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THE NATIONAL LITERACY PACT IN BRAZIL: ASSESSMENT OF WRITING IN THIRD GRADE CHILDREN

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I will analyze the results of the National Literacy Pact (Ministério da Educação, 2012) in relation to writing, released by the National Literacy Assessment (hereinafter ANA, INEP, 2015), in Brazil, in order to discuss the situation of the literacy program and identify aspects of the tool, with regard to writing. I will then discuss the categories of written production that were taken into account by the ANA, when verifying the competence of students in the 3rd year of Elementary School, in the light of the processes involved in the written textual production, from the point of view of psycholinguistics, with the recent neuroscience contributions. I will demonstrate that they were not included in the categories listed by the ANA to assess the writing competence of children who complete the 3rd year of Elementary School in Brazil. The ANA (INEP, 2015) evaluates the following aspects of writing: spelling, punctuation and some elements in the narrative (the only genre of speech evaluated). The assessment tool reveals theoretical and methodological flaws. For example, it does not take into account the skills needed to plan and supervise written production and is limited to a single genre, narrative. In addition, it uses poorly explanatory categories to evaluate. However, the robustness of the data allows us to draw a worrying profile of Brazilian children who complete the three-year literacy cycle in public schools. It is, according to Foraque (2015), a population of 2.3 million children, of which 34.46% were only able to scribble and produce fragments (of these, 11.64% wrote absolutely nothing). Only 9.88% have the ability to write a complete story and 55.66% can outline the narrative progression, but with inconsistencies and poor punctuation. The fact that this last group presents hyposegmentation allows us to infer that one of the biggest problems in its production resides in the difficulty of contrasting the presentation of new characters

and scenarios with the information already introduced.

ANALYSIS CATEGORIES IN THE PRODUCTION WRITTEN BY ANA

The (ANA) “is an external assessment that aims to assess the levels of literacy and literacy in Portuguese (reading and writing) and Mathematics of students in the 3rd year of elementary education in public schools” (INEP, 2013, p.1). Only what concerns writing will be commented on. See what was evaluated and how:

The ANA written production items required the writing of two words and a textual production. The skills assessed in the ANA written production items were:

- Write words with canonical syllabic structure;
- Spell words with non-canonical syllabic structure;
- Produce a text based on a given situation (INEP, 2013, p. 1).

Note that the production of the text was restricted to the narrative. With regard to statistical criteria, for writing “a scale was established whose mean value is 500 and the standard deviation is 100, with 500 representing the average distribution of proficiencies of students in the 3rd year of regular elementary education of public schools in 2013” (INEP, 2013, p. 2).

The results were grouped into four levels for writing, defined below:

Level 1, up to 400 points (cutoff point): They write words with canonical syllables (consonant and vowel) and non-canonical, with some difficulty and even words, orthographically, with canonical syllables. It can be seen in Table 1 that 11.64% of the children did not manage to surpass level 1, that is, the WORD writing level, and in the 11.64% were included both those who could only write a syllable and those who didn't

write anything.

Level 2, greater than 400 points and less than 500, there is an inconsistency in the ANA description when it states: “consisting of only one sentence; Producing narrative texts from a given situation” (INEP, 2013, p. 8), as it is practically impossible to produce a narrative with just one sentence, even if they have the laconic competence of César when narrating: “I came, I saw, I won ” (although, for the completeness of this narrative, it is still necessary to add the scenario: “Julius Caesar, when crossing the Rubicon, uttered”). Still characterizing Level 2 as: “presenting absence or inadequacy of formal elements (segmentation, punctuation, spelling, verbal agreement and nominal agreement) and textuality (cohesion and coherence), still evidencing a distance from the standard norm of the language”, the ANA demonstrates that he is repeating labels that are in vogue, since, evidently, only one sentence lacks the property of textual coherence, in addition to the fact that verbal agreement and nominal agreement are nothing but aspects of cohesion and not isolated grammatical aspects.

Level 3, greater than 500 points and less than 580, children write narrative texts with more than one sentence, with better adaptation to segmentation, verbal and nominal agreement, although with some commitment to formal elements and textuality, showing an approximation to the norm language standard (INEP, 2013, p. 8). Note the imprecise categorization and, again, the contradiction between “better adequacy to verbal and nominal agreement” and “commitment to textuality”, since better adequacy to verbal and nominal agreement is the primordial component of cohesion and, therefore, does not may coexist with “commitment to textuality”.

Level 4, greater than 580 points: Produce narrative texts, based on a given situation,

adequately attending to the use of textual elements, evidencing compliance with the standard norm of the language (INEP, 2013, p. 8). It is inferred from this categorization that the child must have already reached full competence to write narrative texts, according to the standard norm of the written language.

Chart 1, Summary of the Writing Scale below (INEP, 2015, p.15), differs from the number of levels presented by INEP in 2013, as it adds one more level. The inconsistencies are the same, aggravated by the fact that each of the categorizations was preceded by the word “probably”, which increases the degree of uncertainty in the results presented.

CATEGORIES LISTED BY ANA AND WRITING PROCESSING

In order to understand which skills are necessary for written production and, therefore, the bases that must guide the teaching-learning of literacy for textual production, it is necessary to monitor the processing of written production and, in particular, the differences between the processing of reading and writing and between the processing of oral production and writing.

In the first case, the crucial difference, with profound repercussions on processing and learning, is that, in the case of reading, the reader has to recognize the written word in a text that is already ready, whereas, in the case of writing, it is up to the writer to plan how he will transpose his states of consciousness to the text, in order to achieve the pragmatic purposes.

Such computations have to take into account numerous variables such as the purpose of the text, the recipient (whether private or public; status; age range; sociolinguistic variety), genre, topic and medium, as they will determine the style or register of the writing, with choices about syntax and lexicon to be used.

WRITING SCALE					
LEVEL	%BR	WORD			TEXT
		Word	Rel. Fones	Phoneme grapheme	
1	11,64	Not	Some	Not	Not or illegible
2	15,03	They write words alphabetically with changes or omission of letters, changes in the order of letters and other spelling deviations.			No or illegible
3	7,79	They write orthographically* words with a consonant-vowel syllabic structure, with some spelling deviations in words with more complex syllabic structures.			They write in an incipient or inappropriate way to what was proposed or produce fragments without connectors and/or lexical substitution resources and/ or punctuation to establish articulations between parts of the text. They also present a large number of spelling and segmentation deviations.
4	55,66	They write orthographically* words with different syllable structures.			They meet the proposal of giving continuity to a narrative, although they may not contemplate all its elements and/or parts of the story to be told. They articulate parts of the text using connectives, lexical substitution resources and other articulators, but still make deviations that partially compromise the meaning of the narrative, including by not using punctuation or using them inappropriately. The text may present some spelling and segmentation deviations that do not compromise understanding.
5	9,88	They spell out words with different syllabic structures, with some deviations.			They meet the proposal of giving continuity to a narrative, highlighting a central and final situation. They articulate parts of the text using connectives, lexical substitution resources and other articulators. They segment and write words correctly, although the text may have some spelling and punctuation deviations without compromising comprehension.

Chart 1, Summary of the Writing Scale (INEP, 2015, p.15)

In the differences between the processing of oral production and that of canonical writing, there are those that oral production occurs with the interlocutors sharing space-time coordinates and, often, the empirical and cultural context, which does not happen in written production canonical, when the writer writes for a spatially absent and even unknown future reader. Such a distinction implies that the competent editor has to provide in writing the spatial and temporal context and all the

necessary information so that the reader can effectively retrieve the references: the gesture of pointing is innocuous in written communication.

There is no mention, in the ANA categories, of these tremendous difficulties that the writing learner faces: the listed categories demonstrate that their authors ignore important stages of writing processing, that is, the initial milestone in which the brain works to prepare the conceptual map from a

communicative intention to produce a written text (definition of the topic, choice of genre and register, depending on the pragmatic intention, the conditions of the reader and the support: the Level of the Message), that is, the stages of communicative intention and planning. It must be clarified that the expression Level of the Message (Garrett, 1980), where the meaning is generated, is the label that will be preserved by Levelt and colleagues (1999). One must be careful not to confuse it with the same term when it is used as a translation of *utterance*, or when it integrates the model of functions of the language of R. Jakobson. The Message Level, in the verbal production models, means the highest and abstract level when the concepts that will later be lexicalized and inserted in the syntactic structures are gathered.

The second stage, when linearization (syntaxization) and translation of concepts into lexical items occurs, is briefly and confusingly referred to by the ANA evaluators. It must be noted that the taxonomy used by the ANA, opposing WORD to TEXT, already demonstrates the conceptual flaws in the classification: it is inferred, from the hyponyms placed in the WORD column, that the evaluators of the writing skills of the 3rd grade children were not examining whether the children were already correctly translating the concepts into lexical items, not even clearly delimiting the beginning and end of the word, as the hyposegmentation errors were listed in the TEXT column. In fact, some skills related to graphemic coding (a concept that supporters of the Psychogenesis of Writing ABOMINATE) were referred to in the column called WORD, such as “Write alphabetically”, “Write orthographically”, “consonant-vowel syllabic structure” and “structures more complex syllables”, without it being clear what they mean by “Write alphabetically”, since it does not infer any knowledge on the part

of the evaluators about the principles of the alphabetic system of Brazilian Portuguese (Scliar-Cabral, 2003).

The confusions and taxonomic gaps are flagrant in the categorization of the ANA evaluators: suffice it to say that in the TEXT column (which must include textualization categories, such as message level, syntax, translation of concepts into lexical items, thematic progression and monitoring) the most peripheral category of processing, that is, motor execution, when they mentioned “illegible”, although in the classification of the same Level 2 children, in the WORD column, they stated: “They write words alphabetically with changes or omission of letters, alterations in the order of the letters and other spelling deviations”. One wonders how they reached that conclusion, if the text was illegible. They also repeated categories that they had already placed in the WORD column, such as “spelling deviations”.

Examining more deeply the categories listed in the TEXT column, its fragmentary and contradictory character is detected. In addition to the already mentioned fact that the evaluators only assigned one genre, the narrative, it is not known in detail how it was elicited, nor whether it is a fictional or factual narrative. There is a lack of explicit references to the children’s mastery or not of the structure of the narrative, made up of episodes, which have their respective scenario, characters and events, interconnected by connectors that will indicate the type of logical relationships, such as, for example, causality, consequence, addition, etc.

The category “score to establish articulations between parts of the text” marks another constant generality in the ANA. The evaluators ignore that punctuation, except in direct speech (dialogues), when the expressive function prevails, are graphic marks, above all, of syntax. For example, the dot marks the

end of the period or sentence and the comma, the coordination between terms or phrases with the same syntactic function within the sentence or between sentences with the same syntactic function within the period. Commas also mark the beginning and end of an interpolated term and cannot separate the subject from the predicate. Thus, one of the didactic flaws in teaching punctuation is when the teacher naively recommends to children: “When you stop, put a comma”.

Another category that deserves further study is that of “segmentation deviations”. Without the reviewers going into detail, such deviations could be hypo- or hyper-segmentation. In the first case, the individual fails to put the blank space that separates two words in the written text, as in the example “o mar” → “umar”. This stems from the principle that we produce and perceive the speech chain as a continuum and unstressed words (clitics) are phonologically dependent, in Brazilian Portuguese, on the next word that has the syllable of greater intensity. Furthermore, clitics are always purely grammatical morphemes, such as the masculine singular definite article “o” above, and have no concrete referential counterpart, so the child analyzes “umar” as a unit.

An example of hyper-segmentation occurs when the word ends with a consonant and the next one starts with a vowel: the consonant migrates to the next syllable, becoming the onset: “the ear” → “zovidu”. There was a hyper-segmentation in “os” and the plural morpheme migrated to the beginning of the next word, losing its function: a new word was formed, probably the one that the child has in his mental lexicon, that is, /zo ‘vidu/. The so-called “phonetic writing” is nothing more than the approximate translation of how the word is “heard” in the mental lexicon by the child.

The above phenomena were mentioned for

the first time by Hindu phonetics, receiving the name of *sandhi* external (in Portuguese, *sandi*). In contemporary linguistics, they are called the closed outer junction.

FINAL WORDS

It has not been easy for scientists to elaborate production models of written texts: they face several methodological difficulties, from the elaboration of experimental designs that can empirically test the mental representations that govern how pragmatic intentions to produce a text are initiated, how they are meanings to be lexicalized are generated, in short, all the processing steps up to the execution that externalizes the text, these, yes, more accessible to experimental inspection. Opposing theories explain the very format of mental lexicons and the respective retrieval, thus giving rise to divergent experimental models.

The data analyzed by the ANA (INEP, 2015), despite all the conceptual and taxonomic problems of categorization, are important to assess the levels of writing performance in Brazil: they have been very low. I presented the results of the National Literacy Pact (Ministério da Educação, 2012) regarding writing, released by the National Literacy Assessment, in Brazil, and the categories of written production that were taken into account by the ANA, when verifying the students’ competence in the 3rd year of Elementary School, in the light of the processes involved in the written textual production, from the point of view of psycholinguistics, with the recent contributions of neuroscience. I demonstrated that they were not included in the categories listed by the ANA to assess the writing competence of children who complete the 3rd year of Elementary School in Brazil.

The assessment tool revealed theoretical and methodological flaws, as it did not take into account the skills needed to plan and

supervise the written production, being limited to a single genre, the narrative. The categories were not very explanatory to evaluate.

However, the robustness of the data allowed us to draw a worrying profile of Brazilian children who complete the three-year literacy cycle in public schools. It is, according to Foraque (2015), a population of 2.3 million children, of which 34.46% were only able to scribble and produce fragments (of these, 11.64% wrote absolutely nothing). Only 9.88% demonstrated the ability to write a complete story and 55.66% could outline the narrative progression, but with inconsistencies and poor scores. The fact that this last group presents hyposegmentation allows us to infer that one of the biggest problems in its production resides in the difficulty, in the narratives, to contrast the presentation of new characters and scenarios with the information already introduced.

Undoubtedly, at the heart of this desolate picture, are the foundations where systematic education begins: literacy. How literacy is learned “and how it is used determines its value to the learner” (UNESCO, 2014, p. 19).

The seriousness of the problem demands the convoking of all those who, although aware that there are deep structural causes that are beyond their intervention, could contribute to lessen the perverse effects of an outdated education, based on myths and prejudices without any coherent scientific foundation.

More than anything else, specialized teacher training is needed, the adoption of methods that benefit from the most recent discoveries in language sciences, including neuroscience, and the preparation of pedagogical material by equally prepared authors who, at the very least, know that Portuguese Brazilian does not have only five oral vowels, a, é, i, ó, u, as proclaimed in the carnival song.

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