

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS INVOLVED IN THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PROCESS

Fatores socioculturais envolvidos no processo de aquisição da linguagem escrita

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ABSTRACT

Purposes: to verify the influence of social and familial factors in the children's process of acquisition of written language while attending speech therapies and learn about their families sociocultural profile. **Methods:** this qualitative research has as subjects parents or guardians of children enrolled in reading/writing internship of the Speech-Language Pathology of a public university. For the demographic survey, consultations to the children's records were done besides semi structured interviews based on a guide which focused the cultural and family habits related to language and writing. **Results:** the study showed that the families interviewed were mostly from low income, low education, and also from cultural environments with little valorization and encouragement in using reading and writing, and this might have consequences in the academic performance of their children. **Conclusion:** the socioeconomic and cultural deficiency observed in the study can be minimized through the support of social community network and investments in culture and education, since there is interest and expectation of the families in the education of their children.

KEYWORDS: Language; Speech Language and Hearing Sciences; Learning; Socioeconomic Factors

■ INTRODUCTION

Oral language acquisition is part of the human development process that occurs naturally, unlike the learning process, which, in its turn, is cognizant and takes place through formal teaching processes. Reading and writing, therefore, are acquired through learning – generally at school. Thus, written language is not a biological inheritance, but a cultural product, learned and mediated by adults in formal situation¹. This way, we understand there are many factors that may interfere with the acquisition and development of written language. The difficulty of reading and writing may come from the family environment, due

to the absence of stimuli or provision of models that are consistent with the school's models, as well as due to sociocultural and economic factors. On the other hand, the development of reading may benefit when practice events including writing happen in the family environment – for instance, the habit of reading children's books before sleeping, the interpretation of game instructions and TV commercials². The quantity and quality of stimuli the child receives depends, however, on their life conditions and characteristics of the community they live in³. We can see the differences in the process on children who grew up in cultural environments in which reading and writing are not valued, and on the families who encourage the contact with these subjects⁴.

Signor⁵ refers to Bakhtin's theory of speech genres and highlights the important role of mediation in the development process of the language that emerges through social interactions on/by discursive practices. Thus, we can say that the subject is discursively constituted through social relations, and appropriates language from the relationship

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with the other⁵. The distinct literacy orientations of communities are linked to their peculiar way of life and types of social environment interactions. This way, we understand that the variation among socio-cultural contexts in which individuals live may trigger different types of literacy³.

We believe that personality, beliefs and perceptions of parents about their children's motivations and capabilities are significant and can model more effective learning practices. Such practices, in children's socialization process, allow the transmission of habits, values and beliefs that parents consider necessary for the insertion of their kids in society⁶.

Many researches in the field of Speech-Language Pathology intervention on written language, however, still rely on language concepts that do not consider the subject's past history. The Speech-Language Pathology professional must consider the subject as a member of a particular culture, foreseeing the possible social interactions that arise from it⁵.

This way, all these aspects should also be considered as relevant attributes for the fields of health; the search for therapeutic intervention on language delay or difficulty is a key to ensure the quality of life of the diagnosed children. Due to the complexity of factors, a multidisciplinary team (consisting of speech-language pathologists, psychologists, pedagogues, social assistants and others) must accompany these children.

Language directly links to the Speech-language pathology profession, and is considered an area that studies human communication. However, treating pathologies or ensuring the rehabilitation of the patient's functional aspects is not the speech-language pathologist's role. There are other forms of doing this work. More recently, we can see that speech-language pathology is better integrated in the school field, through Educational Speech-Language Pathology. Literature⁷ states that the speech-language pathologist should not be recognized only as a professional focused on health issues, nor exclusively as an education professional. For Cavalheiro⁷, (1996/1997, p. 184, our translation),

[...] The health-education dialectic should be a constant in the practice and valued in the education, for it is on the interface between the Education System and the Health System where one can intend to optimize the care to general population.

In order to standardize the speech-language pathology work in educational area, to create

awareness about this professional's work in the school space, to promote health, and to prevent/guide the school community regarding listening, language, voice and orofacial myofunctional disorders, the *Conselho Federal de Fonoaudiologia* published the Resolution 309, on April 1 2005. This resolution defines that the speech-language pathologist may develop actions with educators. These are some of these actions: training and advising services; development of programs, observations and trials; actions that promote adequate conditions for teaching and learning processes; and contributions on planning and pedagogical practices in the institution.

Believing in the importance of these actions, this investigation aimed at knowing the socioeconomic and cultural profile of children who attended a Reading/Writing Training and verifying the influence of the sociofamiliar environment in the process of language and writing acquisition of these children.

■ METHODS

The Ethics Committee of the College of Medical Sciences, State University of Campinas/UNICAMP, under the Opinion n. 304/2009, approved the research.

The exploratory research used qualitative and quantitative methods for data analysis. We descriptively presented data in tables for result presentation. Eighteen parents/guardians of children were involved in the study; these children were attending a Reading/Writing Training from the Speech-Language Pathology undergraduate course of a public university. The inclusion criterion was to be a parent/guardian of a child who attended the aforementioned training and, after being informed on the objectives of the study, to agree to participate in the research. The people who declined to participate in the survey were excluded. The ones who agreed to participate in the study signed an informed consent (Resolution MS/CNS/CNEP n. 196/96, from October 10 1996).

In order to know the characteristics of the sample, we raised data from medical records of the assisted children and conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants, based on a guiding script; this script focused on socioeconomic and cultural aspects, besides familiar habits regarding the use of language and writing.

The interviews were conducted at the institution while parents/guardians waited for their children to attend the training. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and fully transcribed for qualitative analysis of the contents; the findings were grouped into categories: Family

habits on reading and writing; Access to technology; Family monitoring of the child's education; and Expectations about the child's future.

■ RESULTS

In Table 1 we see the characteristics of the studied sample, which comprised 18 subjects – mothers (66.7%), fathers (5.5%), grandparents (22.3%) and a non-relative member (5.5%) – responsible for the children.

We observed that 94.4% of the interviewed subjects were females, which confirms the relationship of gender and childcare. The age of interviewees ranged from 24 to 53, with a mean age of 37. Schooling data revealed that 5.5% were illiterate and 27.8% had finished (or almost finished) only Elementary School. The findings therefore revealed that most of the studied sample consisted of people with low educational level and low income. The majority of interviewees came from peripheral neighbourhoods in the city of Campinas (72.2%) and other municipalities.

Table 1 – Distribution of parents/guardians according to socio-demographic characteristics (n=18)

Parents/guardians	N	%
Gender		
Female	17	94.4
Male	1	5.6
Education		
Illiterate	1	5.5
1 st Level Incomplete	5	27.8
1 st Level Complete	4	22.2
2 nd Level Complete	5	27.8
Higher Incomplete	1	5.5
Higher Complete	2	11.1
Income		
Up to 1 minimum wage	1	5.6
Between 1 and 2 min. wages	11	61.1
More than 2 minimum wages	5	27.7
Not Informed	1	5.6
Origin		
Campinas	13	72.2
Sumaré	2	11.1
Hortolândia	2	11.1
Artur Nogueira	1	5.6
Marital Status		
Stable Relationship	4	22.2
Married	13	72.2
Single	1	5.6
Total	18	100.0

We observed that most of the interviewees were married or cohabited in a stable relationship. This confirms the variety of family arrangements of contemporary society, and reveals that some interviewees, even if not being legitimate parents, would take care of the children.

The observed family arrangements today may be understood in the context of social and economic

interactions, replacing the centrality of relationships between work and family, as organized axes in people's lives. We consider that the increase of female workforce and separations and divorces are fundamental to change the family arrangements and cohabitation standards⁸.

Most children (55.5%) from this study lived with their biological parents. We observed that, among

those who were not living with their biological parents, 72.2% were with reconstructed families with their biological mothers, most of them in a stable relationship or other family arrangements. We found that one child lived only with the biological mother (with no links to a father figure), and another was under the care of an institution.

In Table 2 we see the characteristics and complaints that motivated the search for

speech-language pathology therapy. We can observe that complaints frequently refer to reading, writing and speaking difficulties (72.2%), speaking difficulties due to cleft lip and palate (11.1%), difficulty in concentrating in class (11.1%) and difficulty due to physical and mental disabilities (5.6%). These children were aged between 7 and 13 years old, with a mean age of 11 years old.

Table 2 – Characterization of children according to complaints, type of school they attend and schooling (n=18)

	N	%
Complaints		
Reading, Writing and Speech Difficulties	13	72.2
Concentration Difficulties	2	11.1
Difficulties due to cleft lip and palate	2	11.1
Speech Difficulties due to physical/mental disability	1	5.6
Type of School		
Public	16	88.9
Private	2	11.1
Schooling		
1 st Grade of Elementary School	4	22.2
4 th Grade of Elementary School	4	22.2
5 th Grade of Elementary School	8	44.4
6 th Grade of Elementary School	1	5.6
9 th Grade of Elementary School	1	5.6
Total	18	100.0

Most of the children who attended the Reading/Writing Training (88.9%) studied in public schools that were near their homes. All of them attended Elementary School. This confirms IBGE's data, which shows that most children between 7 and 14 years of age still cannot read or write – even if they are enrolled in a school. A great number of these children attend the first years of Elementary School – a period in which they build their hypothesis on the functioning of reading/writing.

After the transcription of recordings and reading of interviews with parents and guardians of children in speech-language pathology therapy, the results were organised in the following categories: Family habits on Reading and Writing; Technology Access; Family schooling monitoring; and Expectations about the children's future.

Family Habits on Reading and Writing

One of the most important aspects of this investigation refers to the reading and writing

habits adopted by the family, which may influence the children's attitude towards reading. The first experience in the world is the familiarity relationship with the social environment – i.e., the child identifies with the social environment in which s/he lives, and the environment is the medium of the habits s/he will develop. This way, family habits are learned since the first days of life. This can be explained through the concept of *habitus*, developed by Bourdieu: *habitus* is a general state of individuals, an interior and profound state, that permanently orients their actions⁹.

The findings of this study reveal that most of the interviewees (72.2%) said they enjoyed reading. However, when questioned about their last read book, they contradictorily did not answer, as we see from the reports:

"I like reading. I didn't have the chance to study more, but I like it."

"[...] my husband likes reading. He reads the newspaper every day, and gets angry because I don't."

All interviewees reported having some reading material at home – the most commonly mentioned were books magazines and the Bible. Since the last was strongly mentioned, it is noteworthy that 44.4% of the interviewees said they are Catholic, 33.3% are Protestant, and the others follow different Christian religions, thus being practicing. It should be emphasized that the Church, along with the school and the family, is one of the main literacy sources.

As for the reading habits at home, 66.6% of parents referred having the habit of reading for their children; those who did not (33.4%) justified it with the fact that their children can read on their own.

Another aspect mentioned in the interviews is related to the habit of going to newsstands: 44.4% of the participants do it assiduously; 38.8% admitted frequenting the newsstands for trading stamps, games, sweets, and other material that is not related to reading. The others prefer buying newspapers, magazines or comic books for their children.

When they were questioned about the habit of borrowing reading material, 55.5% said they do not do it; the others use the school libraries where their kids study.

All interviewees attributed some importance to the interest for writing, including the considered functionally illiterate, who, for some reason, did not have access to schooling. In many socially disadvantaged families, writing means signing their name, or making a list of words and short messages. One of the functions of writing, for them, is teaching.

"Oh, I think it's really good, because I can't write. How important it is! Sometimes I walk into a store, and I have to write but I can't... Sometimes they ask me my address and I can't write it down. I suffered for it."

On ways to use the writing, 47.0% of the interviewees say that "notes" are the most frequent form of writing in their everyday lives.

"I write notes for her teacher. All I write I look it up in the dictionary, so I know I'm writing it properly."

"... signature, notes, work stuff..."

For most of the interviewees, the value of writing relates to school, leisure and information functions.

"... [writing] is used for everything, right? You keep improving it... Sometimes I catch myself writing some word, then a blank comes, and I don't know how to write it, so I try to find it."

Technology Access

The investigation further revealed that, although the samples came from lower social classes, most of them had access to some kind of technology. All participants had TV at home, 83.3% had a DVD player and 27.7% had cable TV services. As regards the television programs, most of the children (83.3%) preferred cartoons, and the rest preferred films, soap operas and series.

Regarding digital technology access, 94.4% of the interviewees said they have a personal computer at home – 44.4% of them have internet access. These data are extremely important, considering that nowadays digital media enables access to various kinds of information. When questioned about the communication means that enable better access to news and information about current events, 88.8% cited the TV news, and other media, such as the internet newspapers and radio. The television can be considered the most popular vehicle of communication, and also the most convenient and economically accessible for people to be updated on what happens in their society. It offers various program options, as we can see from the excerpt below:

"... I don't like the TV news because I think they don't speak my language. Globo news is rocket science. I really like the common news."

This report shows that there are differences between the language in use (the nonstandard language) and the one that is used in TV news (the standard variety), that is, there is the perception of various language varieties between the popular norm and the TV standard, which brings us back to the literacy levels and the different ways communities use writing. From this participant's speech, we can see how unintelligible the presenter sounds on the TV news, for these people.

Family support of children's education

Data on the monitoring of the kids' school development reveal that most of the children and adolescents need support on school homework; generally, testimonials showed that this is the mothers' role. Currently the social roles of women are expanding, they are not anymore family-centred, and other people have given this support to the children. In this study, the mother's support for homework activities

was relatively high (44.4%). Some children receive help from other family members, such as fathers and grandparents (22.2%), and the rest (22.2%) do not solicit help, or do their homework only at school, with their teachers' pedagogical support (11.2%). Although many interviewees delegate the support to other people, all of them say they follow the development of the children, participating in school meetings, checking their homework, being aware of these issues.

However, the large presence of mothers monitoring their children happens because most of them are unemployed or do not work outside their homes.

"I'm currently unemployed [...] I read many school books with them. That's homework. We read a lot. When they go to the NGO, they have a pedagogue helping them, but on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays I do the work."

"I read for them at the end of the night, at least one verse... The other day I continue from that paragraph... We always buy comic and story books [...] So we stimulate them in every way..."

Expectations for the future

Parents always dream about the future of their children, imagine what ways their kids are going to follow, and sometimes wish that their children chose certain professions. In this study, parents and guardians were led to think about their expectations about the future of their kids. We observed that the most common expectation is related to overcoming the difficulties they are experiencing today, so they may further develop their studies and opt for a profession they are interested in, as we can see below:

"Well, for my kid, I want him to be a well-educated child, I wish he achieves good things for himself, I wish he has enough study and gets the job he wants, that's what I wish for him..."

"Oh, that he overcomes these difficulties he's having, because he's very smart. I wish he does whatever he wants to do, because if he has enough willpower, he can be whatever he wants..."

"Well... the first thing I really wanted was that he learned to read and write. Because if he's were writing maybe he'd depend less on me..., I wish he's able to achieve the things

he dreams about, because he says he wants to be a firefighter... To be a firefighter you need to study too [...]"

■ **DISCUSSION**

In this investigation, we identified the influence of the socio-cultural factors in the process of written language acquisition, once the majority of the studies sample consisted of people with low education and low income.

Studies reveal that in Brazil only 50% of poor children are able to go to the 2nd grade in elementary school, which proves the importance of literacy in the family environment¹⁰. This fact reflects the reality of most families who undergo deprivation in their social environment; this brings consequences to the children's learning, that are only perceived when they start attending the school.

The influence of family culture can also be seen by the development of specific abilities in children, some of which are privileged and reinforced at school, such as reading and writing. Besides that, the value the family gives to school may make a difference for the representation the child gives to the object writing, later, when they start formal education. Parents who did not have access to school may not attribute enough importance to their kids' learning process, and this fact does not allow them to promote and encourage the children's literacy³.

The effects of adverse social conditions may generate different learning and stimulation levels that the child receives from their family, that is, low levels of maternal education, low verbal interaction between parents and kids, low schooling expectation of parents, difficulties in personal relationships, and others, stressful everyday conditions that both hinder educational actions of parents and affect the school life of children and adolescents¹¹.

When trying to analyse the characteristics of the interviewed families, very important data was found on the new forms of today's family arrangements. Studies⁸ show that most Brazilians live in domestic unities organized around the couple and kinship group, although alternative family arrangements are becoming more common in the last decades. These studies also affirmed that 28 in 100 children under 15 years old did not live with both their biological parents, and most of them (60.0%) lived only with the mother. Among those who were not living with both their biological parents, estimations are that around 10.0% lived with reconstructed families, due to new the marriage of one or both parents⁹. This data embody the new family arrangements, such as the identified data in our samples.

With regards to the schooling of children and aiming at favouring learning and literacy at school, the Ministry of Education established in 2012 the National Pact for Literacy at the Right Age. It is hoped that up to 8 years of age and by the end of the 3rd grade of Elementary School the child is already literated. This way, before this time, the child should be able to understand the functioning of writing, the fluency of reading, and the mastery of comprehension strategies and text production¹².

This way, regardless of the diversity of the educational space, the school must ensure that all students have access to reading and writing. Literacy is one of the national priorities, once the role of helping in their student's education in the practice of citizenry is also a responsibility of the literacy teacher¹².

There is, therefore, a great challenge, both for families and for the school staff: the search for strategies for promoting environments in which reading and writing are significantly present, generating better understanding for the children regarding the functioning of writing itself, and other social functions of writing in our society.

Most of the interviewees do not read or write daily in a systematic way, that is, although they say it is important to read and write, they do not do it every day, at home or at work. This situation also explains why so many participants affirm they like reading, but do not effectively do it. Most parents consider writing to be important, but use it only in certain activities, such as notes – and when they do, they normally need a dictionary.

Traditional instances of education, like school and family, are socializer and coexist interdependently. This way, family has a fundamental role on the children's school development. The school needs parents' help in developing at home the content that is taught at school – such as in school tasks to be done at home. The same way, families need the school's support, in order to ensure the education of their children⁹.

We know that mass media are great disseminators of information in contemporary society. Data from a news report, production and circulation of messages in today's society are extremely dependent on media¹³. The role of media is related to the dissemination of ideas and information, making it an opinion leader. Society has access to the news through media, and this interaction between society and events places the viewer in a historical context¹⁴. However, as a family member stated, some people can hardly understand the message conveyed in media, due to differences between the language they use and the cult language of the TV news – that is, there are different linguistic variants

arising from schooling levels and different levels of writing use.

In this investigation, we observed the great number of mothers monitoring their children at school, and this may happen due to the fact that most of them are unemployed or not working out of their homes. Only 38.8% of these women in the study were working. This fact confirms that the unemployment rate for women is higher than men's rate. It is important, however, to notice that more women are now providing for their families⁸. Besides the structural factors, we see strong gender issues defining the women's role on helping with their children's homework, even if they work out of their homes.

We can see from the parents' speech that they recognise the value and importance of writing in graphocentric societies, like the ones they live in, and also that the mastery of writing gives the person a "better life" – and this includes social mobility and opening doors for cognitive development^{15,16}. Even if not using the writing in their everyday life, parents end up revealing the value writing has in their societies, demonstrating to know that it rules school life, and that the ones who do not care about the studying life are later, somehow discriminated in their working life.

■ CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that relatives of the children who participated in the reading and writing training were mostly of low income and low schooling, from a socio-cultural environment of little stimulus to the use of reading and writing, which reflects on their children's school performance. However, most of them reported following their children's schooling.

Although all families said they had some kind of reading material at home, many of them (44.4%) did not have a developed habit of reading, to serve as a reference reader for their children.

Despite having low cultural status, we found that all participants had access to technology, all of them had TVs at home, and 94.4% had a computer (44.4% had internet access). However, we verified that this equipment was barely or badly used as facilitators for the studying conditions of the children and in their lives.

The biggest expectation of parents regarding the future of their kids was the overcoming of difficulties and the end of schooling, towards achieving some profession that is better than their parents'.

Socioeconomic and cultural deprivation observed in the studied sample could be minimized with the support of community social networks, the

implementation of city libraries and more investment in reading and writing materials for public schools, where most of these children come from. The interest of families in their children's education (present in the monitoring of their school history and the expectation on their school and professional future) shows that there is some demand for such actions.

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RESUMO

Objetivos: verificar a influência do meio sociofamiliar no processo de aquisição da linguagem escrita de crianças em atendimento fonoaudiológico e conhecer o perfil sociocultural de seus familiares. **Métodos:** a investigação, de caráter qualitativo, teve como participantes, pais ou responsáveis de crianças atendidas no Estágio de Leitura/Escrita do curso de Fonoaudiologia de uma universidade pública. Para o levantamento sociodemográfico realizaram-se consultas a prontuários destas crianças além de entrevistas semiestruturadas a partir de um roteiro enfocando os hábitos culturais e familiares relativos à linguagem escrita. **Resultados:** o estudo revelou que os familiares entrevistados eram na maioria de baixa renda, baixa escolaridade, provenientes de ambientes culturais de pouca valorização e estímulo ao uso da leitura e escrita, podendo repercutir no desempenho escolar de seus filhos. **Conclusão:** a carência socioeconômica e cultural observada no estudo pode ser minimizada através do apoio de redes sociais comunitárias e de políticas públicas de cultura e educação, visto que há interesse e expectativa das famílias na melhoria da educação de seus filhos.

DESCRITORES: Linguagem; Fonoaudiologia; Aprendizagem; Fatores Socioeconômicos

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