Historical journey of literacy in Venezuela from the un-learning

Recorrido histórico de la alfabetización en Venezuela desde el desaprendizaje

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Abstract

Currently citizens are exposed to a large amount of information presented through various means. This torrent of information requires skills that are not only limited to the reproduction and decoding of signs and symbols but, they must be able to interpret and express themselves through different means and in more than one language. (Crystal, 2011) In this sense, the concepts related to literacy practices around the world have been transformed towards a more humanistic approach in which the production and understanding of written discourse is appreciated as a tool for personal growth, including in this the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). With this in mind, a historical journey of the concept of literacy in Venezuela is exposed in order to start a deeper study in the future, that reconstructs the concept of literacy and reorients the school practices of reading and writing in the country, through the frame of critical rationalism and unlearning (Andrade, 2005 y Popper, 2008). This study was based on a documentary review of the sources available in official media regarding the teaching of reading and writing in Venezuela, providing as a main conclusion that not only is there no consensus on the vision and methodology for literacy, but also the mentioned rethinking becomes necessary.

Keywords: Literacy, journey, practices, concept, rationalism, un-learning.

Resumen

Actualmente los ciudadanos están expuestos a una gran cantidad de información presentada a través de diversos medios, lo que exige destrezas que no solo se limiten a la reproducción y decodificación sino que los mismos deben ser capaces de interpretar y expresarse a través de distintos medios y en más de un idioma (Crystal, 2011). En este sentido los conceptos relacionados con las prácticas alfabetizadoras alrededor del mundo se han ido transformando hacia un enfoque más humanista en el que la producción y comprensión del discurso escrito se aprecie como una herramienta de crecimiento personal incluyendo el uso de las Tecnologías de la Información Comunicación (TIC). Con esto en mente se expone un recorrido histórico del concepto de alfabetización en Venezuela iniciando con los programas de alfabetización fuera del contexto escolar con el fin de dar inicio a un estudio futuro más profundo que, enmarcado en los postulados

del racionalismo crítico y el desaprendizaje (Andrade, 2005; Popper, 2008), lleve a reconstruir el concepto y reoriente las prácticas escolares de lectura y escritura. Este estudio se basó en una revisión documental de las fuentes disponibles en medios oficiales en relación con la enseñanza de la lectura y la escritura en Venezuela aportando como conclusión principal que no solo no hay un consenso sobre la visión y metodología para la alfabetización sino que el mencionado replanteamiento se hace necesario.

Descriptores: Alfabetización, recorrido, prácticas, concepto, racionalismo, desaprendizaje.

1. Introduction

Literacy is basically the act of teaching the productive management of the written language. Through this brief definition we can appreciate what is usually practiced in classrooms during the teaching and learning process of writing. However, it is fair to admit that in order for an individual to communicate competently through writing, he or she must first understand that writing and reading are ways of doing things that are connected to their daily life and not activities that are only done for job or academic requirements. Being a writer or reader is not about being an author of books, it is about being a person who is inserted into a community through the written expression of ideas.

To understand this, current literacy practices should go through a process of un-learning and critical assessing (Andrade, 2005, Popper, 2008) that, reorienting the concept of literacy, also promotes the transformation of the teaching-learning process of reading and writing in school contexts. Several authors have already realized the enormous deficiencies reported by the graduates of primary education and even adults who have participated in the different literacy programs carried out by the Venezuelan government at different times in history. Therefore, an initial exploration of the essential concepts of literacy that have been contemplated in Venezuela from official government sources through the years is presented below, this in order to take a first step in conducting a deeper investigation that inquires about social literacy practices in Venezuela.

2. Literacy. Reflection as a first step

In the course of our lives, humans acquire, learn, perfect and discard an infinity of behaviors, some inherited from our social environment, such as speech and its cultural idioms, others consciously learned in educational contexts, including the written language. This leads to a transformation of ourselves that in many cases does not stop until the end of our existence. In this order of ideas, as social beings, individuals do not stop expressing themselves, and it is verbal communication, specifically written communication, the unequivocal sign of the human condition. Thus, we understand by communication the act of putting into sounds, signs or symbols ideas that are aimed at a specific receiver adapted to a particular context. These sounds, signs or articulated symbols configure language, which is a dynamic phenomenon covered with creativity, productivity and complexity. To this we can add the words of Ferreiro and Teberosky (1991) who affirm that it is the rules and parameters of articulation that define a language, since words alone do not represent anything until they are combined to form sentences that build a intelligible message. Franco (2000) adds to this idea by saying that "language has no meaning if it is not in interhuman communication" (p.83) and it is without a doubt the written language
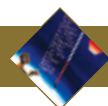
the maximum expression of articulated and regulated language.

Several authors have already listed the differences between oral language and written language, however, it is appropriate to mention Harmer (2000) who states that, unlike oral language, writing must be learned; that is, it requires a process of formal instruction that usually begins in childhood, after the acquisition of oral language. This process is called literacy and can be defined as the act of learning, creation and interpretation of written language for the purpose of communication. Indeed, if it is argued that speech and hearing are developed based on the need to express and be understood, this need is much more relevant when it comes to writing, and that is the undeniable social intention of the written language. Taking the words of Cassany (1999), writing or reading is a way of using language to perform actions and achieve objectives. We read and write with the aim of persuading, arguing, requesting, making catharsis, creating art, regulating behaviors, among other things. Language is the means and also the end of the development of human thought.

Thus, learning implies a change of behavior, as well as the creation and development of new cognitive structures in the human being, and this whole process is externalized and expressed before the world through language. Likewise, this motivates the individual to change their reality, to experience new ways of living it through language. Thus, any learning process in the human being is closely linked to the development of language. It is in fact language the instrument of learning, and in particular words are, then, in that desire of man to name everything that makes up his environment, the form that thought acquires when it is transformed throughout this process.

It can be said, to reaffirm this idea, that knowledge is the product of learning and that language configures it. This leads to the point where, given the social nature of man, he seeks to transmit this knowledge to his fellows and in the process expand and refine it. It is here that writ-

ing becomes the modality of transmission par excellence, given its enduring nature over time even in times of preponderance of audiovisual media and virtual reality (Brown, 2007).

In fact, as Cassany (2003) puts it, writing is and continues to be "the most used code to interact in virtual communities". The fact that fewer and fewer people use paper and pencil to express their ideas has not taken away the validity of writing, on the contrary, social networks, blogs, and other forms of communication via the Internet have reinforced the importance of written communication, to the point that people come to create identities that only exist in words and images but that influence communities of people to such an extent that they transcend reality beyond the virtual.

Continuing with Cassany (2003), computer mediated communication (CMO) has promoted the approach to information from the point of view of multimodal competence, in which the individual represents and addresses messages from a variety of systems: speech, writing, image, audio and any combination that is allowed within the virtual field, so that what started as a written document becomes a community of expression. Hence, if the traditional notion of writing had to be reconceived, it will also correspond to the same with *literacy*. Literacy can no longer be limited to the handling of the signs and symbols mentioned at the beginning, as well as to the conventions that regulate written language; delimiting it to the use of pencil and paper, but it should cover the use and management of audiovisual media to create, represent, share, understand and interpret information in various means of human interaction and with different purposes.

With regard to this, we can bring up what UNESCO (cited in Ortiz, 2007), when referring to literacy as: the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and calculate by using written and printed materials related to different contexts" (p.16). As stated, the process of literacy involves continuous learning in which

tools are obtained that enable participants to develop as actors in the society in which they find themselves while growing as people in their professional and personal fields. Within this same line of thought is the conception that Ortiz (2007) states about literacy, describing it as:

> An educational process that creates an enabling environment for students to develop their written communicative skills, assuming reading and writing as a constant opportunity for learning and growth that allows them to discover the thoughts of others, understand the divergence, expand, confront and communicate their vision of the world and of life. (p.16)

Crystal (2011), in turn, defines the term literacy as the ability to understand and handle different cultural and technological domains. The author refers in this conceptualization to the fact that every day the term covers more and more skills, for example, the efficient use of computers, smartphones, basic knowledge of more than one language, as well as global terminology and idioms. Along the same lines, Richards and Schmidt (2013) relate literate practices and behavior with the socialization and development of individuals in society through the use of writing. From this perspective a literate person would be one who is able to understand, produce and basically interact with all the elements and in all situations within the society to which he o she belongs. It is not, then, to know how to read and write, or to express and understand messages; it is about being able to interpret and manage the information produced by the global community, in other words, be strategically competent in all current communication contexts.

It is not unwise, then, to say that it is necessary to change the focus of literacy by following the path of critical rationalism and un-learning to include in it the skills required in the production and processing of knowledge today.

3. From critical reflection to un-learning

It has already been suggested that, unlike oral language, writing requires a formal training process, and that orthographic, syntactic and pragmatic conventions govern written discourse according to each culture and must be complied with so that production is accepted. This process of instruction covers both reading and writing and is adapted, or should adapt, to the cultural and technological changes of each community. As already affirmed Cassany and Morales (2008) when they explained that although there may be general cognitive skills in the learning of written language, the impact of the forms and customs of each community of writers cannot be ignored.

This implies that, although twenty years ago the children had their first contact with the written language to read in the primers and the traditional books of syllabication, while writing was linked to calligraphy and aesthetics, today it is not surprising that the first reading and writing events are done on a computer or tablets by pressing keys and reading screens, interpreting images and making free shapes and drawings with the fingers, instead of a book and a pencil. Although this fact has not necessarily affected the vision of writing process and product within classrooms.

It is then necessary to ask, what has changed in the vision of the teaching of the written language? Has the conception of literacy that characterizes the social practices of teachers changed? Has the way of teaching and learning to write evolved, or are computers simply included as an accessory and not as a true communication tool?

Without a doubt it is in the learning of writing where the change driven by the technology can be perceived in greater degree. Although there are functional and orthographic principles that are maintained, the writing process would

have to be object of a phenomenon of un-learning. This understanding, first of all, that learning is the "continuous construction and reconstruction of reality" (Guidano cited in Andrade, 2005, p.2), and therefore to un-learn it is necessary to follow a similar route but dismantling the concepts, theories, conventions and structures that are culturally considered as absolute dogmas, in order to adapt them to the new needs and the new procedures of the individuals. In this sense, Andrade (2005) continues to affirm that to un-learn is to recognize that human beings are movement and, in this way, they must undo and redo themselves according to the changes that come from questioning the environment.

Already Popper (2008) spoke of the importance of questioning reality based on the dynamics of society, as well as the data empirically collected from a deductive test, in what became known as critical rationalism. It is this questioning of existing concepts that forces us to reevaluate the historical conventions on the learning of written language, that is, it is the same dynamism, the needs and demands of the new times which leads to generate changes in the assumptions regarding the social literacy practices of schools. While children continue to perceive the need to learn to read and write based on the usefulness of this form of communication for them, today's learners do not perceive writing or make use of it in the same way as ten years ago, therefore, it could be assumed that the teaching method of a decade ago would become inefficient and insufficient for the current generation.

It is important to point out the fact that the texts and the acts that derive from them are a reflection of the individual's thinking. The way of thinking is thought and altered as the vocabulary changes, so that the way in which new virtual notions intervene in the way in which people express themselves has weight in behavior; the word alters the conscience and therefore the learning processes, as established by Andrade (2004). If on an ontological level; following the statements of Govea (2016), the study

of social practices, the roles played by humans and the complexity of thoughts in their minds would lead us to reinforce the previous idea of how changes in the forms of expression have had an influence on the actions and even the interactions of human beings, much more the need to initiate a critical deconstruction of social literacy practices in the country is reinforced.

The aim, then, is to start with a revision of the theories related to literacy in order to establish a theoretical system with which the data collected from reality will be contrasted in later studies. This in order to make a comparison to determine the equivalences, compatibilities or incompatibilities that will ultimately lead to enunciate a literacy concept that is more in line with current communication contexts.

What is sought is nothing more than submitting the current conceptions of literacy to a process of falsification, since taking the words of Echeverría (1989) this process is in effect what generates changes and advances within the knowledge communities. Following the author, it is argued that the current system of education in Venezuela is working with a few notions and literacy methodologies that have been inherited over the years and from realities that are not necessarily compatible with the current situation of the country. But from a conscious questioning and a critical deconstruction of the social practices related to the written language modifications that lead to a true appropriation of the cognitive and communicative character of the writing can be activated.

In this order of ideas there are the premises of critical rationalism which are intended to continue this theoretical review in accordance with Popper's approach. This author conceived critical rationalism as a kind of engine that drives to discard the immutability of scientific knowledge. In effect, if empirical evidence is taken from, for example, the high school classrooms, one could find innumerable failures of the students at the level of the reading and writing in relation to the micro and macro structures of the texts, as well

as the critical understanding of them. Moreover, it would be found that most students do not feel any inclination for written language beyond the school context or what may be useful in the social network space (Pineda, Lugo, & Arévalo, 2016). Only this evidence would be sufficient to propose that the current concept of literacy is giving rise to wrong practices, so it is not premature to claim that it is obsolete.

Undoubtedly, the assumptions made by Popper (2008) are not far from the maxims related to un-learning. Un-learning is defined as the act of tracing the path marked by conceptual assumptions, up to the immovable moments, to reconstruct such assumptions according to new needs and realities. Andrade (2005), indicates that "knowledge is awareness of the biological, psychic, sensory, social and spiritual heterogeneity of the knowing subject" (p.4). On a gnoseological level it would be affirmed that knowledge is a product of man and his interaction with the world, therefore, he is the responsible and architect of the cognitive transformations that may or may not occur of the acceptance or rejection of the parameters established in his action field.

Obviously, the knowledge product of language and configured through words can only be transformed or relearned by renaming the concepts. The same Andrade (2005) states that "the subject is able to get rid of all his words and re-word himself" (page 8) when he goes through the process of discarding what Cegarra and Rodrigo (2004) call obsolete or deceptive knowledge.

It is a question, then, not only of recovering knowledge already enunciated by others but of constructing new knowledge and new ways of thinking through the critical and intentional questioning of what already exists. Piaget (quoted in Quiñónez, & Vélez, 2004) called this an "imbalance", in which almost instinctively the individual formed a series of resistances aimed at protecting their belief systems. However, this same cognitive conflict, driven by disagreements or gaps in knowledge is what leads to the construction of new social representations and the transformation of realities, in other words, leads to falsification.

4. Method and results

This work originates from a systematic documentary review of the sources of official information available in Venezuela in relation to literacy practices inside and outside the school context. It is worth noting that documentary research starts from the collection, organization, analysis and interpretation of information from bibliographic sources, either physical or electronic (Colls, 1994). In this sense, we proceeded to delimit the topic, collect the information, organize the data and develop a conceptual scheme to finally complete the analysis of what was found, as recommended by Morales (2003).

In this order of ideas, having defined the theme as the concept of literacy within the Venezuelan State, we began with a review of the institutional web portals and official publications, as the document of the Robinson Mission (2005), to then proceed to compare the information obtained from this source with what was presented in the official documents obtained in the Educational Zone of the Falcón state, among them the Primary Education Subsystem Curriculum of the year 2007, the Pedagogical Orientations of the Ministry of Popular Power for Education (MPPE) 2017-2018 and the Memory and official account of the Ministry of Popular Power for Education (2013).

From this collection, and having elaborated the conceptual framework of the data, an analysis was derived in which several aspects could be evidenced. In the first place, it was clear that there is no current and unified concept of literacy in the official information sources outside the methodological description of the Bolivarian Literacy Campaign implemented since 1999, which was directed only to the adult population and it was based on the guidelines conceived by the Cuban method "I can do it".

It should be noted with respect to this particular point that, apart from the contradictory figures published by UNESCO and the Venezuelan Government (in 2015 UNESCO affirmed that the literacy rate in Venezuela is 95.4% while the scarce official information available claim that the literacy rate in Venezuela is 100%) there is no recent and concrete information regarding this program, nor any file of the teaching staff in charge of it in order to corroborate.

Secondly, another aspect to be highlighted is the lack of an official literacy concept emanating from the MPPE and, therefore, of results in the absence of a method adapted to the specific needs of the Venezuelan population, which in turn, causes this responsibility to fall to each teacher and decide the most appropriate method to apply, which can result inconsistencies in the development of reading and writing among the student population, even within the same institution (Pineda et al., 2016).

Likewise, it was evident in this review that the latest curricular reforms that occurred in Venezuela were more oriented towards reforming the general structure of the studied subjects in primary and secondary education, the configuration of the educational community and the topics to be tackled, and not the method of teaching at any level (MPPE, 2017).

Finally, from this review it was possible to elaborate a historical route of the literacy programs in Venezuela, which served to illustrate, in more detail, the evolution of the concept from the point of view of the policies of the Venezuelan State.

5. A historical journey of literacy programs in Venezuela

The programs aimed at teaching written language to both adults and children in school and extra-school environments that has been implemented by the Venezuelan government have gone through an important series of transformations in terms of concept and methodology since the last century. In fact, in Venezuela the teaching of reading and writing has been addressed in programs aimed at adolescents and adults outside the school environment for at least 58 years. An exploration of these extra-curricular programs can provide an idea of the concept of literacy that exists within the Venezuelan State and how it has been changing to adapt to political developments and the State's guidelines.

For example, in 1958 after the fall of the Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship, the program *Abajo Cadenas* (Down with the chains) was created, which was defined as a program for the "cultural redemption of the illiterate population" (p. 7) and had two objectives, one cultural: "To elevate the labor masses to incorporate them immediately to the cultural, technical and economic development demanded by the circumstances in which the nation lives" (p. 9) and another political one:

> Develop a healthy nationalism in the common defense of our interests and appreciation of what is ours; that is to say, a constructive nationalism that conditions in the conscience of the Venezuelan of today the feeling of overcoming our depressing condition as a people; We will try to create an eminently national conscience among Venezuelans, rooted in their Venezuelan ideals and feelings that lead them to exalt our historical values, defend our economic patriotism and promote a joint movement of all national sectors in the purpose of eradicating misery and ignorance. The Campaign will seek to lay the foundations of a truly independent nation in the future. (Misión Robinson, 2005, p.10)

Here illiteracy was already described as a source of misery and ignorance, as well as cultural uprooting. In this program illiteracy deprives the citizen of the execution of their rights and duties with the nation, in productive and political activities. To address this, the method of instruction of normal words was used, which is nothing more than the association of a basic or

generating word with an image and then decomposed into syllables and letters. This word must be of frequent use by the apprentices and be directly linked to their context. Literacy in this program is perceived as a mechanical process that did not encourage the independent creation or understanding of the text as an instrument of personal expression and growth; for the program *Abajo Cadenas*, the use of the written language is a means to insert oneself in the economic development of the country.

With this initial step, literacy programs were transformed, and in 1963 the National Literacy Council was created with the objective of "integrating literacy and cultural extension programs with those of agricultural extension or job training, social promotion and environmental sanitation."(Misión Robinson, 2005, p.27). Again, the practice of reading and writing is seen and managed from economic activities and not from social interaction and cultural expression. It is intended in this program to teach reading and writing to future workers and not to individuals in search of means of expression and interaction. By 1979 the Cultural Association for Development or ACUDE was created. It was a nonprofit association conceived by the private sector for which education is "a lifelong process that transcends the school experience and can be developed by individuals or family groups" (Misión Robinson, 2005, p.30).

The ACUDE program changes the conception of written language as something that is learned in order for a citizen to be able to work in an activity that is linked to all day-to-day contexts, in the life of citizens and families, although it is still related to work and economic activities. Thus, it is during the application of ACUDE that the use of audiovisual media (recordings and printed texts) for the teaching of written language is introduced, focusing its messages on aspects of coexistence, health, hygiene and work performance.

After this, the INCE (National Institute of Training and Education) in 1985 began to implement the National Literacy Program, first with the Literacy Work of the INCE and then in 1989 with the Basic Literacy Course that included the following objectives:

> Provide basic literacy to current and potential workers. Develop a clear understanding of national values and the demands of modern life in line with the country's development process. Contribute to the adjustment and development of the personality of the participants as members of an urban community in a democracy. Develop reflective thinking, especially in relation to the approach of human relationships, social problems and work problems. (Misión Robinson, 2005, p.57).

It continues with the vision of literacy as an instrument of insertion into the labor market and will continue with it until the implementation of the National Plan of attention to the adult population with basic learning needs - National Commission of literacy of 1994, that in this case was handled by the Ministry of Education in which a more humanistic and knowledge construction vision was given.

In 1999, the Bolivarian Literacy Campaign was launched, which in 2003 would give rise to the Robinson Mission, a three-stage program: Literacy, Battle for the Sixth Grade, and Reading Circles, which was aimed at:

> Eradicating illiteracy and achieve the pursuit of the sixth grade of primary education in youth and adults nationally and internationally ensuring their political, social and productive inclusion in order to achieve higher levels of development and welfare in the most vulnerable social groups in the country. (Memory and account of the Ministry of Popular Power for Education, 2013, p. 45)

In this program, illiteracy is a source of exclusion and is an obstacle to the development and welfare of social groups, which is why it is the State's policy to attack it.
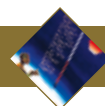
With this in mind, the "Yo sí puedo" (Yes, I can) program, developed by the Government of Cuba, is used in which audiovisual media (videos, recordings, booklets) are implemented to train in a specific number of classes, divided into three stages. Thus, there are ten classes in the first stage and 42 in the second, at the end of which the participants must be able to write their names, recognize and write the numbers 1-30, and construct simple sentences. At the end of the third stage of Mission Robinson, trainees should be able to understand readings and write simple texts. At this point the classes (11-12) are directed to solve problems of spelling and perform reading comprehension at a literal level.

It can be seen in this way how the notion of illiteracy, outside the context of formal education, has been changing over the years according to the programs that the State has implemented to address this phenomenon, although it always emphasizes in its conception the excluding and economically unproductive character of the condition of illiteracy.

It is pertinent to affirm that these premises are equally applicable to literacy practices within primary education settings, as already pointed out, there is no concept or unified literacy practice in Venezuela that emanates from the Ministry of Popular Power for Education, being under the responsibility and professional preparation of teachers the strategies for teaching reading and writing in the classroom.

Thus, as there is no consensus on what literacy practices should be within the school, there is also no uniform route adapted to the Venezuelan reality that gives children the tools to seize the written language and use it as vehicle for their personal development and, therefore, to contribute to national progress. On the contrary, it is evident that graduates of primary and secondary education are dragging comprehension and written production problems that, in most cases, prevent them from participating and interacting efficiently within their community through writing.

In this order of ideas, it could be considered as a current agreement that, if a literate individual is one who is able to socialize information produced by society in different media, then an illiterate would be one who, due to their abilities or lack thereof, is limited in their field of action and its interaction with written information in its environment. In this line, the concepts and practices of literacy should be oriented towards providing people with these tools to be actively inserted in society, so it transcends the learning of reading and writing to position itself in the teaching of skills of mastery and interaction with the world through reading and writing (Leal, 2016).

Final considerations

If literacy involves a process of personal growth, the un-learning of this concept through deductive testing implies ensuring that this growth is adapted to the reality lived by each individual and the social group of which he or she is a part of, which is a process that should never stop as social dynamics do not stop either.

Over the years, the concept of literacy in Venezuela has been far removed from the true communicative nature of written language practice, focusing more on learning skills for conducting economic activities. This has resulted in individuals perceiving writing or reading as a work or educational obligation, as something that is carried out to fulfill some requirement or assignment and not as a means to express themselves and connect with their environment.

This initial exploration of the main theoretical and epistemological aspects related to literacy highlight the need to continue in the study of this practice from the point of view of un-learning and critical testing of concepts, in order to travel the path that will lead to the elaboration of a new conception that encourages literacy practices at the school and extra-school level that cultivates writers and readers, and not simply individuals who codify and decode their language.

The ultimate goal is to use the notions here proposed as an initial roadmap for a future deeper investigation into the literacy practices in Venezuela, an inquiry that can initiate a transformation of current behaviors towards others in which all that human beings can achieve through written language is fully appreciated.

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