

Literacy Practices in a bilingual curriculum: suggesting activities that may help to promote phonological awareness on 1st year's students

Práticas de letramento no currículo bilíngue: sugerindo atividades que podem auxiliar a promover consciência fonológica em alunos do 1º ano.

Lisiane Virginia SCHULTZ¹
Adriana Angelim ROSSA²

***Abstract:** This article aims to present and analyze two activities applied to students who attended the 1st year of elementary school in a bilingual curriculum school in the year of 2010. The activities to be described might serve as examples of literacy practices focusing in how phonological awareness may help students in learning to read in a second language. First, some theoretical review on bilingualism and literacy will be given. Then, the activities will be described and analyzed. By relating theory and practice, the activities presented may exemplify how a teacher might provide students who attended the 1st year of elementary school in a bilingual curriculum school with situations in which they might have made use of phonological awareness to read in a second language.*

***Key words:** bilingualism; bilingual education; literacy, phonological awareness.*

***Resumo:** Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar e analisar duas atividades realizadas com alunos do 1º ano do ensino fundamental em uma escola de currículo bilíngue no ano de 2010. As atividades que serão descritas podem ser exemplos de práticas de letramento com foco em como a consciência fonológica pode ajudar os alunos a aprenderem a ler na segunda língua. Primeiramente, uma revisão teórica sobre bilinguismo e letramento será abordada. Em seguida, as atividades serão descritas e analisadas. Ao relacionar teoria com prática, as atividades apresentadas podem exemplificar como uma professora oportunizou aos alunos que freqüentaram o 1º ano do ensino fundamental em uma escola de currículo bilíngüe situações nas quais os alunos podem ter feito uso da consciência fonológica para ler em uma segunda língua.*

***Palavras-chave:** bilinguismo; educação bilíngue, letramento; consciência fonológica.*

1. Introduction

My interest in bilingualism and bilingual education started about three years ago, when I started working at a school which differs from the others in the city I live by proposing a bilingual curriculum. The idea of teaching children in English, and not just teaching English amazed me. Another aspect that called my attention when everything related to bilingualism was new for me was the possibility of speaking English

¹ English teacher graduated in Languages at UNISINOS and specialized in English at PUCRS

² Professor at PUCRS

during a great amount of time in classroom, almost a hundred per cent, with young learners. That was the moment I can say I fell in love with it.

One of the aspects that have specially drawn my attention to bilingual education is how children learn to read in a second language, in this case, English. In this paper, I will present two activities applied to 1st graders meant to develop phonological awareness in the literacy practices. I consider important to be able to share experiences and refer to them as examples, since I deeply believe practice and self reflection towards it plays a meaningful role in language teaching and learning. Thus, in this paper a mix of ideas based on theory, practice and feelings towards bilingual education and literacy will be presented.

2. Bilingualism

2.1 Some considerations about bilingualism

As a starting point, I will make some considerations on bilingualism and bilinguals. In 1933, BLOOMFIELD apud BAKER (2006) defined that a person to be bilingual needed to have the native ability in both target language and mother tongue.

Although it would be quite interesting if people could have the same control of language in both languages, we might agree that having the native ability to deal with all situations in which interaction is required in life is quite hard, although I believe it is not impossible.

Also in 1933, MACKEY apud BAKER (2006) affirmed that bilingualism refers to the alternate use of two or more languages by an individual.

In 1953, HAUGEN apud BAKER (2006, p. 7) claimed that a bilingual person would be the one who could produce meaningful complete utterances in another language.

Edwards (2006, p. 7) states that everybody could be considered bilingual. He claims that every adult knows at least some words or sentences in another language. However, he suggests that bilingualism is quite linked to “right social conditions”, “motivation” and “opportunity”.

In the process of becoming bilingual, native aptitude, age and intelligence are less important than a supportive context of necessity. With the right social conditions, then, bilingualism becomes just as “natural” as monolingualism in others.

Edwards (2006,p.7) believes that every normal levelheaded person can learn another language or other languages if he or she is given opportunities and if they are motivated towards learning.

But what skill or skills is/are taken into account in order to state an individual is or not bilingual? In consonant with Baker (2006, p. 3), it seems to be problematic as “...a person may be able to speak two languages, but tends to speak only one in practice.” Baker claims that the uses of language can also vary, as an individual can use a certain language for writing, another for speaking, another for reading and another for listening. In order to try to get close to defining a bilingual person, Baker states that it is relevant to consider some dimensions of bilingualism concerning to ability, use, balance of two languages, age, development, culture, context and elective bilingualism.

When it comes to ability, Baker (2006) remarks some bilinguals might produce more in listening and speaking whereas others might read and write better. Use is related to use language for different purposes. Balance of two languages refers to the idea it is rare to find a bilingual who performs exactly the same way in both languages, normally there is a dominant language. In the dimension of age, Baker suggests that when a child learns two or more languages since she or he was born, it is called simultaneous bilingualism. However, when a child learns a second language after he or she is 3 years old, then it is called consecutive or sequential bilingualism.

In the development dimension, Baker claims that incipient bilinguals are the ones who have language which is considerably developed and the other is in the beginning stage. Ascendant bilingualism would refer to the development of a second language. Nevertheless, when one of the languages has a decrease, resulting in a “language attrition” (2006, p. 4), the result is recessive bilingualism. In terms of culture, Baker highlights the fact that ...”bilinguals tend to be more or less bicultural or multicultural”.

Baker affirms that it is regular for a person to be highly proficient in two or more languages but be monocultural, whereas some bilinguals move in direction to biculturalism. Baker gives some examples to show the relevance of context when he mentions bilinguals who use two languages or more in a regular basis everyday and differ from those who use one of the languages when they are on vacation, for example. For elective bilingualism is “a characteristic of individuals who choose to learn a language (VALDÉS & FIGUEROA, 1994; VALDÉS, 2003 apud Baker, 2006)

2.2 Types of bilingual education

Giving the reader some background on types of bilingual education is important, so that one may know better about this issue and be able to “categorize” some kinds of bilingual schools.

As a starting point, it is relevant to mention that there is a distinction between transitional and maintenance bilingual educational when it comes to their goals. (FISHMAN, 1976 & HONBERGER, 1991 apud BAKER, 2006). In a Transitional Bilingual Education program, the speaker learns in the dominant language, so the language he or she speaks from home is shifted. In a maintenance bilingual education program, the language brought from home is kept. There are also subcategories of maintenance bilingual education with different goals, namely, static maintenance and developmental maintenance. (OTHEGUY & OTTO, 1980 apud BAKER, 2006). Static maintenance only keeps the language brought from home while developmental maintenance aims at continuing promoting mother tongue linguistic skills with the goal of proficiency and biliteracy.

For King and Mackey (2007), Enrichment Bilingual Education is referred to children who speak a dominant language and who are learning a second language at school. Maintenance Bilingual Education aims at not only promoting L1, but also L2, so it helps the child to become bilingual and biliterate. According to King and Mackey (2007), Transitional Bilingual Education focuses on fluency and literacy in English, abandoning the language from home. This concept is very similar to the one given in the previous lines. (FISHMAN, 1976 & HONBERGER, 1991 apud BAKER, 2006)

King and Mackey (2007) also mention immersion bilingual education, which involves native speakers of a dominant language and around 50% of the contents at school are taught in the second language and Two-way (or dual-language) immersion bilingual education, which helps , for example, the English native speakers to learn Spanish and the Spanish native speakers to learn English. Both English and Spanish teachers study together during the day and instructions for activities are given in both languages. The goal of this program is to promote bilingualism and biliteracy.

The bilingual program offered by the school where the activities to help to promote literacy through phonological awareness were applied may be considered in terms of types of bilingual education what King and Mackey, 2007 referred to as Maintenance Bilingual Education. I believe it is the one that may bring more benefits to students if we think of a Brazilian context. Children would learn in both languages and would be able to write, read, speak and listen in both languages. Of course the mother tongue “speaks louder” in this case, but even so children would be able to produce much more in the target language than the ones who study a foreign language in a normal basis.

2.3 Benefits of bilingual education

I believe it is important to mention at this point the benefits bilingual education may bring and how some negative beliefs on this process have been demystified through the latest years.

According to Baker (2006), some people might believe that the more a person speaks and uses the second language, the weaker his or her first language will become. Another belief is that if a person is able to use another language, there would be less “space” available for other areas of learning.

There was a time from the 1920s to the 1960s known as the period of detrimental research on bilingualism. At that time, it was stated that monolinguals were superior to bilinguals on verbal IQ. However, this research presented many problems, limitations and flaws in methodology, this is the reason of its non acceptance.

After studies that showed bilingual people could not be considered inferior in terms of IQ due to the lack of reliability in the methods used for research, came the period in which it was believed bilinguals and monolinguals did not differ in terms of IQ, namely, the period of neutral effects.

However, in 1962, Pearl & Lambert’s findings were very significant when it comes to pointing out possible cognitive advantages bilinguals might have compared to monolinguals for three main reasons (APUD BAKER, 2006). The first one is that their research overcame many problems related to deficiencies of researches on the period of detrimental effects. Secondly, the fact that bilingualism did not have negative and neutral effects started to be taken into account. Third, bilingualism research based the on IQ broadened its horizons to the study of other areas of mental activity.

After their research with a sample of 110 children, Pearl & Lambert (1962 apud BAKER, 2006), concluded that bilingualism offers “greater mental flexibility; the ability to think more abstractly; more independently of words, providing more superiority in language concept formation; that a more enriched bilingual and a bicultural environment may bring benefits on the development of IQ; and that there is a

positive transfer between the two languages of a bilingual, facilitating the development of verbal IQ.” (p. 122)

Bialystok (2005) also claims that bilinguals have advantages on monolinguals in terms of cognitive, linguistic and metalinguistic processes, such as selective attention and inhibitory control.

According to Bialystok (2005), although studies on possible benefits of bilingualism in children may be under investigation, it is notorious to point out their relevance in order to prove that bilingual education does not provide any kind of retardation or confusion in children’s learning processes, as it was thought in the past.

3.Literacy in a bilingual perspective

At this point, I believe it is relevant to reflect on what some writers understand by literacy in a language. It is also worthy to mention that in Portuguese there are two different words that are related to this process, namely “alfabetização” and “letramento”. In English, the word literacy has both meanings.

Larson & Marsh (2005) affirm that literacy may be seen in different perspectives. In a traditional view, it is a group of skills that can be isolated taught. New Literacy Studies affirm that literacy is a critical social practice built through everyday interactions in local contexts. In a Critical Literacy view, the readers and authors are active agents in writing and analyzing texts. New Technologies and Literacy claim that means of communication change due to technological advances and transform the literacy foundations.

When it comes to literacy acquisition for bilingual students, Brisk & Harrington (2010) point out the circumstances in which this process may happen varies according to each individual, it is unique for each child. The authors claim that some students may be already bilinguals before they are introduced to the world of words, while others may be literate in their native language and the second language rises afterwards. According to Harding-Esch & Riley (2003), reading in two languages does not appear to entail problems, as children may assign their reading abilities to the second language in an easy way.

But why is reading so important? Bialystok (2001) affirms that literacy is considered one of the main objectives to be achieved by a child in early schooling due to the fact that it is the guarantee an individual will make part of our society. Besides, academic success may depend on mastering this skill in an effective manner.

How does reading happen? Bialystok (2001) claims for the existence of three stages that make part of the reading process. The author states that at each stage there are some notions that are required so that children may move on to the objective of independently reading.

3.1 Pre-literacy

The first stage mentioned by Bialystok (2001) is pre-literacy. The author points out how important the moment when children realize they may read is. The fact is that “children do many things that are “like” reading before the epiphanic moment.” (BIALYSTOK, 2001, p.154) That is, they may recognize names of

people in their families, names or logos of companies and brands, they may print their name and they can recognize the letters of the alphabet, among other things children may be able to do with letters.

And what is the role of phonics when it comes to literacy in a language? Bialystok (2001) claims that phonics are not recommended in terms of eliciting young readers' intrinsic motivation, but their use is important because children should be informed that letters produce sounds. Thus, reading may be a hard and not necessary painful experience if children are not informed about this simple fact.

Another interesting point concerning pre-literacy is that reading is considered a social activity. What children do long before they start reading, that is, their early experiences with picture books lead them to the act of reading, since it is through this interactions children learn the "mechanics of reading (how to turn the pages), the pleasures of reading (curling up with a parent in a quiet space), and the interest of reading (the story or talk that goes on around the book)." (BIALYSTOK, 2001, p.154)

Bialystok (2001) also mentions the routines involved during a storytelling may help children in autonomous reading. Telling stories does not only introduce children to literacy, but also helps children to develop competence in a specific language, in the language used in the stories.

In the Pre-literacy stage, Bialystok (2001) claims that bilingual children have meaningful advantages over monolingual children due to their better understanding that written language is how people represent spoken language in a symbolic way. This "understanding" comes from their experience with two languages.

3.2 Early Literacy: the role of phonological awareness

Adams (1990) claims that acquirement of phonological awareness³ predicts the children's progress in learning to read. Bradley and Bryant (apud BIALYSTOK, 2001) in their early research in 1983 concluded that children who were 3 years old and had more skills concerning rhyme showed to succeed in reading some years later, that is, phonological awareness raised by means of rhymes, in that case, helped children to read.

Bialystok (2001) explains the relevance of phonological awareness to the learning to read process by affirming that alphabetic reading demands separation of words into the sounds they produce and learning the relation between letters and sounds. Nevertheless, alphabetic languages are different in terms of a crystal clear correspondence between sounds and letters: "The transparency of the sound –spelling system in a given language may determine the ease with which children can apply phonological insights to reading" (BIALYSTOK, 2001, p. 168). The author also mentions bilingual children whose languages are different in this sense may benefit from this fact when they learn a more complex language system due to their previous knowledge of a less complex system.

Bialystok points out that the relevance of phonological awareness may not be apparent in young children who speak two languages, but it may show its impact when children learn a second language, as they may have advantages in getting the system of sounds of the second language because of the experience they have attained with another language.

³ Phonological awareness refers to the ability of understanding and reflecting on the way sounds can be combined and changed in order to result in words. In this process, an individual is able to manipulate the units of sounds (recognizing words that rhyme, start and finish with the same sound), that is, comparing and noticing how words can be formed. (ALVES, 2009, p.34)

When it comes to phonological awareness by the ones who study English as a second language, Alves (2003) reminds it is important that the differences of sounds in the languages may be noticed by the learners. The author points out the relevance of activities in which learners may manipulate language, such as language games, segmentation and tasks in which teachers elicit students' phonological awareness.

Concerning a more specific aspect about phonological awareness, namely, rhyme awareness, Alves (2003) claims that learners early and easily develop the ability to identify rhymes of syllables and words in their first language, and so they do in the second language, mainly when such rhymes are expressed not only in oral language but also in the written way.

May activities that promote rhyme awareness help children to learn to read in a second language? How can children recognize sentences in English in a poem if they are not supposed to read in English yet? These answers may not be found in this article, but the activities to be described in the article may serve as food for thought. In the next lines, I will give the reader a brief overview on fluent reading.

3.3 Fluent reading

In consonance with Bialystok (2001), fluent reading involves several cognitive abilities and mental areas. The readers are required to interpret the representations, apply what they know in relation to form and strategies they may use in order to read different types of texts, access what is known about the language, mainly grammar and vocabulary conveyed in a text, and combine previous knowledge about the subject. So, the main point at this stage may refer to understand what has been read. As it can be noticed, defining fluent reading may not be an easy task. Bialystok (2001) also claims that defining fluent reading may be more intriguing when there are two languages in the process, that is, reading is learned later in one of the languages or it is first learned in the second language. It is important to remark that most of the theories on reading in a second language have been based on how this process happens with adults.

I thought it was important to explain what is supposed to happen in the three stages of reading set by Bialystok and previously described in sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3, as the main purpose of this paper concerns reading. In the next section, some background information about the bilingual curriculum program in the 1st year of elementary school will be given.

4. Some background information about the bilingual curriculum program in 1st year of elementary school

The activities selected to be presented in this article aim to suggest how English teachers may work with phonological awareness in the literacy processes even when children do not formally read yet.

At this point, it is essential to give the reader some background about how this bilingual curriculum program works and also make some considerations about what is expected from the students in the 1st year.

As it is known, due to changes that occurred in Brazilian Education, elementary school is now composed by 9 years. So, first year students are 6/7 years old. It is necessary to mention that a great number

of students at this stage are not able to read in English, so the focus of learning and teaching is on speaking and listening skills. The students are involved in literacy practices in their mother tongue and we observe that the interest for writing and reading in English comes together or right after they start writing and reading in Portuguese. The students have two main teachers: a mother tongue teacher and an English teacher. The time they are exposed to English in classroom is of 9 hours per week and they make use of a book developed by a group of teachers from the school.

The activities to be described were designed to two groups of first year, namely 1st year A and 1st year B. 1st year A was composed by 16 students, while in 1st year B there were 13 pupils.

In this bilingual curriculum program, children learn English not only as a language. Other areas of knowledge, such as Math and Science, also make part of English classes. Moreover, the syllabus contemplates cultural aspects of the language, which may be presented through special dates and curiosities about other countries.

As it was mentioned previously, according to this bilingual program, in the first year the main concern about students' learning is on listening and speaking skills and in the second year the focus is on reading and writing.

This fact does not mean literacy practices in English should be "avoided" in the first year. On the contrary, students are stimulated and exposed to literacy in several moments in a class. It is also important to remind that the activities to be described refer to literacy practices in a moment students are passing from the pre-literacy to early reading stage. (BIALYSTOK, 2001)

4.1 Activity 1 -Description (see ATTACHMENT 1)

In the activities attached, the names of the students were erased in order to avoid their exposure.

The topic I was working with the students when this activity was applied was "Clothes".

In the previous class, we had played a *Guessing Game* about Clothes and most of the activities we had done in class were concerning oral production. So, I decided to challenge my students with an activity about rhymes.

It is relevant to mention that by that time these children were already acquainted with rhymes due to other activities they had had through that semester. It is also meaningful to point out that this activity was applied a little before their winter break, in the beginning of July. It means they were almost finishing the first half of the school year.

Students received a handout and I told them this activity was about rhymes and clothes. They got anxious to know what they were supposed to do. Some of them would raise their hands many times to ask me if their guesses about what they should do in the activity were right. I told them they should look at the pictures, starting with the column of clothes. The students' knowledge about the vocabulary related to *clothes* in the oral form made the first activity easier. They were explained that the words in the column on the right side of the paper rhymed with some clothes they knew in English. So, I gave them some time to

think and I could analyze the different strategies they made use while accomplishing this task. Some students simply looked at the pictures and matched, other ones looked at the words.

A few of them said they did not know how to read and due to this fact they would not do what they were supposed to. For these few students, encouragement was necessary, so that they could realize the strategies they could use to do the activity.

In the second part, students were asked about words they knew in English that could rhyme with the word “blouse” and in the third activity they played with words and drew the rhymes.

4.2 Activity 2- Description

This activity was applied in October, 2010. By this time, most of the students could already read in their mother tongue. I thought it was a nice opportunity to work with rhymes, but at this time with a poem that demanded more from them. Parts of the body were the topic of our classes at the given time.

Each student received a part of the poem typed in big letters, so that we could make a circle on the carpet and place the sentences over it. I believe it is relevant to say that the groups were really interested in reading at the time this activity was applied.

The students wanted to read in English as they were reading in Portuguese. In one of the groups, 1st year A, most of the students showed enthusiasm concerning the fact they were reading in English. In the other group, namely 1st year B, there were 3 students out of 13 that did not show interest, I mean, they seemed to have a kind of fear concerning making mistakes, but it also happened in their mother tongue.

After children had received the parts of the poem, I told them we had the challenge of unscramble that text and asked for their help. So, I started reading the poem, and they were supposed to check if the part they had was the part I was reading. For example, I read the part “Hands on shoulder, hands on knees” and they should say if this part was with them. So I did with the whole poem, and students placed their sentences in order on the carpet.

The children who could not identify their sentences were helped by the others (there were 3 kids who could not accomplish the task in the beginning, but with the help of their classmates they could do it). After that, we all read the poem together and we attributed gestures with the body for each part of the poem. Finally, each student drew a part of the poem and I hung their work on the walls of the classroom.

5. Analysis and discussion

I believe there are some important points to be considered concerning the activities described in the previous section.

An important factor is the time of the year they were applied. If the first activity, which was applied in the end of the first semester, had been proposed in the beginning of the year, it might not have succeeded, as most of the students were in the pre-literacy stage in their mother tongue. (BIALYSTOK, 2001)

The same might have happened to the second activity if it was proposed earlier than students could handle it. At this point, I believe the teacher's feeling towards his or her group is fundamental. In my point of view, it is necessary that teachers may be able to observe their students' progresses and challenge them.

Another interesting point to consider is the time these students had attended the bilingual curriculum at this school. In the first group, named 1st year A, most of the students had attended the school in the bilingual curriculum since they were in kindergarten 4, so the 1st year was the third year they had experienced the bilingual curriculum. In this group, it was noticed the students could accomplish the tasks easier than in the other group, 1st year B. In 1st year B, all the students were new at school and they had extra English classes in the morning once a week so that they could attend the bilingual curriculum. For this group, I realized things were more difficult in terms of realizing what strategies they could make use in order to "read", I mean, to realize they could read even though they were not *formally reading*⁴ in English yet.

An explanation to the fact that the first year B group had shown more difficulty to accomplish the proposed tasks might be the less exposure these children had to rhymes and other pre literacy practices, such as storytelling, if compared to the group who attended the bilingual curriculum for a longer period. It is related to what Bradley & Bryant (1983) suggests in their studies with 3- year-old children on how phonological awareness raised by means of rhymes helped children afterwards to read. Besides, they did not have the same opportunities of living reading as a social activity as mentioned by Bialystok in section 3.1 if compared to the other group.

Another significant fact to point out is that it could be noticed the students who could read in their mother tongue were successful in these activities in the sense that they made use of sounds and letters they already knew in Portuguese so that they could read in English. This fact may refer to what Bialystok (2001) claims about the advantages children have in getting the system of sounds of the second language because of the experience they have attained with another language.

It is also substantial to mention the role of context while preparing these activities. Both of them were designed based on what students had been exposed to in terms of contents and they were an extension of the activities that had been applied to the groups, 1st year A and 1st year B, in the mother tongue.

6. Conclusion

There are some important considerations and reflections I would like to share with the readers in this conclusion. First of all, I would like to share my feelings towards bilingual education remarking I have no doubt bilingual education brings quite positive aspects to the ones involved in this process.

As a teacher, I believe it is amazing to teach in English things that are part of children's routine at school, I mean, very simple things and complex issues, such as a project on eating habits, for example. By observing the students every day, I notice how meaningful and natural learning a foreign language may be. So, both teachers and students benefit from it.

⁴ The expression "formally reading" in English was used to mean that in the 1st year students did not have the need of reading and writing texts in English according to the bilingual curriculum at the referred school.

Going deeper on bilingualism, I chose to focus my studies on literacy in a bilingual perspective. It is relevant to remark the importance of literacy practices in the process of reading. Besides, it is necessary to reinforce that children do many things similar reading before they are really able to read a text, for example. So, reading may be seen as a social practice. (BIALYSTOK, 2001)

In this article, my focus on literacy practices was to present and describe two activities that were designed aiming to promote phonological awareness by using rhymes, as this awareness may help children to read in a second language.

It is also essential to mention that the activities described in this article do not intend to suggest that phonological awareness is the key for successful reading and that they should be applied by every teacher who teaches in a bilingual perspective. It is known that each individual has different background and what works for a group of children may not work for others.

In this paper, the reader could find some background on bilingualism, bilingual education and literacy in a bilingual perspective. The theoretical review presented in these lines might help English teachers and whoever may be interested in bilingual education to create activities to be applied to students taking into account what is important to be developed in the pre literacy stage, focusing in future successful reading.

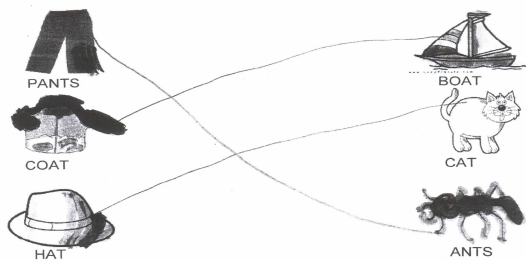
Finally, it is important to remark the relevance of studies on literacy in a bilingual perspective and I believe this paper may contribute for the studies this area.

7. Attachments

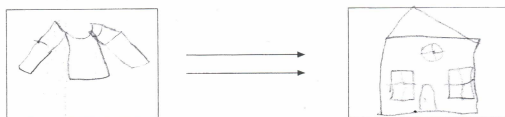
7.1 Attachment 1

MY NAME IS _____

1) MATCH THE PICTURES ACCORDING TO THEIR RESPECTIVE RHYMES:



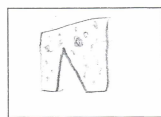
2) DRAW A "BLOUSE". CAN YOU FIND A RHYME FOR THIS WORD?



3) DRAW:



A CAT WEARING A HAT



ANTS IN PANTS



A BOAT OF COATS

7.2 Attachment 2

POEM: HANDS ON SHOULDERS

HANDS ON SHOULDERS
HANDS ON KNEES
HANDS BEHIND YOU
IF YOU PLEASE
TOUCH YOUR SHOULDER
NOW YOUR NOSE
NOW YOUR HAIR
AND NOW YOUR TOES
HANDS UP HIGH IN THE AIR
DOWN AT YOUR SIDES
AND TOUCH YOUR HAIR
HANDS UP HIGH AS BEFORE
NOW CLAP YOUR HANDS
1, 2, 3, 4!



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Accepted: October 10, 2011

E-mail:

lisiane.s@ienh.com.br

arossa@puhrs.br