



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp



Do young children spell words syllabically? Evidence from learners of Brazilian Portuguese



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 October 2012

Revised 27 July 2013

Available online 25 September 2013

Keywords:

Literacy development

Spelling

Prephonological spelling

Syllabic stage

Syllables

Letter names

ABSTRACT

The theory that learners of alphabetic writing systems go through a period during which they treat writing as representing syllables is highly influential, especially as applied to learners of Romance languages. The results of Study 1, a 2-year longitudinal study of 76 Portuguese speakers in Brazil from 4 to 6 years of age, did not support this theory. Although most children produced some spellings of words in which the number of letters matched the number of syllables, few children produced significantly more such spellings than expected on the basis of chance. When such spellings did occur, they appeared to reflect partially successful attempts to represent phonemes rather than attempts to represent syllables. Study 2, with 68 Brazilian 4- and 5-year-olds, found similar results even when children spelled words that contained three or four syllables in which all vowels are letter names—conditions that have been thought to favor syllabic spelling. The influential theory that learners of Romance languages go through a period during which they use writing to represent the level of syllables appears to lack a solid empirical foundation.

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Introduction

To use an alphabetic writing system, children must understand that letters stand for phonemes. This insight is not easy to acquire (Byrne, 1998; Foorman et al., 2003). Before children grasp that

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writing is alphabetic, according to one influential theory (e.g., Ferreiro, 2009), they believe that writing represents the level of syllables. Children must abandon this syllabic hypothesis to grasp the true nature of an alphabetic writing system. The current study was designed to test the theory that young children go through a period during which they treat writing as syllabic. Taking the approach that children's invented spellings provide a window into their ideas about language and writing (e.g., Read, 1975; Sénéchal, Ouellette, Pagan, & Lever, 2012), we examined children's spellings for what they reveal about the use of syllables.

The concept of a syllabic stage grew out of the idea that children construct their own hypotheses or theories about the nature of writing (e.g., Ferreiro, 2009; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). When children grasp that writing stands for language, according to this constructivist view, they take it to represent the syllable. The syllable is an accessible unit of spoken language, and perhaps especially so in Romance languages (Tolchinsky, 2003). During the syllabic period, "the child will come to . . . the syllabic hypothesis, according to which every written letter corresponds to a syllable of the word" (Ferreiro, 1983, p. 287). To spell a word, Ferreiro (1985) explained, a child starts by counting the number of syllables in the word and then writes as many letters as syllables. Thus, Brazilian children may produce ⟨UUU⟩ for *urubu* 'vulture' (Carragher & Rego, 1984), Portuguese children may write ⟨FIS⟩ for *cavalo* 'horse' (Martins & Silva, 2001), French-speaking Canadian children may write ⟨IPPM⟩ for *hippopotame* 'hippopotamus' (Sirois, Boisclair, & Giasson, 2008), Argentinean children may write ⟨PA⟩ for *oso* 'bear' (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982), and Mexican children may write ⟨PIO⟩ for *perico* 'parrot' (Vernon, Caldéron, & Castro, 2004). (Here and throughout this article, we show children's spellings in uppercase letters.) Support for the idea that children pass through a syllabic stage comes from studies showing relatively high proportions of syllabic spellers among learners of Romance languages who are around 4 and 5 years of age. For example, more than half of the Portuguese kindergartners tested by Martins and Silva (2006b) were identified as syllabic spellers.

According to researchers in the constructivist tradition initiated by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), children enter into a syllabic–alphabetic stage after the syllabic stage. Children in the syllabic–alphabetic stage produce spellings such as ⟨PAL⟩ for *palo* 'stick' in which some letters stand for phonemes and others stand for syllables. Ferreiro (2009) described the syllabic–alphabetic stage as a transition period that reflects the difficulties that children face in leaving aside the syllabic hypothesis. Eventually, after sufficient exposure to an alphabetic writing system, children abandon the hypothesis that the letters in written words stand for syllables and move into the alphabetic stage.

The theory that children go through a syllabic stage in the development of literacy plays a central role in research and pedagogy in a number of Latin American and European countries that use Romance languages (Castedo & Torres, 2011). Thus, researchers often compare instructional methods for helping children to move from one stage of literacy development to the next (Martins & Silva, 2006a, 2006b; Silva & Martins, 2002) and study how children in different stages perform in various tasks (Ettore, Manguera, Dias, Teixeira, & Nemr, 2008; Gindri, Keske-Soares, & Mota, 2007; Vernon et al., 2004). Teachers in many Latin American countries see their job as identifying a child's stage of literacy development—presyllabic, syllabic, syllabic–alphabetic, or alphabetic—and helping the child to move to the next stage (Albuquerque, Morais, & Ferreira, 2008). The idea that children develop through these stages forms the basis for tests of writing and reading development that are used by government authorities (Oliveira & Silva, 2011).

The theory that children pass through a syllabic stage in the development of literacy receives some support from studies of speakers of non-Romance languages (Tolchinsky & Teberosky, 1998; Vernon, 1993). The results, however, are mixed for English (Kamii, Long, Manning, & Manning, 1990). Researchers have suggested that certain features of English may make the syllabic hypothesis less widespread or less visible in learners of English than in learners of Romance languages. One consideration is that English contains many one- and two-syllable words. According to researchers in the constructivist tradition, young children go through a period during which they believe that written words should contain a minimum of three letters. Because syllabic spellings of one- and two-syllable words conflict with the minimum length hypothesis, children avoid them in some situations (Vernon, 1993). Another consideration is that many English words include unstressed syllables in which the vowel is reduced to schwa (ə). This phonological feature of the language, it has been suggested, works against syllabic spelling (Kamii et al., 1990).

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