Role-playing, literacy and other infant languages: A dialectical socio-historical approach

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt at enlarging the conventional reflection, developed particularly in Latin America, on the way children access writing. My approach is founded on some central positions held by Vygotskian psychologists on both writing and the use of role-play for pedagogical purposes. Based on results from data collected in empirical research, I claim that children’s role-playing involves the intimate relationship between language and identity which should be explored when writing acquisition is at stake. I understand that the essence of language - and of writing when it is understood as language – involves playing social roles, besides the conventional sense of representation. All these issues are discussed on the basis of a socio-historical approach which is contrasted with an approach that does not presuppose a broad social context when envisaging language.

Introduction

Writing is very often assumed to be something external to its users and as a transcription of oral language, a fact that interferes in the way teachers deal with writing acquisition in many schools. It may be valuable to contrast the Vygotskian socio-historical approach with the constructivist Piagetian approach which has become, in Latin America, a constant reference when studying language acquisition. On the basis of the Vygotskian socio-historical approach to language and thought, I defend the inter-relation between different languages and the fact that each new language assimilates traits existing in the previous languages a child has had access to.¹

Assuming a socio-historical approach, I also call attention to phenomena related to the production and circulation of information in general, which are linked to questions of ideology, hegemony and power (Fairclough, 2003). These issues are responsible for the way in which the constructivist approach has been adopted in most schools without previous discussion, whereas there has been a certain suspicion and lack of information in what concerns the Russian socio-historical approach. From my perspective, this is related to the structure of power present in Brazilian society and is typical of societies which are poorly developed in the organization of the civil society (Cintra, 2010). One of the consequences of the restricted panorama of literacy is that 3% of Brazilian youngsters and children aged from seven to fourteen do not attend school, partly because they feel rejected in the school environment. Less than 5% of the children aged ten years are considered literate in the sense of being able to read and write simple elementary texts.

Method

When I worked as a pedagogical coordinator in São Carlos, an average-sized city in the southeast of Brazil, I visited twenty-eight pre-schools where I observed children’s behavior and advised the teachers responsible for their education. The evidence I will present is a combination of my observations, the effect of advice and orientation I gave teachers and...
educators for development of their pedagogical work, and the result of theoretical research and an attempt to unite theory and practice, i.e., of trying to understand theory in its contrast with practical evidence.

In ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, Freire (1972) proposes a method of research which is intimately related with education, inasmuch as the boundary between the research and education is very subtle and often both processes overlap. It is argued that, in principle, the educator should first visit the community in which they intend to develop an educational practice in order to raise awareness of the “generating themes” they will work with. However, as the process of research is supposed to be carried out in a dialogical fashion, and as the researcher is expected to be attentive to the community’s problems and tensions problem-solving is also intensively present because of the need for the researcher to discuss the questions that emerge, in order to find the best solutions together with the subjects of the research. As a result, there is a rich blend of research and education.

Cameron, Frazer and Harvey (1992), in contrast, defends empowering research as a form of academic research that endeavors to respect the subjects’ agenda, i.e. the emphasis is not centered on the researcher’s priorities, but rather on the problems and tensions present in a certain community and on the ethical compromise the researcher feels concerning questions of marginality, hegemony, counter-hegemonic forces and empowerment. The way I developed the research reflects my interest in empowering teachers and, thus, propitiating a process of empowerment of the children they work with.

**Results**

The results I present involve theory and practice, and make many comparisons, in particular between constructivist and socio-historical approaches. My analysis is centered on the conceptualizations of two psychologists who are representative of each approach and have influenced modern theorization on language and writing, particularly in my country: Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. My intention is to illuminate the differences between two paradigms. The discrete paradigm centers on the individual and on writing itself, a characteristic of autonomous models; the complex dialectical paradigm considers writing in relationship to a number of other factors. This makes it possible to envisage the specificity and the richness of an ideological model (Street, 1993).

**A first comparison between constructivist and socio-historical approaches**

In accordance with Piagetian constructivism, Ferreiro and Teberosky (1985) conducted research in Argentina and Mexico. In Brazil as well as in other Latin American countries it is common for educators to carry out a pedagogical work style that takes into consideration the various stages of children’s process of literacy in the formation of hypotheses.

According to their approach, children undergo an initial phase of indecision between drawing and writing, as they start from iconic representations. Gradually, drawing is replaced by graphic symbolism based on the alphabet. This stage is called pre-syllabic. As they advance in their hypotheses about what writing may represent, some children go through hybrid stages in which the letters come to represent syllables. For example, in order to represent the writing of “gato” (cat) in Portuguese, the child will write “AO”: in this case, each graphic unit refers to a unit perceived by the pronunciation of a syllable. The alphabetical stage is presented as a final phase of a long trajectory in which the teacher may exert influence, since they are aware of this entire journey and of its meaning in cognitive terms.
It is in this sphere that what is called “a rich literate environment” can usually be found: the child should be in constant contact with the literate world, in order to motivate them, i.e., to help them in the construction of their hypotheses, in such a way as to avoid stagnations at certain stages and to promote further development. In general such an environment means the presence of written material affixed to boards, lists of letters in alphabetical order, lists of all children’s names, calendars and the like. It is thus understood that children must feel the “need” to access writing: “need” is considered a propelling shaft in the learning process in the sense of the need the student would feel to enter the literate world through the motivation caused by such an environment.

It is interesting to note that, although it has become usual to facilitate children’s access to diverse resources, most approaches are centered on the acquisition of writing, without much emphasis on the other languages or adequate understanding of writing as a particular language, not only as a transcription or representation of speech.

Based on a socio-historical approach, however, I understand that pedagogical work with infants must not be confined to this, and I started to allude to a much broader perspective. It was this perspective that I intended to explore when advising preschool teachers to work in a different way. I tried to provide a consistent theoretical basis for the need to include the work dedicated to writing acquisition, within a frame that considered social roles as inherent in this process.

The Relation between Different Infant Languages According to Both Approaches

The lack of explicit theoretical bases generally leads to an inadequate fusion of contradictory conceptions: very often, a patchwork quilt is formed in which threads of Vygotskian’s theory cohabit, without apparent conflict, with Piagetian constructivism. In Brazil in particular, theoreticians and educators have often added to Piagetian constructivism an approach directed towards socialization, towards interaction, emphasizing joint, shared learning experiences: “no one learns alone” is a slogan present in any handbook that wants to be modern. From my point of view, there were issues of power and ideology that prevented the question as a whole from being considered in a broader way.

That is why I decided to propose a more in-depth study on Vygotskian theory to the team of teachers whose pedagogical work I supervised. I had two main objectives: to try to better understand what the literacy stages mean from the point of view of this theory; and to broaden our understanding of writing as a particular language, as well as something that is related to effective social practices.

Piaget (1959) referred to the characteristic of children’s thinking, of synthetic nature, and to the gradual evolution from thinking by complexes towards the elaboration of formal operations. This fact gives a partial account of what happens in the child’s cognitive universe when passing from infant to primary school age. It may also be helpful to understand the occurrence of the syllabic stage of graphic representation, to be substituted for the alphabetic conventional stage, analytic in its nature. In other words we can suppose, on the basis of such an approach, that the graphic manifestation revealed in writing - that leads a child to match a sound expression of syllabic basis with just one letter, only later being able to match a phoneme and a grapheme - has to do with his global cognitive transition, from synthetic thinking towards analytical thinking.
When we compare the Piagetian approach to literacy with its Vygotskian counterpart, however, we face a much deeper complexity. This reveals the relatively discrete characteristic inherent in the Piagetian vision, insofar as it implies certain linearity in the passage from stage to stage and does not explore the complex inter-relation among the various infant languages, nor the relation existing between language and the social context. For instance, when the child – who is already trying to pass to the alphabetical stage – presents a kind of retrogression to the syllabic stage (this happened very often in the classes I used to visit), this process is considered from a Piagetian constructivist perspective just as hesitation, an attitude that denounces the fact that superficial elements are focused on, whereas the underlying linguistic and cognitive mechanisms are not duly understood.

Vygotsky (1962), on the other hand, points out the complex dialectic inter-relation existing between thought and speech. When discussing these issues with the many teachers I worked with, I asked them questions such as: Have we paid the necessary attention to the moments when the Russian psychologist affirms that, in the beginning, thought and speech are independent processes, whose lines of development cross each other before separating again? Have we paid the necessary attention to when he postulates a dialectic between antagonistic terms, which present differentiated trajectory and complement each other inside such antagonism? Have we dwelt on details, reading and re-reading and trying to understand the passage where he affirms that the child makes use of language, first inside a global understanding, and that only gradually they start to have a more analytical understanding of the constituting parts? Have we opened our eyes sufficiently when he affirms that exactly because they are antagonistic, the processes involving thought and speech are dialectical: thought crosses a trajectory that goes from particular to general, whereas speech crosses the opposite trajectory, from general to particular?

Piagetian lines speak of a progressive evolution in which certain stages are substituted for others; a similar process takes place in what concerns the semiotic universe, in which the child passes from imitation, to speech, to drawing and finally to writing. The author does not postulate, in a more decisive way, an inter-relation among such languages, nor does he cogitate, with the necessary emphasis, on factors of retention in the transition from one to the other language.

Superficially, both approaches may seem similar; however, they are meaningful distinctive cognitive processes that are worth understanding more fully to allow us to deal with them more efficiently.

According to the division established by Street (1993), on one hand we have the autonomous approach that does not take into consideration the social context; on the other, we have the ideological approach intimately related with social issues. Taking this into account, it is also worth remembering that Vygotsky centered his attention on children of the working class, children who often worked as well; moreover, the Russian psychologist intended to construct a socio-historical approach and was interested in social transformation.

It was with this intention that Vygotsky (1962) established, by means of an absolutely unique approach, comparisons between social speech, egocentric speech, inner speech and writing (passing by drawing, as well). He obtained elucidations through a mutual dialectical interplay by which each language modality gets better understood within the parallel established with the other modality, and showed the reciprocal influence among such different languages. That was how a complex process of transformation of inner into outer speech could be envisaged.
The relation between role-playing and emergent literacy: a consequence of the socio-historical approach

I started to believe it was important to encourage teachers to broaden the concepts of language and language acquisition in order to elucidate the interconnection existing among the various languages, as well as the ways they influence each other. I reminded them that the acquisition of a more genuine or less stifled language occurs in its due time, in such a way that the appropriation of a new language may happen proportionally to the transformation of its previous manifestation – always considering the social context. Taking this into consideration, written language acquisition implies language appropriation rather than merely phonetic transcription.

I also began to re-evaluate children’s role-playing which until now has been valued from the viewpoint of play. I saw it was urgent to consider the role of language development inside role-playing: a particular language the educator must motivate, either by providing stimulating space and material, or by participating, in a discrete, moderate way, in young children’s role-playing. I reproduce here a transcription of a role-play developed in the playground of one of the schools I used to visit weekly. The children were four years old and it is interesting to note the way they already envisaged the functionality of writing inside their role-playing. It is also interesting to note the way they negotiate their roles and the actions to be practiced. They are learning to behave according to certain rules. They are also learning something about the rules implicit in the use of oral and written languages:

Joyce has placed some sticks around a small table and has formed a wooden fence for a “restaurant”. She has put a packing-box on it and has filled it with pieces of paper she had torn in order to make some “money”. Near the box, she has arranged rows of small biscuits she has brought to school.

Joyce – Here was my restaurant. I was the waitress. Look at my restaurant, how gorgeous it is… Who wants to buy some pieces of cake? They are delicious!

Carla: - I will be sitting here to sell the tickets… I was the… What is the name?
- You are the cashier – one child shouts.
Joyce: Yes, the cashier! Give me some paper.
She tears more paper into pieces and separates the largest ones.
- Those are the tickets and this is the money for change. Give me your pen, I will write here some letters so that we can know which the money is, and which the tickets are!
- You don’t know how to write! Robson knows, he will write!

Carla (a little angry): When will they come and buy?

Robson: I was the driver. I can come now, I have left my truck with the mechanic and now I need to eat.

He goes to the “restaurant”:
- I want this piece of cake – pointing to a larger biscuit.

Joyce gives him a piece of “cake” and asks: - What about the money?

Robson runs toward the cash-desk, takes a piece of paper, goes back and buys some cake.
- I am a truck driver. I am rich. I go to many places, I take many boxes of potatoes and I earn much money!

He eats the piece of biscuit and feels very pleased. Carla looks at the restaurant but she does not stand up.

Then she looks again to the restaurant and asks:
- When may I eat? There is no one here now...

Renato observes: - What is the matter? Go on!
Carla looks around, then she runs to the restaurant, she buys some cake very rapidly and goes back soon afterwards. Joyce arranges the pieces of cake again, but she does not take any cake.
Joyce: - I also want to eat some cake, but what should I do, should I buy one or just take one?
Robson laughs: - You buy from yourself and pay back!
Joyce laughs, she immediately takes two “coins” and buys two pieces of cake from herself, explaining: - Everyone has already bought some.
Carla jumps up, she takes a piece of biscuit and goes out running and laughing.
When Joyce sees her, she runs back and shouts:
- Why have you helped yourself?
Carla laughs and answers: - You had left, the restaurant was open, there was no one, then I helped myself!
Everyone laughs and Joyce comments, looking pretty irritated:
- You shouldn’t have done it, you shouldn’t have stolen anything. Next time, when I leave, I will take everything together with me! ...
She takes her biscuits, wraps them with a leaf of paper and starts playing with other children.

This apparent raving, in which we see the children as if in the air, without their feet on the ground, is of fundamental importance for the ascension to more complex categorial stages, which implies the progressive elaboration of abstract thinking. Outside voices begin to internalize in order to provide the existence of an external voice, inside a complex vital dynamic process, primordial for the acquisition, not only of language, but of personhood itself, in which antagonistic voices pertaining to the “I” and to the “other one” coexist.

There we come back to the word need, but within a different approach. It is no longer a need based on external appeal: it is a need confronted with the world. And we must emphasize: children do not just adapt to the world, they are confronted with the world – here is another basic divergence between Piagetian and Vygotskian theories. Vygotsky suggests conflicting, problematical, rather than adaptive or assimilative movements.

Writing certainly may reproduce someone else’s speech, but writing acquisition cannot and must not be reduced to this small dimension of writing. In the same way that Deleuze (1994) refers to linguistic structuralism conception, with its binary differential oppositions, as an approach of the “small side of language”, so reducing writing to a second grade representation implies envisaging only the “small side” of writing. Writing is one of the linguistic manifestations we have access to, and it is not just by chance that it very frequently emerges, in its most elaborate form, exactly at the moment of ontogeny when the child gradually abandons both egocentric speech and role-playing.

I had access to translated texts of the Vygotskian School, where we find references to the gradual transmutation of egocentric speech into verbal thought, as well as to the importance of role-playing for the ascension to superior categorial levels. I was also aware of the way Vygotsky (1991) assigns the pre-history of writing to drawing, and of the way Leontev (2001) identifies the need for research devoted to showing the inter-relation between affective and intellective processes, to which he attributes equal importance in the formation of the cognitive universe. I was familiar with Luria’s (1979) exploration of Vygotsky’s indication that the meaning of words develop from a more intimate relation with the object world, until it becomes part of an autonomous universe of semantic inter-relations. On the basis of such indications, I advanced in my theoretical and experimental research, in contact with infant school children, until realizing
the existence of an inter-relation, not only between egocentric speech and verbal thinking, but among the various languages and verbal thinking, which becomes progressively abstract. I have thus understood that writing presupposes the internalization, not only of verbal speech, but also of personhood, of interlocutors, so that the abstract thinking it involves admits and presupposes dialogue.\footnote{7}

That is why I explained to the teachers whose work I supervised that we must attribute a much broader dimension to role-playing, than the one of simple child’s play in the sense of pure amusement. By means of role-playing, personhood is formed not only in the alternating sense that includes now the one, now the other one: complex personhood is formed, involving problematically the “I” and the “other”. And this is not all: referring to the words themselves, once inside children’s role-playing they acquire duplicity and polyvalence. It is inside children’s role-playing that a broom is a broom and a horse at the same time; the packing-box is a packing-box, but it is also a cash-desk and may serve as a boat at another opportunity; the pieces of paper are reshaped into money. From a single sense, the words get transformed, as if by a magician’s trick, into entrances for multiple meanings.

According to this proposition, I started to focus on children’s language when role-playing. This often becomes more intense when children are aged four to six years, as a process productive activity, and does not simply extinguish at the age of seven, when role-playing is replaced by other kinds of games; from the moment it no longer exists externally it still maintains marks in the child’s inner speech. I believed, thus, that it was also worth understanding the linguistic structure present in children’s role-playing, as well as its forms of development since its emergence until the beginning of primary school, in order to give an account of the dialogic element that persists in inner speech.

The studies “The psychological principles of infant play” (Leontev, 2001) and “Play and its role in the mental development of the child” (Vygotsky, 2002) helped me to outline some intuitions for proposing an approach pointing out the interconnection, in infant language ontogeny, between the language used by children when role-playing and their social and egocentric speeches (including also the development of an inner speech). I started to visualize a dialectical relation according to which activities that are in principle disparate are related and influence each other, forming a complex heterogeneous whole. Within this whole, it is possible and necessary, however, to separate the elements involved in order to understand their specificities and be able to interconnect them and to detect in what way they really influence each other.

I also began to understand that just like language in general, writing must be seen not only in its conventional representative dimension, but also inside an attempt to understand what roles, which personhood is at play in this new language as well. It was in this sense that Vygotsky’s considerations (1962) on the inter-relations among the various infant languages provided me with a background for reflection on the modality of language that children practice when role playing, and about the social roles this implies are presupposed for writing acquisition.

**Discussion**

Because of certain structural similarities between the language children practice when role-playing, and the contrast recognized by Luria (1979) between sympraxic and synsemantic language, I began to see in this function of infant language an important phase for access to adult conceptual language, passing through complex transitions by the constitution of inner speech. It is necessary to focus on children’s language when role-playing, to analyze its linguistic structure and to establish parallels between this manifestation and the progressive
transformation of the child’s language: both in outer and inner speech; in verbalized and written language.

We can compare the way sense and meanings are manifested. Leontev (2001) emphasizes the way, in role-playing, a stick while beginning to have another sense, maintains its basic meaning as well: the stick is still a stick, inside a sympraxic conformation, while it simultaneously acquires another sense in role-play, i.e., while becoming a horse. It is inside the action of play, involving objects and interlocutors that this transfiguration happens, as if by magic, without, of course, being a result of any kind of mind-absence or hallucination. In this new form of language, the character of transition becomes neat, from a structure of meaning dominating until then to a process of transition towards the structure of meaning characteristic of adult language. The former is mostly linked to the object world and depends on it, whereas in the latter the words become separated from the world of things, acquiring a certain autonomy and independence. It is worth considering some aspects recognizable in the progressive development of children’s role-playing, from the age of three until the beginning of primary school age. Such aspects point to a structural progression also present in other modalities of language, either in outer or inner speech, so we should include role-playing language alongside the other languages, in order to detect most neatly the complex dialectic process relation implied therein.

According to Elkonin (1998), the most important evolving aspect of play is the development of argument, closely related to the presence of a role. At three years he child already presents a play of thematic character, which develops intensely until seven years, concomitantly to the gradual learning of the role the child represents in the children’s community. There is thus a gradual passage (based on theme and role) from domestic actions (like cooking, washing etc.) to histrionic meanings based on these actions (“I am the mother”, “I am the cook” etc.). Beside these protagonized actions, relations among characters appear and, finally, the role itself emerges.

A better comprehension of the relation existing between language and social roles within infants’ role-play is of essential importance for propitiating a more acute insight about the relation existing between language and identity in general, always according to an ideological approach. In this respect, it is worth noting that in children’s role-playing the relation between language and ideology (Voloshinov, 1973) becomes very neat, once they reproduce in it roles and situations present in the adult world, either to stabilize or to destabilize them. However, these aspects are only plainly visible using a broad socio-historical approach. Unfortunately, my work as a pedagogical coordinator had to be interrupted after a very successful period of eighteen months. I was able to develop a close relationship with the teachers, which included friendship and complicity, and became the guarantee of better performance in the activities concerning literacy practices on the part of the children. Progressively, the schools I supervised were acquiring a different dynamic: there seemed to be more life, more vivacity, more voices, more languages and indeed less artificiality. This pointed to the empowerment of the civil society, intimately related to the transformation in the restricted character of literacy, at least within the boundaries of the schools I supervised.

Nevertheless, as I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, formal education is related to issues of power and ideology, and it is not easy to transform a frame of restricted literacy, exactly because of the broader context of social struggle – the social arena Voloshinov (1973) referred to that means real hegemonic and contra-hegemonic actions, advances and setbacks.
I do not agree with Bruner (1997) when he proposes the celebration of divergence between Piaget and Vygotsky. As I understand it, when we celebrate divergence we may inadvertently fail to grasp some essential questions. One of them – and perhaps the most important – is the one concerning the transitions between phases and the Vygotskian postulation of “Aufhebung” (implying dialectical integration of old elements inside new ones). Another one – amongst several – is the zone of proximal development that, according to Jantzen, is yet a quite unexplored field for research. Celebrating divergence may, thus, lead to a tendency to integrating both approaches and to a situation in which one does not attribute the necessary value to very important questions inherent in the Vygotskian perspective.

It is worth considering here the difference established by Street (1993) between the autonomous and the ideological model of literacy. The “literate environment” considered in this case fits with the autonomous model of literacy in spite of the consideration of a certain context. This context, however, is far from being envisaged from a broader socio-historical approach.

Duarte alerts us to the danger of just adding “a social pinch to constructivism”: “[...] the question does not concern turning to a social constructivism, or bringing a social ingredient to constructivism, once we understand that Piagetian constructivism already contains a model that includes a social element, and such a model lies on the biological model of interaction between the organism and the environment. It is not the case that Piaget has not considered the social element; the problem refers rather to the way he considered it” (Duarte, 1996:88).

I will not explore here all the implications of the socio-historical dimension of the Vygotskian perspective, but it certainly implies the ideological model of literacy rather than the autonomous one typical of the Piagetian perspective.

I have been developing research concerned with the Marxian concepts of instrument, of need and of alienation, and with their application to language acquisition.

“When we interpret the differences as negative and under the category of opposition, are we not on the side of the one who has not had a correct listening or hearing, who hesitates among several possible versions, who tries to ‘get recognized’ by establishing oppositions, the small side of language, not the side concerning the person who speaks and attributes sense? Don’t we thus betray the nature of language game, that is, the sense of this combinatorial, of these imperatives or of this linguistic throwing of dice that, like Artaud’s cries, can only be grasped by the one who speaks inside a transcendent exercise?” (Deleuze, 1994:329-330).

I intend to understand better these aspects in future research exploring Leontev’s concept of “activity” and its implications in what concerns external and internal activity.

References


