

Literacy in Brazil: For what purposes?

Márcia Montenegro Velho

The purpose of this paper is to discuss two literacy programs that were implemented in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s. The first, built on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, was carried out in the early 1960s. The second program, the Brazilian Literacy Movement (MOBRAL), although created in 1967, wasn't implemented until 1970, and lasted until 1985, when a military government transferred power to civilians. The motivation for discussing these two plans results from their two basic differences. The first difference is related to the programs' philosophical and conceptual bases, while the second difference, a consequence of the first, is the way they were organized and implemented. Before discussing the plans, however, it is necessary to provide some background information about the socio-political situation in Brazil in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Language planning is, ultimately, a political decision which is clearly reflected in the way both of their plans were shaped and developed. After situating the historical context of the two plans, this paper will compare and discuss them within a language planning framework.

Historical Background

Beginning in the early 1950s, the Brazilian government decided to economically modernize the country which was at the time characterized by an essentially agricultural economy. Foreign funds started to flow into the country, and the process of industrialization and urbanization began. This process, however, inevitably contributed to changes in the social structure of the Brazilian society, creating social tensions.

In 1958, the Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE), was established by the federal government with technical and financial support from USAID, the United States Agency for International Development. The purpose of SUDENE was to coordinate a federal program of economic development in the Northeast region. I am focusing on the Northeast region because it reflects very well the political uproar across the country. More than in any other region, the number of

leftist movements and the intensity of their actions attracted attention from the national establishment and international organizations.

In 1961, the so-called "Alliance for Progress" was launched by the American government. The Alliance "was a vast cooperative effort, unparalleled in magnitude and 'nobility' of purpose, to satisfy the basic needs of the [Latin] American people, for homes, work, land, and schools" (Page, 1972:12). USAID together with SUDENE was in charge of administering and distributing the American aid.

In 1960 Jânio Quadros was elected president with vast popular support, and there were great expectations for his government. Quadros believed that education was not only a right in itself but a necessity in the Brazilian context, and the problem of adult education was given great attention (Paiva, 1987). Quadros allocated federal funds to that area and during his time in office the Basic Education Movement (MEB) was instituted. Since Brazil is a predominantly Catholic country¹, the organization and coordination of MEB was assigned to the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops - CNBB (Paiva, 1987). MEB used Catholic radio stations as its medium and targeted the North and Northeast, since it was the poorest in the country and had the highest levels of adult illiteracy. MEB concentrated its efforts in rural areas. This movement was identified with radical concepts of social change.

After seven months in the presidency Jânio Quadros resigned, and in August, 1961 the vice-president, João Goulart, took office. He was considered by many to be a leftist, and from the very beginning his government was weakened by a lack of congressional support, and according to Rose and Newson (1982), "In the absence of an effective government, there was no sense of direction and the country drifted" (184).

The National Literacy Plan (PNA - Plano Nacional de Alfabetização)

At this point we can better situate the work of Paulo Freire. Freire is not only known for his work with adult literacy in Brazil and elsewhere (Chile, Guinea Bissau), but also for his views of what education is, or should be. He was born in the Northeastern state of Pernambuco and the development of his thought was deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of that region. As Rose and Newson (1982) point out Brazil was, and to a certain extent still is, two countries: the North and Northeast, characterized by an agricultural and aristocratic society, and the Central and Southern, distinguished by an industrial and more democratic society.

As previously mentioned, the industrialization process caused drastic changes in the social structure and inequality sharply increased between those with power and those living at the subsistence level. Paulo Freire understood that the educational system fostered the maintenance of the status quo. For him, the lower classes weren't being educated, but rather domesticated. He believed that only with changes in the social structure could all people live a dignified existence. Freire's thoughts were essentially Marxist and also permeated by Catholic principles. He believed that only through education could a person change his or her life.

In 1954, Paulo Freire started to teach at the University of Recife. It was his belief that the university should be responsible for the spread of education to all people. In 1960, the Popular Culture Movement (*Movimento de Cultura Popular - MCP*) was created in the city of Recife, Pernambuco, by leftist Mayor Miguel Arraes. His ultimate goal was to become governor of the state, and he believed that if he had the support of the lower classes his chances of being elected would significantly increase. Since an illiterate person at that time didn't have the right to vote, he decided to include a literacy program in the Popular Culture Movement. The literacy program, although necessary and justifiable in its own right, was motivated by political interests. Paulo Freire was designated as this adult education program's director, and the program's target was the slum areas of Recife. The work with the MCP was fundamental to the development of the "Paulo Freire Method" of literacy instruction, or *Conscientização* (Consciousness Raising).

In the MCP, the 'Cultural Circles' were created with the objective of offering a new perspective toward learning. The circles were groups in which "instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants; instead of alienating syllabi, compact programs that were broken down and codified into learning units" (Freire, 1986:42).

A basic postulate in Freire's work is that the student comes to the learning process already knowing how to read the "world." What s/he needs to learn is how to read the "word." According to Freire, "there is no such a thing as absolute ignorance or absolute wisdom" (Freire, 1986:43). Illiteracy is not a disease that needs to be cured. It is, rather, "one of the concrete expressions of an unjust social reality. Illiteracy is not a strictly linguistic or exclusively pedagogical or methodological problem. It is political, as is the very literacy through which we try to overcome illiteracy" (Freire, 1985:10). The function of the coordinator is to help the person develop a "critical consciousness", as opposed to a "magical" one, which Freire defines as a process in which we "simply apprehend facts and attribute to them a superior power by which it is

controlled and to which it must therefore submit. Magic Consciousness is characterized by fatalism, which leads men to fold their arms, resigned to the impossibility of resisting the power of facts" (Freire, 1986:44). On the other hand, a consciousness that is critical is "integrated with reality," and so leads to change.

There are three ways in which a critical consciousness can be attained: 1) through dialogue; 2) through a change in the context of education; and 3) through the use of "thematic breakdown" and "codification" (Freire, 1986). Freire defines thematic breakdown and codification, respectively, as "a splitting of themes into their fundamental nuclei, and the representation of a theme in the form of an existential situation" (Freire, 1986: 45).

The Cultural Circles were an essential element of Freire's method, since the literacy programs were implemented through them. They were implemented by university students. The "method" itself is comprised of five phases:

Phase I

The universe of the literacy students is explored through the use of informal interviews, conversations in public places, etc., which results in a list of the most common words used in a given community.

Phase II

Through an analysis of the list of words obtained in Phase I, "generative words" are selected. The list of generative words should observe three criteria:

- a. It should be phonemically rich, i.e., have the basic sounds of the language;
- b. It should be Phonetically difficult, going from the simplest combination of syllables to the most complex ;
- c. The words should have pragmatic content.

One of the main points stressed by Freire is that whatever is going to be taught should be relevant for the learner, related to his or her reality. Paulo Freire indicates that in the traditional literacy syllabus, meaningless and absurd sentences are commonly used, and he questions how these sentences can be of any significance to the learner. He appropriately asks: "how can they [students] critically understand their concrete oppressive situation through a literacy work in which they are instructed with sweetness to learn phrases like 'the wing of the bird' or 'Eva saw the grape'?" (Freire, 1985:9).

Phase III

Codifications are developed. Real life situations are used in order to foment group discussion, so that although the codifications depict everyday situations, they also promote the discussion of problems at the regional and national levels. (Freire, 1986).

Phase IV

An agenda is developed. Up to this point no teaching of specific reading or writing skills has been done. The first eight meetings or so are dedicated solely to group discussions. In the fourth phase, then, the whole group (never more than twenty people), organizes an agenda for the remaining meetings.

Phase V

Teaching materials of two sorts are developed:

- a. slides and/or pictures containing all the syllables of the Portuguese language²
- b. pictures portraying a situation to be discussed

A person could be taught to read and write in forty days using the method outlined above. As Page comments, it was a "revolution in forty days" (Page, 1972:176).

Following the success of his literacy work in the Recife slums, Freire was chosen as the director of the University of Recife Cultural Extension Service (*Serviço Cultural de Extensão - SEC*), which had as its main goal the diffusion of popular education. Up to this point, Freire's actions had been restricted to the municipal level.

In 1963 USAID financed the *Angicos Project* in the city of Angicos, Rio Grande do Norte. Paulo Freire was its coordinator. It became one of the first large scale projects in which Freire's method was used. At the beginning, the project was quite small, but when it was terminated, it had reached approximately four hundred people (Paiva, 1987). On the last day President João Goulart attended some of the classes and praised the project and gave national recognition to the work of Paulo Freire (Jeria, 1984). Interestingly enough, despite the project's success USAID chose not renew its contract which expired in January, 1964.

In 1963 the *First National Literacy Meeting* took place in Recife. Its purpose was two-fold: 1) to determine the number of all literacy movements taking place in Brazil, and 2) to articulate the interchange of ideas and methods among the movements, so that they could be coordinated at the national level (Paiva, 1987). There were forty-

four literacy movements at that time, and almost all of them were using Paulo Freire's concepts in one way or another. All of the movements wanted "the advancement of mankind [*promoçau do homem*], the raising of the people's consciousness and the participation in the political life of the country through a non-directive pedagogical action" (Paiva, 1987:251).

The same group that organized the National Literacy Meeting started to work directly with the Minister of Education, Paulo de Tasso, and helped initiate a national literacy campaign. "The federal government would finance and provide technical aid, while the implementation of the program would be given to the local unions and students' associations, which would extend to the whole country the Northeast experience. Using the Paulo Freire Method of adult literacy, the campaign would reach five million people up to 1965" (Paiva, 1987:256). In October, 1963, the National Literacy Committee was established with the objective of elaborating a national literacy campaign. And then, in January 21, 1964, the National Literacy Plan (*Plano Nacional de Alfabetização - PNA*) was instituted³. Paulo Freire was chosen as national coordinator of the plan, which had as its goal the creation of 20,000 Cultural Circles throughout the country (Jeria, 1984).

According to Paiva (1987), the PNA was envisioned as a mass literacy program in which the continuity wasn't too important. Its goal was to use Freire's method through the Cultural Circles and help people become literate in forty hours. After the first forty hours the "cultural circles should have been converted to political organizations [not concerned with literacy] for the masses" (Paiva, 1987:258). This position, I would argue, is not consistent with Freire's practice, and in fact, Freire himself contends that "we were planning a post-literacy stage which would only vary as to the curriculum" (Freire, 1986:58).

The literacy plan had many problems, both economic (lack of resources), and political, given the unstable condition of the country. Paulo Freire and the plan itself were accused by politicians, the press and the international establishment of spreading communist ideas. In addition to the political difficulties, Freire encountered problems in the implementation of the plan:

A major problem in setting the literacy program is instructing the team coordinators. Teaching the purely technical aspect of the procedure is not difficult; the difficulty lies rather in the creation of a new attitude, that of dialogue so absent in your own upbringing and education. (Freire, 1986:52)

Two primers were created. The first one, "*Saber para Viver*" ("To Know is to Live"), was created at the beginning of Freire's work in Pernambuco. The second primer, "*Viver é Lutar*" ("To Live is to Struggle"), was used in the PNA, had a strong impact, and was charged with having communist beliefs:

In the deteriorating political situation, attacks from the opposition became continuous to the government's policies. The left moved quickly to gain lost terrain, the army was close to a 'Coup d'etat'. On the other hand, the press was accusing the Minister of Education of 'spreading' foreign ideas throughout the country (Jeria, 1984:63).

Despite its promising results, the National Literacy Plan created in January of 1964 was officially terminated in April of that year as a result of a March military coup (Paiva, 1987). All but one of the forty-four literacy movements were also cancelled. The only survivor was the MEB (Basic Education Movement) because of its connection with CNBB (National Conference of Brazilian Bishops). The movement's political orientation, however, was forced to undergo drastic changes in order to survive. Furthermore, not only was the National Literacy Plan extinguished, but most of its documents were lost or destroyed (Brandão, 1985). The plan has been totally dismissed, although it represents an important attempt to eradicate illiteracy in Brazil. It was ignored and never mentioned in the mass literacy program undertaken during the military government and subsequently⁴. This, I will argue, is one of the main obstacles to progress in Brazil, i.e., changes in government inevitably cause changes in policies and programs even if they are being successfully carried out. Individual interests are always subsumed by political interests.

Paulo Freire's own future wasn't promising either. After the coup in June, 1964, he was jailed for his beliefs for seventy-five days, and in September of the same year he chose to leave Brazil, going first to Bolivia and then to Chile, where he stayed until 1969, helping the Chilean government with its literacy campaigns.

MOBRAL - Brazilian Literacy Movement (*Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização*)

Following the military coup, almost nothing was done in the field of adult literacy. Of the forty-four movements in existence prior to the coup, only MEB, as pointed out above, survived. The termination of the literacy movements can be explained by the fact that the "literacy and adult education programs promoted in the

early 1960s were perceived as a threat to the established regime, which wanted to preserve the capitalist order" (Paiva, 1987:259). Under international pressure, mostly from UNESCO, the military government was forced to revive its "interest" in the area of literacy⁵. The years of the technocrats of education had begun.

One of the first steps the Brazilian government took was to reactivate the *Cruzada ABC (Ação Básica Cristã)*, or Basic Christian Crusade, which was created in 1962 in Pernambuco with the objective of promoting adult literacy. It was first called "Agnes Promotion" (*Promoção Agnes*), founded by an American Protestant church, and financed through the Agnes Erskine Foundation and USAID. Up to 1965-66, the *Cruzade ABC* had a peripheral role in adult education in the Northeast, precisely because of its foreign origin. With UNESCO pressure, however, the government resolved to revitalize the Crusade, and in August, 1967, an agreement between the Ministry of Education (MEC) and the Crusade was signed. The main purpose of the accord was to extend the Crusade's action to the whole country.

In the *Cruzade ABC*, the illiterate person was perceived as an "economic parasite" and that "only through education could s/he begin to produce and participate in the community" (Paiva, 1987:268). Its intentions seemed essentially paternalistic. The underlying goal of the accord between the MEC and the *Cruzade ABC* was to "neutralize" the ideological impact that all previous movements had had. The Crusade used a program of food donation to stimulate participation in its courses, and, in fact, food assistance was given only if the person participated in the classes. The Crusade was discontinued sometime between 1970-1971.

It seems that the MEC-Crusade ABC agreement was only a step during the preparation of a more ambitious program of mass literacy. For the first time, real educational planning took shape in Brazil. Although education was the theme and final objective, the "official decisions were driven by predominantly economic, political and ideological criteria" (Paiva, 1987:263). Education was viewed not as a course of individual growth, but rather as a way of accelerating economic development. The educational process was perceived as a "profitable" instrument in the National Developmental Plan (*Plano Nacional de Desenvolvimento - PND*), and the "education of adults stood in the first line of attack... it constituted a powerful weapon serving to accelerate development" (MEC, 1971:5).

The direction was chiefly technocratic. The military administration understood that adult illiteracy constituted an impediment to the country's growth and decided to create an official agency which would assume the task of eliminating the "problem" of adult illiteracy. MOBREAL - the Brazilian Literacy Movement (*Movimento Brasileiro de*

Alfabetização) was then established on December 15, 1967. Although it was created in 1967, the program wasn't implemented until September 8, 1970. The architects of MOBRAL understood that the organization would have to be completely independent, which resulted in the establishment of the MOBRAL Foundation⁶.

The two main objectives of MOBRAL were, first, to reduce the level of adult illiteracy from 33% (illiterate population aged 15 years and older), and second, to use the eradication of illiteracy as an avenue to economic development (See Appendix 1 for evolution of illiteracy in Brazil and see Appendix 2 for a description of MOBRAL objectives). Among its priorities were: 1) to eradicate illiteracy in urban areas;⁷ 2) to reach the population between 15 and 35 years of age; and 3) to give priority literacy programs, rather than to continued education. The rationale behind selecting this population (15-35 year-olds) was "justified by the fact that this group was more likely to return, in terms of increased productivity, the resources invested in its formation during its useful life" (MEC, 1971:15). MOBRAL was financed through resources from the federal government, 30% of the total income of the sports lottery, and through donations from private institutions⁸.

MOBRAL was very well structured (See appendix 3 for MOBRAL's central office structure). It was comprised of: 1) the MOBRAL Central Office, which was directed by an economist, and had an engineer as its executive secretary, 2) the Regional Coordinators, 3) the State Coordinators, and 4) the Municipal Boards. The central office had five divisions: 1) Pedagogy, 2) Mobilization, 3) Finance, 4) Supporting Activities, and 5) Research and Training.

The country was then divided into five regions, having Regional Coordinators in charge of each one. Under the Regional Coordinators came the State Coordinators, followed by the Municipal Boards, which were of vital importance to the system, since it was through them that the program was implemented. It was the Municipal Boards' task to enlist the program's students, as well as to provide classrooms, recruit teachers and organize courses (MEC, 1971). In this sense, the Municipal Boards were quite autonomous. According to Tollefson's (1981) classification of language planning processes, the MOBRAL system was decentralized, since it was characterized by a loose degree of coupling at the Municipal Boards level.

A compilation of various methodologies was applied. Interestingly enough, although they had to be approved by the Central Office, the methods used in the program were designed by two publishing companies, which were also in charge of distributing the materials. The materials were: textbooks and drill books, four books for

continued education, and the MOBREAL Journal (the only material produced by MOBREAL itself).

The MOBREAL system was composed of two programs: 1) the Functional Literacy Program, and 2) the Integrated Education Program. As referred to above, priority was given to the Functional Literacy Program. This plan was equivalent to the first grade, and lasted five months. After completion of this basic program, the student could continue in the Integrated Program, which had three sections, each one also lasting five months and equivalent to the third, fourth, and fifth grades respectively (Oliveira, 1982).

All MOBREAL documents lengthily discuss the organizational aspect of the system as well as the implementation of the program. Evaluation, however, is almost always done in an obscure fashion. A UNESCO document (1975) identifies two types of evaluation of the system itself. In the first type of evaluation, each level (Central Office, Regional Coordinators, etc.) evaluates the level below. The second type of measure is a self-evaluation (each level evaluates itself) (UNESCO, 1975). When it comes to the evaluation of the results of the program, however, no specific instrument is offered. In their own estimate, MOBREAL's figures show that the level of illiteracy had dropped from 33% in 1970 to 26% in 1973 (UNESCO, 1975), which demonstrated the program's success.

At the end of each Functional Literacy Program, each student was given a certificate, which enabled them to "cross out" from their lives the stigma of being illiterate. This diploma was provided if the person could: 1) "understand the content of texts and phrases read; 2) write texts and phrases with a complete meaning; and 3) solve basic math problems involving length measurement, money values, mass measurement, etc." (Oliveira, 1982). In the realization of the census, however, it is well known that if the person responded that s/he was able to write and read her/his own name and the name of family members, the person was considered literate.

A statement by a Federal Deputy, however, illustrates very well the program's limitations: "it [MOBREAL] was a salesman of illusions and a total economic waste" (Hausman and Hoar, 1978:119). In fact, as Hausman and Hoar point out, when an evaluation of the program was carried out in Pernambuco state in 1973, it was found that "80% of a group of newly literate rural workers had forgotten how to write less than a year after 'graduation'" (Hausman and Hoar, 1978:119). As Fishman correctly comments, "evaluation of policy by those who formulate and implement policy must, by its very nature, be self-serving to some degree" (Fishman, 1979:17)⁹.