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LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANCE LANGUAGES

Liliana Tolchinsky and Harriet Jisa

Romance languages are the group of modern languages that evolved from spoken Latin. While all the Romance languages are written with the Latin alphabet, the transparency of the orthographic systems vary considerably. In this chapter we will focus specifically on Spanish and French, two languages which can be placed at two extremes on a continuum of orthographic systems ranging from shallow (Spanish) to deep (French). These two languages provide a natural window into understanding how orthographic systems facilitate or impede early literacy.

Spanish is the most widely spoken of the modern Romance languages. According to Ethnologue it has the second largest number of native speakers after Chinese. About 6 per cent of the world’s population, more than 400 million speakers, have Spanish as their first language. Most Spanish speakers are in Latin America; indeed of all the majority Spanish-speaking countries, only Equatorial Guinea and Spain are outside of America. Moreover, although Spanish is the official language of Spain it shares the linguistic space with several co-official languages that, depending on the Spanish region, are spoken at home and taught at school. Thus, learning reading and writing in Spain is rather different in monolingual communities such as Madrid compared to bilingual communities such as Galicia or Valencia.

According to Ethnologue, French holds the fourteenth place among the languages of the world for number of speakers. Currently it is estimated that there are 76 million speakers. Only English has more countries choosing it as an official language, however. Before 1930 in France, one person out of four spoke a regional language with their parents, this number dropping to 1 out of 10 in 1950 and 1 out of 20 in 1970 (Costa and Lambert, 2009). French became the language spoken by the entire population only in the middle of the twentieth century (Costa and Lambert, 2009). Today while some regional languages are taught in public school (Basque, Breton, Catalan, Occitan and Alsacien), the official language of instruction is French. In Switzerland, Belgium and Canada (Quebec) French is the language of schools in the French-speaking areas. In many former French colonies, French is also the language of schooling.

Language orthographic and phonological representations

Spanish is an inflectional language with rich morphology. Very few words consist of only one morpheme. Only interjections, conjunctions, prepositions and a subset of adverbs are...
immune to both inflection and derivation. Most nouns, adjectives and determinants are inflected for number and two grammatical genders corresponding to natural gender only for animate nouns. Spanish verbs can take about forty possible different verb affixes (Alcoba, 1999). Grammatical morphology is very regular in the spoken and written forms, and Spanish-speaking adults are able to generate and to write these forms even though they hear a word for the first time (Aguado, 2004). The only exception to this is the plural forms /s/ in Andalucian variety.

French is also relatively rich in morphology. The major contrast with Spanish, however, is that the majority of grammatical morphology is silent (Fayol, 2013). The plural provides an interesting example. Compare les petits triangles rouges (‘the little red triangles’) and le petit triangle rouge (‘the little red triangle’). In written French the noun and the adjective are spelled with the plural –s. However, the only audible distinction is on the determiner, the other words being pronounced the same in the singular and the plural. Plural marking on verbs is also often not marked in spoken French, il mange (‘he is eating’) and ils mangent (‘they are eating’). The plural is written with an –s on the pronoun and –ent on the verb, but neither of the plural markings are audible in spoken French.

**Orthography**

Spanish is written with a transparent orthography according to the two criteria proposed by Seymour et al. (2003): high spelling–sound predictability and a very simple syllabic structure. On top of these two features that were found to facilitate literacy learning, the names of most letters in Spanish are helpful to literacy learners, as most letter names contain the phoneme that the letter represents.

Spelling relations are highly predictable because there is a one-to-one correspondence from graphemes (letters and digraphs) to phonemes and from phonemes to graphemes in almost 75 per cent of cases. The pronunciation of graphemes has no variation across words except for three consonants (c, g and r), which are read in different rule-governed ways depending on the context (Cuetos and Suárez-Coalla, 2009).

The Romance languages have the syllable as their basic rhythmic unit. Newer and more refined analysis has shown, however, that there are subtle differences between Spanish and French, with French in an intermediate position between stress-timed English and syllable-timed Spanish (White and Mattys, 2007). Spanish has clear syllabic boundaries and a very simple syllabic structure, in which the most common types of syllable are consonant–vowel (CV) and consonant–vowel–consonant (CVC). There are few consonant clusters, all of which occur only at the beginning of the syllable, and only five simple vowels.

The French orthographic system presents one of the major challenges facing elementary school teachers. The French alphabet contains 26 letters (with four diacritics) to represent, depending on regional varieties, 32 to 36 phonemes. In contrast to Spanish, French orthography is not transparent. For example, the sound /o/ can be written in a variety of ways, including o, au, aux, aut, aud, ot, eau. However, these different written versions are always read /o/: phonemes can be represented with a variety of graphemes, but in general graphemes represent phonemes predictably. It has thus been argued that French is easier to read than to spell (Fayol, 2013). Many final letters in words are silent: /u/ can be written oup, as in coup (hit) or oix such as in roux (redhead). Although goulot, bungalow, galop, beaux all finish with the sound /o/, the orthographic representations differ.

The iconicity of both Spanish and French letter names help children grasp the fact that letters stand for sounds. The names of the vowels are completely iconic as they consist of
the vowel sound (e.g. a for /a/), and the names of most consonants comprise two phonemes with the consonantal part of the letter name being the denoted phoneme (e.g. be for /b/).

As for many languages, knowing the names of letters is a good predictor for future reading and writing in French (Fayol, 2013). Children who know the names of letters learn the sound of letters more easily, especially when the word begins with the name of the letter (e.g. vélo, /velo/ ‘bike’) (Jaffré and Fayol, 1997). Upon entering primary school, however, knowing the sounds of letters is a better predictor of future reading and writing than knowing letter names, and serves as a bridge between writing and phonology (Foulin, 2005). There is significant variation among children in the first year of elementary school. Foulin (2007) asked children to identify the 26 letters. In general, 17 out of 26 were identified. However 20 per cent of low SES children could only identify 12 letters. The author shows that intervention, including drawing children’s attention to the formal aspects of letters and to the direction of reading, improved children’s recognition.

Phonological awareness has been found to predict successful literacy learning in different languages. However, the type of linguistic unit that best predicts successful reading depends on the language and on the characteristics of the orthography that children are learning (Goswami, 2002; Share, 2008). Awareness of phonemes is deemed to be crucial for reading acquisition in English (e.g. Muter et al., 1997). The association between phonemic awareness and reading is lower, however, in languages such as Spanish with a simple phonological structure and a consistent orthographic representation. The simplicity of the Spanish syllable structure and vowel system, reinforced by the consistency of Spanish orthography, may account for the role that syllables play in reading and for their predictive value for learning to read (Alvarez et al., 2001; Carreiras and Perea, 2002; Carrillo, 1994; Dominguez, 1996; Jiménez and Ortiz, 2000). Six- and seven-year-olds are significantly less proficient in phoneme isolation than in syllable deletion and attain conventional reading and writing in Spanish without being able to explicitly segment words into phonemes (Tolchinsky and Teberosky, 1998; but see Defior and Tudela, 1994).

Although sensitivity to morphology is very relevant for developing spelling abilities in French and other deep orthographies (e.g. Pacton and Fayol, 2003; Bryant et al., 2000) it is less crucial for shallow orthographies (Sanchez et al., 2012). The role of phonology is directly proportional to the shallowness of the orthography and inverse to the role of morphology; the deeper the orthography is, the more morphological information is needed to find the correct spelling. In languages with rich morphology and shallow orthography, words could, in principle, be (almost always) accurately spelled using nonlexical phoneme-to-grapheme conversion rules alone. In Spanish, dictation is a relatively easy task and even five-year-old children at the beginning of their school education are capable of writing unfamiliar words, including pseudowords, without difficulty (Cuetos, 1989). In general, spellers must resort to their morphological and lexical knowledge more frequently in French than in Spanish – or other transparent orthographies – in order to spell accurately (Defior et al., 2008). Studies have shown that there is a stronger reliance on sublexical procedures for shallow than for deep orthographies (Defior et al., 2008; Landerl et al., 1997; Notarnicola et al., 2012).

Morphological awareness has been shown to play an important role in learning to spell in French, as in English (Pacton et al., 2013; Rey et al., 2005: Pacton and Fayol, 2003; Pacton et al., 2005; Sénéchal, 2000). For example, children can use morphological information for the spelling of final silent consonants. For seven- and eight-year-olds, words such as grand (‘big, tall’) or camp (‘camp’) are correctly spelled earlier than words such as jument (‘mare’) or tabac (‘tobacco’) (Sénéchal, 2000). When the adjective grand is in feminine gender (grande), the final consonant is audible. The noun camp has a derived verb, camper, in which the
consonant /p/ is pronounced. The phonological sequence /et/ can be written in four different ways (ette, aite, ète or ète). Pacton et al. (2005) dictated sentences with pseudowords containing /et/ in either diminutive or non-diminutive contexts. Children’s spelling accuracy of –ette, the diminutive suffix, was facilitated when the pseudo words were used in the diminutive contexts.

In a longitudinal study of six-year-olds, Sprenger-Charolles and Siegel (1997) asked children to read and write regular words (table, ‘table’), irregular words (sept, ‘7’, scie, ‘saw’) and pseudowords with regular spelling (sinope, turche). Regular words and pseudowords were read and written before the irregular words. Irregular words were often regularized, si instead of scie. During the course of the study and with increasing exposure, the children’s spelling improved and led the authors to propose that the children were constructing an orthographic lexicon in addition to a phonographic representation. The role of exposure to printed words as a basis for creating an orthographic lexicon is essential for French children (Martinet et al., 2004). The creation of an orthographic lexicon liberates the cognitive charge on young French word-writers.

Lété and Fayol (2013) measured reading times of third graders, fifth graders and adults in a priming task to investigate the features of the orthographic representation. The primes were either completely different (poule, ‘chicken’ – jardin, ‘garden’), contained a substitution (jartin – jardin) or contained a permutation (jadrin – jardin), with the idea that reading times would be faster for substitutions and permutations. The third graders showed no difference between the conditions, suggesting that their reading is purely decoding. The fifth graders showed a priming effect for the substitution condition. For the adults, only the permutation condition showed faster reading times. The authors argue that the orthographic representation in the orthographic lexicon is flexible to a degree.

In principle Spanish children can read and spell words that they have never seen. However, Cuetos and Suárez-Coalla (2009) examined reading accuracy and speed of children five to ten years of age and found both an effect of lexicality and lexical frequency. Greater accuracy and speed were observed in the reading of words over pseudowords and of high-frequency over low-frequency words, especially as grade level increased. Therefore, the existence and use of orthographic representations probably begins to develop from very early on, alongside sublexical reading for unknown words and pseudowords.

**Early literacy**

In Spain preschool education (Educación Infantil) consists of six non-compulsory courses distributed into two cycles: first cycle (0–3) and second cycle (3–6). Primary school (ages 6–12) consists of six courses distributed into three cycles of two years each (initial, middle and high) and secondary education (ages 12–16). There are three types of school: public, subsidized and private. There are few public centres providing preschool education, and access is restricted to the less-favoured sector of society.

In 2000 most of Spain’s autonomous communities (regional governments) gained full powers in the area of education and the current education law (Ley Orgánica de Educación 2/2006, 3 May) has defined a set of ‘basic competencies’ that are prescriptive for every community (2/2006: p. 17166). These indicate that, for preschool, code-centred abilities are secondary to the functional uses of literacy (pp. 480–482). A similar approach is proposed for the first cycle of primary school, although alongside this there is a growing concern for correct spelling and more emphasis on reading, including a recommendation that, at primary level, at least 30 minutes should be devoted to reading every day. Literacy is considered a competency
that should ‘cut across’ the curriculum, and therefore much time is dedicated to reading and writing in the specific content areas (p. 43085).

Autonomous communities made their own directives in rather different ways. In Andalusia the local curriculum recommends ‘To approach reading and writing through a diversity of texts related to daily life, and relating to written language as an instrument of communication, representation and pleasure’ (428/2008, p. 8). The document contains clear methodological guidelines for relating reading and writing to different topics – from the most mundane (e.g. a shopping list) to the most literary, with a clear emphasis on exploiting every opportunity as a potential literacy event (p. 22). In first grade the approach remains highly functional but with a greater emphasis on orthographic knowledge. From preschool on, teachers are counselled to evaluate ‘the advance of literacy, understood as the capacity to produce and interpret the texts used in our society’ (428/2008, p. 22).

In contrast Madrid is a more code-oriented community. The preschool timetable needs to include a specific slot each day for reading and writing activities (22/2007, p. 7). There are clear directives as to the order in which linguistic units should be introduced both for reading and writing: letters, syllables, words and texts as well as activities for exercising precise reading. Additional importance is attached to reading aloud with adequate pronunciation, intonation and rhythm. Special mention is made of the instructional role played by ‘the adult’ (22/2007, p. 13) and not solely by pair interactions. For primary school the recommendations include both a concern for reading as an instrument for learning in every content area, for the correct use of Spanish language and the specific vocabulary of all content areas (p. 42). No specific consideration is given to autonomous writing. Rather, writing competence is evaluated through children’s ability to copy and to take dictation. In primary schools, evaluation reflects text comprehension and production as well as spelling rules, tidiness of handwriting and correct use of language (p. 30).

In France, elementary education is divided into three cycles. The first cycle includes preschool (three- to five-year-olds). The second cycle includes the last year of nursery school and the first two years of elementary school (six- to eight-year-olds). The third cycle includes the last two years of elementary school. The cycle system is an attempt to break away from strict age-grading and to take into consideration individual variation in development.

Unlike Spain, the school system in France is highly centralized and administered under the Ministry of National Education (Ministère de l’Education Nationale). All programme and curriculum decisions are taken on a national level. Education is obligatory from the age of six years until the age of 16. Despite the fact that education is obligatory only at the age of six, 96 per cent of the population begins publicly financed preschools at three years of age.

During the first cycle emphasis is placed on communicative activities, such as show and tell. Nursery school classrooms have a book corner and reading stories to the children is an important activity, intended to make children sensitive to the differences between written and spoken French. Rhyming games, phoneme detection activities and games using minimal pairs are used to increase phonological awareness. A report edited by the Ministry of Education in 2013 (Le Cam et al., 2013) indicated that children entering first grade in 2011 showed significant improvement compared with children entering first grade in 1997, with phonology accounting for much of the improvement. The activities proposed in the first cycle aim to do three things: improve oral language skills, prepare for the acquisition of literacy skills and encourage the child to pay attention to formal aspects of language.

During the second cycle, the child continues to work on spoken language, improving pronunciation, articulation and control over intonation. In all classroom activities the teacher encourages children to exchange information, tell stories, describe situations, give a point of
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view and ask for further explanations. Written language is present in all aspects of classroom life. Children should write their lessons and they should begin to write original texts. The child should be able to coherently tell a story and recount a past event, to identify the essential parts of a short story, to summarize a story told or read, to comment on it and to supply other possible outcomes. By the end of the second cycle the child should be able to write a short text respecting the constraints appropriate to each type of writing task, including an introduction, appropriate vocabulary and complete syntax (the correct use of pronouns, connectors, tense and aspect).

During the third cycle, the teacher organizes activities in which the students practise recounting events, describing situations, giving explanations, formulating questions and justifications, arguing and expressing their opinions. This oral work is destined to improve the organization, coherence and clarity in the written expression of ideas. Different types of written texts are presented (narrative, descriptive and argumentative) and the child should be able to produce these different types of texts.

While the official instructions that we have summarized very briefly are quite detailed concerning the achievements to be obtained for each cycle (cf. http://eduscol.education.fr), what actually goes on in the classroom to attain the goals set out in the official instructions is somewhat opaque. The 2013 report published by the Ministry of Education indicated that the level of performance in language of children leaving preschool and entering primary school was higher than the level of performance of children in 1997 and 2011. However, the same report indicated that in elementary school the level of performance of children born in 2005 had significantly decreased in reading comprehension, vocabulary and orthography.

Approaches to multilingualism

Spain offers a diversity of multilingual scenarios due to immigration processes and to historical characteristics of Spanish communities. After centuries of emigration Spain has recently experienced large-scale immigration. The percentage of foreign population in Spain increased steadily from 1981 (less than 1 per cent) to more than 12 per cent in 2011, but subsequently started to decrease for economic reasons. In contrast, the historical multilingualism of certain Spanish regions – Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia – is strengthening, with the communities ‘own languages’ being attributed new status as co-official with Spanish, and as other communities (Balear Islands, Valencian Community, Navarra, Aragon y Asturias) increase the use of the local language in school.

Although the traditional view of France is that it is a monolingual country, over 70 languages are currently listed as languages of France (Cerquiglini, 1999), including regional languages and immigrant languages. The immigrant population increases constantly and in urban areas teachers are often in classrooms where French is not the first language of the majority of children. Special classes are provided for newly arriving immigrant children.

Influence of international assessments

International student assessment surveys are carried out under agreed conceptual and methodological frameworks. The relative position of countries’ average test scores is the indicator that attracts most public attention and influences national education policies. Results of these assessments indicate that, at least since 2000, Spanish students’ reading comprehension has not improved (Mullis et al., 2012; OECD, 2010). There is a lack (or poor dissemination) of effective strategies or programmes. Ripoll and Aguado (2014) showed that among the
interventions that were applied to improve reading comprehension the best results are achieved by those interventions that are based on combining explicit teaching of reading and comprehension strategies. In contrast, few interventions based on improving decoding have been shown to significantly influence reading comprehension.

Since 2001 France has participated in the reading comprehension evaluation conducted within the PIRLS framework (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). The aim of this evaluation is to assess reading comprehension in children who have completed their fourth year of primary school. The results for French children examined in 2001, 2006 and 2011 show a steady decrease in reading comprehension performance (Colmani and Le Cam, 2012). French children scored below the average of children in the European Union in 2011. The evaluation asks children to read texts and then to answer questions, either multiple choice or questions that require writing a short text. The French children show lower performance for the open-response questions, indicating that combining reading comprehension and written production is particularly challenging for French children. Interestingly, in the PIRLS 2011 evaluation of reading comprehension, the French and Spanish children perform very similarly. The two countries are below average both in literary and informational reading, and with similar scores in overall average reading achievements (Mullis et al., 2012).

**Principal methods and content areas of literacy instruction**

A comprehensive study (Tolchinsky et al., 2012) that comprises 13 per cent of the population of preschool and first-grade teachers from different geographical regions of Spain (Almeria, Asturias, Cantabria, Catalonia, Madrid, Valencia, Leon, the Basque Country and Valladolid) showed that more than 60 per cent of the teachers declared that they follow ‘mixed’ methods, 16 per cent a global method and the rest were distributed across phonic (8 per cent), syllabic (5 per cent) and constructivist (6 per cent).

In spite of the generalized use of these labels to denominate literacy teaching methods it is hard to know what kind of activities and content areas are implied by them. Therefore, the participants in the study were asked to respond to a more detailed questionnaire about the practices implemented in classroom in relation to classroom dynamics, concern for situational learning, instructional activities and evaluation. Results revealed three profiles of teaching practice that were termed instructional, situational and multidimensional.

Teachers who match the profile of instructional practices reported setting aside a specific amount of time in the school timetable for reading and writing activities. They rely heavily on knowledge of letters and sounds to teach reading and writing, work on phonological awareness and explicitly correct children’s reading. Teachers in the situational practices group stated that they frequently organize reading and writing activities in small groups, make use of all kind of situations that arise in the classroom to teach vocabulary and assess children’s progress by analysing production of short texts. They also reported using a wide range of printed materials in class, and encouraging children to write down the words they need even if they don’t yet know the letters involved. Finally, teachers assigned to the profile of multidimensional teaching presented a mixed picture of practices. They also set aside specific time for reading and writing activities and rely heavily on knowledge of letters and phonological awareness to teach reading and writing but take advantage of situational learning, encourage independent writing and strategic reading.

Most teachers in preschool presented a situational profile, whereas the instructional profile was predominant among first-grade teachers, probably due to higher demands imposed by
parents and policy-makers for systematic teaching of reading. A clear link emerged between self-declared teaching methods and practice profiles. Instructionally oriented practices were more frequent among teachers who claimed to follow syllabic or phonic methods, whereas situation-oriented practices were more common among followers of global or constructivist approaches.

Provision for children with special educational needs

Inclusive schooling is the prevalent ideology in Spain and France regarding children with special needs. Efforts are mobilized for children with special needs to remain in the same school context as typically developing children. Underlying this ideology is the conception of an interaction between students’ characteristics and educational environment. The idea is that any student can experience learning difficulties at one time or another in their schooling. This approach has been particularly successful for early childhood education with very high enrolment rates and important learning achievements. However, in the transition from elementary to secondary education the ‘dis-integration’ of pupils with special needs affects 35 per cent of the students in Spain and is significantly more intense in public than in private schools (Alonso Parreño and Araoz Sánchez-Dopico, 2011; Echeita, 2011; Toboso Martín et al., 2012).

There are no systematic screening procedures during preschool or first grades of primary school. The teacher is the main identifier of potential reading or writing difficulties. Once the teacher detects a potential problem, he/she can resort to specialized teachers, usually specialized in therapeutic pedagogy, or to centres for pedagogic orientation. Depending on the size and location of the school, these two resources are part of the school or are shared by groups of schools. In line with the inclusion principle, the goal is to find ways to attend to the child’s needs within the same classroom by means of curricular adaptations or by separating the child for special attention for the shortest period of time possible. The main barrier to the fulfilment of these ideal aims lies in the lack of special preparation of the classroom teachers, who sometimes feel helpless when confronted with the needs of some children.

In 1981 Priority Education Zones (Zone d’Education Prioritaire, cf. www.education.gouv.fr#educationprioritaire) were created in the most impoverished areas, regrouping preschool, primary and middle school into zones that receive additional funding and support from the Ministry of Education. Teaching loads are adjusted so as to provide time for the teachers’ participation in pedagogical teams. Supplementary personnel within these schools follow the children’s progress and tutor children who are particularly challenged individually or in small groups. Parental cooperation is greatly encouraged, with the idea of firmly embedding the schools in the community. These priority zones were created with the aim of overcoming social class differences in school success.

Variety of literacy resources

Given the diversity of classroom settings and teaching practices it is difficult to provide a general view of available resources. In the official curricula one can find specific references to the need for creating distinct spaces in preschools for undertaking different activities (e.g. library, natural experiments). Emphasis is placed on the use of written messages in everyday life as well as the importance of relating to the children’s life experiences for understanding and producing texts.
Both in Spain and France, preschool classrooms are organized by ‘corners’ – and the library or reading corner is obligatory in every preschool. However, some library corners display children’s story books almost exclusively, while others contain a huge diversity of texts – recipes books, encyclopedias, music scores, gossip magazines, newspapers, calendars and so on. Moreover, while in some classrooms the printed materials are directly accessible to the child, in other classrooms they are kept in high and closed cupboards, only accessible to the teacher who brings them to the children for specific activities. The same diversity of availability applies to all kinds of materials. While in some classrooms erasers, tape and Tipp-Ex are available to the child when composing texts, because correcting is conceived as part of the writing process requiring that the writer have at his/her disposal all the necessary instruments, in other classrooms children must ask for permission to correct their texts. In the same line, while some kindergarteners are preparing the script of an oral exposition on Van Gogh paintings, in other kindergarten classrooms they use template-based materials of graded difficulty that emphasize exercising letter-recognition, letter-shape drawing and letter-to-sound mapping, moving systematically from one letter to the next.

Major challenges for current and future early literacy provision

Spanish children learn to decode isolated words very early. After a few months of formal instruction they are able to read accurately most words they are required to read, especially if they are frequent words. Children attain accurate decoding (and adequate levels of spelling) both in monolingual and multilingual environments in spite of being exposed to a diversity of teaching practices. Nevertheless, Spanish students have obtained one of the worst results in international evaluation (PISA, 2003; Mullis et al., 2012). Twice as many Spanish children score below level 1 of reading ability – the lowest level as measured by the PISA report – as at the highest level. Moreover, in the national evaluations the situation remains very similar: 30 per cent of students finish primary school without attaining the minimal level required for secondary school (Comunidad de Madrid, 2004). In spite of having learned to decode rather successfully and even given relatively favourable socioeconomic conditions, reading comprehension is still a major challenge for many Spanish-speaking children.

The situation is rather similar in France. A report published by the Haut Conseil de l’Education in 2007 (cf. www.hce.education.fr/gallery_files/site/21/40.pdf) indicated that 60 per cent of children leave elementary school with satisfactory results, 25 per cent show some weakness and 15 per cent show very severe weaknesses. One of the issues raised in that report concerns the necessity of continuing education for teachers, claiming that teachers are not sufficiently supported once they have finished their initial training. Another issue addressed in this report is the incapacity of the system to help children in difficulty. The majority of children who begin elementary school with weaknesses in reading readiness finish elementary school with severe weakness: primary education seems incapable of helping those children catch up.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by discussing the differences between Spanish and French orthographic systems and how they influence initial periods of acquiring literacy. Very young Spanish-speaking children are able to decode and transcribe unfamiliar words and pseudowords. Young French-speaking children are able to read and spell regular and frequent words, but irregular words and grammatical morphology remain a challenge throughout education.
We expected that these differences would be reflected in the challenges for literacy instruction and accomplishment that each country faces; and yet the challenges are similar in spite of the described differences. Neither Spanish nor French children after four years of elementary education appear prepared to fulfil the fundamental aim of literacy learning: to extract and use information from written language in reading comprehension. The goal for both countries is to find ways of overcoming this limitation.

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