

COMUSAÚDE PROJECT: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR THE
ILLITERATE ELDERLY PEOPLE

*PROJETO COMUSAÚDE: ESTRATÉGIAS DE COMUNICAÇÃO AO IDOSO NÃO
ALFABETIZADO*

*PROYECTO COMUSAÚDE: ESTRATEGIAS DE COMUNICACIÓN PARA ANCIANOS
ANALFABETOS*



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ABSTRACT: The current text materializes part of the research that has been carried out within the research group and as part of the prerequisites for obtaining the postdoctoral degree in education. The aim of this study is to analyze the communication strategies used in the field of health with unsuccessful elderly. From the historical-cultural perspective of human development, there are explanations about the ComuSaúde project carried out with illiterate elderly residents in a municipality in the West of Santa Catarina. Through a qualitative, ethnographic research, with observations and records in the moments of orientation on medicines to the elderly. As results, this research highlights the ComuSaúde project as a way to rescue human dignity to the subjects resulting from the exclusion of the right to appropriation of written language.

KEYWORDS: Literacy. Health. Illiterate seniors.

RESUMO: O texto em tela materializa parte de pesquisa que vem sendo realizada no âmbito do grupo de pesquisa e como parte de pré-requisitos para obtenção de título de pós-doutorado em educação. Tem como objetivo analisar as estratégias de comunicação utilizada no campo da saúde com idosos não alfabetizados. A partir da perspectiva histórico-cultural do desenvolvimento humano se tece explicações acerca do projeto ComuSaúde realizado com idosos não alfabetizados moradores de um município do Oeste de Santa Catarina. Por meio de uma pesquisa de abordagem qualitativa, etnográfica, com observações e registros nos momentos de orientações acerca de medicações aos idosos. Como resultados, esta pesquisa destaca o projeto ComuSaúde como uma via de resgate da dignidade humana aos sujeitos frutos da exclusão do direito a apropriação da linguagem escrita.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Alfabetização. Saúde. Idosos não alfabetizados.

RESUMEN: El texto en pantalla materializa parte de la investigación que se ha llevado a cabo dentro del grupo de investigación y como parte de los requisitos previos para la obtención del título de postdoctorado en educación. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar las estrategias de comunicación utilizadas en el campo de la salud con los ancianos sin éxito. Desde la perspectiva histórico-cultural del desarrollo humano, hay explicaciones sobre el proyecto ComuSaúde realizado con ancianos analfabetos residentes en un municipio del oeste de Santa Catarina. A través de una investigación cualitativa, etnográfica, con observaciones y registros en los momentos de orientación sobre medicamentos a los ancianos. Como resultados, esta investigación destaca el proyecto ComuSaúde como una forma de rescatar la dignidad humana a los sujetos resultantes de la exclusión del derecho a la apropiación del lenguaje escrito.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alfabetización. Salud. Adultos mayores analfabetos.

Introduction

The term literacy is intensely manifested in the educational field from the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889, when the process of reading and writing gains visibility and starts to compose a stage of schooling in Brazil. Process aimed at teaching reading and writing, literacy is complex and involves specifically human actions. These actions impose the need to include non-literate people in the world of written culture, thus requiring the formulation of means and modes that enhance access to reading and writing for all.

In Brazil, with the Proclamation of the Republic, literacy was institutionalized, that is, it gained a specific space and place in the debate on the social ascension of the new republican nation, since knowing how to read and write was a minimum condition required for citizens by republican standards. Specifically, it was from the first republican decade, with the reforms of public education, that the social practices of reading and writing became school practices conditioned to the systematized organization that would enable the formation of citizens for the political and social development of the country, because among the purposes of the republicans, social and economic ascension also fell into the arms of literacy, which assumed responsibility for the new literate society.

Faced with this responsibility and others that the school began to assume in these approximately 130 years, several changes occurred in the history of literacy, especially in the year 1930, with the process of unification of “political initiatives in all spheres of social life, education and, in particular, literacy became part of state government policies and actions as strategic areas for promoting and sustaining the desired national development” (MORTATTI, 2006, p. 330, our translation).

From that moment until today, education has been controlled and measured by the results of assessments that show reading and writing learning indices, mechanisms to show the (in)efficiency of public schools. In literacy, these indices, resulting from the history of literacy marked by disputes, sometimes by teaching methods, sometimes by learning theories, culminated in the development of literacy programs whose focus is the training of literacy teachers with a view to increasing the results of assessments.

In this historical context, Graff (1994) indicated that history left two domains in charge of the teaching of reading and writing: first, the ontological domain, which refers to the search for the essence of the act of literacy and what constitutes this act; the second, the axiological domain, based on the values and conceptions of literacy.

Under analysis of these two domains, Graff (1994) pointed out that the desired economic progress that was linked to the literacy process is a myth, because thinking that literacy is the salvation of social problems is a necessary myth to ensure the hegemony of the current political system in each season. The myth, according to the author, is a result of the appreciation that crystallizes the economic conception and social ascension of those who are literate to the detriment of the conditions of being able to teach and learn to read and write to everyone.

Still, for the author, literacy is taken as a hegemonic device to control the economically disadvantaged class that starts to be manipulated, even if in a hidden way, by means of new policies in the field of education (GRAFF, 1994), example of the National Policy Literacy Program (PNA). Based on the writings of Gramsci (2002), we conceptualize hegemony as the creation of an ideological bloc that allows the ruling class to maintain an intellectual monopoly to strengthen its dominance. This control movement puts the promoters of schooling in the wake of teaching, that is, our literacy teachers, who become more moral, orderly, disciplined, obedient and conformed workers, values expected by the hegemony of the moral economy of literacy (GRAFF, 1994; MORTATTI, 2006).

For Mortatti (2006), the way to overcome this dominance is to strengthen the concept that literacy is a process that enables autonomy, which is the movement of apprehending historically elaborated knowledge towards emancipation, which is the condition for the conscious use of this knowledge in different social contexts.

Like the author, we defend that literacy should be debated as the process resulting from the historical and cultural elaboration of signs that are socially shared and that drive a qualitative leap in the human psyche. As a field of knowing how to read and write, which are typically human actions that allow the subject to enter the complex territory of the symbolic world elaborated by the being itself. It's discovering the magic of language and communicating, learning and becoming aware of it.

However, this understanding is not an easy activity for the subjects of the literacy process, it is a practice that needs to break free from the ties that, throughout history, considered as a priority, evaluative indices to the detriment of the social, economic and political conditions of those who teach literacy and who needs to be literate. A story that erases the importance of humanization beyond the economy provided by learning to read and write.

In this way, identifying how subjects, the result of an exclusionary process that took away their right to learn to read and write, survive in literate communities, is the topic discussed in this work. Based on a qualitative, ethnographic approach research with non-literate elderly

people, nurses and health agents in a neighborhood in a city in western Santa Catarina, we aimed to analyze the communication strategies used in the field of health with non-literate elderly people.

To meet the proposed objective, this work is organized into four sections: in the first, we contextualize the historical process of Brazilian literacy, especially the institutionalization of literacy in the country. In the second section, we present the methodology. In the third section, we explain the language, the Brazilian reality and illiterate elderly people. In the fourth, we highlight the analysis about the ComuSaúde project, followed by the final writings.

Institutionalization of literacy

As one of the main processes of social ascension, learning to read and write became minimum conditions for legal subjects in the early republican period. The requirements for performance in reading and writing began to intensify in the first decades of the 1900s when the transition from agrarian to industrial society took place, because for the new moment, new forms of work were being established in the country.

In the continuity of this story, in the Vargas Era, access to education expanded, but the duality in education also intensified, one taught future rulers and the other taught the working class to write, read and calculate, the latter with the objectivity of train the workforce that would be controlled by those who learned to govern, because teaching the economically disadvantaged classes was due to the “[...] need to train them for a new work discipline [...]” (GRAFF, 1994, p. 86, our translation).

With this duality, the country arrived in 1920 with 71.2% of people still unable to read and write. Given this data, the movement of the Manifesto of the Pioneers for a New Education (1932) appears in the country, having as leaders Lourenço Filho, Fernando de Azevedo and Anísio Teixeira (BECALLI, 2007). This movement highlighted the criticism of the traditional teaching method and proclaimed the role of the student, in addition to intensifying the critical discourse about the duality of the school, pointing to this duality as the main cause of failure in literacy.

After this manifesto, Brazil experienced other moments of change, unfortunately many of which placed education as a space for the (de)training of manpower for the labor market, whose scientific emptying was latent and distanced education from the possibility of guaranteeing everyone the enrichment of human training capable of emancipating citizens (FRIGOTTO, 2011).

In the field of literacy, these changes, especially from the year 2000 onwards, at the national level, focused on the training of those who teach literacy, thus emerging training programs for literacy teachers, such as the Program for Continuing Education of Literacy Teachers (Profa - 2000), the Continuing Education Program for Teachers in the Early Years of Elementary Education (Pro-literacy - 2005) and the National Pact for Literacy at the Right Age (PNAIC- 2012) which ended when the constitutive movement of the National Common Curricular Base began (BNCC). Movement that brought to light the National Literacy Policy (PNA-2019) (BRASIL, 2012b; 2019).

The PNA is the current document that guides the new literacy training programs and literacy practices, instituted by Decree No. 9765 of April, 11, 2019. It is presented by the Brazilian government as a turning point in education, specifically for helping in “scientific, economic and social progress of a people” (BRASIL, 2019, p. 5, our translation).

This contextualization demarcates the field of Brazilian schooling for the teaching of reading and writing, especially for children, however, reading and writing is everyone's right, regardless of age or social condition. Therefore, reflecting on the literacy process of non-literate subjects marks the condition of reflecting on the (im)possibilities of emancipation and autonomy of these subjects, fruits of this historical process that valued the simplistic qualification of cheap labor to the detriment of awareness by the appropriation of human language that would enhance human development and that would dismantle the oppressive and emptied process impregnated in the teaching of reading and writing in Brazil.

Methodology

Language is a central element of literacy and, in this work, we analyze language through Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective and Bakhtin's dialogic theory. The appropriate method to conduct the analysis on our research object, in its relationships and determinations, is the historical-dialectical materialism which, in this research, allows us to establish reflections on the reality of illiterate elderly people in the context of health on the social practices of language in the guidelines regarding medication and, mainly, on the role of literacy in the humanization of all.

From the definition of the method, this investigation follows the path of research with a qualitative, ethnographic approach, a path that allows approximation with reality and insertion in the researched environment through observation and analysis of interactions, which are the

instruments for data collection in this search. This methodological path materializes in the follow-up of the meetings held by the four health agents, with ten elderly people from a neighborhood located in a municipality in the west of Santa Catarina. In this neighborhood, health agents meet fortnightly with the elderly to check the correct use of medication, explaining times, quantity and which medication should be used. These elderly people are not literate, hence our immersion, to identify the language practices used in this space as a way of overcoming the failure left by education.

The neighborhood chosen stems from the survey carried out by the Municipal Health Secretariat (SMS) that aimed to identify which neighborhood in the municipality had the highest percentage of illiterate elderly people. A total of ten seniors participates in this project. To present the research results, we will use the S to identify the neighborhood, AS for the health agents, ES for the supervising nurse and the initial letter of each name to identify the elderly, to those who have the same initial letter we will add one of them the initial letter of the surname.

Through the eight moments of observations, which took place every two weeks, lasting approximately two hours each, in the months of September and October 2022, and added to the analysis of the interactions identified in these meetings, we sought to analyze how the practices have been developed of language in the guidelines about medication for illiterate elderly people, presenting the spaces and times destined for these moments. These meetings were recorded and later transcribed. In addition, we used the field diary to record situations not verbalized, but observed by the researchers.

Language, reality and illiterate elderly

At the beginning of this research, we contextualized the institutionalization and economic determinants of literacy which, throughout history, was seen as the salvation of the illiterate nation, mainly the salvation of the economy. And, currently, we highlight the PNA as a result of this process and an agent for maintaining this logic (MORTATTI, 2019).

Maintenance when, among other elements, it highlights in its timeline the document “Childhood Learning: an approach to neuroscience, economics and cognitive psychology, published by the Brazilian Academy of Sciences” (BRASIL, 2019, p. 15, our translation). Still, in the speech of Roger Beard, one of the specialists who helped in the writing of the PNA notebook, he states: “That is why poor-quality literacy can not only harm individuals, but also affect the entire national economy” (BRASIL, 2019, p. 16, our translation). Or, still, in article 4, when dealing with the objectives of the literacy policy, it is highlighted “III. ensure the right

to literacy in order to promote citizenship and contribute to the social and economic development of the country” (BRASIL, 2019, p. 50, our translation).

These fragments and others that pervade the valuation of the economy in the PNA show that the concern with economic ascension is still crystallized in the processes of teaching reading and writing, that the concern with training manpower is imminent and the lack of concern with the many Brazilians illiterate is not a foreground debate.

We do not deny that economic ascension is important and that literacy contributes to it, however, literacy must be understood beyond these capitalist dictates. Literacy is the field of language that humanizes, transforms and emancipates. It is a right of all regardless of age and social status.

For Vigotski (2007), it is through language that the individual is humanized and becomes a social being. Language is the field of human communication formed by a set of systems of signs and instruments socially shared and culturally elaborated through symbolic mediation that enables, in addition to communication, social organization and the subject's awareness. Therefore, language goes beyond economics, it is indispensable in the process of humanizing men and women.

By entering the field of reading and writing language, unlike oral language, as this lies in the complexification of language in its alliance with thought, it works with visual systems of graphic orientation that are objectivations of humanity and present themselves as a new and challenging task oriented from psychological, linguistic and pedagogical foundations, systematized in school teaching practice (DANGIÓ, MARTINS, 2017).

This teaching practice, according to Luria (2012, p. 143, our translation) should consider that the child, upon entering school “has already acquired a wealth of skills and abilities that will enable him to learn to write in a relatively short time”. However, the teaching of reading and writing takes place in a challenging territory that is often conditioned by guidelines that deprive the teacher of the autonomy of the educational act.

As an educational act of language, we understand the action of teaching aimed at the appropriation of writing in relation to human culture, in relation to objectivations historically produced with the objectivity of producing the humanization of individuals. As Saviani (1991, p. 21, our translation) stated, “educational work is the act of producing, directly and intentionally, in each unique individual, the humanity that is historically and collectively produced by the group of men”.

In the field of language, the appropriation of forms of writing and reading is essentially and typically human and, therefore, must be made possible for everyone as a condition of humanization. However, throughout the history of education, which is not exclusive to literacy, the school, the place of systematized teaching and the production of humanization, was, and continues to be, but now in a camouflaged way by the discourse of terms in Brazil, a National Base Common Curricular (BNCC), dualistic, but a “perverse dualism of the Brazilian public school: school of knowledge for the rich, school of social acceptance for the poor” (LIBÂNEO, 2012, p. 1, our translation).

This social welcome is the way to maintain social inequalities, the minimal and perverse state. With this research, we experience a story with subjects from other times, fruits of the initial debates of the concern with the quantification of literacy to the detriment of qualification, access and permanence of all. The subjects of this research are part of the statistics that show the high rate of illiterate people in Brazil.

The result of the research entitled “Todos Pela Educação” carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2010), points out that about 40.8% of the total number of Brazilian boys and girls up to 8 years old are illiterate. Still, the same research highlights that social projects try to change this scenario, giving the poorest children the opportunity to read. Among the projects, the one named "Never give up on your dreams" stands out in the research, which organizes a children's library within day care centers and needy schools. An example of maintaining the school of social acceptance for the poor, as Libâneo (2012) said.

When we analyze data from the IBGE (2010) on the elderly population, there are approximately 6 million Brazilians aged 60 or over who cannot read or write. Of these, 56.6% live alone. These data point to the fragility of education in the country, as knowing how to read and write are minimum conditions of human dignity. However, as the limitations of our education are not new, we are aware of the challenges surrounding the legacy of failure left by the teaching of reading and writing.

Inheritance of failure that removes autonomy, especially from the elderly population, because if we understand that reading and writing is a minimum condition for autonomy in literate societies, how do these illiterate elderly people live? How do they relate to reading and writing practices? Still, the rate of medication use at this stage of life is high, how are these organized with the guidelines for time, dosage and type of medication that are oriented through writing?

In this context of the illiterate elderly population, we have, in Brazil, the National Education Plan (PNE) whose goal 9 deals with the eradication of illiteracy, however, this goal has not yet been reached and the validity of the document ends in 2024. We are hopeful, in the sense of hope proposed by Paulo Freire (2014), which is the act of doing and believing that it will happen. Therefore, this research is an act of hope, as we explain the need to think about educational programs for the thousands of Brazilians who still cannot read or write and who are not at an institutionalized literacy age according to the current documents, the example, the PNA.

We cannot deny that some attempts to teach literacy to the elderly population were organized, among them, social projects to welcome the elderly and the possibility of enrolling in Youth and Adult Education spaces, palliative measures, but important that end up assuming the responsibility of contribute to the education of the elderly, especially those who are illiterate. In this work, we bring to the debate the ComuSaúde project for the elderly (CS) carried out in a municipality in the west of Santa Catarina by health units with illiterate elderly people.

ComuSaúde of the Elderly

ComuSaúde project for the elderly (CS) aims to establish means of communication with illiterate elderly people, mainly regarding guidelines for the use of medication. The project is developed in a municipality in the west of Santa Catarina in all neighborhoods “*due to several cases of elderly people using medications incorrectly, at the wrong times and amounts*” (ES, 2022, our translation).

In Bairro S, meetings take place every two weeks, lasting approximately two hours each. These meetings are conducted by the Unit's Health Agents under the supervision of a nurse. The purpose of these meetings is “*to guide and explain to the elderly the use of medicines, even to monitor them to verify that they are using them correctly, as they do not know how to read or write and live alone*” (ES, 2022, our translation).

Regarding the organization of the meetings, the subjects were instructed to sit in a conversation circle (RC) format, a characteristic that marks the intentionality of dialogue and that places the subjects in the horizontal plane of the discourse, that is, all utterances matter in the circle. CR implies a listening and speaking exercise in which several interlocutors are added, built through interaction with the other. This interaction occurs through the process of dialogism, which are “the relationships of meaning that are established between two utterances” (BAKHTIN, 1997, p. 346, our translation) in a territory that promotes the circulation of

meanings – of health agents (HC) and elderly people – in a movement capable of acting in symbolic language, through the cultural practices of communication that can emerge from and in historically situated interactions.

When starting the CR, the AS always started by asking the elderly to talk about something that happened during the days when they did not meet, at that moment the statements shared the anxieties, joys and difficult moments they had experienced. “*It was hard, I felt sick on Monday and I took the medicine from the green box, then I slept. I woke up with the neighbor calling – grandpa, grandpa*”, (Elderly A, our translation). Another, “*it was cool, the financing came out and I bought it with a blender, now I can make smoothies*” (Elderly H, our translation).

Next, the AS checked the medicines with each elderly person, because, in addition to the meetings for the RD, the medications were also delivered. In this second moment, we observed that they gave the elderly medicine boxes with different colors. “*Look, this yellow one is to be taken at midday, when the sun is strong*” (AS1, 2022, our translation). The colors were used in the medicine boxes always articulating the colors with elements such as the sun at noon, black at night and blue for tomorrow. The quantity was registered in the box with risks.

We created these color strategies, but for example, when they take more than one at noon, or at another time, we try to cover the boxes with the same color, but with different tones and we advise them to pay attention. Unfortunately, these elderly people live alone and need autonomy, many of them have already taken the wrong medication, one even had to be hospitalized, as he took three at night and took three of the same, that's when we think of different shades of the same color. These are strategies, but if they knew how to read and write, everything would be different, they wouldn't suffer so much from color dependency (AS 2, 2022, our translation).

These health professionals end up finding language strategies to guide elderly people who cannot read and, when carrying out these actions, they act in the field of symbolic mediation.

As examples of psychological tools and their complex systems can serve: the language; the different forms of numbering and calculation; mnemonic resources ; the algebraic symbology; works of art; the writing; the schemes; the diagrams; the maps; the drawings; all possible forms of conventional signs, etc. (VIGOTSKI, 1987, p. 182, our translation).

In research, Vygotsky (1987) identified meaning and mediation by sign and instrument. Mediation by sign is an internal activity aimed at controlling the subject himself, and mediation by instrument is externally oriented towards controlling nature, but both entail changes in

cognitive functioning. In this research, subjects interact mediated by symbolic meanings and “are tools that help in psychological processes and not in concrete actions” (VIGOTSKI, 2007, p. 30, our translation).

The colors on the medicine boxes became a psychological sign that was directed towards the subject's own control - the elderly person, helping him to solve problems such as: remembering, representing, comparing, reporting, planning, among other internal actions that were made possible and potentiated by the elaborations of the actions carried out by the AS directed to the conscience of the elderly.

The very essence of human memory lies in the fact that human beings are able to actively remember with the help of signs. It could be said that the basic characteristic of human behavior in general is that men themselves influence their relationship with the environment and, through this environment, personally modify their behavior, placing it under their control (VIGOTSKI, 1987, p. 58, our translation).

Thus, it was possible to observe that the elderly, from the symbolic mediation carried out by the colors on the medicine boxes, enabled higher psychological functions, although they did not know how to read or write, but they recognized other signs that enable the development of cognitive capacities to internalize the shared signs and transform them into mediating elements (GALUCH; SFORNI, 2009).

We understand and defend reading and writing as keys to accessing systematized knowledge, as the appropriation of this knowledge is a condition for human development, but we know that not everyone had and still has access to this knowledge and strategies such as those developed by the analyzed project. This makes it possible to highlight the weaknesses of our education and the need to rescue the dignity of non-literate people and enable them to enter the literate territory, dominating the written language, as a symbolic system present in the culture in which they are inserted.

However, it is worth mentioning that we observed that some medicine boxes had some letters, about this, AS3 clarifies “*we have this project running for five months, it is recent, we thought of doing it by phase, first the colors, then, like some remember, we wrote the letter M in the morning, T in the afternoon and N in the evening*” (our translation). The AS understand the importance of knowledge of written language, as this makes it possible to break with the condition that deprives them of the written language elaborated and used by all human beings.

In this context, the project provides us with elements for reflection on the important struggle that we must wage in favor of everyone's access to literacy, the guarantee that everyone

knows how to read and write. The project leads us to think about human formation, which should be considered as the path for the development of cognitive abilities, which guarantees the internalization of knowledge that becomes mediating elements, with which the subject can establish with objects, facts and phenomena a relationship that dispenses with contact with the perceptible world (GALUCH; SFORNI, 2009).

Finally, we emphasize that even lacking this human training in the field of written language, the objectified actions of AS enabled the elderly to act in accordance with the symbolic instruments they have to mentally organize their life activity, thus highlighting the importance of language in the process of human socialization, in addition to highlighting the importance of rescuing the dignity of these elderly people who were deprived of the right to read and write.

Final writings

Reflecting on the objectifications of the literacy process is always a complex task, as it is in this reflective movement that weaknesses emerge. In this research, which aimed to analyze the communication strategies used in the field of health with non-literate elderly people, it was possible to show that throughout history these subjects were not raised about the concerns of national documents and programs about literacy.

Furthermore, the history of literacy leaves attenuated marks that furrow the exclusion camouflaged by social ascension. A nation with subjects deprived of the right to know how to read and write is an excluding, selective and limiting nation of human development. We also know that, over the years, subjects end up using medications more recurrently and knowing which medication, quantity and time are minimum conditions for well-being, however, for illiterate elderly people, this moment of life becomes the moment of dependence, which suppresses their autonomy from these subjects.

Therefore, dialogue about the literacy process in an intersectoral way is necessary, specifically in contexts shared by illiterate subjects, as it makes it possible to highlight the need for research committed to the individual and collective dimensions of subjects that interrelate in the territory of oral and written languages.

Based on this research, we highlight the need to make room for educational literacy programs that are linked to the field of health and that can contribute to facing problems related

to learning to read and write, excluding inequalities through conditions of participation and insertion in the different social spheres of language.

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