Reading process and Language education Linguistic, educational and political aspects regarding two groups in Uruguay: Deaf students and University students

El proceso lector y la enseñanza del lenguaje. Aspectos políticos, educativos y lingüísticos concernientes a dos grupos en Uruguay: estudiantes sordos y estudiantes universitarios

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present some current issues in linguistic education within the public system of education in Uruguay.
First I will review the situation of two groups that can be considered excluded: the mass of entering students at the Universidad de la República (UdelaR) that drop out in large percentages in the different schools and the Deaf, who only recently have increased their participation in higher levels of formal education.
Then, more specifically, I will relate the exclusion to some aspects of their linguistic education, focusing on their reading practices.
Finally, some thought will be given to possible ways of improving or increasing the interventions of the formal system with regard to linguistic education.

Key words: Processing texts; Deaf; University students; Exclusion

RESUMEN

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo presentar algunos asuntos relevantes sobre la formación lingüística de nuestros estudiantes en el sistema público de educación en Uruguay.

Primero se presentarán dos grupos que se pueden considerar excluidos: el grupo de estudiantes que ingresa cada año a la Universidad de la República (UdelaR), de los que egresa un bajo porcentaje dado que muchos abandonan sus estudios en el primer año, y los Sordos, que tradicionalmente han tenido poca participación en el sistema educativo formal y sólo recientemente se los encuentra participando más en los niveles intermedio y superior del sistema educativo.

Luego, más específicamente, relacionaremos la mencionada exclusión con la educación lingüística, enfocándonos en las prácticas de lectura.

Finalmente, reflexionaremos sobre posibles formas de mejorar o incrementar las intervenciones del sistema educativo en la formación lingüística.

Palabras clave: Procesamiento de textos; Sordos; Estudiantes universitarios; Exclusión.

D eaf students and University students in Uruguay have a common problem: they have a hard time keeping on in formal education, and many times that may have to do with their abilities to process the amount and complexities of the reading materials they need to understand.

Deaf students have a long history of being left out of formal education (Peluso, 2010; Uruguay. Administración Nacional de Eduación Pública & Consejo Directivo Central [ANEP & CDC], 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). Traditionally their natural language, the different sign languages that are transmitted in a visual modality, was not recognized as such and oralizing practices kept deaf students *busy* - inmersed in practices that carried little meaning, and thar were very time and energy consuming-, minoritized and aloof from knowledge production, authorized interactive creativity and cultural production. Only recently have sign languages been recognized as such and bilingual education has given them a place in formal education -though many times a minor role (Behares, 1989; Peluso, 2010, Larrinaga and Peluso, 2007; Behares,

Brovetto, and Peluso, 2012). A hindrance for sign languages to be seen in their full role in education is the fact that they do not have a written form, as oral languages do.

With such history, the deaf community´s access to formal education has been very limited and in very few places Deaf people can be seen in the upper echelons of higher education (Uruguay. Adminstración Nacional de Educación Pública & Consejo Directivo Central, 2013).

University students represent a population that has been growing enormously in the last century. What is striking at our university, Universidad de la República (UdelaR), is the number of dropouts: at many schools only between 10 and 20 percent of the entering students graduate. Most university students drop out after frustrating experiences at the beginning of their studies (Diconca, 2011).

In this context, the aim of this paper is to present some current issues in linguistic education within the public system in Uruguay. First I will review the situation of these two groups: the mass of entering students at the UdelaR and the Deaf. Then, I will relate their exclusion to some aspects of their linguistic education, focusing on their reading practices. Finally, some theoretical aspects in relation to reading practices will be discussed and some thought will be given to possible ways of improving or increasing the interventions of the formal system with regard to linguistic education.

In this work I gather some results from research I have been carrying out in various Schools from the Social Area of the UdelaR. I started observing students at the university in courses that focus on reading in academic English and Deaf students in primary and secondary school focusing on their reading practices. The representations of the teaching staff about the reading abilities of the students in these contexts were also noted.

This research proved to be important background for the current research I now coordinate that studies the attitudes and solutions of the faculty when facing reading and writing problems in students in two units of the UdelaR, which has been financed by the University (CSIC/CSE).

Relevance of reading

In the current global context, in which various language, communication and information technologies collaborate, such as writing, videos and computers, differed textuality (Peluso, 2011) has acquired new structures and functions. This has led to a reorganization of discourse practices related to writing, and, in spite of some alarmist, negative voices, these recent developments in our culture have made the need for written language gain ground. Just a century ago or a bit more, formal education at any level was for an elite, and massive attendance of students to education at tertiary level is a phenomenon that is only a few decades old. In our highly complex, sophisticated and competitive culture, people need to be able to keep on within the formal education system and go through university if possible. Literacy is not any more a problem of primary and secondary school or, in adult life, the possibility of reading instructions or a newspaper article. Being literate also involves now, for many, managing highly sophisticated technical articles in our native tongue and in at least one more international language, which may vary depending on the field -although in most fields English has become the international language.

In order to process the information in fields of high complexity, in order to read and study "thick" texts, the reading practices in more than one language, with all the strategies they involve, continue to be relevant. In the academic and technical field, reading is of paramount importance.

The Deaf community: reading and exclusion

When we talk about education for the Deaf community in our country we have to bear in mind four concepts: reading, equity, empowerment and accessibility (Larrinaga and Peluso, 2009; Peluso, 2011; Uruguay. Ley Nº 18.437, 2008). As we discuss these concepts we have to bear in mind the fact that Uruguayan Sign Language (LSU), the natural language of Deaf communities in Uruguay, has not developed written forms in the fashion oral languages have, which has had clear consequences in the educational process of the Deaf.

It is essential when we deal with a minority community as the Deaf to manage the parameters that ensure for them equity in the public school system. In this case, that means early fluent access to their national or community sign language, empowerment through the creation of cultural products in their national or community sign language, the search for alternative systems to register sign language through technological devices, other than writing as mentioned by Peluso (2011), and teaching them to improve their reading skills, in Spanish in the case of Uruguayan Deaf people, as they go up in the formal educational system.

In the present state of the art, from any language and culture, reading is necessary to ensure accessibility to information, and for most scientific and technological fields it is even necessary to read in more than one of the languages in which current scientific and technological knowledge appears -languages of power, sometimes called *super standard varieties* (Trudgill and Hannah, 2013)-. This is why reading in Spanish is highly relevant for the Deaf community of Uruguay: not only is it one of the national languages, but it is also the language in which current scientific and technological developments are recorded in our country and in much of the world.

Within the framework of bilingual education for the Deaf, an issue of particular interest is the relations between orality and writing. When facing a classic situation of bilingualism there are eight psycho-linguistic skills that are at play and in our case in Uruguay they would be: understanding orality in Spanish, production of oral Spanish, comprehension of written Spanish, production of written Spanish, understanding orality in LSU (Uruguayan Sign Language), production of orality in LSU, understanding written LSU, and producing written LSU.

But this presents certain peculiarities in the case of the Deaf for two reasons: on the one hand, due to the fact that orality in Spanish is strongly interfered because they do not have access to oral language through the oral channel; on the other hand, due to the fact that our sign language lacks a writing system, so far. Thus in Uruguay, bilingual education of the Deaf tries to fit the needs of our community's particular bilingualism, i.e. take into account that the languages involved - Spanish and LSU- maintain a functional distribution according to which the LSU specializes in orality (in the face-to-face interaction) and Spanish in writing. This occurs primarily in Montevideo and some provincial capitals. In these educational contexts the classes are taught in LSU (directly by the teachers that are bilingual or through an interpreter), but the bibliography to be studied is in written Spanish.

Hence, the practices of teachers in their area include a strong linguistic reflection, since each teacher has to help students read the subject matter they learn in a second language (Spanish) in its written form and so, metalinguistic requirements double.
This particular specialization of bilingualism strongly challenges models of teaching reading and writing of Spanish in this case, since they have to be taught without having an orality in that language as direct support. In a traditional class with hearing students, one of the teaching tools the teachers have been using for centuries to teach reading

and writing is the teacher's discourse (Larrinaga, 2003). In any class we will find teachers that, to help students confront the hardships of their first scientific texts, use their most valuable tool: speech.

From the point of view of pedagogical discourse, we can interpret that the teacher´s task at this stage is to make sure the students enter the scientific discourse of the subject in question. Even though the teacher´s discourse in class is highly variable and has moments of greater informality, it also contains some moments that, for pedagogical reasons, the teacher introduces a speech which is closely related to a written language format.

This educational resource that consists of moving within orality, increasingly toward the formal pole, typical of academic writing, helps students (both functionally and structurally) to access written texts in an increasingly comprehensive way. Good teachers not only convey the contents they want to teach, but they are also aware of the fact that their students will later have to deal with complex texts to continue studying the subject. Intuitive teachers, at some special high moments of the class, will be found structuring the pedagogic discourse in the fashion of written language to help their students to overcome this distance between orality and formal writing.

This is what happens with hearing students. Deaf students are not sensitive to the teacher´s strategy to scaffold their reading -modeling speech in the fashion of a written text- so, for the Deaf, processing Spanish texts without an orality in Spanish becomes harder than for a hearing student in a double way: for the absence of the language itself (the orality in Spanish in this case) and for the lack of access to the teacher´s strategy to scaffold their reading- the explanations in sign language will never be that transparent.

Universidad de la República: reading and exclusion

The University of the Republic was the only University of the country until the late nineteen eighties, when private Universities started to appear. As a National University, it has among its goals the creation of knowledge and of professional human resources as well as outreach projects and activities.

The University of the Republic is the most important one not only because of its free character but also because of its outreach activities and the services it offers in the fields of health and law assistance that cover the needs of a great part of the low income population. The various agreements it holds provide private and public entities with technical counseling as well. But, most importantly, it concentrates between 70 and 80% of the scientific research of the country and around 100.000 students in a country with a population of a little over three million people (Uruguay. Universidad de la República, 2013).

However, as mentioned above, there is a large number of dropouts. The University of the Republic, which allows all citizens of the country who have finished secondary school to continue their formal education, ends up excluding a large percentage of the population (Diconca, 2011; Comisión Sectorial de Enseñanza, & Universidad de la República, 2014). At the same time, many diagnostic tests applied to different implicated participants within the University point out that linguistic education may be an area that needs further work, which may improve the situation (Barco and Lizarriturri, 2005; Macri and Noboa, 2004; Torres, Fedorczuk, and Viera, 2009). Facing this situation, the Comisión Sectorial de Enseñanza (CSE) of the UdelaR brought two Argentinean specialists that implemented a course on "Understanding and Producing texts at the University" for all the teaching staff of all the Schools of the UdelaR. This course aimed at reflecting critically on the processes of reading and writing at the

University as well as at promoting teaching strategies to help students in their management of written texts (Barco and Lizarriturri, 2005).

Similar difficulties to these observed in our university students in managing academic texts were pointed out for other Universities of the region, such as in Chile, Argentina and Colombia (Arnoux, 2004; Carlino, 2005; Cartolari and Carlino, 2012; Cisneros, 2007; Desinano, 2009; Parodi, 2010; Schweizer, 2011).

In consonance with all the above referred studies, in the Schools of the Social Area where my research has been carried out through the courses in reading in academic English, I could also see that the difficulties presented by the students facing academic and also journalistic texts in English did not concern exclusively the managing of the foreign language, but mostly the managing of textuality in general , as was pointed out in Larrinaga (2003), as the description of the work in reading courses is explained. When the students work in class with texts in English, it becomes apparent that the problems in analyzing cohesion and coherence of the texts, carried from their reading practices in Spanish, their mother tongue, are the ones at play. These difficulties presented by some students when reading these texts may turn the University into an area of frustration and even exclusion for them. Even though it is clear that an exclusive relation between problems in dealing with written language and dropping out cannot be established, I believe it is one of the elements that may influence the situation.

Problematizing reading

People read at different paces depending on personal characteristics and possibilities and also according to situation, to different texts and to different aims of the reader toward the text. In general terms, we can talk about analytic reading versus "general", "whole" or global reading.

This classification of reading modalities has been inspired by cognitive psychology's top-down vs bottom-up processing. According to Dawson and Medler (2009, p. 37):

Information can flow both from the bottom of the system to the top of the system and from the top of the system to the bottom of the system. When information flows from the top of the system to the bottom of the system this is called "top-down processing", which is sometimes known as "theory-driven processing".

The implications of this top to bottom flow of information is that information coming into the system (perceptually) can be influenced by what the individual already knows about the information that is coming into the system (as information about past experiences are stored in the higher levels of the system).

Then, according to cognitive psychology, top-down processes foster a kind of understanding more influenced by previous knowledge and experiences.

Global reading is a reading modality that relies basically on previous knowledge and that mechanically depends more on lexical recognition than on the decoding of relationships. This reading modality, thus, does not allow for a deep penetration into "the new material". A reader using this modality is less "affected" by what he or she is reading. Yet this modality presents a clear advantage as compared to the analytic one: it substantially increases reading speed.

Analytic reading, on the other hand, is a reading modality that allows thorough understanding of a conceptually dense topic. It has strong syntactic basis and goes necessarily through areas of formal decoding.

Neither of these modalities is exclusive and it is better to think of them as polarities: in one extreme, very analytic reading with complete decoding of all syntactic relations and an interpretation for them; and in the other extreme, very global reading, almost

scanning for known key words. In the middle of these extremes, we could find various stages of blurred decoding. An ideal reader would move between the analytic polarity and the global polarity at will, according to his or her needs.

However, in a specific individual, one of the modalities may appear as the most frequent one, or the main or first. The preponderance of one modality depends on many factors, such as the goal the reader has in mind upon reading a text, the kind of text to be read, the reading style held by the community to which the reader belongs - doctors or students at the medical school may read more globally than engineers-, methodological conditioning during the reader's school studies, to mention just the most relevant ones. Many times despite many textual and extra textual conditioning factors, one reading modality prevails, and this may hinder the reader from reaching the goals he or she had set up from the start.

When we are dealing with academic reading, relevant instances of study or work require from the reader the analytic modality, as he or she aims at receiving lots of information, mostly new information, and at understanding the subtle relations proposed by the text, between different arguments, etc. If the reader fails to decode for instance an adversative connector, he or she may end up understanding the opposite of the idea that the text is intended to convey.

It is this kind of analytic reading the one that students entering the University are still in the process of developing. If some students have not reached the level of sound analytic reading required to cope with the amount and depth of the reading materials they are given at the University, they may start having difficulties. It may, in some subjects more than in others, carry negative consequences in their academic performance, without their knowing exactly what the problem is.

Because of the nature of the process of reading, that takes place mostly in isolation, where there is just the reader and the text, the reader can take time to reflect, think and stay on the text where there are always intricate things. It is not a function of language like conversation, in which there is another speaker who forces you to go ahead. So, as we read we go back and forth all the time, especially when we are reading technical texts in any field, because the information is new and reading globally would not suffice. As we go back and forth when we are reading, we have time to use metalinguistic strategies, that is, use what we know about language. The more aware (or intuitively aware) we are about the formal aspects of language the better we can use these strategies when we read.

If a good reader does not understand an important sentence in a reading, he or she will go back, for example, to find the referent of the pronoun that bars understanding. Readers know that an "it" takes them to something singular that is not a person, etc. The same happens with relative pronouns and other structures, such as the particle "but": after it we expect to find a contrast, but if we do not, we have most possibly misunderstood the first idea.

Exclusion from reading = Exclusion from the formal system of education

We have seen two groups in Uruguayan population that have difficulties progressing in our system of education and that problems in processing the texts they have to read to access knowledge may have to do with these difficulties: a. the Deaf students, that have been traditionally excluded at the secondary and tertiary levels of the system and b. the entering students at our national university that drop out, frustrating their professional and personal aspirations. The educational system intervenes traditionally in indirect ways trying to teach how to read, but clear interventions require awareness of the problem.

Reading -unlike writing- has always been a difficult process to share, as it is mostly a silent process the product of which, understanding, can also be silenced or masked by production problems. To overcome this and to start with, a simple way of helping someone read better is to read with him or her, at any level. In this way we are creating an instance to do what we frequently call among teachers -emulating the coinage "know how" in the business world-, the "show how", that accounts for most of the linguistic awareness raising. As there are many different and sometimes individual strategies to get meaning from a text, the expression "show how" refers to the fact that we are showing the strategies we have used to understand something, so as to share them with the other in this case the university student or the Deaf student. Sometimes reading out loud or pointing at the text and signing, with comment and explanations can do the trick or even physical closeness to somebody else may help as pointing at words and marks may be relevant.

This reading-out-loud, or pointing at the text and signing in the case of the Deaf, to make the "show how" must be a reading with comments on the ways we are handling the form of each sentence, pointing out the relationships we establish at all levels. Making the process of reading explicit is not something we usually do, so the one – tutor, professor, teacher- "lending" his or her linguistic categories must deploy a high level of linguistic awareness. On the other hand, peers that read together are very helpful to the development of each other's process of reading (Uruguay. Universidad de la República. Programa de Respaldo al Aprendizaje, 2012). Even though they may not be trained to develop linguistic awareness, they naturally show why they answered a question in a certain way or how they solved a problem about the passage read.

To a certain extent, some time ago, and still today in some schools of our university, the groups of students that studied together- a deeply rooted habit among our university students- provided the reading together and sharing of strategies necessary to reach higher levels of analytic reading.

New trends and philosophies to change perspectives on interventions

In the following pages I will discuss about three areas or theoretical stances: language ideology and plurilingualism, the construction of disciplines within the educational system, and theoretical viewpoints on language as an object.

Reflecting on them may allow us to develop interventions reorganizing our knowledge sometimes within traditional disciplines and sometimes regardless of them.

Language policy and ideologies

Decisions on linguistic education in the formal education context and on how the relationships of the languages and the specific abilities taught are established clearly respond to different language ideologies that have prevailed in different socio-historical periods, which generally have a global character.

The language ideologies can be grouped around two main axes (del Valle, 1999): a monoglossic ideology and a pluriglossic ideology.

By monoglossic ideology I refer to the ideology that supported the European modernist project, which sustained the idea *one nation - one language.* It is an ideology based on the idea of homogeneity and the construction of national identity: according to it all the inhabitants of the same country speak homogeneously the same language. This idea of strong homogeneity is in the base of the notion of *citizen* from the French Revolution.

At the same time, as I will discuss later, this historical period with its modernist ideology may even have fostered the development of theories on language as an object, like structuralism and generativism. These theories proved fundamental to the

understanding of the structural and cognitive aspects of language, though at times have been wrongly used to go against political or pedagogical integrations.

The pluriglossic ideology, in turn, supports another project that could be related to the current European postmodern project, global and communitarian at the same time, which defends and celebrates heterogeneity, the idea that the country is built on differences. The European *citizen* today is actually a multiethnic, multilingual man or woman, leading consequently to a search for the protection of this multilingualism.

In America this concern is also observed. A feeling of respect for linguistic heterogeneity as part of the so-called *civil rights* appears in USA: for example in King´s court ruling of 1979 in which the city of Ann Arbor was ordered to take "Black English" into account in its schools (Rickford, Sweetland, Rickford, and Grando, 2013). In South America there is much debate about the rights of linguistic minorities, with a progressive recognition of the native American languages -such as Guarani as national language of Paraguay, together with Spanish (Barrios and Behares, 2006). I should add here the increasing recognition of sign languages. For example in Uruguay, LSU has become one of the national languages through the Law N° 17.378 (Uruguay. Ley Nº 17.378, 2001).

The European Union has worked a lot on multilingual contexts in order to formalize the community in all the aspects that have to do with education in an inclusive way. Taking a look at the ideas behind the linguistic education they conceive will make us think of different approaches to teaching language –both mother tongue and second or foreign language-, and the abilities involved, like orality or reading.

In Section 1.3. of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (*Framework*) the concept of *multilingualism* is discussed and its replacement by *plurilingualism* is proposed as a framework for education (and implicitly for use) of

languages in the European Union (Council of Europe. Language Policy Division, 2001, pp. 4–5).

According to that document, *multilingualism: "is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society"* (Council of Europe. Language Policy Division, 2001, p. 4).

This perspective conceives that the knowledge and use of each language is not to be mixed with another and that in all cases the native speaker is the model. This is, on one hand a political stance, but at the same time it is anchored in a linguistic and cognitive perspective of language as an entity or structure strongly bounded, which is opposed to models of language like Hudson´s, discussed later.

However, *plurilingualism* means that:

(...) as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. In different situations, a person can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor. For instance, partners may switch from one language or dialect to another, exploiting the ability of each to express themselves in one language and to understand the other; or a person may call upon the knowledge of a number of languages to make sense of a text, written or even spoken, in a previously 'unknown' language, recognising words from a common international store in a new guise (Council of Europe. Language Policy Division, 2001, p. 4).

With this notion of *plurilingualism,* a radical change of approach comes, which raises many questions in the field of psycholinguistics and applied linguistics, traditionally linked to the conception of an homogeneous language and the existence of an ideal native speaker, "owner of the knowledge", as model.

Even though the Framework presents a conception of plurilingualism that puts excessive emphasis on communication: "*he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence...* ", going a step further, I consider that, cognitively, one individual can model the forms and ways of a language into another as well as use the strategies and technologies developed in one language to manage other things that are not in separated compartments. These other things would include interpretive strategies, reading skills etc., and all these exchanges between languages, varieties and abilities would give linguistic education a unity. So, a reading class in a foreign language would be adding to interpretation skills in one´s own "language" as would an analysis of a structured narrative through some other media.

Plurilingualism promotes, then, the use of many linguistic varieties, with varying balance according to needs, places and knowledge of the individuals of these varieties and of the strategies and technologies (reading and writing) in which they are handled. In turn, it strongly defends the individual´s own variety. This again -going a little further- should be not only a political defense, but a cognitive one. A Spanish speaker can speak with an Italian speaker, each in their own language, and with certain convergence strategies they can come to understand each other. The same happens with written language: a skillful reader can probably read in more than one language, although writing is more difficult. The development of receptive skills, like oral and written comprehension, comes first (Ellis, 1994). Accordingly, in oral or written production, the model that seeks native-like accuracy should be flexibilized.

The problem of the construction of the disciplines

Within our educational system it is interesting to observe how the subjects have been traditionally shaped, i.e. how knowledge is segmented (Calderón, 2000; Terige and Diker, 1997). The delimitation of the disciplines, in the whole educational system, in the language area has left us with fixed traditional subject such as *Spanish, Language, Literature, English, Portuguese, Morphosyntax, etc.* Despite this variety, there is a clear separation and hierarchy between *mother tongue* and *foreign language* and a dichotomization between *form* and *content* expressed in opposed teaching methodologies, as we can gather, for example, from the syllabi of Primary and Secondary School in Uruguay of "Idioma Español" versus "Literatura" (Uruguay. Administración Nacional de Educación Pública & Consejo de Educación Primaria, 2008; Administración Nacional de Educación Pública & Consejo de Educación Secundaria, 1996, 2013).

In general, within the traditionally shaped subjects, the idea of language as a clearly circumscribed and homogeneous entity prevails, in part as a consequence of the influence of modernity (*one nation one language*), identity processes (belonging to a group, differentiation from others) and the processes of standardization of languages that create the "standard variety" that has a very particular representation in people´s minds, creating an illusion of the existence of "the language", the ideal way things should be.

Thus the subjects tend to be isolated in our educational system. For instance, as we can see in the documents published by the Linguistic Policies in Public Education Commission in Uruguay (ANEP & CDC, 2008) Spanish is taught, on the one hand, in subjects like "Literature" that emphasize "content", but only with literature as content, and, on the other hand, in subjects that teach grammar, that is, that emphasize "form",

with strong structuralist tradition. In turn, these subjects in no instance connect with other subjects like history or geography that concentrate in content and many times remain aloof from their role, that should be introducing the newcomers to those scientific worlds, into their discourse formations and the reading of the scientific discipline. Also English, the only foreign language that is taught as a curricular subject in our system, is taught disconnected from the other linguistic endeavors the students may be going through, with a communicative approach, involving the four skills, but mostly without taking into account what "communicative" may mean at each stage and each context.

Language is essentially heterogeneous and its limits are not precise

Classically in linguistics, major theoretical frameworks (Chomsky, 1965, 1989; Saussure, 1993) have conceptualized the object of linguistics *(language* in the case of Saussure and *internal language -language, generative grammar, competence, knowledge of language-* for Chomsky) from an abstract formal and idealized perspective, sustaining its homogeneity. In both cases, these linguistic theorists have focused on explaining the mechanism of the language itself, and even the essence of it and, ultimately, what it means to be individuals with language. It is interesting to point out that when we say "classically in linguistics", as I did at the beginning of this paragraph, we are referring merely to the 20th century since linguistics is a fairly new discipline.

With the pioneer works of Labov (1966), a different vision is introduced in some areas of linguistics, in which language is related to the social arena, showing the high variation inherent to it. Sociolinguistics leaves the homogeneous view of language and in its descriptions, shows its high heterogeneity, providing an explanatory framework about the relationship between language and society.

A language consists of many varieties that respond to social categories such as age, social class, geographical location, sex / gender, and different usage scenarios, such as more or less formal contexts, writing or oral, etc. In this way, the power relations that occur in society are not only reproduced but replayed in language. Not only do we speak one language, but we also make acts of identity within it (Le Page, 1968).

Faced with a view of language as a highly heterogeneous entity within, the view of the outer limits of language is also affected: where does a language begin and another ends? This question becomes more dramatic in the case of clearly related languages. For example, we may wonder if Romance languages are not actually varieties of Latin. Or in the case of languages with high levels of intelligibility like Spanish and Portuguese: how is it possible to speak of two different languages?

And these same questions may arise the other way, not from the difference but from the unity: is the Rioplatense Spanish the same language as the Spanish in a Mexican rural sector?

Located in an extreme position in the debate about "language" and "variety", Hudson (1987) dismisses the concept "language" and introduces the concept of "linguistic items" which help to break down the idea of clear and precise boundaries between languages. A linguistic item can be any piece of linguistic knowledge, whether lexical or formal, syntactic, semantic or pragmatic. These linguistic items can be (for methodological purposes of study and adopting a taxonomic criterion) organized in sets of "attenuated forms of varieties", although each speaker possesses a single set, wherever each item may come from. For this author a linguistic variety is a set of *linguistic items* with similar sociolinguistic distribution. In turn these sets would be in a continuum of intelligibility both diatopically and diachronically. The concept "language" would remain then as an anthropological cultural entity, and the concept of "attenuated

variety" as a set of linguistic items with similar distribution for some reason (social, sexual, age, situational, professional, etc..).

Final Comments

In this paper I have presented some issues concerning linguistic education within the public system of education in Uruguay, more specifically reading and its role, not only in education as a system but also in individual growth, production of ideas of one´s own and subjectivization. As we have seen, reading is essential to remain and progress in the system of education. But it also has an essential role for the individual interacting with knowledge and information, as it is a silent interior process of interpretation that finds a way to make of that knowledge and information his or her own. Sometimes the individual will be more completely or profoundly affected by the text. And other times he or she will be missing more or resisting more the offer of the text.

Mainly, I have focused on two populations that have problems remaining and progressing in the system: some Deaf students and some entering students at the University. We have seen how it is always worth to try to work in the area of language, more specifically reading, and to reflect on ways to improve the interventions of the education system in linguistic processes. The idea that pervades all our research is that reading practices are key to remain and progress within the University, and then to be updated professionals. This is not necessarily so for writing practices.

We have seen how some theoretical and ideological standings have an impact on the interventions proposed by the education system. Some of these standings foster purist attitudes about language and hinder the possibility of less traditional interventions, while some others question language as an object of education and of use.

They conceive the phenomenon of "language" in its heterogeneity, with a set of abilities, or sub-phenomena involved that have to do with structural or syntactic aspects as well as with phonetic, motor, pragmatic aspects and other. Then it is possible to open the way to integrate varieties on the one hand, and to "deconstruct" the strategies and abilities that may need work (like the reading process), on the other.

In this way, we may think of new disciplines that explore, for example, only reading in one language in some instances, or reading according to topics, regardless of the variety in others. We may foster subjects that teach reading without the orality of the language, as it is done in many universities -reading comprehension courses for academic purposes in a foreign language. In the same line, we encounter the teaching of reading to the Deaf that is not only the teaching of vocabulary, but mostly the pointing at relation within the sentence and the text, as the "show how" of the process of interpretation that I have mentioned.

Vindicating the continuum orality-writing we can think of subjects that focus on orality and its relation with rhymes and other cultural objects like music. We could also think of introducing or expanding the teaching of other varieties, not necessarily following the European models, but thinking of varieties with regional criteria. We should take into account the relevance of Portuguese regionally not only because of the MERCOSUR but through cultural and mainly the music influence from Brazil, and also its role as national minority language (DPUs: Dialectos Portugueses del Uruguay). LSU is another national language that should be integrated in the education system. The languages of migrant groups should also be taken into account. Finally, depending on clear theoretical and ideological positions, there may be many diverse proposals.

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