

# Problematic issues on the acquisition of literacy

by *Clotilde Pontecorvo\**

In introducing this special issues of “Rassegna di Psicologia”, I move from the assumption that the innovative way about early literacy was opened only in the years seventies of the XX century by the revolutionary study of Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky on pre-school Argentine children speaking Spanish. Thus it was ascertained that the process of literacy acquisition starts with spontaneous writing of young children and not with a reading activity, as it was assumed by scholars and educationalist for a long time, until recently.

During the last year, I devoted a study time to the thought of Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>. He was an outstanding German intellectual that lived between 1892 and 1940 when he committed suicide in order to escape from the nazist persecutors in Spain, near to the France border.

Among many other interests, he observed and wrote down about the first two years of the linguistic development of his son in a time when only Darwin and few others had done something similar.

He was also interested in understanding children's early literacy by looking at the emergence of reading skill. The reading choice was probably due to the fact that both Walter Benjamin and his wife Dora, were avid collectionists of German childhood books, published in their century and in the preceding one. They were particularly interested in the technical and aesthetical evolution of the illustrations. Walter Benjamin produced also some interesting reflections on the ways in which the abc books proposed, in the years thirties of the XX century, a point of view on early literacy. In this domain he underlines the relevance of the shapes of the letters, and he is aware that it is not important to make the letters attractive figuratively (as it was done in many books of the Liberty period), while is more important to reduce the ambiguity of letters' recognition for young children.

He focused on the acronyms by associating them to images representing the referent of the word and he insisted on the executive activity of first grade reading (see *Orbis Pictus*, trad. it. 1981; *Bambini, abecedari, giocattoli*, 2010; and moreover the articles translated into Italian by Cappa and Negri: see Benjamin, 2012).

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For this reason I use in what follows the Benjamin conception as a traditional one, as a kind of reference point that serves in order to illustrate the new ideas about early literacy. The traditional hypothesis, followed by most scholars until the 80' years of XX century, were shared by Walter Benjamin: he considered reading as a passive activity; therefore he thought it was easier than writing; this was a mistaken idea, because for a young child writing in her own way is a spontaneous activity, coming naturally from the scribble phase of drawing, while reading is a much more difficult activity, since it requires to understand a text written by others.

Now the change of paradigm is radical. It has been acquired that all children who, in most cases, grow in an urban or quasi urban environment, make spontaneous marks for writing words or short phrases.

It is still true that as Benjamin supposed, the child discovers progressively the phonetic value of the single letters that so become phonemes and graphemes, when the single letters are written, but this happens through a different route in children's writing development and not as a result of any scholastic systematic spelling teaching, although this is not yet shared by most teachers.

Another relevant point in Benjamin's reflections on early literacy concerns what he calls the "guessing" activity of the child. When the child begins to read words, he will be using all the possible information strategies to "anticipate the meaning".

In reviewing recently published (in the year thirties) spelling books for early reading, Benjamin (2012)<sup>2</sup>, who shared the opinion of many scholars of his time and also over time, some present educationalists, that they aimed at preventing the guessing activity of the child by using strange and non-familiar words and even non-words. On the contrary, today in studying early literacy development and in particular early reading, we usually propose to pre-school children familiar words written on the containers of well known food (like cookies, milk, chocolate) as well as on some familiar medicine like "aspirina": this activity solicits the child to interpret the letters of the words through the expected meaning of the image on the containers, combined with the letters that he can recognize. At this aim it is critical to use familiar written words referring to well known containers.

This is called the "meaning anticipation" activity and is an usual strategy also for expert readers. Italo Calvino, in *American Lectures* (trad. it. 1988) remembers when he was a preschool child of four-five years old, and every week waited with anxiety the development of the story drawn in the cartoons of the *Corrierino dei piccoli*, of which he received every week a new issue, trying to figure out the possible continuation of the story. Now we have also got some well grounded empirical data showing that the skills of an expert reader are linked to the cognitive activity of representing the possible continuation of a given text (Brown, Palincsar, 1989).

Coming back to writing development, it was found firstly by the researchers Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979), and then in many other different languages, including Italian (Pascucci, 2005; Formisano, Pontecorvo, Zuccheromaglio, 1986), that children's written marks, before schooling, are interpreted by themselves applying two main principles that are autonomously produced by children mainly until they discover on syllabic hypothesis.

The first principle establishes a minimum quantity of marks or letters in order to get a word acceptable for the child to be written or read: this minimum quantity ranges generally from three to five marks for having a word that can be considered correct by the child; very few accept only two marks.

The second principle usually followed by most preschool children, is that a word cannot be composed by the same letters in a contiguous position; for this reason perhaps five years old Italian children, that are still in kindergarten refused to write geminate letters, in particular when in a word there is more than one dyad of geminate letters (see Ferreiro, Pontecorvo, Zuccheromaglio, 1987).

In a first phase, which lasts differently in diverse children, they begin to write down both conventional and non-conventional marks mainly using a personal repertoire of letters that are taken frequently from the letters of their first name, that they may have learned from the parents or from an older sibling through copying.

A crucial point occurs when the child understands that the written marks have to do with the sound sequence of an uttered or listened word. This critical passage, carries the child toward one early syllabic hypothesis. At this point the two original principles (of the minimum quantity and of the internal variety of letters in a word) can still produce a range of cognitive conflicts typically when the written marks are longer or shorter than the sound sequence.

The new approach to early literacy is variously developed in the papers collected in this issue, specifically referring to both Spanish speaking and Italian speaking children.

Starting from the present shared conception, the papers collected in this issue develop different features of children early writing, mainly within the syllabic phases or going further toward proto alphabetic ones.

In order to clarify the results collected in this issue, I insert here a methodological note, resumed from the explicative one addressed by Emilia Ferreiro to the editorial committee that stresses the mainly qualitative characteristics.

The first three articles move within the transitional phases between the syllabic and the alphabetical ones, while the last one concerns the words formation in older children, opening a new way to latter writing development.

The first article by Lilia Andrea Teruggi and Claudia Molinari concerns the comparison between the graphical features of written marks produced by infant school children in two modes: by handwriting and by using a computer keyboard. The two groups of children (one from Argentina and one from Italy)

were both enrolled in public schools and received a list of words through a dictation activity.

The second article, presented by Franca Rossi, concerns the transition of a group of Roman infant school children, from pre-syllabic stages to the syllabic ones and even to some proto-alphabetic levels; the study investigates also children's personal ideas about how writing can be acquired.

The third article by Ilaria Zazzera, presents and discusses empirical data about the revision process of their own writing in 65 children during the whole first grade of primary school. Their strategies are linked to their level of writing conceptualization.

The last contribution presented by Emilia Ferreiro and Alejandro Velázquez deals with a fully original topic, not much studied until now in written language. The awareness of the main Spanish derivative morphemes is studied in pairs of Mexican students of second, fourth and sixth grade; they were interviewed with the tasks of prolonging or shortening the word beginning; the study's aim was to reveal the different children comprehension strategies.

I take from an explicative note sent by Ferreiro to the reviews Editorial Council, a necessary explication of the type of data that are mainly presented in this issue.

The main methodological feature is that the authors prefer more the use of semi-structured interviews that produce qualitative analyses of children's answers, than straight experimental design. In this approach they are not only looking to the dichotomy correct/incorrect but they are interested in the developmental process, in which some answers can be interpreted closer further to the correct ones, for different psychological or the linguistic reasons.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The practical reason was to complete the first degree in Jewish studies by presenting a short dissertation on Walter Benjamin's thought, where I analysed the topics of childhood literacy, modernity and messianism (30 June 2014).

<sup>2</sup> We quote here a recent and useful Italian translation of the writings of Walter Benjamin on childhood and early literacy development.

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