

INVENTED SPELLING IN VARIED CONTEXTS

Introduction to a special issue of
L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature

JACQUES FIJALKOW

University of Toulouse

Researchers working on acquisition of written language by children are traditionally more interested in reading than in writing even if, today, spelling and writing have become common subjects of research and the themes of academic conferences. A country as large as Japan, as [Tsukada](#) says (in this issue), is just beginning to consider writing as an object of investigation, even though reading is a classic concern in his country. One of the most heuristic research methodologies in spelling is “invented spelling”. It is a very simple situation in which a child – most often 4 or 5 years old – is asked to spell words or sentences that s/he has never been taught. These written productions are very meaningful in the eyes of a researcher.

A first way to consider such productions has been to look at them in light of the school curriculum to know what children learnt, and when, compared to what was officially taught. More or less explicitly, comparison is made between input (teaching) and output (learning).

This classic and almost institutional point of view began to change when the linguist Read (1971) looked at children’s spellings as if they were a second language, as if the spelling that children used were indeed a language other than English, their mother tongue. Since that time children’s spellings have been seen as an interesting object from a linguistic point of view.

The third direction – and a second epistemological revolution – resulted from the work of a former student of Piaget’s, Emilia Ferreiro (Ferreiro and Teberosky,

1979). Following Read's work, she decided to apply a Piagetian scheme to these first spellings, seeing them as products of children's thoughts on written language. From this point of view, errors in spelling were no longer considered as such, but as cues to a developmental process. When children are seen from this constructivist perspective, the research focus is not on what is learnt and when, but on children's thinking about language. Input and output are not at issue, but rather children's successive ideas on spoken and written language and on the relationship between them. The various works of Ferreiro, and specially those on "invented spelling" (Ferreiro, 2000), are now widely read. Their success among children's psychologists is comparable to the success of phonetic awareness among cognitive psychologists.

Replicating the basic paradigm in France, the same development was not seen with French-speaking children as had been the case in Argentina or Mexico with Spanish-speaking children (Fijalkow & Fijalkow, 1991). In Greece, however, [Tantaros](#) was able to categorize the productions of Greek children along the same lines as found in France (in this issue). In Brazil and Quebec, [Vieira](#) (this issue) found similar responses to those of Ferreiro with intellectually disabled children. So we are faced with a problem: what conditions need to be met in order to say that a developmental scheme can be validated or not? When a researcher gets the same or/and different responses, which criteria should be used in order to claim similar development or not? No doubt we need more rigorous methodologies to decide objectively. Moreover, other authors in the English-speaking literature, less influenced by this kind of theoretical debate, has described the development of invented spelling otherwise ([Pelletier](#), this issue). So, the question of whether the development of invented spelling is the same all over the world in different contexts remains open.

In this developmental perspective, another direction resulting from Ferreiro's work has been the reexamination of traditional themes of research from a constructivist point of view. In this light, we reconsidered a very traditional exercise – copying a text –, looking at it as a window on the development of literacy (Fijalkow, 1988). Other examples of this new perspective are stress and intonational oppositions ([Vaca](#), on Mexican children, in this issue), distinction between drawing and writing ([Tantaros](#), in this issue) or trying to use the Latin alphabet taught at school (Spanish) for writing one's only spoken mother tongue (Maya) ([Pellicer](#), in this issue).

A fifth avenue of research, rather than taking a new direction, delves deeper into some aspects of spelling development. For example, [Morin](#) (in this issue) carefully compares the letters produced by children spelling words in Quebec from a double point of view: phonogramic exhaustiveness and phonogramic conventionality.

A very controversial point in the context of this research remains the role played by the syllable. According to Ferreiro, the syllable has a central role, but a specific analysis on this theme with French children did not allow us to confirm this claim (Creuzet, Pasa & Fijalkow, forthcoming). This empirical difference once again raises the more general question: is spelling development the same all over the world in all contexts? More specifically, is the syllable as important a unit in every language as it appears to be in Spanish or in Portuguese ([Alves Martins](#) in Portugal and [Vieira](#) in Brasil, in this issue)? We can see that [Pelletier and Lasenby](#) do not use it to describe the development of English Canadian children (in this issue), nor

[Morin](#) with French Canadian children (this issue), nor [Pasa and Morin](#) with French speaking children in France and in Quebec, nor [Tantaros](#) in Greece. Is it a matter of theoretical preference or of epistemological blindness? No satisfying response can be given at this point. Comparative research is needed across languages having different properties to determine whether the syllable is the keystone of spelling development, or rather a unit whose influence on spelling is limited to a group of languages. The more or less complex relations between spoken language and written language could be a decisive criterium.

The sixth direction of research in child spelling development is less oriented to children's development than to learning at school. Considering, according to Vygotski (1997), that development is more dependent on learning than learning is dependent on development, we have shown in experimental conditions that children's spelling can improve. It thus appears as an effect of social learning and not only of natural development. Several specific questions have been studied from this perspective in different doctoral dissertations under our supervision: spelling and drawing, spelling horizontally or vertically (Sarris, 1996), first and last name spelling, spelling with different fonts (Cazes, 1996; for an overall summary, see Fijalkow & Fijalkow, 1998), and sentence segmentation (Farré, 2000). Other doctoral research is currently in progress with the same experimental didactic methodology.

A variation on the same theme favors ecological validity over experimental evidence. Using a naturalistic comparative method, data have been collected in nursery or first grade classes using distinctly different ways of teaching literacy. The question here is whether the way children spell the experimental words or sentences differ according to the didactic context. Several comparisons made in France in different classes have given a positive response to this question (Pasa et Fijalkow, 2000; Pasa, 2002). Similar results have appeared in Quebec ([Pasa & Morin](#), in this issue) and in Portugal ([Alves-Martins](#), in this issue). Children' spelling thus seems strongly influenced by the way written language is presented. These naturalistic studies, as heuristic as they be, are nevertheless very global. They should be considered as starting points toward studies trying to identify what children do to learn to spell in varied teaching and learning different contexts.

REFERENCES

- Cazes, V. (1996). *Entrée dans l'écrit; étude de quelques stratégies*. [Emergent Literacy : a study of some strategies]. Université de Toulouse-le Mirail. Thèse de doctorat en Sciences de l'Éducation.
- Creuzet, V., Pasa, L., & Fijalkow, J. *L'écriture inventée: que signifie écrire une lettre pour une syllable? Forthcoming* [Invented Spelling : what means to write a letter for a syllable ?]
- Farré, C. (2000). *La segmentation de la phrase chez le jeune enfant*. [Segmentation of Sentences by Young Children] Université de Toulouse-le Mirail. Thèse de doctorat en Sciences de l'Éducation.
- Ferreiro, E. (2000). *L'écriture avant la lettre*. [Reading before Writing a Letter] Paris : Hachette.
- Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky A. (1979). *Los sistemas de escritura en el desarrollo del niño*. [Literacy before Schooling] Madrid: Siglo veintiuno editores.
- Fijalkow, J. (1988). La copie de texte comme indicateur de l'apprentissage de la langue écrite chez l'enfant [Copying a Text as an Indicator of Learning to Read] *Journal Européen de Psychologie de l'Éducation* (numéro spécial, *Early Literacy*, edited by E. Ferreiro), III (4), 431-447.
- Fijalkow J., & Fijalkow E. (1991). L'écriture inventée au cycle des apprentissages [Invented Spelling at grades 1 to 3] . *Dossiers de l'éducation*, 18, 125-167.

- Fijalkow J., & Fijalkow E. (1998). Facteurs pédagogiques et psychologiques de l'entrée dans l'écrit: problèmes méthodologiques. In M. Brossard & J. Fijalkow (eds.). *Apprendre à l'école: perspectives piagésiennes et vygotskiennes* [Learning to Read at School ; Piagetian and Vygotskian perspectives]. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux.
- Pasa, L. (2002). *Entrer dans la culture écrite: rôle des contextes pédagogiques et didactiques* [Emergent Literacy : Roles of Context and Didactics], Université de Toulouse-le Mirail, Thèse de doctorat en Sciences de l'Éducation.
- Pasa, L., & Fijalkow J. (2000) Didactique de l'écrit: simplifier la langue ou la présenter dans sa complexité? [Teaching Reading : Simplify the Language or to Use it as it is?] , *Travaux neuchâtelois de linguistique*, 33, 45-66.
- Read, C. (1971). Pre-school children's knowledge of English phonology. *Harvard Educational Studies*, 41(1), 1-34.
- Sarris, D. (1996). L'écriture inventée: psychogenèse ou sociogenèse? [Invented Spelling : a Psychogenesis or a Sociogenesis ?]. Université de Toulouse-le Mirail, Thèse de doctorat en Sciences de l'Éducation.
- Vygotski, L. (1997). *Pensée et langage* [Thought and Language]. Paris: la Dispute.