguese? As stated by Soares, it is due to the fact that the research was “replicated and proven in languages with transparent orthographies, or close to transparency”, such as Spanish (the original language of the research), Catalan, Italian and Portuguese, both Brazilian and European. In languages with transparent orthography, syllables are well demarcated and the correspondence between phonemes and graphemes is consistent – in contrast, the greater the opacity of a language's orthography, the less these characteristics will be found. Here, another difference in relation to the federal government's proposal is highlighted: the current policy is strongly based on a study (NATIONAL READING PANEL, 2000) on initial literacy in English, whose orthography “is always indicated as one of the most opaque”. Furthermore, the lecturer considers this study outdated, even in the USA, where it was carried out, and also partial – it “came to the conclusion that the phonic method was the best, although other methods have not been studied”.

Another point of the fundamental divergence between the two conceptions is that the Brazilian federal government's proposition postulates the pronunciation of phonemes as an essential practice to learn the alphabetical system, what, according to Soares, contradicts linguistic theories: “it is a scientific evidence of Phonology that phonemes are not pronounceable. They express an abstract linguistic relationship. It is not possible to pronounce a phoneme, except the vowels (‘a’, ‘e’, ‘i’, ‘o’, ‘u’), even so, with differences between /a/, /ã/ etc.”. At this point, the lecturer makes an interesting comparison: essentially, the child identifies phonemes in the same way as in phonological descriptions of languages. In short, for both the child and the linguist, “two sounds are identified as two phonemes when they are in contrast and opposition in words with different meanings”. For example, the Portuguese words ‘bata’ and ‘mata’, “two words that are distinguished orally only by sounds located at the same position in the sound chain”. Soares defends that, from the moment the child's conceptualization of the written language corresponds to the stage “syllabic without sound value”, teachers will fundamentally “work with contrasts and oppositions, so that the child reaches the graphophonemic awareness, and then learn systematically, as the phonic method intends, and explicitly the knowledge of phoneme-grapheme relations”.

According to Soares, focusing on the social uses of writing only after the development of graphophonemic awareness is a serious mistake. She sustains that theories of Textual Linguistics, Discourse and Genres, as well as practices observed in Lagoa Santa, offer evidence that the child's cognitive and linguistic development allows and favors the work with real texts since early childhood education – which is regarded by the municipal school system in its goals. As an example, she

presents the framework of “skills of reading and interpreting” for Preschool and first grades of Elementary School. In Preschool, for instance, they include “relating text and illustrations” and “incorporating new words found in texts into vocabulary”. It is important to mention that the municipal school system’s goals – both for the learning of the alphabetical system (*alfabetização*) and for social uses of written language (*letramento*) – are built on the skills that children in each grade have developed in previous years. Thus, the lecturer emphasizes that the concept of “*alfabetização e letramento*” that she presents, in addition to being built collectively, is open to continuous updating.

Another important lesson from Magda Soares's lecture comes from the use of language. The Professor is one of the main contributors to the introduction of the term “*letramento*” in Brazil. Her work is marked by the permanent affirmation of the necessity of connecting “*alfabetização*” to “*letramento*”. After decades of contributing so to give both terms their place in language, Magda Soares's current work proposes that we explore those words also in another way. Moreover, it instigates us to think about the limits of the meaning of an addition by syntax: after all, in “*alfabetização e letramento*”, there are still different words, therefore, a linguistic separation of concepts. This is where we clearly see the intimacy with the object by someone who has dedicated herself with such rigor and enthusiasm in studying it. “When people ask: what is the method you use in Lagoa Santa? We don't use a method! If you want to call it a method, we do *alfaletramento*, we use *alfalettrar*, which is *alfabetizar* and *letrar* at the same time.”

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