

Original articles

Adults writing profile at the beginning of their reading and writing acquisition

Jéssica Rodrigues de Paula⁽¹⁾
Ariadnes Nobrega de Oliveira⁽¹⁾
Amanda Luiza Aceituno da Costa⁽¹⁾
Patrícia Abreu Pinheiro Crenitte⁽¹⁾
Aline Roberta Aceituno da Costa⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Faculdade de Odontologia de Bauru -
Universidade de São Paulo, FOB-USP,
Bauru, São Paulo, Brazil.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: to describe and analyze the writing profile of 12 adults in the literacy phase.

Methods: 12 students of both genders enrolled in the Youth and Adult Education Program (EJA) of public school in a medium-sized city in the state of São Paulo. The study was divided into two stages: proposal presentation to participants and School Performance Test assessment to evaluate the writing phase and the type of error presented by each participant.

Results: the majority of the results belonged to the alphabetical phase (criterion established by Ferreiro and Teberosky). The most frequent errors were grapheme omissions and oral support.

Conclusion: results indicated the need to focus on the alphabetic principle acquisition, which allows the initial writing by the phonological route, and to work the differences between standard and colloquial language.

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Mailing address:

Aline Roberta Aceituno da Costa
Al. Octávio Pinheiro Brisola, 9-75 – Bauru,
São Paulo, Brasil
CEP: 17012-901
E-mail: alineroberta@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Reading and writing learning is a milestone in the life of any individual who belongs to a graphical society, that is, who has all his activities somehow linked, permeated by reading and /or writing. One example is the society in which we live, either to find a job, use a public transport, or to fulfill leisure activities, we find ourselves surrounded by situations which lead us to feel the need of reading and writing¹. When children learn to read and write, they have uncountable new possibilities and they enter new environments to which they had no access before they were literate. Such learning make possible great changes in children´s lives, as reading a ticket, sending and receiving messages through mobile phone, reading a game´s rules, making progress in academic learning, reading books and so on.

Similarly, illiterate adults, who spent their lives using surviving strategies, in a society which uses so much written language, have a new perspective on life and among the social group when they learn to read^{2,3}. Literature presents several authors who argue that literacy will be enormously influenced by the level of literacy of the person who is learning, that is, by the level of knowledge that one has in relation to social practices when making use of reading and writing. What these authors defend is that the more the learner understands about the functions that reading and writing can have on his daily life the more probable will be the success of his learning^{2,4}. In addition, if learning to read written words is enormously influenced by all experiences, all interactions with the world through which an individual has lived throughout his life, it is plausible to infer that reading and writing learning taken by an adult will have peculiarities in relation to the same learning taken by a child⁵.

One of the few studies on adult literacy, a literature review⁶ which investigated the topics covered by researches on Youth and Adult Education from 1978 thru 2004 (26 years of research), pointed out that of the 68 articles found in the literature, twelve were about reading and writing development and learning. Among the twelve articles, only two investigated initial acquisition of written language. One of these studies⁷ investigated the relations between metaphonological capabilities that lead to segmentation of the speech chain and learning of reading in alphabetical systems. The author concluded that the knowledge of the phonemes is prerequisite for success in reading acquisition. The other study⁸ sought to understand the phonological processes that occur in adult

linguistic variety, in the literacy process. In his conclusions defended the need of taking into account such processes when handling errors (all kinds of divergences among learners´ writing and the form expected by normative grammar, the learner´s writing valued by the culture, one that a student wants to reach at the end of literacy process, will hereby be called as “errors” only for convenience of expression).

Despite these studies, there is a shortage of works describing typical development, expected when it comes to language writing acquisition by adults. Regarding the learning sequence of reading and writing with children, some authors⁹ describe it in three stages: logographic (visual pattern reading, in general, as if it were a drawing, when it appears in an invariable context, thru memorization), alphabetical (reading from word segmentation in its constituents, from the phoneme association corresponding to each grapheme, from the junction of all phonemes to read the whole word, the meaning comes out of derived sound and not from visualization of the whole word) and orthographic (word recognition happens in a global way, from morphemes and analogies, reading is more instantaneous and writing goes with orthographic pattern closer to the language rules and not so dependent of conversion between graphemes and phonemes).

Another theoretical point of view regarding reading learning sequence is the so called written language Psychogenesis, which says that the learner makes hypotheses about the code, walking through a pass that can be represented by levels: pre-syllabic, syllabic, syllabic-alphabetical and alphabetical¹⁰. The research developed by the authors shows that writing construction follows a regular line, organized in three moments: 1) distinction between iconic representation (images) or non-iconic (letters, numbers, signs); 2) construction of differentiation forms, progressive control of the variations in the qualitative axis (spelling variations) and the quantitative axis (spelling quantity). These two periods configure the pre-linguistic or pre-syllabic; 3) writing phonetisation, when appears sound assignments, started by syllabic period and ending in the alphabetical¹¹.

Unlike children, some studies argue that an adult in the process of literacy learning has already surpassed pre-syllabic level. It is clear for him that writing uses letters and what is the social function of writing. While it is very easy to achieve written outputs from a pre-literate child, with an illiterate adult there is a

strong “non-knowing awareness” and he feels unable to try writing¹². After alphabetical phase it is supposed that the learner master and respect more and more conventional rules regarding representation among sounds (phonemes) and letters (graphemes), not only in simple syllables, in situations where letter/sound representation are unique (ex: p - /p/; d - /d/) but also in situations with multiple representations (ex: z -s -x -/z/).

Deviation of spelling rules of words, agreed by community, are considered as orthography errors, and the most common are: 1.those related to phoneme-grapheme converter (replacing deaf phoneme by a sound phoneme or vice-versa; random replacement, inversion, transposition, omission or grapheme addition); 2. Those related to no observation of contextual rules (simple: r, rr, s, ss, c, qu, ç, + e, ç + l), nasalization; complex: accentuation) and 3. Related to language irregularities¹³. All types of errors are possible in a child literacy as well as in an adult literacy, studies, in general, has characterized the development, difficulties and the sequence presented by children. However, on account of the experience impact on initial reading and writing learning, one arising question refers to writing profile and types of errors made in the adult early literacy years, these errors may be different from those usually found throughout children writing development.

To better understand the course of adult in the literacy phase, this study is proposed to investigate the writing profile of adults participants of the young and adult education program, EJA, in the literacy phase. This knowledge can collaborate in the programming of teaching and in the study of strategies that privilege adults reading and writing literacy.

METHODS

The present study was submitted to evaluation of its ethical aspects to the Research Ethics Committee from Bauru Dentistry Faculty – University of Sao Paulo and started only after approval (CAAE # 09203713.1.000.5417).

The participants were clearly informed on the research details (concerning a population that does not read or write with proficiency, the researcher read the Free and Informed Consent Form before the classroom teacher) and asked the participants agreeing with this Form, to write their names at the end of the document. The works were only started after the term signature.

Participants

All students, regularly enrolled in the Young and Adult Education Program – EJA, belonging to a mixed room (where are served first and fourth series of elementary education), of a municipal public school in a medium-sized city in the state of São Paulo were invited to participate of such study.

Besides the 31 invited students accepted the invitation and signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE) to participate in the study, 12 students of both sexes, finished the research.

The sample selection was done according to the following criteria: included were students enrolled in the Young and Adult Education Program – EJA – who signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE), without complaint of sensorial deficiency, motor or cognitive and finished data collect.

Place

The research participants’ classroom is the church parish hall located in a suburban neighborhood of a medium-sized city in the interior of Sao Paulo. During classes period (nightly, 19-21h) there is no other local activities and the place is safe, clean, spacious, bright and airy. The research was conducted in the same environment were the students were watching classes (the church parish hall), together with the classroom teacher. The room was enough large and the research activities were made at the back of it, were two chairs and a table were placed. The necessary office stuff for the activities was on the table: pencil, paper, pen, pencil sharpener.

Procedure

Data collect was conducted along four months, once a week, adding 16 visits to the place were Young and Adult Education class classes take place with which the study was carried out. The class dates were set by the classroom teacher as those during which there would not be other activities or other professionals present in the local. The teacher considered that more than one activity in the classroom would disturb the classes’ progress.

The researcher introduced herself to all the class and explained her activities goal, and then invited each student individually to join the study. All 31 class students were invited, despite agreeing, eighteen participants began their study activities, although, due to absence and school dropout, it was not possible to

finish activities with everybody. At the end, 12 students participated of the whole study.

The study was divided in two stages:

2.3.1 – Proposal submission to the participant, signature of Free and Informed Consent Form and the fulfillment of an identification form. The identification form questions, presented as an interview, had the following items: name, age, marital status, sons, occupation, whether this was the first time in school (if negative, explain).

2.3.2 – Application of an activity which enables to value study participants' writing profile. The test applied was a writing subtest of the School Performance Test¹⁴. The test consisted of a list of words dictate which allowed investigate the writing phase and the type of error done by each of the participants of the study (attach 1).

Data analysis

The results were entered registered and classified using two analysis criteria:

1 – The experimenter analyzed the participants writing using data established by Ferreiro and Teberosky¹⁵ from which they classified it in one of the phases proposed by the author, as follows: pre-syllabic, syllabic, syllabic-alphabetical and alphabetical.

2 – So, those productions identified as belonging to alphabetical phase were analyzed descriptively in relation to orthographic adjustments. Errors were analyzed and then, allocated in one of the following classifications:

- Multiple representations: phonemes which can be represented by several graphemes or vice-versa – ex: /s/ - s, ç, ss, sc, xc, c - /k/, /s/
- Oral support: spell the words according to speech and not according to writing conventions – ex: use of vowel “u” and not “o” at the end of paroxytone words (bolo – bolu; menino – meninu)
- Omissions – stop placing graphemes which belong to the word (ex: galinha – galina).

- Deaf - sound: change, when writing, graphemes which represent pairs of phonemes which differ only about the presence or not of vocal folds vibration – ex: p-b; c-g; t-d.
- Letters addition: insertion of letters which do not belong to the word to be spelled – ex – pastel – pasatel; martelo – martelou.
- Confusion among letter ; use of a letter in the place of other – ex.: telhado – tenhado; girafa – giraja.
- Inversion: Putting letters in inverted order – ex.: bar – bra; festa – fetas

RESULTS

Participants personal data collected in initial individual interview (first stage of the study), allowed, besides knowing the participants profile, establish a first contact (rapport) before asking the student to perform the task. Thus, this stage results shows us that five men and seven women took part in the study, in the age range between 18 and 63 years, among the women two do not work outside, one works as a hairdresser and the others work as domestic servant or daily laborer. Among men, one is a football (soccer) player, one is a charger and the others work as masons or mason's helper.

As to the second stage, most of the participants took more than one day to conclude activities, which was in the School Performance Test subtest application¹⁴. This happened when the participant showed tiredness and/or needed more than 2 minutes to perform the writing of each word. The task was interrupted so they did not get much tired and also to perform school routine activities. Writing productions coming from dictation (writing subtest – TDE) were analyzed by means of criteria established by Ferreiro and Teberosky¹⁵ and, moreover, the writing were classified in one of the phases proposed by the authors (pre-syllabic, syllabic, syllabic alphabetical and alphabetical). The results are summarized on Table 1.

Table 1. Participants writing profile

Participant	Grades	Gender	Writing phase (Ferreiro and Teberosky ¹¹)
P1	3rd	F	Alphabetical
P2	1st	M	Syllabic-Alphabetical
P3	1st	F	Alphabetical
P4	2nd	F	Syllabic
P5	3rd	F	Syllabic-Alphabetical
P6	2nd	M	Alphabetical
P7	4th	F	Alphabetical
P8	3rd	M	Alphabetical
P9	4th	M	Alphabetical
P10	2nd	F	Alphabetical
P11	3rd	F	Syllabic
P12	1st	M	Syllabic

Participants are identified by letter P

The results pointed out that five of the participants are not fully literate, but in literacy phase, and their writing were fit in the following phases: syllabic and syllabic-alphabetical.

The writing productions of the other seven participants, identified as belonging to alphabetical phase, were analyzed on the orthographic adequacy.

Errors were analyzed and then, allocated in one of the following classifications: Multiple representations, oral support, omissions, deaf-sound-voiced exchange, letters addition, insertion of letters that do not belong

to the word to be spelled, confusion among letters, inversion. It was found the presence of all types of errors, the most part concentrated on types: Omissions and oral support (total of 67,4% of errors). Table 2, which follows, presents a summary of the errors and Figure 1 presents them individually.

Figure 2 presents individual data of each of the participants as for age, work done and number of sessions required to finish proposed activities in this work.

Table 2. Types and number of errors of each of the seven participants who show alphabetical writing

Types of errors	Participants							Total	
	P1	P3	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10		
Multiple representations	3	2	2			1	3	11	8.3%
Oral support	15		4	3	3	10	7	42	31.8%
Omissions	6	20	4	1	2	11	3	47	35.6%
Sound confusion		2			2			4	3.2%
Letter addition	2					3	1	6	4.5%
Letter confusion		2			3	2		7	5.3%
Inversion	5	5		2		2	1	15	11.3%
TOTAL	31	31	10	6	10	29	15	132	100%

Participants are identified by letter P

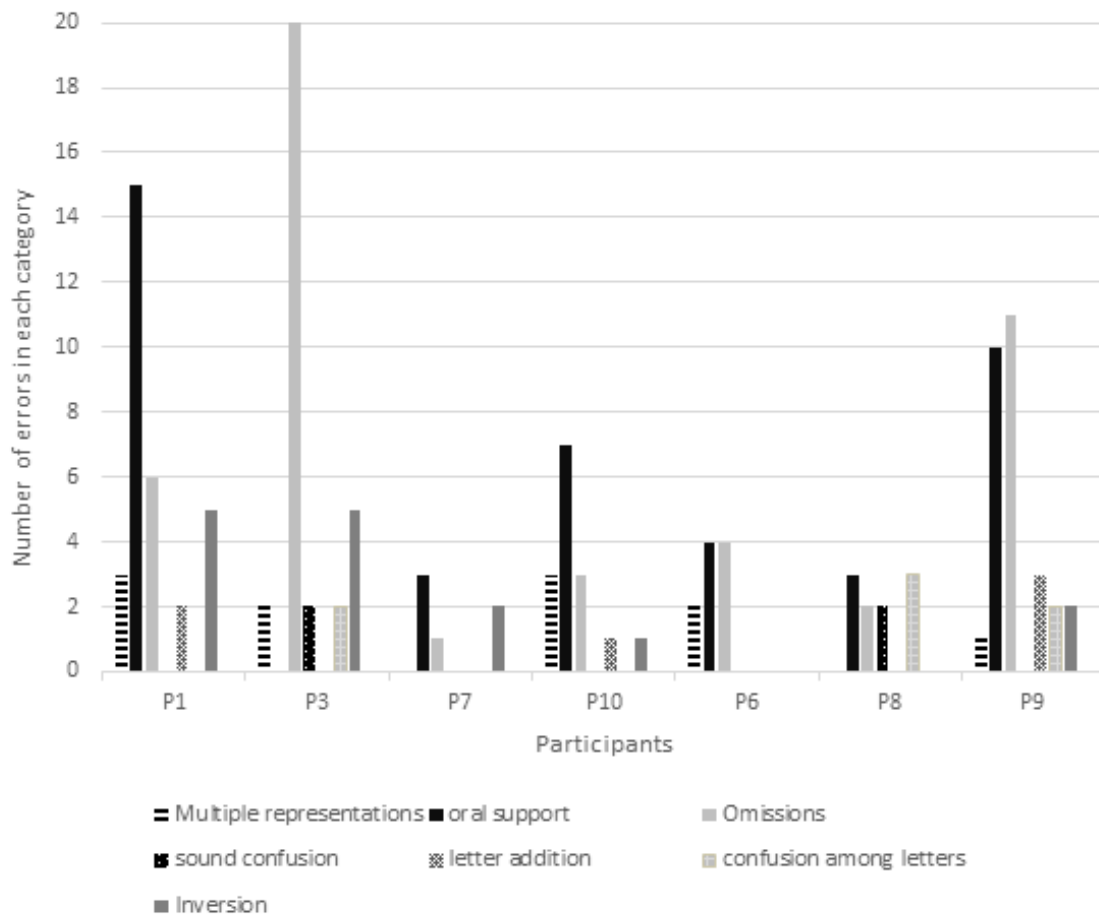


Figure 1. Presentation of the number of errors found for each of the literate participants in the two categories

Participants		Grades	Age (years)	Work outside home	Number of Sessions	
Participants on writing alphabetical level	Gender: Female	P1	3rd	38	-	2
		P3	1st	27	Hourly Housekeeper	2
		P7	4th	32	Housekeeper	1
		P10	2nd	29	-	1
	Gender: Male	P6	2nd	18	Soccer Player	2
		P8	3rd	63	Mason	2
		P9	4th	56	Mason helper	3
Participants on levels previous to alphabetical	Gender: Female	P4	2nd	46	Hourly Housekeeper	2
		P5	3rd	62	Hairdresser	1
		P11	3rd	43	Housekeeper	1
	Gender: Male	P2	1st	51	Hauler	1
			1st	37	Mason Helper	1

Figure 2. Personal information of study participants

DISCUSSION

This study had for purpose investigate the writing profile of adults participants in the young and adults education program, EJA, in the literacy phase. In spite of being adult participants and possibly know the letters and the use of reading and writing in society⁴, the fact that five participants did not have alphabetical writing (P4, P5, P11, P2, P12) shows that these participants have not yet grasped the alphabetical principle¹³, the comprehension of the relationship between phonemes and graphemes. P5 and P11 data need special attention once the female students are in third year of school attendance. This result suggests the need of doing investigations about participants literacy profile, whether there is (or there isn't) any correlation between literacy and alphabetization. Furthermore, it is suggested an investigation of the effects of the realization of systematic interventions that stimulates attention and manipulation of the sounds present in speech (repetition, division, etc., of parts of phrases, words, syllables, rhymes, alliterations, et cetera) favoring reflections that lead to alphabetical level.

Analysis of the participants results in alphabetical level (P1, P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10) showed that divergent prevalent type between participants initial writing and the one expected by normative grammar is letters omission (35,6% of the mistakes). Relevant in this result is the fact that all participants presented at least one occurrence, as it does not happen with other types of error. This datum suggests that the teaching of writing language to adults must consider the necessity of activities that drive the learner to reflect on sounds (phonemes) of each of the words and the relation of these phonemes with the graphemes (letters). Besides this, it suggests that formal education through a teacher's intervention is a priority, once such comprehension will not happen only by exposure to situations where reading and writing are used – considering that such exposure, in these adults participants life history, already occurs for many years¹².

Thus, to write without omitting letters implies an ability to identify all phonemes in the words¹⁶. This means an advanced phonological knowledge in terms of conscience of the sound structure of the words, as well as an ability to relate each phoneme to its letter (correspondence one by one), or to letters which are correspondents to this phoneme when the relation is not bi-univocal (as in digraphs).

An intervention proposal, which has widely been pointed out as a reflection and comprehension favorer

of the so called alphabetical principle (relation between graphemes and phonemes), is the proposal of doing stimulating activities of the phonological conscience, which is the awareness that the speech has an underlying phonetic structure¹⁷⁻²².

The second type of error most frequent, especially for P1 and P3, (31,8%) is "Oral support". An important reflection regarding this, comes from Santos e Navas²³ when they say that the writing system, in many ways and not always perfect, are based in oral language, with important implications on how writing and orthography work, id est, many of the mistakes made by a student in literacy phase can be caused by orality interference in this process.

Among many and diverse questions on this initial phase of language learning are: typical orthographic development, phonological conscience, orthographic deviations, how the writing process develops, speech pathology programs effectiveness in the students' performance, relation between speech and writing; relation between orthography and literacy; authorship question on writing and, yet, criteria used issue to consider as pathological, children's writing mistakes²⁴.

Besides the relation between speech and writing being presented more like an investigation subject, the present study shows that, with adults, this is an extreme relevance issue, and should be a priority concern, once it is an aspect which shows a great influence on initial writing of these apprentices.

It is important to point out that errors like this are expected once the orthographical conventions will only be understood and kept in memory when the apprentice is wholly literate and faces, on extending basis, texts dealing with activities involving writing⁵.

Furthermore, to overcome this type of error it is important consider observations already emphasized in an earlier study about the need to know specific aspects of linguistic variety of the students in literacy process and still consider such processes when treating their spelling mistakes,

It is also possible, to facilitate orthographic difficulties overcome with oral support using strategies that lead to reflection about differences between standards used in people's speech and writing in different contexts (formals or casuals) in which they participate daily²⁵.

An investigation that analyzed the teaching process of elementary school children's textual production found out that there is need to offer alternatives to the teacher regarding collective linguistic analysis and

individual writing correction²⁶. Each student can answer better to different forms of correction depending on his doubts and difficult types (writing correction by the teacher, collective correction and correction by colleagues, for instance), therefore it is important to use varied forms throughout the process.

Participants which made more mistakes were P1 (31 errors), P3 (31 errors) and P9 (29n errors) which are respectively in 3rd, 1st and 4th grades; and the participants which made less mistakes were P6 (10 errors), P7 (6 errors) and P8 (10 errors) which are respectively in the 2nd, 4th and 3rd grades. Therefore, there was not seen relation between exposition time to formal teaching and orthographic correction. This remark may point that other variables present in these participants lives, considering they have never been in a school or because they have not continued their studies and also because they have daily experienced several experiences in an literate society²⁷, and this seems to be influencing the writing literacy, more than the exposition years in the Young and Adult Education classroom and, therefore, for a better comprehension of the aspects involved in this population literacy process, it would be interesting to look for such variables.

So, it is possible to say that there is a great need to do more studies which investigate initial acquisition of written language by adults. Moreover, it is necessary that these studies analyze the comprehension of these students writing and look for more meaningful variables for this population, which have previous stories quite different from those displayed by children on literacy phase. Such studies will permit the construction of strategies and teaching procedures that favor reflection and thereby hypotheses construction and student literacy.

Procedures based on scientific evidences will favor, beyond time optimization (data revealed that some participants take four years in the literacy process – P7, P9), reduction of frustration and hence school dropout by these population.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study allow us to conclude that reading and writing literacy by adult people happen throughout several years and the exhibition of cultural practices where reading and writing are used, although necessary, is not enough for literacy. In addition, the most committed mistakes are those that show the need of formal teaching of the relation between sounds and letters (omissions) and also those related with

major exposition to the language cultured norm (oral support).

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