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The reading comprehension and inferential process of an elderly student

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Abstract

This article is part of a master's dissertation that investigated the reading comprehension and the inferential process of elderly students from a youth and adults class. Only data from one of the participants will be considered, which were constructed through semi-structured interviews and reading sessions. The interviews aimed to identify the participant's life and reading stories. The reading sessions consisted of answering inferential questions about two texts – a *cordel* and a poem – divided into parts previously established by the researcher. The results showed that: the participant's reading comprehension and inferential processes were based mainly on the textual material; there was a connection between the participant's life and reading histories and his comprehension of the texts, and, moreover, it was demonstrated that there was a greater difficulty for the participant in reading the poetic genre than in reading the *cordel* genre.

Keywords: reading comprehension; inference; textual genre; elderly; EJA.

A COMPREENSÃO DA LEITURA E O PROCESSO INFERENCIAL DE UM ESTUDANTE IDOSO

Resumo

Este artigo é parte de uma dissertação de mestrado que investigou a compreensão da leitura e o processo inferencial de estudantes idosos de uma turma de jovens e adultos. Foram considerados apenas os dados de um dos participantes, construídos por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e sessões de leitura. As entrevistas objetivaram identificar as histórias de vida e de leitura do participante. As sessões de leitura consistiram em responder a perguntas inferenciais sobre dois textos – um *cordel* e um poema –, que foram divididos em partes previamente estabelecidas pelos pesquisadores. Os resultados evidenciaram que a compreensão da leitura e o processo inferencial do participante basearam-se principalmente no material textual; que houve relação entre as histórias de vida e de leitura do participante e sua compreensão dos textos; e, ainda, que existiram maiores dificuldades do participante na leitura do gênero poético do que na leitura do gênero *cordel*.

Palavras-chave: compreensão da leitura; inferência; gênero textual; idosos; EJA.

LA COMPRENSIÓN LECTORA Y EL PROCESO INFERENCIAL DE UN ESTUDIANTE ANCIANO

Resumen

Este artículo es parte de una tesis de maestría que investigó la comprensión lectora y el proceso inferencial de estudiantes ancianos de un grupo de jóvenes y adultos. Solo se considerarán los datos de uno de los participantes, contruados a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas y sesiones de lectura. Las entrevistas tuvieron como objetivo identificar las historias de vida y lectura del participante. Las sesiones de lectura consistieron en responder preguntas inferenciales sobre dos textos, un *cordel* y un poema, que se dividieron en partes previamente establecidas por el investigador. Los resultados mostraron que la comprensión de lectura y el proceso de inferencia del participante se basaron principalmente en el material textual, que existía una relación entre las historias de vida y lectura del participante y su comprensión de los textos, y que también era evidente que el participante tenía mayores dificultades para leer el género poético que para leer el género *cordel*.

Palabras clave: comprensión lectora; inferencia; género textual; ancianos; EJA.

1. Introduction

Good command of written language has currently become indispensable for individuals to participate in various social practices – identification of traffic signs, political participation, reading and comprehending letters, water and electricity bills, medical prescriptions, shopping lists – and in the most diverse contexts involving life in literate societies, for instance, formal education, politics, and the job market.

The challenge imposed to the modern educational system is to organize schools and educational activities to enable individuals to find, through reading and writing, the answers for problems faced in daily life and information required to understand better an aspect of the world that may be the object of concern, and to reason and defend a stand or opinion, among other things (Ferreira, Gonçalves, & Melo, 2018).

According to the 2013 PNAD (National Household Sample Survey), in Brazil, the index of 15-year-old or older individuals unable to read and write, which was 17.2% in 1992, fell to 8.5% in 2013. However, the same survey revealed that the highest number of illiterates comprises 40-year-old or older individuals, 37.6%. This issue becomes increasingly complex in Brazil when we consider the significant growth in elderly individuals every year.

According to Neri (2001), the elderly comprise individuals situated in a given historical and socio-cultural context that present specific characteristics, such as appearance, physical strength, and social roles, different from those exhibited by non-elderly adults. The contemporary literature presents various definitions of old age. There are definitions in which old age is considered the result of a progressive process of biological, neurological, psychological, and social loss (e.g., Damasceno, 2001; Santo *et al.*, 2017; Mendoza-Ruvalcaba, Arias-Merino, Flores-Villavicencio, Rodríguez-Díaz, & Díaz-García, 2018); and definitions in which old age is more related to a process of changes related to life experiences and the particular characteristics of an individual's socio-historical context than to age-related factors (e.g., Lima, 2001; Tavares *et al.*, 2017; Mantovani, Lucca, & Neri, 2016).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the notion that the brain development process would be genetically determined – therefore, there would be no possibility to change the brain structure – is increasingly inconsistent, especially given advancements obtained through the most current brain imaging techniques. These advancements have shown that the brain is surprisingly flexible, and mental functioning may change depending on exposure to external or environmental factors, including diet, education, and lifestyle (Lima, 2001).

The brain was believed to lose its growing capacity with the aging process, becoming fixed and static immediately after puberty; approximately 50% of the brain cells would be destroyed during the normal aging process (Lima, 2001). According to Lima (2001), such loss would result from a decline in specific mental faculties, meaning that, as a rule, all individuals would experience loss of memory capacity and cognitive functioning, with a real possibility of those living to old age of becoming senile.

However, experts currently believe that the primary reasons for the apparent decrease in intellectual functions and memory among the elderly are not only related to the aging process *per se* but to diseases (Neri, 2001; Lima, 2001). The same effects are significantly attenuated when aging is paired with the habitual practice of tasks demanding intellectual effort, such as reading newspapers, novels, and movie subtitles; social interactions (e.g., talking, exchanging ideas, laughing, etc.); learning new skills such as languages and games, or learning how to use new computer technologies; taking classes; engage in manual activities; or any activity

that engages cognitive functions (e.g., Tavares et al., 2017; Silva, Lima, Diniz, Ribeiro, & Santos, 2018; Oliveira & Rossi, 2019).

Even though some cells in certain brain parts disappear with age, the effect is not devastating or irreversible (Lima, 2001). Recent discoveries in cognitive science enable understanding that, in addition to genes, environmental factors such as diet, education, and lifestyle, play a determinant role in mental functioning (Lima, 2001). Thus, some studies show that (e.g., Damasceno, 2001; Neri, 2001), even though some cells may cease to exist and an inevitable intellectual decline is expected even in a healthy aging process, contrary to the aging myth, this effect is not devastating or unchangeable (Lima, 2001). Currently, these effects are significantly attenuated with the practice of intellectually demanding tasks such as reading and writing (e.g., Neri & Lima-Costa, 2018).

In summary, the aging process comprises, in addition to a biological process, a dialectical process that takes place with constant exchanges between individuals and their social context, in which (verbal and/or written) language plays a vital role.

Seeking to improve the development of teaching and learning practices concerning reading and text comprehension implemented in Youth and Adult Education (EJA) schools and intending to adapt these practices to individual characteristics and the specific needs of the elderly, the following question emerged:

- Which specificities characterize text and inferential comprehension processes among elderly individuals when reading written texts?

This paper is part of a Master's thesis (Abreu, 2018), and the objective was to investigate textual and inferential comprehension processes of elderly individuals attending EJA schools.

According to Marcuschi (2008), all reading comprehension theories fall into one of two paradigms: a) decoding-reading comprehension; or b) inferential reading comprehension. The theories proposing that comprehension occurs from cooperative and inferential tasks (as proposed by the social interactionist theory) consider comprehension a constructive, creative, and social interaction task (Barbosa, Freitas, Ferreira, & Gonçalves, 2020).

In a text comprehension process, inferences enable establishing connections between what is said and not said (i.e., what lies between the lines) to maintain the continuity and coherence of what is read. Marcuschi (2008, p. 249) states, "the

essential contribution of inferences in text comprehension is that they provide an integrating context for information and establish continuity of the text itself, conferring coherence to it”.

Inferences are cognitive processes that connect many different types of knowledge (Dávalos & León, 2017). Inferential processes are inherent to a broader text comprehension process and often make understanding a given text even richer and more elaborated than the text itself would allow for, based only on its objective information.

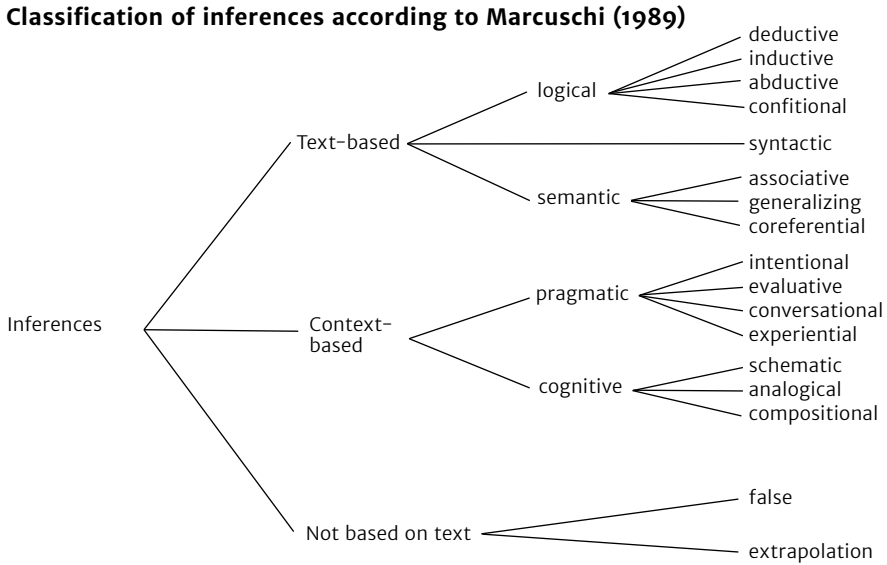
There are several propositions to classify inferences (e.g., Graesser, Singer & Trabasso, 1994; Kintsch, 1998), but the inferential model proposed by Marcuschi (1989, 2008) was adopted in the Master’s thesis from which this study originated. This model departs from a social interactionist perspective of language, in which inferences are considered to be composed of: 1. text variables (syntax, lexicon, referential structure, and objective information); 2. reader variables (knowledge regarding the world, beliefs, linguistic knowledge, and educational level, among others); 3. author variables (knowledge regarding the world, intentions, objectives, coding strategies, among others); and some rules according to which these variables are operated (Marcuschi, 1989).

Marcuschi (1989) identifies three groups of inferences: 1. text-based inferences; 2. context-based inferences; and 3. inferences not based on text or context.

Text-based inferences can be of a logical nature (deductive, inductive, or conditional), syntactic, or semantic (associative, generalizing, or coreferential). Context-based inferences can be of a pragmatic nature (intentional, conversational, evaluative, or experiential) or cognitive (schematic, analogical, or compositional). Inferences not based on text or context would be extrapolation or false inferences.

Regarding the types of inferential operations that commonly occur in text comprehension processes, the same author identifies the following: deduction, induction, particularization, generalization, synthesizing, paraphrasing, association, illocutionary, evaluation, reconstruction, elimination, addition, and incorrect inferences.

Figure 1.1. General framework of inferences.



Note that the genre influences inferential and text comprehension processes, i.e., text genres guide comprehension (Marcuschi, 2008). In this study, two genres were adopted in the reading sessions: the poetic genre and the *cordel* genre.²

Poems are a text genre with specific characteristics, the common discursive purpose of which is to evoke feelings, emotions and more frequently refer to the world of ideas and affections than to the exterior, natural reality. Connotative meaning is more frequently used in poems, allowing for multiple interpretations and focusing mainly on subjectivity. In terms of structure, poems are traditionally written in the verse form (although there are poems written in prose, such as the case of “Poema do Menino Jesus” [Poem of the baby Jesus], by Fernando Pessoa (2005) which was adopted in this study’s 2nd reading session), commonly employing specific linguistic resources related to metric, rhyme, and rhythm in addition to other linguistics resources concerning sonority.

² T.N., from Portuguese, *cordel* translates as “string literature.” The name originated from booklets being hung from strings to be displayed to customers.

The *cordel* genre is part of the folklore of the Brazilian Northeast (a collection of old narratives of actual, imaginary facts or legends based on folk themes or characters). It originated from Portuguese novels written in verses, which initially appeared in oral and later in written forms (Haurélio, 2016). These are inexpensively printed booklets containing narratives in verses. They are composed of a group of verses, which constitute stanzas that commonly present the whole meaning. The stanzas most frequently used in *cordel* literature are a quartet (four-verse stanza, no longer in use), a sextain (six-verse stanza), and a tenth (ten-verse stanza). “O cego de Jericó” [The blind man from Jericho], by Leoníres Di Oliveira (2014), the text used in the 1st reading session, is a *cordel* text composed of tenths.

Considering this paper's dimensions, only the results concerning one of the participants, Alberto,³ are presented. The choice of the participant was not random: he was chosen because the connection between his life histories and text comprehension was apparent during the reading sessions held with him. Additionally, the excerpts that best illustrate the processes we discuss here emerged in Alberto's sessions.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Three elderly students from a classroom composed of youths and adults enrolled in Module 5 of a municipal school located in Recife, in the state of Pernambuco (PE), Brazil participated in the original study. All the participants were 60 years old or older and comprehended written texts, one of the inclusion criteria. Two teachers were asked to aid the selection of the participants and nominated the elderly students who met the study's inclusion criteria. For didactic purposes and due to this study's dimensions, only the results concerning one participant are discussed. Alberto was born in Camaragibe, a town in Pernambuco, and was 73 years old at the time of data collection.

2.2 Material

Two individual interviews and two reading sessions were held with each elderly participant. The interview script was based on Marcuschi (1989). This script

3 Fictitious name.

was composed of 21 questions addressing the following: age, place of birth, type of geographic area and population of origin, and current geographic area and population (urban or rural), educational background (including that of the parents), occupation (including that of the parents), family income, experience with reading written texts (including that of parents and relatives), reading preferences (written texts), and the participants' current subjects of interest.

Texts printed on A4 sheets of paper in Times New Roman, font size 24, were used in the reading sessions. We opted for a noticeably larger font because two participants reported impaired vision. The two texts adopted for the reading sessions were based on information concerning the participants' reading backgrounds, mainly composed of religious subjects (spiritualist and Catholic), literary (poem and short story), and narrative genres. For this reason, the *cordel* ("O cego de Jericó") [The blind man from Jericho] and a poem ("Poema do menino Jesus") [Poem of baby Jesus] were chosen; both were of a narrative type and referred to themes of a religious nature.

The interviews and reading sessions were audio-recorded using a voice recorder application installed in a Samsung mobile phone, model J7.

2.3 Procedures

The study project was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Federal University of Pernambuco (Ufpe) (Opinion report No. 1,967,495) and complied with all ethical guidelines. According to the recommendations of the committee previously mentioned, all the students invited received clarification regarding the study objectives, provided on a free and informed consent form. Aided by the researcher, the participants read the consent form in detail and signed it afterward.

Two semi-structured interviews were individually held with each participant. As noted before, the interviews were intended to outline the socio-cultural profile of each participant and identify their reading habits. The interviews were held in an unoccupied classroom on the school premises, in the intervals between classes, as agreed by the researcher, teachers, and participants. The interviews lasted 20 minutes on average.

Two individual reading sessions were held with each elderly participant on days and times scheduled with the participants after the initial interviews. The text

comprehension tasks consisted of answering inferential questions regarding the two texts: one narrative text of the *cordel* genre (“O cego de Jericó” – see Appendix A) and another narrative text of the poem genre (“Poema do menino Jesus” – see Appendix B). Both texts were appropriate for the study’s objectives. All the participants read the full texts and showed comprehension, from which emerged data that are analyzed here.

The participants read a single text in each session. As previously noted, the text was printed on A4 paper, using Times New Roman, font size 24. Before the sessions began, the participants received clarification regarding the respective genres and that the texts were divided into excerpts. They were asked to read each excerpt aloud and answer the questions at the end of each excerpt.

The participants were also aware that there was not a timeframe to read the excerpts or the entire text and that there was not a single correct answer to the inferential questions; instead, there were multiple potential answers. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the reading sessions at any time if desired.

Before the sessions began, the participants received the following instructions:

This is a *cordel* text [or poem, in the 2nd session] and refers to a biblical parable [or concerns a dream of the author, in the case of the 2nd session]. The text is divided into “X” excerpts [13 parts in the case of the *cordel* and 16 parts in the case of the poem]. You will read each of these parts aloud and then answer one or two questions about what you just read and tell whether you understood the text. There is not a “single correct answer” to any of the questions. Several answers to the same question are possible. What matters is what you understood from what you just read. You may take as long as you wish to read the excerpts and answer the questions or withdraw from this reading session at any time.

The method adopted in the reading sessions enabled analyzing the text comprehension process while the participant was reading it (online) rather than after the reading (offline), as usually assessed in most studies in the field (e.g., Marcuschi, 1989). More precisely, the technique “with pauses previously marked in

the text”, that is, the question-answer technique was used. It consists of the researcher dividing the text into parts, establishing pre-marked pauses, and asking inferential questions immediately after reading. As explained by Boas (2010, p. 21):

The question-answer technique can be implemented using a pause protocol. This test consists of giving the reader a text divided into parts. Each interruption (pause) is determined beforehand. The researcher establishes questions related to each excerpt. Before handling the text, the researcher divides it into parts, choosing the most relevant intervals to achieve the objectives. Afterward, the researcher asks questions regarding each excerpt. Using this pause, the reader reads each excerpt aloud or silently and answers the questions verbally or by writing or both. This test enables researchers to check text comprehension and verify the reader’s inferences and assessments so that researchers can control the questions and determine the most convenient pause, that is, the one that will undoubtedly trigger multiple interpretations.

According to Marcuschi (1989, p. 22), “this type of individual collection of data, in which one informant is addressed at a time, enables good control,” and, because it demands time, it is more suitable for studies with a small number of participants. In addition to enabling to verify the nature of inferences more accurately, this technique is a common task implemented in reading sessions developed in a teaching context (Boas, 2010), suggesting that participants would more easily understand the dynamics of the reading sessions by experience. Finally, the use of this technique is justified considering that, on the one hand, one of the assumptions of studies addressing text comprehension is that memory plays an essential role and, on the other hand, as mentioned in this study’s theoretical framework, most of the literature on aging identifies memory-related changes in seniors’ cognitive performance.

A qualitative and exploratory analysis was performed of the two reading sessions based on the theoretical framework adopted here. The participants’ comprehensive reading process was described along with the characteristics of inferences that emerged in the same process, based specifically on the inferential model proposed by Marcuschi (1989, 2008).

Some of the indicators identified in the participants' socioeconomic and cultural profiles were used to analyze the reading sessions. In summary, the information concerning each participant's socioeconomic and cultural profile was interwoven with information concerning the reading sessions, which enriched understanding regarding the participants' reading processes and generation of inferences.

Analysis of text comprehension, supported by Marcuschi (1989), was also based on the following:

- Before deciding between right and wrong, identify the procedure the reader used to reach a given result.
- If the reader's answer is based on plausible reasoning, that is, it is based on textual information or some other justifiable instance, admit it as possible.

From this perspective, coherent with the theoretical framework adopted here (within which text comprehension results from a negotiation between author, text, and reader), the possibility of answers is broadened beyond those predicted as "right" or "wrong", making countless responses possible and appropriate.

3. Results

The results suggest a relationship between Alberto's life history and reading background and text comprehension that resulted from the two sessions. Alberto was the participant who presented the most robust and diversified reading background and who performed the best in the sessions, both when decoding text elements and answering the inferential questions. Alberto was able to comprehend both texts, most of the time generating coherent inferences from the text content. This participant presented the best performance in general (reading fluency and comprehension) in both reading sessions.

Alberto used the text as his constant and primary reference in both sessions – more than his personal experiences and knowledge – to elaborate most inferences. However, in some cases, mainly in the 2nd reading session, his strategy to more frequently resort to the text, apparently "seeking the right answer," proved inadequate, leading him to inferences that were incoherent to the text's information, as the following example shows. In the 2nd reading session, Alberto resorted to the text and extracted random information from the poem's excerpt 5 (in *italic*, below) to answer question 9, "Who lives with Jesus in the village?"

Participant: Today, [he] lives in the village with me. It is a *beautiful, laughing, natural* child. He wipes the nose (laugh) on his right arm – splatters in puddles (laugh) of water. Picks the flowers, likes them, and forgets them. Throws stones at donkeys. Steals fruits from the orchards and runs away, crying and screaming at the dogs. Knowing they do not like it, and everyone thinks it is funny, he runs after the girls, who go on a ranch along the roads...

Interviewer: Great.

P: Yeah.⁴

I: Now, with whom does Jesus live in the village?

P: With the *beautiful, laughing, natural* child.⁵

In the 1st reading session, Alberto's performance seems to be favored by his strategy of seeking the answer to the inferential question solely in the text. Of the 16 inferential questions, the answer to only one question (question 6) was not coherent with the meaning provided in the text. Alberto inferred that "*conversêro danado*" [damn conversation] was undoubtedly about the blind man, Bartimeu, which is not coherent with the information in the text ("people passed by/ did not pay attention/ to that grumpy man").

In the first reading session, Alberto more frequently adopted inferential operations of the "illocutionary" type (3 out of 16 answers) and the "particularization" type (5 out of 16 answers). "Illocutionary assessments", according to Marcuschi (2008), correspond to inferences of a lexical, semantic, and pragmatic nature and can be understood as an activity that makes illocutionary acts explicit with performative expressions that represent them. In this case, the reader builds a framework to make intentions explicit (e.g., to order, warn, state, criticize, invite, threaten, express feelings). For instance, after reading the excerpt: "This man asked: / – What do you want me to do? / The blind man got emotional / and was getting embarrassed / He took advantage of the occasion / Amidst the crowd / told Him with such fervor: / – in front of everyone / I ask You at this time / May I see Lord?" Alberto answers the inferential question, "Why did the blind man get

4 Convention: I: Interviewer; P: Participant.

5 In the poem, the child is Jesus Himself.

emotional?”), opening his arms: “Because Jesus asked (chanting as if he was the character): What do you want me to do?”.

“Particularizations” consist of taking a lexical-based general element or an element based on personal experiences and knowledge, individualizing or contextualizing it to a particular content with a specific lexeme, that is, lexical, semantic, and pragmatic inferences. For instance, the participant used this type of operation to answer an inferential question (question 3) in the first session: Alberto read the excerpt of the *cordel*, which says that the character Bartimeu “since his birthday / Carried disgrace. / He was soulless, apathetic / He was blind from birth / He carried only three things: / A stick that guided him / A cloak and a basin. / His name was Bartimeu / Thus, his desire / Was to see daylight”. Hence, to the inferential question, “Why did the blind man carry disgrace?” Alberto answered: “He was discontent with life”. Here, the following must have happened: the participant condensed expressive information of the blind man’s unfortunate situation (“he carried disgrace. / was soulless, apathetic / and he was blind from birth / he carried only three things: / a stick that guided him / a cloak, and a basin”) into the specific lexeme “discontent”, a more familiar word than “disgrace”, a term that stands out in the text, due to its unusual nature. In reality, the participant simultaneously adopted two types of inference: “particularization” – as he took a general element of lexical basis (*disgrace*), or relied on personal experiences and knowledge (*blindness* and *poverty*), individualizing or contextualizing it into a specific lexeme (*discontent*); and “paraphrasing” – a particular inference of lexical and semantic nature, considering that the participant made a lexical change (from “*carried disgrace*” to “*was discontent with life*”) to convey the same information without fundamentally changing the propositional content.

The use of inferences of a “reconstruction” type was also observed in the participant’s performance. Reconstructions consist of totally or partially reformulating text elements. Note that the excerpt to which question 9 refers “What was that Jesus heard that made him embarrassed?”, says that “Jesus took a step back / He became very embarrassed / with the man’s speech / with what he had heard / Suddenly, he stopped / and ordered the people / Fetch the indigent / who is at the side of the road / stayed alone / Begging, without relatives.” When asked about what Jesus had heard that made him embarrassed, Alberto answered:

P: Because, when the blind man asked to be seen, people told him to shut up, right?

I: Yes.

P: There, wasn't it? Jesus took a step back and became very embarrassed that the blind man was screaming to be looked at, right?

I: Yes.

P: Jesus didn't like it because he was begging Jesus, and people were scolding him, right?

Here, Alberto constructed a partially different understanding, in which Jesus “*did not like*” to see the blind Bartimeu being scolded. In reality, what makes Jesus feel embarrassed was Bartimeu's plea: “Jesus, feel sorry for me. Because I very much want to see!” The purpose was for the participant to elaborate something about the blind man's screams and pleas, which would leave Jesus “feeling awkward”, embarrassed. Perhaps, Alberto understood that “embarrassed” meant “upset” (“*didn't like it*”). If this understanding is the reason he interpreted the text the way he did (i.e., a meaning that diverged from the lexicon “embarrassed”), then Alberto understood the excerpt perfectly and only “paraphrased” the text. In other words: considering the text's purpose, Alberto obtained a “mistaken”, inappropriate understanding. The text does not say that Jesus was concerned with the blind man being mistreated by the people, as Alberto stated (“Jesus didn't like it because he was begging and people were scolding him, right?”). If Alberto actually understood that embarrassed meant “did not like”, we can say that he understood the excerpt read and his answer was not an attempt at guessing the meaning because of a lack of understanding from him.

Even though Alberto's performance in the *cordel* reading was favored by the almost exclusive strategy of seeking the answer to the inferential question in the text, we believe that, in addition to his linguistic knowledge and familiarity with written texts, his personal experiences may have positively influenced his reading and comprehension of the *cordel* text. Alberto reported in his first interview that he once helped an “indigent” who “lived for 29 years abandoned on the streets” and “used to beg”. While reading the *cordel*, he spontaneously mentioned: “Boy, this reminds me of something I experienced myself. I took care of a poor man in the gutter. Now, everything is coming back.”

In the second session, Alberto read “Poema do menino Jesus” [Poema of the baby Jesus], which was very different from the first. The participant found it more difficult to answer most of the inferential questions. Even though we did not investigate the cause of such difficulty, we assume that his religious life history prevented him from understanding “Poema do menino Jesus”, a narrative that subverts the traditional biblical characters (e.g., a dirty God, a Holy Spirit depicted as a stupid dove, a Jesus who lifted the girls’ skirts, among others). After reading the poem, Alberto commented:

P: This is something people have many doubts about. Uh, uh Catholicism, right?

I: Yes.

P: We like...find it, it is a very complex thing! You know? Religion is something that, if you look deep down, like... you even become... skeptical!

I: Yes.

P: Isn’t it?

I: mm-hmm.

P: For this reason, there are atheists, right? Aren’t there?

I: Yes.

[...]

I: What do you think of the text?

P: [Alberto gasps, looking excited or thrilled, and laughs]. The text says that you read and find a little... There are phrases that you, I don’t know, they seem invented, things that don’t exist, you see?

I: Yes.

P: Isn’t that right?

I: Yes.

P: or not?! It is! That doesn’t fit in, actually, like... it’s confusing, right?

Additionally, in this session, the participant frequently asked inferential questions, suggesting he was experiencing memory problems and difficulty retaining information.

I: Now, why do you think that in the poet's dream, Jesus speaks ill of God, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit, and the Catholic Church?

[Long pause]

P: Wow... Come again?

[...]

I: Ok. Now, why are the stories of men's things different from the blooming of a flower?

[Long pause]

P: Yes. Please, would you repeat?

[...]

I: Ok. Now, one last question: Why does the poet think the story could be real?

P: [Long pause] Why...?

I: Why does the poet believe the story could be real?

P: [Long pause] Again, son, would you please repeat it?

In this session, Alberto was not able to answer only three of the 21 inferential questions. All of Alberto's answers were directly extracted from the text, except for his answer to the inferential question "Why does the poet say he is always a poet?", which was a deductive inferential operation, in which the participant gathered two pieces of information from the text ("And it is because he *always* walks with me / that is why I am *always* a poet.") to infer that "It is because he always walks with me!" However, inferences were not always coherent with the text meaning, in which cases, his answers resulted from false inferential operations. For instance, when he was asked, "who stole the three miracles?" Alberto answered: "God". The participant then re-reads the excerpt: "One day, God was about to sleep, the Holy Spirit, ...ah..." and he answers: "The Holy Spirit!". It seems a hasty interpretation of the deictic *he* (actually referring to the Jesus character), whom Alberto erroneously related to God and Holy Spirit, mentioned immediately before the pronoun appears in the text.

Even though Alberto directly extracted virtually all the answers to the inferential questions from the text, it does not mean that he did not comprehend the text. Instead, it means that his (linguistic or experiential) knowledge of the world did not support his understanding of the poem, showing that the reader lacked familiarity, so he repeated or copied what was said in the text, acting as if he only had diaphanous information (Marcuschi, 2008). One must consider that

one of the fundamental characteristics of the poetic genre is the multiplicity of interpretations this type of genre allows. Here, the observation made by Marcuschi (1989, p. 18) fits in: “If we take a poem, we can imagine that little from our comprehension is explicit in the text. Is a poem a type of implicit text by nature?”

4. Discussion

Even though this study's results do not explain some of Alberto's difficulties when reading “Poema do menino Jesus”, some reflections are proposed regarding the 2nd reading session. The poem only provides a literal reference to Jesus in the title (“Poem of baby Jesus”). Throughout the text, Jesus Christ is mentioned only once, and another two times He is referred to as Baby Jesus, requiring the reader to perform the complex and constant task of making inferences, different from the ones required to read and understand the first text. In the *cordel*, the protagonist (Bartimeu) is directly and frequently mentioned in most excerpts (sometimes, more than once). Other times the lexicon “blind” is used, and sometimes words that refer to his condition of misery are used, as Bartimeu is the only blind and miserable character in the narrative (as the title says “the blind man of Jericho”: “the blind” and “grumpy man” in the 1st excerpt; and “the blind” and “Bartimeu” in the 2nd excerpt; “blind from birth” in the 3rd excerpt; “indigent” in the 7th; “poor man” and “condemned” in the 8th excerpt; again, “blind” in the 9th; “dismembered”, “grumpy”, and “beggar” in the 10th excerpt; and finally, “blind” and “Bartimeu” in the last excerpt).

The massive presence of anaphoric elements is believed to be the main difficulty Alberto experienced with the poem, considering that the text demanded from the reader to frequently resort to anaphoric remissions to read and comprehend the text correctly.⁶ Some examples are presented next:

He had fled from heaven; He was too much ours for us to pretend; They did not even let Him have a father or mother; His father was two people; and His mother had not loved before having Him; And they wanted Him, who was born only from His mother; He went to the miracle box and stole three of them; Then run to the Sun; Today, lives in my village with me; Cleans His nose on His right arm; Taught me to look at things; Points out to me the things that

⁶ Anaphoric remission is a modality of cohesion that consists of reactivating a reference mentioned earlier in the text.

have flowers; Says ill of God; *He* lives with me in my place in the middle of the hill; *The New Child* who lives where I live; And enjoying *our* shared secret; We get along so well with each other; But we live *together* and *two*.

Therefore, the poem demands a more complex type of inference than the the *cordel*, a task in which memory – at least retaining information during the reading process – plays an essential role. As previously mentioned, considering the aspects of the participant's religious life history, perhaps his difficulties in this second session are also related to the narrative's subversive content.

Regarding the texts, we believe that the two texts were appropriate for the participants; they fit their reading capabilities and limitations. Additionally, their previous readings were determinants for obtaining competent text comprehension and generating inferences.

In general, this study's results suggest that schools have not invested in teaching text comprehension from a dialectical perspective and integrating information. According to researchers studying EJA (Di Pierro, Orlando, & Masagão, 2001), this modality has not given priority or valued the students' knowledge. These results are in line with Ferreira et al. (2018), that is, schools have not effectively ensured the development of competencies to elaborate inferences, which is only possible by valuing reflection and reconstruction of knowledge. On the contrary, according to the authors, reproductive, passive, and uncritical reading is perpetuated in schools, preventing the development of more competent citizens, able to master written language.

In line with Marcuschi (1989), schools should work with new genres and texts and propose reading activities that require readers much more than merely decoding and repeating superficial text information (such as what was mainly observed here), that is, activities that demand readers to critically dialogue with texts, elaborating meanings and inferences coherently with text information, reflecting more coherent and cohesive global text comprehension.

This study is expected to reinforce the need to work with a diversity of genres and texts in schools in general, specifically in youths' and adults' education. Finally, story reading can be used in schools to provide texts closer to the students' contexts, facilitating the work of teachers (and students) in developing more skillful readers.

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Appendix A

O cego de Jericó (Leonires de Oliveira)

1. Estando Jesus andando
2. Pras bandas de Jericó
3. Tinha um cego mendigando
4. Que dava até grande dó.
5. Tava à beira da estrada
6. Com as roupas toda rasgada
7. Empoeirado, grudento.
8. O pessoal que passava
9. Nenhuma atenção dava
10. Para aquele rabuzento.

1ª Pergunta: Por que o pessoal que passava não dava atenção ao cego?

11. Derna o seu nascimento
12. Carregava a desgraça.
13. Tava sem alma, alento
14. E era cego de nascença
15. Só três coisa levava:
16. Uma vara que o guiava
17. Uma capa, uma bacia.
18. Seu nome era Bartimeu
19. Por tanto o desejo seu
20. Era ver a luz do dia.

2ª Pergunta: Por que o cego carregava a desgraça?

3ª Pergunta: Por que o cego estava sem alma?

21. Nada lhe dava alegria,
22. Somente tinha tristeza.
23. Passava assim o dia
24. Por toda a redondeza
25. Com a bacia na mão
26. Esmolando com razão
27. Um pouco de alimento.
28. Pra todos que ali vivia
29. Servia de anarquia
30. O cego de nascimento.

4ª Pergunta: Como as pessoas tratavam o cego?

5ª Pergunta: Que tipo de esmola o cego "recebia"?

31. Mas houve certo momento
32. Que sua sorte mudou
33. Estava muito atento
34. Quando assim escutou
35. Um conversêro danado
36. Foi ficando agastado
37. E com as urêa em pé.
38. As pessoas que passava
39. Ele assim interrogava
40. Querendo saber o que é.

6ª Pergunta: Que conversêro deixou o cego com as urêa em pé?

41. Disse a umi: cabra de boa fé
42. O que danado é isto?
43. - E Jesus de Nazaré
44. Que todos chamam de Cristo.
45. Que por aqui tá passando,
46. Disse o home o ignorando
47. E ele botou pra berrar.
48. Dizendo forte assim:
49. - Jesus tem pena de mim
50. Pois quero munto enxergar!

51. Mais alto pôs a gritar
52. Deixando o povo aturdido.
53. E o Mestre só a passar
54. Fazendo-se despercebido.
55. O povo o repreendia:
56. - Oxê! Deixe dessa agonia
57. Deixe o home em paz!
58. E mesmo assim nem ligava
59. Por mais que o impatava
60. Ele gritava ainda mais.

7ª Pergunta: Por que o povo ficou aturdido?

8ª Pergunta: Por que o cego gritava?

61. Jesus deu um passo atrás
62. Ficou munto encabulado
63. Com a fala do rapaz
64. Qu' ele tinha escutado.
65. De repente ele parou
66. E ao povo mandou
67. Buscar o tal indigente
68. Que à beira do caminho
69. Ficava ali sozinho
70. Mendigando, sem parente.

9ª Pergunta: Que fala Jesus escutou que o deixou encabulado?

71. Chegaram uns cabra valente
72. Para perto do coitado.
73. Lhe disseram tão somente:
74. - Levante-se seu condenado
75. Que o home tá lhe chamando.
76. O cego foi se levantando
77. Sua capa fora jogou.
78. Ingualsin a um caçote
79. Deu um grande pinote
80. De Jesus se aproximou.

10ª Pergunta: De que maneira o cego se aproximou de Jesus?

81. Este então lhe perguntou:
82. - Que queres que eu te faça?
83. O cego se emocionou
84. E foi ficando sem graça.
85. Aproveitou a ocasião
86. Em meio à multidão
87. Lhe disse com tal fervor:
88. - diante de todo mundo
89. Lhe peço nesse segundo
90. Que eu enxergue senhor!

11ª Pergunta: Por que o cego se emocionou?

91. Portanto o Salvador
92. Como calma, sem aperrêi,
93. Alimentado d' amor
94. Mostrou para que vêi.
95. Atendeno o tal pedido
96. Daquela ismilguido
97. Rabugento, esmolê.
98. Disse sem pestanejar:
99. - Quero que volte a enxergar
100. E veja o dia com' ele é.

12ª Pergunta: Em que momento do dia o cego voltou a ver?

101. E foi ficando de pé
102. Com a vista embaçada
103. Viu Jesus de Nazaré
104. Sentado naquela estrada.
105. Pulando de alegria
106. Jogou fora a bacia
107. A vara que o guiava
108. De braço ao céu erguido
109. Exaltava-o com bramido
110. E a Deus Glorificava.

13ª Pergunta: Por que o cego viu Jesus de forma embaçada?

14ª Pergunta: Por que a primeira coisa que o cego fez foi jogar a bacia?

111. O povo que ali estava
112. Que viu o acontecido
113. Também o acompanhava
114. Naquele louvor querido.
115. Ficaram tão abismados
116. Boquiabertos, admirados
117. Com a tamanha proeza.
118. Seguiu-o na santa trilha
119. Contando as maravilha
120. Por toda a redondeza.

15ª Pergunta: Por que o povo ficou abismado?

121. Realizada a proeza
122. Jesus Cristo se retirou,
123. Olhou o cego com firmeza
124. E assim lhe abençoou.
125. Depois disso Bartimeu
126. Nunca mais se submeteu
127. A viver naquela escória.
128. Seu encontro com Jesus
129. Foi, no entanto a luz
130. Que mudou a sua historia...

16ª Pergunta: O que de fato Bartimeu enxergou?

Appendix B

Poema do menino Jesus
(Alberto Caserio)

13.Num meio-dia de fim de Primavera
2.Tive um sonho como uma fotografia.
3.Vi Jesus Cristo descer a terra.
4.Vejo pela encosta de um monte
5.Tornado outra vez menino,
6.A correr e a rolar-se pela erva
7.E a arrancar flores para as deixar fora
8.E a rir de modo a ouvir-se de longe.

1ª Pergunta: Como Jesus chegou à terra?
2ª Pergunta: Quem é o Jesus do sonho do poeta?

9.Tinha fugido do céu.
10.Era noivo demais para fingir
11.De segunda pessoa da Trindade.
12.No céu tudo era falso, tudo em desacordo
13.Com flores e árvores e pedras.
14.No céu tinha que estar sempre sério
15.E de vez em quando de se tornar outra vez homem
16.E subir para a cruz, e estar sempre a morrer
17.Com uma coroa toda à roda de espinhos
18.E os pés espetados por um prego com cabeça,
19.E até com um trapo à roda da cintura
20.Como os pretos nas ilustrações.

3ª Pergunta: Por que Jesus fugiu do céu?
4ª Pergunta: Por que no céu tudo era falso e em desacordo?

21.Nem sequer o deixavam ter pai e mãe
22.Como as outras crianças.
23.O seu pai era duas pessoas
24.Um velho chamado José, que era carpinteiro,
25.E que não era pai dele;
26.E o outro pai era uma pomba estúpida,
27.A única pomba feita de mundo
28.Porque não era do mundo nem era pomba.
29.E a sua mãe não tinha amado antes de o ter.
30.Não era mulher: era uma mala
31.Em que ele tinha vindo do céu.
32.E queriam que ele, que só nascera da mãe,
33.E nunca tivera pai para amar com respeito,
34.Pregasse a bondade e a justiça!

5ª Pergunta: De quem Jesus era filho?
6ª Pergunta: O que o texto quer dizer quando diz que a mãe de Jesus era uma "mala"?

35.E um dia que Deus estava a dormir
36.E o Espírito Santo andava a voar,
37.Ele foi à caixa dos milagres e roubou três.
38.Com o primeiro fez que ninguém soubesse que ele tinha fugido.
39.Com o segundo criou-se eternamente humano e menino.
40.Com o terceiro criou um Cristo eternamente na cruz
41.E deixou-o pregado na cruz que há no céu
42.E serve de modelo às outras.
43.Depois fugiu para o Sol
44.E desceu no primeiro raio que apanhou.
45.Hoje vive na minha aldeia comigo.
46.Hoje é uma criança bonita de riso e natural.
47.Limpa o nariz ao braço direito,
48.Chapinha nas costas de água,
49.Colhe as flores e gosta delas e esquece-as.
50.Atira pedras aos burros,
51.Rouba a fruta dos pomares
52.E foge a chorar e a gritar dos céus.
53.E, porque sabe que elas não gostam
54.E que toda a gente acha graça,
55.Corre atrás das raparigas
56.Que vão em ranchos pelas estradas
57.Com as brilhas às cabeças
58.E levanta-lhes as saias.

9ª Pergunta: Com quem Jesus vive na aldeia?

10ª Pergunta: Por que Jesus se comporta como é descrito pelo poeta?

59.A mim ensinou-me tudo.
60.Ensinou-me a olhar para as coisas.
61.Apostar-me todas as coisas que há nas flores.
62.Mostrou-me como as pedras são engraçadas
63.Quando a gente as tem na mão
64.E olha desvagar para elas.

11ª P. O que exatamente Jesus ensinou ao poeta?

65.Diz-me muito mal de Deus.
66.Diz que ele é um velho estúpido e doente,
67.Sempre a escarrar para o chão
68.E a dizer indecências.
69.A Virgem Maria leva as tardes da eternidade a fazer meia.
70.E o Espírito Santo coça-se com o bico
71.E empoleira-se nas cadeiras e suja-as.
72.Tudo no céu é estúpido como a Igreja Católica.

12ª P. Por que no sonho do poeta Jesus fala mal de Deus, da Virgem Maria e do espírito Santo?

73.Diz-me que Deus não percebe nada
74.Das coisas que criou -
75."Se é que ele as criou, do que duvido." -
76."Ele diz por exemplo, que os seres cantam a sua glória,
77.Mas os seres não cantam nada.
78.Se cantassem seriam cantores.
79.Os seres existem e mais nada,
80.E por isso se chamam seres."
81.E depois, cansado de dizer mal de Deus,
82.O Menino Jesus adormece nos meus braços
83.E eu levo-o ao colo para casa.

13ª P. Por que no sonho do poeta, Jesus duvida de Deus?

84.Ele mora comigo na minha casa a meio do outeiro.
85.Ele é a Eterna Criança, o Deus que faltava.
86.Ele é o humano que é natural.
87.Ele é o divino que sorri e que brinca.
88.E por isso é que eu sei com toda a certeza
89.Que ele é o Menino Jesus verdadeiro.

14ª P. Por que o poeta diz que esse é o menino Jesus verdadeiro?

90.E a criança tão humana que é divina
91.E esta minha quotidiana vida de poeta,
92.E é por que ele anda sempre comigo que eu sou poeta sempre.
93.E que o meu mínimo olhar
94.Mé enche de sensação,
95.E o mais pequeno som, seja do que for,
96.Parece falar comigo.

15ª P. Por que o poeta se diz poeta sempre?

97.A Criança Nova que habita onde vivo
98.Dá-me uma mão a mim
99.E outra a tudo que existe
100.E assim vamos os três pelo caminho que houver,
101.Saltando e cantando e rindo
102.E gozando o nosso segredo comum
103.Que é saber por toda a parte
104.Que não há mistério no mundo
105.E que tudo vale a pena.

16ª P. Quem são os três que vão pelo caminho?

106.A Criança Eterna acompanha-me sempre.
107.A direção do meu olhar é o seu dedo apontado.
108.O meu ouvido atento alegremente a todos os sons
109.São as cócegas que ele me faz, brincando, nas orelhas.
110.Dano-nos tão bem um com o outro
111.Na companhia de tudo
112.Que nunca pensamos um no outro,
113.Mas vivemos juntos e dois
114.Com um acordo íntimo
115.Como a mão direita e a esquerda.
116.Ao anoitecer brincamos as cinco pedrinhas
117.No degrau da porta de casa,
118.Graves como convém a um Deus e a um poeta,
119.E como se cada pedra
120.Fosse todo o universo
121.E fosse por isso um grande perigo para ela
122.Deixá-la cair no chão.

17ª P. Por que é perigoso deixar a pedra cair no chão?

123.Depois eu conto-lhe histórias das coisas só dos homens
124.E ele sorri porque tudo é incrível.
125.Ri dos reis e dos que não são reis,
126.E tem pena de ouvir falar das guerras,
127.E dos comércios, e dos navios
128.Que ficam fumo no ar dos altos mares.
129.Porque ele sabe que tudo isso falta aquela verdade
130.Que uma flor tem ao florescer
131.E que anda com a luz do Sol
132.A variar os montes e os vales
133.E a fazer doer aos olhos dos muros caídos.

18ª P. Por que as histórias das coisas dos homens são diferentes do florescer de uma flor?

134.Depois ele adormece e eu deito-o.
135.Levo-o ao colo para dentro de casa
136.E deito-o, despidido e lentamente
137.E como seguindo um ritual muito limpo
138.E todo materno até ele estar nu.
139.Ele dorme dentro da minha alma
140.E às vezes acorda de noite
141.E brinca com os meus sonhos.
142.Vira uma de pernas para o ar,
143.Põe uns em cima dos outros
144.E bate palmas sozinho
145.Sorrindo para o meu sono

19ª P. O que o menino Jesus faz quando o poeta está adormecido?

146.Quando eu morrer, filho,
147.Seja eu a criança, o mais pequeno.
148.Pega-me tu ao colo
149.E leva-me para dentro da tua casa.
150.Despe o meu ser cansado e humano
151.E deita-me na tua cama.
152.E conta-me histórias, caso eu acorde,
153.Para eu tornar a adormecer.
154.E dá-me sonhos teus para eu brincar
155.Até que nasça qualquer dia
156.Que tu saibas qual é.

20ª P. Para onde o poeta que ir ao morrer?

157.Esta é a história do meu Menino Jesus.
158.Por que razão que se percebe
159.Não há-de ser ela mais verdadeira
160.Que tudo quanto os filósofos pensam
161.E tudo quanto as religiões ensinam?

21ª P. Por que o poeta pensa que a sua história poderia ser verdadeira?