

HELPING UNDERSTANDING WRITTEN TEXTS: WHY START IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

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Abstract

The paper discusses the development of comprehension of texts with children who do not yet read conventionally. With this intention, we conducted a review of research in the area of cognitive psychology with an emphasis on those involving the practice of shared reading stories with children between 4 and 5 years old. In the analysis of these studies, we discussed the implications of their results for pedagogical action, evaluating the potential of certain methodological procedures adopted to develop children's comprehension. Finally, we reflect on alternatives for exploring both reading strategies and text content in order to guide the formation of "active listeners" who produce meaning from the texts they listen to and who, later on, will be able to read autonomously.

COMPREHENSION • READING • PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

AJUDANDO A COMPREENDER TEXTOS ESCRITOS: POR QUE COMEÇAR NA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL?

Resumo

O artigo discute o desenvolvimento da compreensão de textos com crianças que ainda não leem convencionalmente. Com essa intenção, conduzimos uma revisão de pesquisas na área de psicologia cognitiva, com destaque para aquelas envolvendo a leitura compartilhada de histórias com crianças entre 4 e 5 anos. Na análise desses estudos, discutimos as implicações dos seus resultados para a ação pedagógica, avaliando o potencial de certos procedimentos metodológicos adotados para desenvolver a compreensão das crianças. Por fim, refletimos sobre alternativas de exploração tanto de estratégias de leitura quanto do conteúdo do texto com vistas a orientar a formação de "ouvintes ativos", que produzem sentidos com base em textos que escutam e que, mais adiante, poderão ler autonomamente.

COMPREENSÃO • LEITURA • EDUCAÇÃO PRÉ-ESCOLAR

AYUDANDO A COMPRENDER TEXTOS ESCRITOS: ¿POR QUÉ COMENZAR EN LA EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL?

Resumen

El artículo discute el desarrollo de la comprensión de textos con niños que aún no leen de manera convencional. Con esa intención, realizamos una revisión de investigaciones en el área de la psicología cognitiva, con énfasis en aquellas que envuelven la lectura compartida de historias con niños entre 4 y 5 años. En el análisis de estos estudios, discutimos las implicaciones de sus resultados para la acción pedagógica, evaluando el potencial de ciertos procedimientos metodológicos adoptados para desarrollar la comprensión de los niños. Finalmente, reflexionamos sobre alternativas para explorar tanto las estrategias de lectura como el contenido de los textos con miras a orientar la formación de “oyentes activos”, que produzcan significados a partir de los textos que escuchan y que, más adelante, podrán leer de manera autónoma.

COMPRENSIÓN • LECTURA • EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL

L'AIDE À LA COMPRÉHENSION DE TEXTES ÉCRITS: POURQUOI COMMENCER À LA MATERNELLE?

Résumé

L'article traite du développement de la compréhension de textes avec des enfants qui ne lisent pas de façon conventionnelle. Pour ce faire, nous avons réalisé une revue des recherches dans le domaine de la psychologie cognitive, particulièrement sur celles impliquant la lecture partagée d'histoires avec des enfants entre 4 et 5 ans. Dans l'analyse de ces études, nous discutons de l'implication de leurs résultats pour l'action pédagogique, évaluant le potentiel de certaines procédures méthodologiques adoptées pour développer la compréhension des enfants. Enfin, nous réfléchissons à des alternatives pour exploiter à la fois les stratégies de lecture et le contenu des textes en vue d'orienter la formation d'“auditeurs actifs”, qui produisent du sens à partir des textes qu'ils écoutent et qui, plus tard, pourront lire de manière autonome.

COMPRÉHENSION • LECTURE • ÉCOLE MATERNELLE

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To say that a text has potentially no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy ending
(Eco, 2004, p. XXII, own translation).

CURRENTLY, WHEN DISCUSSING THE SUBJECT OF READER FORMATION, THERE IS NO DOUBT about the need for them to be able to understand what they read, capturing and critically dialoguing not only with ideas or information explicitly present in the text but also with what is between the lines. In this paper, we defend the importance of working towards this objective from early childhood education, with a view to developing a posture of seeking and producing meanings in the face of the texts that children listen to before learning to read.

This means that, for us, access to diversified and good-quality texts is essential, but it is necessary for the school to go beyond that by assuming its role in building bridges between young readers and texts. In this perspective, our intention is to reflect on the practices of reading aloud and talking about the texts read in early childhood education, analyzing, in particular, the possibilities of starting to help children to comprehend texts before they can read independently. With this focus, we seek, therefore, to analyze possible pedagogical implications resulting from studies in the field of cognitive psychology that included children between 4 and 5 years old.

Based on this objective, we explain, at first, the notion of comprehending texts that we adopt and make some conceptual clarifications that we consider important. Then, we approach why we take into account that the subject of textual comprehension deserves attention in the first years at school and we continue with the presentation and discussion of research data from cognitive psychology conducted in the last decades. In this regard, we emphasize that, although this field of knowledge has been the target of criticism before the institution, by means of a decree, of the Política Nacional de Alfabetização [National Literacy Policy] (PNA) Decreto n. 9.765, 2019 [Decree n. 9.765, 2019], we understand that disagreeing with the PNA's conceptions of reading and comprehension of texts does not mean throwing everything related to the cognitive domain into "the trash can".

Soares (2016), when addressing the initial learning of written language, explains that each science studies a part of the whole, that is, it inevitably fragments this whole, taking each of its parts separately: "if the whole is complex and multifaceted, if each facet is of a specific nature, each one can only be investigated separately" (Soares, 2016, pp. 32-33, own translation). Although partial and, therefore, insufficient, the different fields of knowledge that study reading make fundamental contributions to understanding it. For example, while the sociology of reading is concerned with the act of reading as a social practice (who reads, what, when, how and why), the history of reading is interested in how this practice has been modified over time. The cognitive psychology of reading, in turn, studies the mental processes involved in the act of reading (activation of previous knowledge, production of inferences, elaboration of hypotheses, etc.).

From this perspective, research in the latter theoretical field, especially intervention research, gives us clues about which skills associated with text comprehension could be prioritized in reading work with children between 4 and 5 years old. However, as Soares (2016) warns, it is necessary to remember that, when it comes to planning the pedagogical action, it is the whole that must be considered and not just its parts. Starting from this point of view and based on concepts and research from the field of cognitive psychology, we reflect on some alternatives for action aimed at comprehending texts with the small children. In this context, we will pay special attention to the activity of reading in the story circles, a proposal often present in the routine of early childhood education and the early grades of elementary school.

Some clarifications on text comprehension

Despite the undeniable importance of reading comprehension for participation in social and cultural practices mediated by writing, “teaching to be a reader” remains a major challenge for schools. Thus, it is necessary to make explicit the concept of text comprehension that we adopt here, either from the reading we do or from a text read aloud by others (as in the case of reading heard by children who cannot read yet).

Based on Marcuschi (2008, p. 248), we consider that “to comprehend is to infer”. This means conceiving language “as a socio-interactive and cognitive activity, with a notion of reference and coherence produced interactively and a notion of text as an event, with the meaning being always situated” (Marcuschi, 2008, p. 248, own translation). In this perspective, to comprehend a text, it is necessary to consider not only the textual basis, but also the context in which the reading takes place, as well as the expectations, interests, knowledge and values of the reader/listener. The elaboration of inferences, in turn, assumes a fundamental role in the process of production of meanings, since they provide an integrating network both for the information given in the text and for the connections that the readers/listeners can build between what the text brings and their knowledge and previous experiences. In the words of Marcuschi (2008), inferences function, therefore, “as cohesive hypotheses for the reader to process the text” (p. 249, own translation), giving it coherence. The author also emphasizes that reading comprehension is not simply an act of “decoding”, that is, of converting letters into spoken sounds or a mental image of these sounds (Coscarelli, 2014).

In this context, it is worth clarifying the use of the terms “decoding/decode”, which, at times, will be used in this paper. The first clarification is that such terms are commonly used by researchers in the field of cognitive psychology – and also in other areas (such as linguistics and education) – in national and international publications. Thus, maintaining the terms used in the studies of authors cited here does not mean that we adhere to the concept of writing as a simple speech transcription code, which would be learned by memorizing the letters and the sounds associated with them. On the contrary, like Ferreiro and Teberosky (1985) and Ferreiro (2007), we consider it erroneous to treat writing as a code and we recognize the immense mental effort that the learner needs to undertake to master the written representation system (in our case, the alphabetic writing system).

The second aspect that needs to be pointed out concerns the relationship between text comprehension and decoding. Thus, even though the decoding and automatic recognition of words are basic components in the literacy process (see Monteiro & Soares, 2014 on this subject), they do not ensure, for example, the elaboration of inferences, an essential element for the comprehension of the texts we read and/or hear, as we emphasized earlier.

From this perspective, we differ from what the PNA proposes by stating that expanding the repertoire of words stored in our memory and the possibility that they are automatically recognized by the reader would be “the most efficient and least costly way for the memory, allowing the reader to read quickly and prosody, *make inferences and comprehend sentences and texts*” (Decreto n. 9.765, 2019, p. 27, own translation, emphasis added). As we will argue here, the elaboration of inferences and comprehension are not mere consequences of the ability to convert letters into sounds and the increasingly automatic recognition of words, as this statement assumes. Furthermore, we do not consider that it is necessary first to learn to decode (which, in PNA, would be equivalent to “learning to read”) and only then to learn to comprehend. In short, we disagree with the idea that text comprehension “depends first on learning decoding and, later, on automatic word identification and oral reading fluency” (Decreto n. 9.765, 2019, p. 19).

In this regard, it is also worth noting that recognizing the influence of decoding ability on reading comprehension does not imply accepting that learning to decode is a necessary condition

for learning to comprehend. Accepting this statement would justify teaching with an emphasis on graphophonemic correspondences, reducing reading to knowledge of the “code” and removing from the act of reading the primary need to produce meanings, something that must be incorporated, from an early age, when we read to children who cannot read yet.

We believe, therefore, that the development of reading and comprehension should be based on “cooperative and inferential activities” that result from “constructive, creative and socio-interactive” work (Marcuschi, 2008, p. 248, own translation). In this sense, we will argue, in the next item, about the importance of early childhood education assuming a perspective of reader education based on these principles.

Why and how to help children comprehend texts?

Several studies in the field of cognitive psychology (Cain et al., 2004; Kendeou et al., 2009; Oakhill et al., 2003; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002) reaffirm the idea that reading comprehension and decoding ability should be looked at separately in development.

The study by Oakhill and Cain (2012) also reinforces this necessary distinction between the two processes. The research involved a sample of approximately 100 English children between the ages of 7 and 8, attending the 3rd year of primary school and with average comprehension and decoding skills, assessed using a standardized test¹ widely used in England, the *Neale Analysis of Reading Ability* (Neale, 1999).

Children were asked to perform an extensive series of tasks involving vocabulary skills, phonological awareness, grammatical knowledge, inferential capacity and textual integration, among others. The authors’ objective was to indicate which skills would have a significant impact on children’s performance in decoding and text comprehension later on when they were again tested at ages 10 and 11 (in the 6th grade). The research, therefore, intended to investigate which skills would be precursors of comprehension and decoding in beginning readers.

The results showed that the skills of “comprehension monitoring”, “elaboration of inferences” and “knowledge about the structure of the textual genre read” were predictors of reading comprehension at the end of the 6th grade. That is, good results in these skills in the 3rd grade resulted in good performances in reading comprehension in the 6th grade. The “phonological skills” in the 3rd grade, in turn, were predictors of children’s performance in the decoding ability in the 6th grade. Therefore, the authors concluded that different skills seem to be involved in the development of comprehension and decoding.

By indicating that different skills were causally implicated in reading comprehension and decoding, the study by Oakhill and Cain (2012) presents an important contribution to teaching, insofar as it reinforces that decoding and comprehension, although constituting related processes, deserve specific pedagogical work at school. That is, text comprehension is neither synonymous with decoding nor a mere result of the ability to fluently read the words and sentences of a text, as advocated by the PNA (Decreto n. 9.765, 2019).

In this sense, it is necessary to formulate specific objectives for the teaching of comprehension in the initial years of schooling and, in these terms, we argue that the pedagogical work aimed at the development of comprehension can and should begin when children listen to the texts still through the voice of the teacher. We believe, therefore (Brandão, 2006; Brandão & Rosa, 2010,

1 In the test, children are asked to read aloud short stories, which increase in size and complexity, in addition to answering literal and inferential questions after reading each one. The test is interrupted when a certain number of errors occur while reading the story. In this way, Neale assesses children’s performance in both decoding and reading comprehension.

2011; Brandão et al., 2013; Brandão et al., 2021), that much can be done towards the formation of “active listeners” who seek to extract and produce meaning from the texts they hear, for example, in story circles.

In these and other reading spaces, through a conversation about the texts guided by the teacher, it is possible to encourage children to think about what they hear, engaged in the construction of meanings through active interaction with the texts to which they have access, with the mediation of the teacher. In other words, from the beginning of schooling, it is essential to teach

... reading like someone trying to assemble a puzzle. In this way, we will be forming a reader who, in front of any text, seeks to find and build links between the pieces, identifying clues to relate the parts, in order to elaborate a coherent whole: an image that makes sense and that can, after all, be interpretable and understood. (Brandão, 2006, p. 74, own translation).

In this context, children need to discover, from an early age, that written texts have something to say and that it is up to the reader-listener to adopt an active behavior to try to understand what the text says. We emphasize, however, that this “effort to search for meaning” to understand/appreciate what they hear does not occur spontaneously. On the contrary, it is necessary that children have access to meaningful texts, that is, with themes that are attractive to them, that answer a question of interest to them, or that adopt an aesthetically interesting verbal and non-verbal language. Furthermore, the teacher must pay special attention not only to the selection of these texts but also to the *quality of the conversation* that can take place through their reading. In this way, we hope that, from active listeners, children will become active readers, the result of mastering a “way of reading”, learned in reading and conversation situations, mediated by the teacher (Brandão & Rosa, 2010).

In this direction, in the next item, we will review some studies that help us to reflect on different aspects involved in the pedagogical work aimed at helping children to comprehend texts in the early years of schooling.

Comprehension of texts and pedagogical action with 4 and 5-year-old children

In Brazil, there are few studies that address text comprehension in children under 6 years of age (Brandão & Spinillo, 2001; Marinho, 2015; Santana & Brandão, 2016; Queiroz et al., 2021). However, there is vast international literature that discusses comprehension in children in this age group. Most of these studies analyze the comprehension process of the children through the retelling of stories presented in audio and/or video, as well as through their answers to open questions formulated based on the stories heard (Broek et al., 2011; Kendeou et al., 2008). Children’s comprehension has also been analyzed through the narrative they produce when asked to read picture books (Kraayenoord & Paris, 1996; Tompkins et al., 2013), that is, books with visual narratives in which there is no verbal text.

Regardless of the methodological option adopted, such studies have repeatedly indicated that 4-year-old children are already capable not only of extracting literal information from the text, but also of making inferences about, for example, the objectives of certain actions of characters or about their emotional states, or even establishing causal connections between events in a story (Kendeou et al., 2008). In summary, the literature indicates that the comprehension processes experienced by young children when listening to a story are entirely similar to the processes in which older children and adult readers engage (Lynch et al., 2008).

In a review of research in the field of cognitive psychology that examined text comprehension in children under six years of age, a significant correlation was found between certain skills (*vocabulary, knowledge of narrative structure, comprehension monitoring and construction of*

inferences) and young children's oral comprehension (Tompkins et al., 2013). In addition, studies such as Silva and Cain (2015) and Kendeou et al. (2008) also revealed the predictive power of some of these skills for children's later reading comprehension. In the research by Kendeou et al. (2008), for example, the inferential abilities of 4 and 6-year-old children when retelling or answering questions about stories presented on video or in audio proved to be predictors of reading comprehension assessed two years later, when the group of 6-year-olds had completed 8 years.

Starting, then, from the results of these studies, we will reflect on intervention research that investigated precisely the skills highlighted above in children aged 4-5 years, seeking to explore the possibilities of a pedagogical work aimed at the development of comprehension of children in this age group. In this regard, it is worth remembering Chartier's (2007, p. 173, own translation) observation that "a pedagogical instrument intended for collective use cannot be conceived from the model of a situation of experimental acquisition". In other words, although we recognize that methodological research strategies should not be directly transposed into pedagogical work with children, we understand that knowledge and reflection on the studies that we will present below can contribute to the discussion and planning of practices aimed at developing text comprehension with young children.

From this perspective, the first study that seems relevant to us was conducted by Morrow (1984). In the research, 254 children from 15 classes of kindergarten were divided into groups that used different discussion procedures during story reading activity. In one group, the comprehension questions emphasized the structural elements of a story (that is, they required, for example, the identification of the place where the story takes place and its characters, the objective or the problem faced by the main character or even the sequence of events in the narrative and its outcome).

In the second group, the discussion of the story was conducted through literal and inferential questions and also critical thinking questions,² which, according to the definition given by the author, asked the children to apply information from the stories to solve a problem. In the third group, the previous procedures were combined. In the so-called "control group", the stories were simply read without discussion and, at the end of the reading, the children were asked to draw. In the three groups where there was discussion, it only occurred before and after reading, making a total of 10 minutes of conversation. That is, there was no conversation during the reading of the texts.

All children were assessed for their comprehension in a non-standardized pre-test and two post-tests (the first one performed immediately after the intervention and the other one month later). The tests consisted of 10 comprehension questions about a story read to children: five addressing the structural elements and five addressing the other types of questions cited. Based on the results of the pre-test, the children were distributed into the four groups mentioned. The results showed that the children in the three discussion groups performed better on the two post-tests when compared to the non-discussion group, and, as might be expected, the group that combined the different question types performed significantly better than the others in the post-test.

Morrow's (1984) study pointed out, therefore, that it is not enough to read good quality books to children, it is also necessary to pay attention to the conversation that can take place after reading and, in particular, to the nature of the questions that will conduct this conversation about the text. The study also showed that a relatively short intervention, in which only eight stories were read and discussed, had a positive and, apparently, lasting effect on children's comprehension of new stories.

2 In the study, the differentiation of the types of questions does not seem clear. For example, a question about where the story takes place or what a character's problem is, could be, at the same time, a literal or inferential question, depending on how the information is presented in the text.

Morrow and Smith (1990), in a later study, investigated the effect of different reading-aloud conditions (reading one-to-one, reading to groups of three children, and reading to the whole class) on the comprehension of children in their final grade of early childhood education and the first grade of elementary school. At the end of the reading, they were asked to retell the stories they had heard, and the types of comments and questions asked by children and adults in the three reading conditions were also analyzed. According to the study, reading in small groups was more favorable for comprehension, contrary to the authors' expectation that one-to-one reading would have a more positive impact.

Morrow and Smith's (1990) research reinforces, therefore, the value of talking about text to broaden comprehension, as well as highlighting an important aspect of the teaching planning of early childhood education teachers, which is to consider the number of children during story circles. In that study, the classes had, on average, 15 children. In Brazil, this number is usually higher (around 20 to 25 children, in the case of 4 and 5-year-olds) and informal observations also indicate that reading in small groups does not seem to be common in early childhood education institutions.

In addition to the aspects commented on in the studies presented here, it is possible to distinguish two groups of more recent research that seem to bring contributions to reflect on the pedagogical work with text comprehension in early childhood education. One of them investigates the possibilities of teaching *comprehension strategies* in the context of reading stories to small children. The other group of studies focuses on what some authors have called a *deeper discussion or conversation about the content of texts* read aloud.

In the following sections, we will discuss these two groups of studies in more detail, starting with those whose approach focuses on the explicit teaching of reading strategies. Next, we will dedicate our attention to research in which the discussion about the content of the texts read is privileged.

Story reading and explicit teaching of reading strategies

Starting from a cognitive approach to reading, it is understood that, in order to create an integrated and coherent representation of the text, the listener or reader needs to use certain strategies, such as: making predictions, activating prior knowledge, summarizing, producing inferences and monitoring his/her comprehension. In this perspective, there is a good number of works in literature (Barak & Meister, 1994; Menin et al., 2010; Souza & Giroto, 2014) that investigate and propose the teaching of cognitive strategies for the development of comprehension of texts. In early childhood education, we can cite a few examples that have adopted this approach.

One of them is the intervention study conducted by Debruin-Parecki and Squibb (2011) with 30 children who had an average age of 4 years and 5 months and attended two classrooms in the prekindergarten of a school that served families with low socioeconomic status. The intervention was implemented by the teachers with the support of the researchers for eight weeks with three weekly sessions. Eight storybooks on the theme "friendship" were used to teach the strategies. Thus, the aim was to teach children to connect the ideas of the text with their personal experiences, make predictions about what could happen next in the story, and evaluate such predictions, reconstitute the sequence of events in the story, and expand their vocabulary through a selection of words considered unfamiliar in each of the stories read.

The children participating in the study were evaluated in a standardized pre and post-test, the *Early Literacy Skills Assessment* (ELSA) (Cheadle, 2007), which included the assessment of comprehension among its items. At the end of the study, vocabulary was also assessed in a task where children were asked what they knew about a particular word. The 21 words that made up this

task were randomly selected among those that had been worked on during the intervention, which adopted the scheme described below. Initially, the children were introduced to the vocabulary of the story to be read with the presentation of cards with written words, and drawings associated with them, and discussion about the meaning of these words. The second step was the reading of the book, during which the meaning of the words was resumed in the context of the story. In addition, throughout the week, the teachers tried to use selected words from the text whenever they had the opportunity, in everyday situations. Finally, after reading the book, some activities were proposed in small groups involving, for example, retelling the story through dramatization and stimulating connections between the story heard and the personal experiences of the children. According to the authors, although the study did not use a control group, the comparison of the results obtained in the standardized test performed before and after the intervention showed a significant gain in comprehension, as well as in the vocabulary of the participating children.

Another work along the same lines is Myers' (2005) account of his experience teaching cognitive strategies for text comprehension based on an adaptation of the "reciprocal teaching" model proposed by Palincsar and Brown (1984). In this approach, the teaching of four strategies guided by the teacher is suggested. They are summarization, search for clarification, formulation of questions and predictions during the reading of texts. The proposal is that, through reading and dialog between the teacher and the children and between the children, the latter internalize such strategies and gradually engage in comprehending the text and monitoring this comprehension.

Myers (2005) used four puppets to personify the strategies she intended to teach her group of 5-year-old children. Thus, throughout the project, the author repeatedly read different stories already known to the children, using the puppets to explain the role of each of the strategies. For example, the "princess" was introduced as someone who was supposed to tell a story in a few sentences. The children helped to remember the story with the support of the teacher, selecting what was essential and the princess presented the summary of the story to the rest of the class. Another puppet, "Clara", needed help and interrupted the story whenever she did not understand the reason for something. "Quincy" asked "easy questions to see who was listening to the story" (Myers, 2005, p. 318), while the "Wizard" tried to guess what would happen in the story. According to Myers (2005), as the function of the puppets became clear, the children took on different roles during the teacher's reading of the story, with the great involvement of the children being noticeable, since the use of the puppets helped in the participation of the shy children. The author also recorded behaviors that had never been noticed before, such as the expression of some children that a certain part of the story had not been understood.

Cahill and Gregory (2010) reported an experience similar to the previous work. In this case, the comprehension strategies were presented and explained to the children of a kindergarten with the support of images and representative gestures. For example, to explain the strategy of establishing connections between the text and the children's knowledge and experiences, a teacher, "Mrs. Hope", presented a poster with the illustration of the brain with small drawings of ideas circulating around it and explained that, when we find new information, it is easier to remember and understand it if we "stick" this information with what is already in our mind.

Children were then taught to show the shape of the letter C with their hand whenever they made some "Connection" between what they heard in the story and their previous knowledge or experience. Another poster focused on teaching the prediction strategy, stating that "good readers ask questions before, during and after reading" (Cahill & Gregory, 2010, p. 516). According to Cahill and Gregory's (2010) report, when looking at the cover of a book, Mrs. Hope took notes of the children's questions and also recorded her questions during the reading. The children, in this case, were instructed, during the reading, to raise and move their index fingers whenever they imagined

something that could happen later in the narrative. By making these hand signals, the teacher listened to what each child had to say and thus reinforced the teaching of the prediction strategy.

We believe that this need to supposedly facilitate the development of comprehension through resources such as puppets, colourful posters, mimes and vocabulary teaching is questionable. Evidently, the child who has access to reading of good stories has a clear interest both in less familiar words (for example, the *escalavrado* knee [lacerated] in *O Joelho Juvenal*, by Ziraldo, 1989), and in those that literature gives an unexpected or funny use (such as in Chico Buarque's *Chapeuzinho Amarelo*, 1979). Thus, if a mediator is available to read stories, children will be able to appreciate, comment and also ask the meaning of certain words, if they feel the need.

It is also worth remembering that encouraging children to infer the meanings of words while reading is a fundamental reading behavior and, therefore, needs to be developed. This does not mean that the adult cannot highlight a word during the reading and try to find out if the children know its meaning. However, it seems unnecessary and extremely artificial to present a list of supposedly unknown words with corresponding drawings, before reading a story, and follow a step by step to learn how to use these words, as we saw in Debruin-Parecki and Squibb's (2011) study.

The proposal of Myers's (2005) study does not seem attractive to us either. After all, how to make sense of the Wizard's puppet that makes predictions of a story that everyone already knows and knows what will happen next? We also found it strange to see children making gestures in the shape of the letter C or with their index finger waving in the air while reading a story, as proposed in Cahill and Gregory's (2010) study. Children between 4 and 5 years old who tend to listen to good quality stories are, naturally, interested and able to talk about the texts read without needing supposed ludic resources which, from our point of view, mischaracterize the reading situation. It is like thinking that, in order to attract children's attention to the letters, it would be necessary to draw hair with pigtails and a smiling face on each one of them, which distorts the conventional format of these symbols.

Although we consider it essential to help children develop, from an early age, reading comprehension strategies in shared reading situations, we conceive that such strategies – which constitute knowledge of a procedural nature – can be gradually incorporated by children, through, for example, conversation conducted by the teacher before, during and after reading and not in “specific classes to teach a ‘list of reading strategies’, as if these were techniques to be defined and exemplified” (Brandão, 2006, p. 69, own translation). In other words, “the strategies must be learned in use, in concrete reading situations, which, in turn, should be inserted in significant communicative contexts, proposed by the teacher” (Brandão, 2006, p. 69, own translation).

As previously announced, we identified in the available literature another group of works that addresses reading aloud and talking about stories with young children, without any concern with the explicit teaching of certain comprehension strategies. In the next item, we will present some of these works, highlighting different aspects that are important not only for the development of children's oral comprehension in preschool but also for their later reading comprehension.

Reading and talking about stories: a path to help comprehend

In general, “interactive aloud reading” or “shared reading of stories” (hereinafter SRS) or, as it is more commonly called in Brazil, the “story circle” is associated with the experience in which an adult reads to a child or group of children and in which there is some conversation about the story being read or about themes related to it.

Based on the literature review conducted, we found the absence of longitudinal studies that explore the relationships between SRS in the first years of schooling and later reading

comprehension. However, as we saw in the intervention studies cited above, SRS with children in the last grades of kindergarten seems to have a positive impact on their oral comprehension. Thus, if we consider the indication of some studies that listening and reading comprehension are highly related (Kendeou et al., 2008; National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008; Nation et al., 2010), we can hypothesize that SRS in preschool can also bring gains to children's reading comprehension later on.

Based on this argument, we will now examine some indications from researchers who have sought to identify qualitative aspects that favor a more significant interaction between children and teachers during SRS.

Pentimonti et al. (2013), for example, by reviewing intervention studies that analyzed the impact of SRS (whether performed at home by parents or in the school context), point to three approaches that proved to be empirically validated. That is, approaches that, according to the authors' criteria, proved to be effective in at least two studies, when compared with a control group or with a group that experienced another experimental condition. They are: dialogic reading, exploration of vocabulary and approach to graphic and conventional aspects of the written text.

The "*dialogic reading*" (Whitehurst et al., 1988; Whitehurst et al., 1994) consists of a procedure that proposes certain types of interaction between adult-children during SRS in order to stimulate active participation in the activity and the development of their oral language skills. Such procedures include, for example, formulating open questions, especially questions that begin with "why..." or that stimulate the retelling of the story heard; repeating and expanding on responses or comments made by children and make associations between the text and personal experiences.

"*Vocabulary exploration*" (word elaborations) is a procedure that aims to promote children's interest in potentially unfamiliar words during SRS and, in this way, contribute both to expanding their vocabulary and to deepening their knowledge about the meaning of the words. Thus, during or after reading, children are encouraged to discuss/elaborate on the meaning of some words that appear in the text. This procedure is commonly repeated during subsequent readings of the same book and, to expand the children's exposure to the new vocabulary, the teacher uses the words highlighted during SRS in other contexts or situations (Wasik & Bond, 2001), as in make-believe play.

When commenting on Debruin-Parecki & Squibb's (2011) study, Pentimonti et al. (2013) point out limitations in relation to the proposal, in which reading seems to be at the service of expanding vocabulary, possibly compromising the pleasure of listening to a story, as well as children's comprehension and enjoyment of the text. Sharing the concerns of Pentimonti et al. (2013), another aspect that seems equally crucial to us is the negative influence that investment focused on vocabulary may have on the process of teachers choosing what to read to their group of children. That is, instead of selecting aesthetically well-constructed and attractive literature books, with texts and illustrations that dialogue and stimulate children's imagination, the criterion for choosing the books to be read may be poorly limited to the presence of unfamiliar words.

In addition, we find it highly concerning to imagine that the content of the conversation based on a story read gives all this emphasis to the elaboration of the meaning of unfamiliar words found in the text that has just been read. As we also commented before, we understand that a good literary text certainly includes not only words probably new for children but also uses and new ways of saying them. Thus, from our point of view, while reading, the teacher can highlight unfamiliar words that appear not only in the literary text but also, for example, in a news or instructional text. However, it is essential to use common sense so as not to compromise the flow of reading aloud and, above all, to encourage children to ask questions and infer the meaning of the new words they come across.

Still regarding the vocabulary, Hogan et al. (2013) point out that, although in the review of intervention studies conducted by researchers associated with NELP (2008), SRS emerges as the

activity that showed the greatest impact on the development of children's oral language (specifically in relation to the receptive vocabulary and not to the expressive),³ isolated measures of vocabulary were not good predictors of reading comprehension. In fact, such a result is not surprising, since, as we have already discussed here, comprehension results precisely from the reader/listener's ability to make connections between words and sentences to build a coherent and integrated mental model that gives meaning to the text. Thus, having a good repertoire of words should not, in fact, be enough to guarantee the comprehension of a text.

The "approach to graphic and conventional aspects of the written text" ("print referencing") involves making explicit verbal or non-verbal references to aspects related to the printed text, in order to draw children's attention to, for example, the writing direction, the name of some letters, the use of speech bubbles or even the recognition of certain words within the text. The idea is, therefore, to emphasize these aspects, since, commonly, children tend to focus their interest on the illustrations in the book. We consider this proposal interesting, provided that, as in the previous case, the teacher does not constantly break the flow of reading to make references of this type. Furthermore, we emphasize that this approach is not related to text comprehension, but to the exploration of some writing conventions or graphic aspects of the text, as well as global word recognition.

Still regarding the topic of SRS, some authors have highlighted the absence of intervention studies with preschoolers focused on the elaboration of inferences during reading aloud. Kleeck (2008), for example, based on research results, argues about the need to formulate literal questions and inferential questions of different types, especially those aimed at establishing causal relationships that structure the narrative. According to the author, the greater the child's exposure to inferential language, the greater the possibility that the child will have to use this language by him/herself, reading in a way that goes beyond the information explained in the text and illustrations.

Kleeck (2008) also emphasizes, as well as other authors (Brandão & Rosa, 2010, 2011; Riter, 2009), the need to plan and formulate questions, as well as to make comments during the reading, in order to enable a greater quality in the discussion of the text with the children.

In fact, some studies have indicated (Scheiner & Gorsetman, 2009) that, although SRS is a frequent activity in early childhood education, teachers' planning on conducting the activity does not usually occur. In their research with 31 teachers of children between 3 and 5 years of age from four private preschools in central New York, the referred authors concluded that the teachers did not recognize the role of inferences for comprehension.

However, analyzing the quality of interactions between teachers and children during SRS, Lennox (2013) draws attention to the gains that storytelling, when well planned, can have since preschool. Thus, according to the author, during the conversation about the story, it is possible to develop abilities to predict, formulate hypotheses, explain, imagine, infer, evaluate and solve problems, that is, the so-called high-level thinking processes. The author emphasizes that, when reading stories, we are also expanding children's knowledge of the world, which provides the basis for the development of these processes. So there is no point in restricting the conversation to literal questions, retelling the story, or purely descriptive comments about the text or illustrations. On the contrary, questions whose answers are between the lines of the text that explore, for example, the intentions or feelings of a certain character need to be formulated for children, stimulating their ability to think about what they hear and seek to comprehend.

3 Expressive vocabulary concerns the ability to orally define what a word means. The receptive vocabulary, on the other hand, implies a less complex demand, as it is enough to indicate that the word is known (for example, by pointing to an image that matches a word said by the examiner).

Finally, Cunningham and Zibulsky (2011) highlight the absence of longitudinal studies that observe the relationships between SRS experiences, independent reading volume and reading comprehension. They hypothesize that children immersed in an environment with a lot of access to books and who may have good and frequent SRS experiences may develop pleasure and interest in reading that encourages them to read independently when they are able to do so later. Still, according to the authors, such an interest in reading would tend, in turn, to develop, in a deeper way, critical thinking and text comprehension skills. In this sense, for Cunningham and Zibulsky (2011), the greatest benefit of SRS at the beginning of schooling would perhaps be the pleasure and interest in books that this activity could awaken in children and its “indirect effect” on reading comprehension. For them, this effect may even be stronger than the impacts already pointed out by some studies, for example, in relation to the increase in children’s vocabulary when exposed to SRS.

In concluding this section, two observations still seem important to us. The first is that, although we have highlighted the role of reading and talking about stories for the development of comprehension, the reflections made on this topic can also be applied to the context of presenting stories through videos. Likewise, we understand that such notes can also be extended to reading and talking about other text genres (news, reports, game instructions, etc.), as long as their singularities and their own modes of operation are respected. Finally, although our focus has been on reading stories with children between 4 and 5 years old and comprehension development, we cannot forget that access to reading and, in particular, to literature is fundamental for all ages and for many other reasons that have not been prioritized here (Candido, 1995; Castrillon, 2011; Petit, 2008).

Final considerations

As we know, even an experienced reader may not understand well, for example, a text on an unfamiliar topic. In the same way, as the epigraph presented at the beginning of this paper expresses, there are interpretations of a text that are not acceptable, because they contradict the information presented in the textual base. In fact, as proposed by Paris (2005), certain skills called by the author “unlimited”, such as comprehension, evolve throughout life and will never be fully mastered. Learning to construct meanings is not, therefore, a simple activity and needs to be explored as an object of teaching at school from an early age.

In this direction, throughout the paper, we defend the possibility of contributing to the formation of “active listeners” in early childhood education, engaged in comprehending and reflecting on the texts they listen to and that, later on, they will be able to read autonomously. This means considering that, before learning to read, children can learn to assume the position of readers who think about the texts they hear and who make an effort to extract and produce meanings. The development of this attitude in the interaction with written texts is, from our point of view, the basis of the process of constituting a competent and critical reader, as we all want.

Therefore, we consider that situations of shared reading of stories and other text genres can contemplate the exploration of both reading strategies – without assuming a tone of transmission of these strategies – and the content of the text and other themes derived from it. In the first case, questions can be asked that trigger certain reading strategies, such as activating prior knowledge, prediction, verification and inference. In the second, open questions that focus on what the text says and others related to themes that can be associated with it can be added to the conversation, thus promoting the exchange of experiences and impressions among children. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that, although the studies analyzed here have emphasized the questions asked by adults, it is also necessary to value the questions and comments that children formulate during reading so

that a pleasurable and authentic experience of listening and talking about the texts read with/for them is actually experienced.⁴

In this way, we hope that the story circles gain space for discussion in the initial and continued education of teachers and that the reflections presented here stimulate the debate on the possibility of formulating objectives specifically aimed at developing the comprehension of texts in curricular proposals for early child education. We also hope that the paper can inspire teaching practices during the reading activity with children in this initial moment that we consider decisive in the long and complex journey of a reader's formation.

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4 On this subject, see the research conducted by Brandão et al. (2021) and Nascimento (2021).

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Note on authorship

The author formulated the objectives of the paper, produced the original manuscript and contributed to the revision of the text. The co-author collaborated in the restructuring of all sections of the paper and did the general revision of the writing.

Data availability statement

The data underlying the research text are informed in the paper.

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