

THE PORTUGUESE SIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM: past, present and future

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Abstract: The Portuguese Sign Language (hereinafter LGP) is linked to the deaf education in Portugal for decades. Its genesis is found in the first institutes in Lisbon and Porto in the 19th century, in which a considerable number of deaf people had gathered and developed signed communication systems. During the 19th century, the methodologies used in their education were based on these signed systems and the manual alphabet. With the advent of oralist methodologies introduced in Portugal, these signed communication systems were banned from the classroom, although deaf students continued to develop their sign communication clandestinely. The LGP was rescued in the 80s and 90s of the 20th century as a result of the studies carried out by the University of Lisbon in partnership with the Portuguese Association of the Deaf, and of the first attempts to implement bilingual education for deaf students. Both developments demonstrated the need to teach LGP as a first language to deaf students and the construction of an LGP curriculum. The first national LGP curriculum is published (DGIDC, 2008) with the publication of the Decree-Law 3/2008, which regulated deaf bilingual education for the first time in its Article 23. In 2018, two new Decree-Laws were published (54/2018 and 55/2018) that revoke the previous Decree-Law and promote a curriculum review of all school subjects. To understand the effectiveness of the 2008 LGP curriculum, we carried out an exploratory study. We interviewed four deaf LGP teachers who suggested the reformulation of the LGP curriculum, respecting the 2018 legislation and the reality of the current deaf school population.

Keywords: Deaf Education. Bilingual Education. Portuguese Sign Language. Educational Policies. Curriculum Program.

O CURRÍCULO DE LÍNGUA GESTUAL PORTUGUESA: passado, presente e futuro

Resumo: A Língua Gestual Portuguesa (doravante LGP) esteve durante décadas ligada à educação de surdos em Portugal. A sua génese, encontra-se nos primeiros institutos fundados em Lisboa e Porto no século XIX, sendo nestes locais que se reuniram no mesmo espaço um número considerável de crianças e jovens surdos que permitiu desenvolver sistemas de comunicação gestual. Durante o século XIX, as metodologias utilizadas na educação de surdos assentavam em sistemas de gestuais e no alfabeto manual. Com o advento das metodologias oralistas introduzidas em Portugal, estes sistemas de comunicação gestual dentro da sala de aula foram banidos, mas os alunos surdos continuaram a desenvolver a sua comunicação gestual clandestinamente. A LGP apenas viria a ser resgatada na década de 80 e 90 do século XX fruto das investigações levadas a cabo pela Universidade de Lisboa em parceria com a Associação Portuguesa de Surdos e pelas primeiras tentativas de implementação da educação bilingue para alunos surdos que teve como consequência a necessidade de ensinar a LGP como primeira língua aos alunos surdos e a construção de um programa curricular de LGP. Só com a publicação do decreto-lei 3/2008, que regula pela primeira vez educação bilingue para alunos surdos no seu artigo 23o,

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é publicado o primeiro programa curricular de LGP a nível nacional (DGIDC, 2008). Em 2018, foram publicados dois novos Decretos-Lei (54/2018 e 55/2018) que revogam o Decreto-Lei anterior e promovem a revisão curricular de todas as disciplinas escolares. Para compreender a eficácia do currículo do LGP 2008, realizamos um estudo exploratório. Entrevistamos quatro professores surdos da LGP, cujos resultados apontam para uma proposta de reformulação do currículo da LGP, respeitando a legislação publicada em 2018 e atendendo a realidade da população escolar surda atual.

Palavras-chave: Educação de surdos. Educação Bilingue. Língua Gestual Portuguesa. Políticas Educacionais. Programa Curricular.

EL CURRÍCULO DE LENGUA DE SEÑAS PORTUGUESA: pasado, presente y futuro

Resumen: La Lengua de Señas Portuguesa (en adelante LGP) está vinculada a la educación de sordos en Portugal desde hace décadas. Su génesis se encuentra en los primeros institutos fundados en Lisboa y Oporto en el siglo XIX, y fue en estos lugares donde se reunía en un mismo espacio un número considerable de niños y jóvenes sordos, lo que permitió el desarrollo de sistemas de comunicación gestual. Durante el siglo XIX, las metodologías utilizadas en la educación de los sordos se basaban en los sistemas gestuales y el alfabeto manual. Con el advenimiento de las metodologías orales introducidas en Portugal, estos sistemas de comunicación gestual dentro del aula fueron prohibidos, pero los alumnos sordos continuaron desarrollando su comunicación gestual de forma clandestina. La LGP solo sería rescatada en los años 80 y 90 del siglo XX como resultado de investigaciones realizadas por la Universidad de Lisboa en colaboración con la Associação Portuguesa de Surdos y por los primeros intentos de implementar la educación bilingüe para estudiantes sordos, lo que resultó en la necesidad de enseñar LGP como primera lengua a estudiantes sordos y la construcción de un currículo LGP. Recién con la publicación del Decreto-Ley 3/2008, que por primera vez regula la educación bilingüe para alumnos sordos en su artículo 23, se publicó el primer programa curricular LGP a nivel nacional (DGIDC, 2008). En 2018 se publicaron dos nuevos Decretos-Leyes (54/2018 y 55/2018) que derogan el anterior Decreto-Ley y promueven la revisión curricular de todas las materias escolares. Para comprender la efectividad del currículo LGP en 2008, llevamos a cabo un estudio exploratorio. Entrevistamos a cuatro docentes sordos LGP, cuyos resultados apuntan a una propuesta de reformulación del currículo LGP, respetando la legislación publicada en 2018 y atendiendo a la realidad de la población escolar sorda actual.

Palabras clave: Educación de sordos. Educación bilingue. Lengua de Señas Portuguesa. Políticas Educativas. Programa Curricular.

Introduction

We cannot address the issue of the Portuguese Sign Language (hereinafter LGP) curriculum without first understanding the journey that this language had throughout the history of deaf education in Portugal, to which it is closely linked.

Officially, the education of the deaf in Portugal appears in 1823 by the Swedish teacher Per Aron Borg, who, at the request of King João VI, traveled to Portugal to found the Royal

Institute for the Deaf-Mute and Blind (CUNHA, 1835; FUSSILIER, 1893; SANTOS, 1913; CARVALHO, 2007). The creation of this school made it possible for several deaf children to come together and to develop a system of sign communication³. However, we cannot confirm that this is the institution where the genesis of the LGP took place, as we do not have the sources that allow us to affirm this possibility and to claim that there was no sign language before its foundation. It is also debatable that there is an influence of Swedish Sign Language in the LGP, supposedly brought by Professor Borg, although further studies are needed to clarify this detail. The only evidence we have is the similarity between the two manual alphabets. However, it is totally insufficient to make such a pertinent statement, since the manual alphabets are not considered part of the Sign Languages, but are a code for teaching writing and reading to deaf children. In the future, we aim to publish a study about this topic.

In 1870, the College for the Deaf was founded in northern Portugal by Guimarães, which would give rise to the Municipal Institute for the Deaf-Mutes of Porto, providing a response to deaf students in the north of the country. According to Fussilier (1893), Santos (1913), Da Costa (1874), Alves (2012) and Carvalho (2007, 2019), the deaf students at this Institute had sign communication, although we do not know if this communication was similar to the one used by the deaf students in Lisbon.

From 1905 onwards, with the introduction of oralist teaching methodologies for the deaf in the Portuguese institutes, sign communication systems began to be forbidden and to develop clandestinely in the boarding schools for the deaf, such as in their playgrounds and canteens. In the 40s of the 20th century, due to a national reform in deaf education, there was a great mobility of deaf students between the institutes of Lisbon and Porto. It was through this mobility that the two sign communication systems will unite into one for the foundation of the LGP.

Only in the 1980s emerge the first attempts to recover the LGP from its underground state, as it was primarily investigated and gradually introduced in deaf education, giving rise to deaf bilingual education through the teaching of LGP as a first language (L1) and of Portuguese as a second language (L2).

³ We will use the term *sign communication* for the communication used by the deaf students in the nineteenth-century institutes as we do not have sources that allow us to state that they were Sign Languages, since we do not know the structure levels of these forms of sign communication.

It is then in this context of bilingual education that the need to teach LGP as an L1 to deaf students arises for the first time and, consequently, the need to build an LGP curriculum. However, in the 1980s and 1990s there was no legislation by the Ministry of Education to regulate the teaching of LGP and each school for the deaf developed its own LGP curriculum. With the publication of the Decree-Law 3/2008 that regulates the bilingual education for deaf students, the first national LGP curriculum is also published in the same year (ME/DGIDC, 2008). In 2011, the curriculum of Portuguese as an L2 followed (ME/DGIDC, 2011). In 2018, the Ministry of Education publishes two new Decree-Laws (54/2018 and 55/2018), revoking the previous one and establishing the reformulation of the curriculum for all subjects. This reformulation needs to take into account the essential learning as this is defined by the new decree-laws. Thus, at present, the LGP and Portuguese curricula are under this process.

Firstly, this paper aims to describe the trajectory of LGP within the education of deaf people in Portugal; the legislation that was created to affirm the language as a linguistic and educational right for deaf people; and the structure of the LGP curriculum as it was applied in schools. Secondly, it aims to discuss its application in practice and its overall effectiveness (or not).

Initially, we carry out a historical contextualization of LGP in deaf education in Portugal from the 19th century to present. Then, we discuss the related legislation in Portugal for the education of the deaf in general, and for the LGP in particular. Next, we present the structure of the LGP curriculum that is in force (ME/DGIDC, 2008) and the conditions under which deaf students access it upon their arrival at school. To understand the results of the LGP curriculum after a 13-year application in schools, we conducted an exploratory study with the participation of four deaf LGP teachers, who represented the country's four main regions: the north, center, south and the autonomous one. We then present and discuss the results of this study.

Deaf Education in the 19th century

We have not found historical sources that allow us to address deaf education in Portugal before 1823, except of two petitions from 1822 by José Freitas Rego and António Patrício to the Portuguese Courts to create classes for the deaf but without success (MINISTÉRIO DO REINO, 1822). Thus, according to Cunha (1835), Fussilier (1893), Santos (1913), Lourenço

(1956), Alves (2012) and Carvalho (2007, 2019), deaf education in Portugal formally began in 1823 with the foundation of the Royal Institute for the Deaf and Blind by the Swedish professor Per Aron Borg, who had already founded the Institute for the Deaf and Blind in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1809.

Aron Borg was hired by the King João VI and accompanied by his brother Joahm Borg. Later, in 1826, he hired a Portuguese teacher, José Crispim da Cunha. Regarding his education methods, Aron Borg and his assistants used the *mixed method*, which meant the use of the manual alphabet that Borg himself created and of some established signs for teaching the Portuguese language. Aron Borg returned to his country in 1828, he was replaced by his brother who died in 1832, and José Crispim da Cunha remained the director until 1834, the year in which the Institute is integrated into the Casa Pia de Lisboa (hereinafter CPL). In 1860, the education of the deaf was abolished in the CPL. However, during the 19th century, some individual initiatives for the education of the deaf emerged again in Portugal. Of these, we highlight the work of Father Pedro Maria Aguilar (1893), who, in 1870, founded a college for the deaf in northern Portugal, in Guimarães.

According to Fussilier (1893) and Da Costa (1874), Father Aguilar developed an exemplary methodology based on the works of the abbots L'Épée and Sicard. Due to lack of funds, the College of Guimarães closed, but Aguilar, not giving up, made a request to the Porto City Council to found a school for the deaf in this city. In 1877, the Municipal Institute of the Deaf Mutes of Porto was founded. After his death, he was replaced by his nephew Eliseu Aguilar, who was already his assistant at the College of Guimarães. His appointment in the newly-founded Municipal Institute of the Deaf-Mutes in Lisbon led to the closure of the Institute of Porto in 1886. It was only in 1893 that the city of Porto had deaf education again through the Institute of the Deaf Mutes Araújo Porto, and was administered by the Holy House of Mercy (Santa Casa da Misericórdia).

The oral methods

At the beginning of the 20th century there were in Portugal two institutes for the education of deaf people: one in the north, the Institute of Deaf Mutes Araújo Porto, and one in the South, the Municipal Institute for the Deaf Mutes in Lisbon, which was integrated in the CPL after the

closure of the Municipal Asylums. Due to the lack of specialized teachers for this type of teaching, Professor Nicolau Pavão de Sousa was sent by the Institute for the Deaf-Mutes Araújo Porto (in Portuguese, ISMAP) to the Institute of Deaf Mutes in Paris. In this period, the French Institute already advocated the oral method for teaching deaf people, since the mid-30s of the 19th century, and thus, when Professor Pavão de Sousa returned to Portugal, he introduced the pure oral method in our country.

Fruit of a reorganization of deaf education at CPL, this teacher is hired as the director of this institute. Moreover, the so-called oralist methodologies in Portugal will be subdivided into three main ones in the decades to follow: the intuitive-oral-pure method (1905-1950); the maternal-reflective method (1951-1963); and the verbo-tonal method (1963-1991). During this long period, the Portuguese Sign Language (hereinafter LGP) was prohibited from the classes as it was considered to hamper the development of speech. However, this language continued to develop outside classrooms, in the boarding schools (as mentioned previously), although it was not a schooled language.

LGP in the 70s, 80s and 90s

Until the 70s, there were no consistent responses from the Ministry of Education for the education of deaf students. The responses for this school population were coming from other ministries, such as the Ministry of Social Solidarity that managed the two large Institutes of Lisbon and Porto, which, in turn, were advocating the oralist methods (as mentioned above). Legislation for the disability area was published at the beginning of the 70s (see below). In this context, Special Education teams are created and integrated by the Ministry of Education, which, supported by the Luso-Swedish cooperation program, changed the educational paradigm for the deaf in Portugal. The collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Phonetics Laboratory of the Arts and Humanities Faculty of Lisbon University gave rise to a series of colloquia, training courses and research in the methodologies used in deaf education worldwide, which resulted in the first study of LGP. These studies culminated in the publication *Talking Hands* (in Portuguese, *Mãos que Falam*), the first LGP dictionary (PRATA, 1980). This broad research group of special education teachers, linguists and deaf associations advocated other methods for the education of the deaf, besides oralism, such as Gestualism, Total

Communication, Bimodalism and Bilingualism, methods which laid the foundations for recovering the LGP and its introduction to the education of deaf students.

In 1983, professor Sérgio Niza, who introduced the Modern School movement in Portugal, together with the president of the Portuguese Association for the Deaf, José Bettencourt, attempted to implement a first bilingual education model for deaf students at the A-da-Beja school. However, the lack of funding terminated this project. A paradigm shift in deaf education took place at the Institute Jacob Rodrigues Pereira/Casa Pia in Lisbon (in Portuguese, Instituto Jacob Rodrigues Pereira /Casa Pia de Lisboa - IJRP/CPL) in the early 1990s with the inauguration of Maria Augusta Amaral as the director of the Institute. Together with the Gallaudet University in the USA, she conducted the first study on the failures of those students who were exposed to oral methods for several years. The study was published in 1992 and served as a basis for implementing a structured bilingual model for the education of the deaf. Studies about the LGP at the Institute and in conjunction with the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lisbon (FLUL) also resulted in the publication *For a Grammar of LGP* (AMARAL, COUTINHO, DELGADO-MARTINS, 1994). Thus, the 1990s marked the period of the LGP linguistic research and its inclusion in deaf education, which, along with the Portuguese language as an L2, gave rise to the Bilingual Education of the deaf.

Legislation, Deaf Education and LGP

In the early 70s, the Portuguese education system showed some signs of change concerning the students with “disability”⁴. The enactment of the Decree-Law No. 6/71 (Government Gazette No. 262/1971, Series I, 1971-11-08) advocated rehabilitation, social integration and the proliferation of the special education schools. In addition, the Ministry of Education assumed entirely the responsibility for children and young people with disabilities with the Veiga Simão reform and the publication of the Law 5/73 (Government Gazette No. 173/1973, Series I of 1973-07-25). Moreover, this Law passed the guardianship of these children from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Corporations and Social Security⁵ to the Ministry of Education.

⁴ Designation of that time.

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In 1976, the new Constitution of the Portuguese Republic changed the perspective on education, defending that “everyone has the right to education with a guarantee of the right to equal opportunities for access and school success” (Government Gazette No. 86/1976, Série I, article 73, No.1, 1976-04-10). In relation to people with “disability”, “The State undertakes to carry out a national policy of prevention and treatment, rehabilitation and integration of the disabled” (Government Gazette No. 86/1976, Series I, article 71, 1976-04-10). Based on this legislation, Special Education Teams are created with the aim to promote the family, social and school integration of children and young people with “disability”. Regarding the deaf student, as previously mentioned, with the emergence of the Special Education Divisions and the Luso-Swedish cooperation agreement, investment was made in the training of teachers and technicians as well as in research, aiming at creating support rooms, special classes in regular schools, and itinerant support (PINHO-MELO, MORENO, AMARAL, et al., 1984).

In 1979, the Law No. 66/79 for Special Education was published (Government Gazette No. 230/1979, Series I of 1979-10-04), and the Support Centers for the Hearing Impaired (in Portuguese, NADA) were founded - later designated Support Centers for Hearing Impaired Children (in Portuguese, NACDA) - to respond to deaf children’s education in line with the declaration of the United Nations (1975).

In the 80's, several other legislation was enacted to regulate special education, including the education of the deaf. The Decree-Law 301/84 (Government Gazette No. 208/1984, Série I, 1984-09-07) made schooling compulsory in Portugal and, in 1984, the Basic Law of the Educational System (Government Gazette No. 237/1986, Series I, 1986-10-14) changed radically the education, including the special education.

In the 1990's, Portugal was a signatory of the Salamanca Declaration that internationally assumed the inclusive perspective in education (UNESCO, 1994). In this decade, the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic recognized LGP (AR, 1997), stating that: “The State must protect and value the LGP as a cultural expression and instrument of access to education and to equal rights for deaf people.”

This recognition was not an easy journey, but became a reality thanks to the action of the LGP Defense Commission, which was constituted by the following institutions relating to the Portuguese Deaf Community: the Portuguese Association of the Deaf (in Portuguese, APS);

the LGP Interpreters Association (in Portuguese, AILGP); the Parents' Association for the Education of the Hearing Impaired Children (in Portuguese, APECDA); the Portuguese Association of the Rehabilitation Technicians for Deaf Children and Young People (in Portuguese, APTRCJS); the Portuguese Federation of Deaf Associations (in Portuguese, FPAS); the Centre for Deaf Youth (in Portuguese, CJS), and the Association of Families and Friends of the Deaf (in Portuguese, AFAS). This Commission published a document defending the LGP. As a result of this legal recognition, the normative order 7520/98 was published (Government Gazette No 104/1998, Série II, 1998-05-06), laying the foundations for the inclusion of LGP in deaf bilingual education. Within the scope of this order, the NACDA changed its nomenclature to *Support Units for Deaf Students* (in Portuguese, UAAS), eliminating once and for all the term *hearing impaired*.

According to the order:

[...] The education of deaf children and young people should be carried out preferably in bilingual environments that enable the domain of LGP and the domain of written and possibly spoken Portuguese, respecting in this matter the parents' options regarding the linguistic/educational context in which their child will enter [...] (ME, 1998).

Although this order was a huge step towards the implementation of deaf bilingual education, a more in-depth regulation was needed. This came with the publication of the Decree-Law 3/2008 (Government Gazette No. 4/2008, Série I, 2008-01-07) and its article 23 that regulated the bilingual education of deaf students. For this purpose, the Decree-Law provisioned the creation of Reference Schools for the Bilingual Education of Deaf Students (in Portuguese, EREBAS) to cover the entire national territory. In line with this context, the realization of deaf bilingual education also necessitated a curriculum for LGP as an L1 and for Portuguese as an L2. Thus, the curricular program of the subject LGP was published in 2008 (ME/DGIDC, 2008) and the curricular program of Portuguese as an L2 in 2011 (ME/DGIDC, 2011). In 2018, the Decree-Law 54/2018 revoked the Decree-Law 3/2008, a change that we would like to discuss in a future publication.

The LGP curriculum

Before the official publication of the LGP curriculum in 2008, some deaf schools had already developed LGP curricula that entailed the structural teaching of the language to deaf children and young people. We can highlight the case of the IJRP/CPL. As mentioned above, the bilingual education in the IJRP/CPL began in the school year 1992/1993, during which the need for planning the LGP teaching as an L1 was clearly understood. At that time, the existing LGP planning mainly focused on hearing peoples' learning (as an L2) in deaf associations. For the teaching of LGP as an L1 little or nothing existed.

Thus, the IJRP/CPL director gathered a group of LGP trainers⁶ who began to build a GLP curriculum to be applied in this Institute only. This first curriculum was intended for the pre-school education and the first Cycle of the Basic Education (in Portuguese, Ciclo do Ensino Básico - CEB), as these were the cycles to be covered by the first stage of bilingual education. Also, the Portuguese language sub-department began to develop the Portuguese program for the deaf (as an L2).

Table 01: LGP stories for children

YEAR	STORY
2005	Puss in boots
2005	The three little pigs
2005	Rabbit and The Turtle
2007	The mouse and the moon
2007	Little Red Riding Hood
2008	The secret of sun and the moon
2009	The big cat, poet by profession
2010	The Lion and the Cockatoo lady
2010	A breath of wind
2011	What is happening here?
2012	Lost in laughter

Source: Elaborated by the author / the authors

⁶ Designation of that time.

Apart from the IJRP/CPL, we must highlight the work in 1990 by the LGP Unit of the Portuguese Association of the Deaf (in Portuguese, APS), whose main objective was to carry out linguistic and didactic studies about this language. Initially, the ULGP dedicated itself to the training of LGP teachers and interpreters. Later, these trainings became degree courses; in 1997, the degree course in the LGP translation and interpretation at the School of Education in Setúbal; and in 1999, at the School of Education in Porto. In 2005, the Degree in LGP was created at the Coimbra School of Education, and in 2010, at the Catholic University of Portugal.

After the recognition of the LGP in the Constitution of the Republic in 1997, there was a great approximation and collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the APS/ULGP that culminated in the drafting of the Decree-Law 3/2008 (ME, 2008) and the LGP Curriculum (ME/DGIDC, 2008). For the construction of this latter, the Ministry of Education/General Directorate for Innovation and Curriculum Development invited some researchers, members of the ULGP. In addition to the construction of this curricular program, support materials were also built, mainly children's stories (see Table 1), for the teaching of the program.

In 2018, the LGP teacher recruitment group (group 360) is created, aiming at giving an equal status to the LGP teachers, when compared to their colleagues of other curricular subjects, and hence, access to a teaching career. This achievement was only possible after actions were taken by the Association of Sign Language Teaching Professionals (in Portuguese, AFOMOS) and the Teachers' Union (in Portuguese, FENPROF).

The LGP Curriculum Structure

The 2008 curricular program for the LGP subject is aimed at all deaf children and young people, regardless the type and degree of deafness and age at which they acquired the language. It must be applied and adapted to all cases, considering the heterogeneity of the school population (ME/DGIDC, 2008).

The main user of the curriculum is the LGP teacher who teaches the contents, and for this reason he/she must master the language as an L1 to teach it correctly. The LGP teacher must, like any other teacher of any other curricular subject, develop objectives, activities, lesson plans, pedagogical strategies, and know how to use resources and develop materials for teaching the LGP (ME/DGIDC, 2008).

For the fulfillment of its role within a bilingual school, LGP must be informally present, and as a language discipline, must be introduced in a systematic and organized way. In terms of its teaching hours, LGP as a subject must be total in pre-school education, since it is this period in which deaf children acquire their mother tongue/L1, and knowledge of themselves and of the world. Therefore, there must be a linguistic emergence at this stage. In the remaining stages, the teaching hours must never be inferior to those of the Portuguese language for the hearing student. In addition, the classes should not have more than eight deaf students in pre-school; ten in the first CEB, twelve in the second CEB and fifteen in the third CEB and in secondary education (ME/DGIDC, 2008).

Concerning assessments, these must be done via video, as LGP takes place in a visual-spatial mode and there are no consensual written records of sign languages. As a result, schools need to have material resources to carry out these assessments. EREBAS must also have visual resources to facilitate students' access to global information (light bells, telephones with video calls, internet, among others). Classrooms should be spacious and well lit, with desks arranged in a semi-circle so that students can interact with one another.

The LGP curriculum is divided into four major core areas:

- (i) *the LGP interaction*: the student must fluently express thoughts and feelings, according to the norms of visual communication, adjusting his/her signing production to the context and the interlocutor; and easily understand formal and informal utterances in LGP.
- (ii) *the LGP Literacy*: the student must understand, produce and analyze types of LGP discourse; enjoy using the language for entertainment; be critical and creative; understand experiences; and interpret meanings.
- (iii) *the Language Study*: The student must know and analyze the grammatical aspects of LGP and its sociocultural variations, and study the origin of signs and their evolution.
- (iv) *the LGP, Community and Culture*: The student must know the different cultural and historical aspects that define the Deaf Community by his/her direct or indirect involvement in the lives of deaf people over time, and develop an identity and a positive self-concept (ME/DGIDC, 2008).

These four areas should not be worked in isolation but always in collaboration. Therefore, the intention is that, at the end of their schooling, deaf students attain skills in terms

of discourse fluency, grammatical knowledge of the language, sociolinguistic adaptation to the contexts of language use, and sociocultural awareness of their deaf identity.

Having presented the general structure of the LGP curriculum, we will pass in the next section that describes the exploratory study we carried out about the need (or not) in changing the LGP curriculum, based on the opinion of LGP teachers. We took into account its 13 year-application in EREBAS; the publication of the new Decree-Law 54/2018; its reform year imposed by the Ministry of Education with the Decree-Law 55/2018; and today's deaf population in schools.

Deaf students and curriculum access

Overall, when students enter school, they do not have the same characteristics, a situation that has a direct implication on their academic success (MARZANO, 2004). Even if we establish the same level of comparison (e.g., the school grade they attend), we find that they do differ from each other upon their arrival at school. If we compare deaf with hearing students, the differences are even greater.

We know that the 97% of deaf students comes from hearing parents who do not sign (MITCHELL, KARCHMER, 2004). Consequently, these children do not share family conversations, do not benefit from the surrounding information as they do not hear, and do not interact with linguistically competent deaf adults. Thus, their lack is great in relation to the prerequisites of the LGP levels, self-knowledge, and knowledge of the world. Moreover, many deaf children are currently referred for cochlear implants and, in some situations, LGP is never provided to them. Such choices are made due to a medical decision or/and because the parents are, in general, poorly informed about the advantages of an early LGP acquisition and the importance of contact with the deaf community. These students are usually integrated with other hearing children. Not infrequently, though, when it turns out that they do not reach the supposed auditory and oral success, they are belatedly referred to the EREBAS and only then they start their first contact with Sign Language and LGP.

Another aspect is the issue of deaf students with associated cognitive and/or motor problems, who are grouped with other deaf children by age. Their difficulties are not taken into account since their hearing loss is the only criterion. Many LGP teachers refer to the difficulty

they have in managing these classes, in which these deaf students have very different learning moments (see below).

Thus, the reality we find at the level of the deaf school population is as follows:

- Deaf children with mild, severe or profound deafness.
- Deaf children who have LGP as their L1 and Portuguese as their L2, but who have reading and writing difficulties.
- Bilingual deaf children, proficient in LGP and Portuguese.
- Deaf children with different levels of LGP acquisition.
- Deaf children who are oralized, without LGP acquisition, and with difficulties in Portuguese.
- Competent, oralized deaf children in Portuguese.
- Deaf children with cochlear implants, competent in LGP and Portuguese.
- Deaf children with cochlear implants without LGP acquisition and competence in Portuguese.
- Deaf children of deaf parents with early LGP acquisition.
- Deaf children without language acquisition.
- Deaf children with cognitive and/or motor and/or visual problems.

This heterogeneity of the deaf population in Portuguese schools is great and the task of the LGP teachers is more complex in view of this reality. Therefore, we carried out an exploratory study to understand how these teachers deal with this reality, and the role of the LGP curriculum in this context.

Methodology

The participants of our study were four LGP teachers, representing the national territory (north, center, south). We selected them considering the following criteria: (i) they are licensed in LGP teaching; (ii) they have more than ten years of service; and (iii) they are native to LGP. The anonymity of the subjects was guaranteed and they are identified as: Subject A, Subject B, and Subject C.

We selected as a data collection instrument the semi-structured interview. The interview is a frequent data collection technique in Social Sciences, including the field of Deaf Studies,

and is defined as the technique in which the researcher presents himself in front of the interviewee and asks questions with the aim to obtain data that are of interest to the investigation (GIL, 2008). It is a form of social interaction, a form of dialogue in which one party seeks to collect data and the other presents itself as a source of information. Selltiz (1987) consider the interview a very adequate data collection technique to obtain information about what people believe, expect or want, intend to do or did, as well as about their explanations or reasons about previous things. Moreover, it is considered as the technique par excellence in social investigation, because its flexibility allows its application to the most diverse fields (GIL, 2008; SELLTIZ, 1987). However, it can be monotonous for the interviewee to answer the questions that are asked, and when there is an inadequate understanding of the meaning of the questions, the interviewee can provide false answers for conscious or unconscious reasons (GIL, 2008).

In terms of structure, the interviews have different levels (MAY, 2004; RICHARDSON, 1999), and its degree of structuring should be considered in their conduct (BILKEN, BOGDAN, 1994). For our study, we chose the semi-structured interview, since this type uses a previously prepared script that guides the development of the interview, but maintains a high degree of flexibility in exploring the participants' responses. In our semi-structured interviews we wanted the participants to respond to the following questions:

1. State the strengths of the LGP Curriculum.
2. State what are the weaknesses of the LGP Curriculum.
3. Do you think the LGP Curriculum responds to all deaf children and young people?
4. Give suggestions for improving the LGP Curriculum.

The interviews were conducted in LGP by a deaf researcher as the interviewees were all deaf. The interviewer explained the objectives and procedures of the interview and the requests for informed consents in LGP. The interviews took place on the 9th and 10th of September 2021 and had an average duration of 15 minutes each. The interviews were later translated and transcribed in Portuguese, thus leaving two interview records; one on video in LGP, and one in written Portuguese, allowing future deaf or hearing researchers to explore their content if needed.

The study results

Data were analyzed directly in LGP, as both investigators are proficient in the language, and were grouped in categories following the themes of the research questions.

Regarding the first question and the strengths of the LGP curriculum, Subject A highlighted the aspects of the History and Culture of the Deaf Community, addressing that deaf students show more interest in these topics. Subject B referred to the four divisions of the curriculum (interaction, literacy, language and history and culture of the deaf community) as the learning areas that cover everything that the deaf child needs to learn in relation to LGP. However, he drew attention to the fact that the achievement of the LGP learning objectives depends greatly on the children's individual abilities. Subject C underlined the very existence of the curriculum, which he considers an excellent help for the LGP teachers: “[...] Twenty years ago there was no curriculum and we had to be the ones to prepare it to teach the classes, and it was very different among the various LGP teachers [...]” (Subject C, September 10, 2021).

As for the second question regarding the weaknesses of the LGP Curriculum, Subject A pointed out that the curriculum proposes several stories in LGP, but that they are not suited to the schooling level/year of the students. “[...] The stories are always the same, which makes them less variable [...]” (Subject A, September 9, 2021). The participant stated that he normally chooses parts from the stories, adapts them to the students' level of education, and creates purposeful material following the objectives of the LGP curriculum. Subject B highlighted the diverse LGP levels of the deaf students as they enter school, to which he referred as the main reason for the teachers' difficulty in following the curriculum. It is not possible to teach the entire LGP curriculum, but only aspects of it, especially to students with late language acquisition. In this latter case, “[...] We still need to add some things in terms of contents and competences [...]” (Subject B, September 9, 2021).

Participant C pointed out that in relation to the Reference School for Bilingual Education (in Portuguese, Escola de Referência para a Educação Bilíngue - EREB) schools on the coast of Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra, complying with the LGP curriculum is not very problematic. In contrast, this is a difficult task for the EREBs in the interior of the country, as many deaf students are isolated and have little contact with other deaf people. Subject C explained as

following: “[...] The curriculum is not compatible with them [...] it is not possible to follow the years of schooling in a natural way, the students only communicate with the same person, the LGP teacher, which is not enough [...]” (Subject C, September 10, 2021).

Subject C also mentioned that he sometimes tries to bring together two deaf students with different levels of signing skills so that the student with the lower ones can learn from the other through their interaction in LGP since “[...] The number of hours of LGP [four hours per week] is insufficient for them to develop [...]” (Subject C, September 10, 2021). The participant also highlighted the difficulty in reconciling the syllabus with the important dates for the deaf community. Furthermore, it was pointed out that almost all of the proposed videos for the secondary education are in International Sign Language, a language foreign to the majority of deaf students. As a result, they cannot understand their content, for the additional reason; they do not yet master the LGP.

Question three asked the LGP teachers to comment about the suitability of the LGP curriculum for the deaf students’ learning. Subject A indicated that the present curriculum is not viable for deaf children who enter school with problems associated with deafness. Therefore, “[...] It is necessary to create another, specific curriculum for these children [...]” (Subject A, September 9, 2021). The participant also emphasized that even for the “normal” deaf children the curriculum is extensive. Likewise, Subject B considered the curriculum not to respond to all deaf children, as many of them do not have the prerequisites to access it: “[...] For example, some enter the 5th grade and they don't know anything about LGP, and I have to go to the part of the curriculum for pre-school and teach them in a camouflaged way [...]” (Subject B, September 10, 2021).

The same opinion was expressed by Subject C, who stressed that students’ successful LGP learning depends significantly on what is taught in pre-school education. Although this participant did not have classes in the first CEB, he referred to his fellow LGP teachers who taught in such classes, and to their difficulties in teaching their deaf students who had different abilities and specificities.

The LGP teachers were asked to give their suggestions (if any) for future improvements of the LGP curriculum. Thus, participant A proposed the creation of a new curriculum specifically for deaf children with problems associated with deafness. He further emphasized

the need for a vast collection of LGP stories and activities to cover the learning objectives of each core area. Participant B pointed out that some aspects of the transversal competences of the curriculum must be deepened at the level of these core areas. He also emphasized the updating of the curriculum as this was made back in 2008 because: “[...] There are new things to include, as this is done with other programs of the other subjects, such as Portuguese and English that are constantly being updated, and LGP looks like it is stopped [...]” (Subject B, September 9, 2021).

In this same interview, participant B also reported that the EREBs are currently receiving many foreign deaf students, a situation which the LGP program does not cover, and therefore it is not suitable for these students. It was suggested: “[...] Another LGP curriculum should be made for foreign deaf students, non-mother tongue for foreigners, I don't know if that's how you say it [...]” (Subject B, September 9, 2021).

Subject C stressed again the need to improve the LGP curriculum for secondary education. “[...] As I mentioned before, there is an excess of videos in international signs and that should be more balanced with the videos in LGP [...]” (Subject C, September 10, 2021). The participant saw the need for more LGP didactic material, especially for the children in pre-school education, as well as for the deaf blinded students, with whom he felt he was not well trained to work: “[...] I heard that a 2-year-old deaf-blind student is coming and I don't know how I'm going to work with him. I still don't know what his level of blindness is, whether it's mild or severe [...]”. In addition, Subject C proposed the creation of an LGP curriculum for hearing students who may want to learn LGP as an L2.

Discussion and conclusion

To understand the effective application of the 2008 LGP curriculum in EREBAS, we carried out an exploratory study, in which we asked, through semi-structured interviews, three deaf LGP teachers from three different regions of Portugal.

It appears that the participants agree with the strongest point of the LGP curriculum; that is, the areas of History and Deaf Culture. However, they commented there should be a greater focus on informal and formal LGP education settings, for most deaf students are children of hearing parents and as such, upon their arrival at school, a deep linguistic immersion is

necessary, to which the LGP curriculum also refers. According to the teachers, the LGP curriculum is a strong political instrument, and as such, it is a great help to the work they need to carry in their LGP L1 classes, especially in relation to its four core areas.

Referring to its weaknesses, the participants highlighted mainly extracurricular aspects, such as the scarcity of didactic materials for delivering the content of the program; the low number of deaf students per class that does not allow for optimal linguistic interaction; and the overall school organization.

In relation to question three, the participants highlighted their difficulty in applying and adapting the curriculum to their students, especially to those with great delays in LGP acquisition, and to those with additional special needs and specificities (cognitive, motor, vision problems, etc.), who need a specialized intervention beyond the use of a sign language. It seems that the LGP curriculum becomes too demanding when teaching concerns these students. Therefore, as they proposed, an adapted LGP curriculum must be constructed to work with the needs of these deaf children in particular.

The heterogeneity of the deaf population at school is today a reality in Portugal and in many other countries (see: CANON, GUARDINO, GALIMORE, 2016; CLARK, 2018; GREGORY, 2017; KNOORS, MARSCHARCK, 2018). According to Clark (2018), the proportion of deaf children with other medical, neurological, behavioral or psychosocial conditions is increasing, and Sign Language curricula must take this reality into account. Prevalence estimates range from 50% to 70%, and this shift in complexity challenges students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Perhaps documenting diagnostic profiles at schools can contribute to the understanding of their learning profiles, which, in turn, can inform policy decisions, program design, calibration of parental expectations, and implementation of effective teaching strategies.

The LGP teachers also saw the urgent need for an overall reformulation of the curriculum, as this already happened for the other curricular subjects. Such updating should consider the new legislation, the schools' deaf population in the Portuguese education system, as well as the needs of the LGP teachers.

This curriculum reshaping must come along with the creation of pedagogical material, for it is practically non-existent. This lack of didactic materials is generally met in the teaching

of other sign languages, although some countries have worked towards the production of curriculum based learning materials of sign languages as L1 (see MERTZANI, 2016; BONNAL-VERGÊS, 2006). The existing LGP materials (they have been constructed over the last decade) have not been planned following the LGP curriculum, and hence, they are not mapped to its objectives and educational grades. They are developed under national projects for one-off responses (for access to museums, and teaching LGP as an L2 for hearing parents, among others). In fact, the manual entitled *The class of Dinis* (MORGADO, MARTINS, 2015) can be regarded the only curriculum-based learning material as it aimed at teaching LGP for the first CEB. Clearly, it is necessary to plan the construction of such materials through the collaborative work of LGP teachers and researchers in the field of sign language teaching for the actual delivery of the LGP curriculum in the sign language classroom.

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