

LIBRAS IN LAW AND SCHOOL PRACTICE: what we have and what we need

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Abstract: In Brazil, the Brazilian Sign Language – Libras has been recognized as the language of the Brazilian deaf community since 2002, a recognition that has allowed advances, especially in the area of education. Timidly, Libras has been publicized in social spaces and in the media. However, still trained professionals are lacking to work not only in the area of education of deaf students but in the most varied social environments where deaf people circulate and need accessible communication. This paper presents the legal context in which Libras is inserted and occurs in the school practice, explaining what we have and what is still missing to achieve. There are bilingual schools in the country though in lower numbers than it is actually needed. Moreover, among most bilingual schools, a Libras first language curriculum is not being practiced. Most of them follow the model of teaching Libras to hearing people as a second language, or focus on teaching cultural issues of the deaf people with little emphasis on teaching the linguistic and grammatical aspects of the language. Such actions are due to limited debates on the formal teaching of Libras as a first language as well as due to the scarce training of Libras teachers.

Keywords: Sign Language. Curriculum of Brazilian Sign Language. Bilingual Education. Teacher training.

A LIBRAS NA LEI E NA PRÁTICA ESCOLAR: o que temos e o que precisamos

Resumo: No Brasil, a Língua Brasileira de Sinais – Libras é reconhecida como língua da comunidade surda brasileira, desde 2002, o que possibilitou avanços, principalmente na área da educação. Timidamente, a Libras vem sendo divulgada nos espaços sociais e na mídia. Porém, ainda faltam profissionais capacitados para atuar não apenas na área da educação de estudantes surdos, mas nos mais variados ambientes sociais, nos quais as pessoas surdas circulam e necessitam de comunicação acessível. O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar em qual panorama legal a Libras está inserida e como ela acontece na prática escolar, explicitando o que temos e o que ainda falta para alcançar o que, de fato, precisamos. Há escolas bilíngues criadas no País, em número muito inferior ao que é necessário. Dentre a maioria das escolas bilíngues não há um currículo de Libras como primeira língua sendo praticado. A maioria delas segue o modelo de ensino de Libras para ouvintes, ou seja, segunda língua, ou focam ensino de questões culturais do povo surdo, pouco enfatizando o ensino das questões linguísticas e gramaticais da língua. Considera-se que tais ações se devem ainda aos reduzidos espaços de debates sobre o ensino formal da Libras como primeira língua e, também, pela escassez de formação de professores de Libras nesse viés.

Palavras-chave: Língua de Sinais. Currículo da Língua Brasileira de Sinais. Educação Bilíngue. Formação de professores.

LIBRAS EN LA LEY Y LA PRÁCTICA ESCOLAR: lo que tenemos y lo que necesitamos

Resumen: En Brasil, la Lengua de Seña Brasileña – Libras es reconocida como la lengua de la comunidad sorda brasileña desde 2002, reconocimiento que ha permitido avances, especialmente en el

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área de la educación. Tímidamente, Libras ha sido publicitada en espacios sociales y en medios de comunicación. Sin embargo, aún faltan profesionales capacitados para actuar no sólo en el área de la educación de los estudiantes sordos, sino en los más variados ambientes sociales donde circulan las personas sordas y necesitan una comunicación accesible. El objetivo de este artículo es presentar el panorama jurídico en el que se inserta Libras, y cómo se produce Libras en la práctica escolar, explicando qué tenemos y qué nos falta para lograr lo que, de hecho, necesitamos. Hay escuelas bilingües creadas en el país, en cantidades muy inferiores a las necesarias. Entre la mayoría de las escuelas bilingües, no se practica un currículum de Libras como primeira lengua. La mayoría siguen el modelo de enseñanza de Libras para oyentes, es decir, como segunda lengua, o se centran en la enseñanza de temas culturales de las personas sordas con poco énfasis en la enseñanza de los aspectos lingüísticos y gramaticales de la lengua. Tales acciones se deben también a los reducidos espacios de debate sobre la enseñanza formal de Libras como primera lengua y, también, a la escasez de formación de profesores de Libras.

Palabras clave: Lengua de Señas. Currículo de Lengua de Señas Brasileña. Educación bilingüe. Formación de profesores.

Introduction

The Law 10.436/2002 recognized the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) as a “legal way of communication and expression”, having a “visual-motor linguistic system with its grammatical structure” and capable of “transmitting ideas and facts of the communities of deaf people in Brazil”. Also the Law determines the guarantee of supporting the use and dissemination of Libras “as a way of objective communication and current use by the deaf communities in Brazil”, through which the public health services “must guarantee adequate care and treatment for people with hearing impairment” and the educational systems should, from then on, “guarantee the inclusion of teaching the Brazilian Sign Language in the training courses of Special Education, Speech Therapy and Teaching, at their secondary and higher educational levels, as part of the National Curricular Parameters - PCNs” (BRAZIL, 2002).

The Law 10.436 aroused great expectations in the Brazilian deaf community, among deaf people, family members, professionals – teachers and interpreters – in the sense of allowing full access to educational and health services in the natural language of deaf people, Libras. However, as we will see in this article, despite the fact that 20 years have passed since the publication of the Law, several actions that could allow the transit of deaf people in the Brazilian society in an accessible way are still lacking. The Proposal for a Constitutional Amendment (in Portuguese, Proposta de Emenda Constitucional - PEC) nº 12 is pending in the National Congress since 2021. In this PEC, the amendment of article 13 of the Brazilian Federal

Constitution is requested, with the aim of including Libras as an official language of Brazil along with Portuguese. This initiative intends to disseminate Libras more effectively and to be used by all Brazilian people, both deaf and hearing, as is Portuguese. According to Kamila Gouveia, author of the PEC idea, we still do not have Libras for everyone and in all spaces because it is not yet an official language, with the same requirements and possibilities as Portuguese (GOUVEIA; FERREIRA; TENÓRIO, 2018; GOUVEIA, 2019; GOUVEIA, 2021).

Perhaps the officialization - and not just the recognition of Libras - is what is still missing from the Brazilian society to be accessible to deaf people. This accessibility permeates the school space. Thus, this article aims to present the legal framework in which Libras is inserted, and how it happens in the school practice, explaining what we have and what is still missing in achieving what we need.

Libras in political documents

Libras was recognized in 2002, and since then, it has been mentioned several times in official documents that aim at organizing and promoting its functioning. Thus, this section, will present the most relevant Laws, what they mention about Libras, and what is implemented.

As a first document, I present the Decree 5.626, published on the 22nd December in 2005. The document regulated the 2002 Libras Law, which determined the following actions that would make Libras effective in the country. The main provisions of the Decree concerning education are listed below.

1. The inclusion of Libras as a mandatory curricular subject in teacher training courses, both at secondary and higher education levels, and also in Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology courses. In the other courses, Libras must be included as an optional unit. For implementing this action, it was necessary firstly the training of lecturers who would teach these subjects. This was also provisioned by the Decree. However, still in 2022, we lack of Libras lecturers who would teach Libras in all mandatory courses. There are fewer in those that could be offered as optional.

2. The training of the Libras teacher for teaching the language in Elementary, Secondary and Higher Education. Such training should be carried out in Higher Education in a full time Degree of Language Arts: Libras or in Language Arts: Libras/Portuguese as a second language

or, still, in a Pedagogy course or in a higher regular course, as long as the focus is bilingual. Priority for entry and training in these courses should be given to deaf people. In 2006, the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) created the first undergraduate class in Language Arts: Libras. Through the years, other public and private universities have offered the course, but in a quantity inferior to the training needs and with varying quality (QUADROS; STUMPF, 2009; KLEIN; SANTOS, 2015; SANTOS, 2016). The Ministry of Education committed to promoting specific programs for the creation of undergraduate courses beyond the Language Arts: Libras; that is, courses that could enable the training of teachers so as to teach Portuguese as a second language and Pedagogy in a bilingual perspective. As for these courses, we are far short of what we actually need for the training of the professionals who would work in schools where deaf students are, whether in inclusion or in bilingual spaces (GIROTO; CICILINO; POKER, 2018; FERNANDES, 2016; ARLINDO, 2021)

3. The guarantee for deaf people's access to communication, information and education in selection processes and in the curricular contents at all levels and education stages, from early childhood to higher education. For this, the presence of some professionals in schools is foreseen, such as the Libras teacher, the Libras translator and interpreter, the teacher for the Portuguese as a second language for deaf people and, also, teachers who know about deaf students' linguistic singularity. It was also determined that all people working in schools, from employees to management, should know Libras. In line with this, it was planned that all student assessments would be offered in both languages; Libras through videos or other electronic and technological means, and the Portuguese language to be examined semantically. With regards to everything that the Decree envisaged, unfortunately we still do not have a specialized teachers' training - not to the extent that this is necessary (LACERDA; ALBRES; DRAGO, 2013; ALBRES, 2017; TERRA-FERNANDES, 2018).

4. Complement the curriculum of the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC), in order to contemplate the teaching of Libras and the teaching of Portuguese in its written modality as a second language. For more details on how the BNCC was complemented, see the article by Chiella and Menezes in this Dossier.

5. Training of Libras - Portuguese interpreters should take place through a bachelor's degree in Translation and Interpreting, or through professional education courses, university

extension courses and continuing education at higher education institutions and other educational institutions accredited by government education departments. Such professionals should work as board examiners in selection processes, as interpreters in classrooms where deaf students are, and also in other services and activities of educational institutions. As in the other fields mentioned so far, training is available at various levels. However, the number is still below the need, the quality is varied, and there is no training standard for these professionals (MARTINS; NASCIMENTO, 2015; RODRIGUES, 2018; LUCHI, 2020; SILVA, 2020).

6. Organization of schools and bilingual education classes, in which teachers from different knowledge areas know the linguistic uniqueness of deaf students. According to the Decree, in these spaces, Libras is the first language and the language of instruction, and the written modality of Portuguese, the second language for deaf students. It is up to parents and students to choose their schooling preferences. The Decree opened up the possibility of a bilingual education that is under discussion for so long in Brazil and abroad. Some bilingual schools were opened in the country, such as the Municipal School of Bilingual Education Professor Carmen Regina Teixeira Baldino, in Rio Grande, in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, as we will discuss later. However, the number of schools is insufficient for the demand (CAMPELLO; REZENDE, 2014; STURMER; THOMA, 2015).

In 2015, the Law 13.146 established the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities. It determines who is considered a person with a disability and what measures are intended "to ensure and promote, in conditions of equality, the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms of people with disabilities for their social inclusion and citizenship" (BRASIL, 2015). Among several specifications, the Law considers that Libras is a form of communication for the Brazilian deaf people and that, therefore, it is necessary to offer "bilingual education, in Libras as a first language, and in the written modality of Portuguese as a second language, in bilingual schools, bilingual classes and in mainstream schools". After a 10 year difference between the Decree and the Law, the possibility to have Libras in mainstream (inclusive) schools was expanded too, since deaf students can choose to study there. For this, the Law provides that there would be ample "training and availability of teachers for specialized educational service, Libras interpreters, interpreter-guides and support professionals". In the

same Law, "the offer of Libras teaching, the Braille System and the use of assistive technology resources" are seen to expand students' functional skills.

Another document that directly supports and influences the use of Libras in the teaching of deaf students in Brazil is the National Literacy Policy (PNA), established by the Decree 9.765 of April 11, 2019. Based on this Decree, several documents responsible for organizing and monitoring literacy in Brazil were prepared, including that for deaf students. It is promised that the PNA "will guide its actions in the sense that literacy will include the understanding of the Braille system, the understanding of the grammatical structure of the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) and the articulation between language practices" and reaffirms the commitment of the Ministry of Education to offer bilingual education with Libras as a first language and Portuguese in written form, in bilingual schools, bilingual classes and in mainstream schools. There is a point introduced in this document that we have not seen - not yet - in practice but which is very relevant to the teaching of Libras. The PNA presents the intention to propose the "development of indicators of fluency in reading, writing proficiency, and proficiency in Libras for the service of special education" (BRASIL, 2019).

As part of the PNA documents, the National Evidence-Based Literacy Report (RENABE) presents the results of national evaluations carried out by the Ministry of Education. In this, the Ministry expects the cognitive sciences to lead Brazil to better educational results, given that the rates of functional illiteracy in the country are astonishing. The document makes several references to Libras and deaf students. According to Capovilla and Raphael (2005), deaf-signing children have specific lexicons in Libras and a large vocabulary in their language is necessary in order to have greater reading comprehension and written naming skills in Portuguese. Although the interest of the document is literacy in Portuguese, there are important recognitions regarding Libras, based on scientific research in the area of deafness. In the document, when deaf children are usually mentioned, there is also a presentation of indigenous people and quilombolo, who communicate with their own lexicons.

An important mention in the RENABE is the research by Newport (1990), who presents the need for early access to sign language, preferably before the age of 5. This study shows that, if students are exposed after the age of 12, "they will probably not reach full proficiency in sign language, even if they will be exposed to language daily for the next 30 years of life" (p. 210).

Throughout the document, Libras is explained as the mother tongue (L1) of deaf people, including the indigenous deaf children whose L1 is an amerindian sign language, such as Urubu-Kaapor Sign Language, and the Tactile Libras for deafblind people. The report presents several researches that identify the need to acquire Libras as a metalanguage to later think about literacy in the written Portuguese language.

Finally, and with several points that were not mentioned before, the Law 14.191 amends the important Law 9.394 of the Directives and Bases of National Education (LDB). The change concerns the modality of bilingual education for the deaf. Until then, the teaching of deaf students was considered from the perspective of special education. The deaf community had an intense struggle to change the LDB (CAMPELLO; REZENDE, 2014; OLIVEIRA, 2015; CABELLO; MARTINS, 2021). The Law reinforces what has already been seen before and expands the discussion. It presents that bilingual education for the deaf has Libras (L1) and written Portuguese (L2) as two languages. The Law also affirms that teaching can take place in bilingual schools, in bilingual classes for the deaf, in mainstream schools or in deaf bilingual education reference centres, called the bilingual pole schools. The possibility of bilingual pole schools was presented, at that moment, for the first time in the legislation. Through the Directorate of Bilingual Education Policies for the Deaf (DIPEBS), the Ministry of Education already offers such space to several states where there are no conditions to have bilingual schools in certain regions due to the very small number of deaf students. However, officially, this was the first mention of bilingual pole schools.

The Law also expands the possibilities of deaf education when it mentions that “The offer of bilingual education for the deaf will start at zero year, in early childhood education, and will extend throughout life”, allowing deaf adults, even those who did not complete Basic Education, to enroll in specialized pedagogy classrooms to be in contact with their peers and learning - since not all spaces in society are accessible in Libras. In addition, it mentions the production of specific teaching materials, as well as the training of bilingual teachers through appropriate specializations. It also establishes that “in the processes of teachers’ hiring and periodic evaluation referred in the caput of this article, the entities representing deaf people will be heard.” That is, there is mention of greater care in the selection of people who will teach deaf students in the bilingual teaching modality. It is perceived that there is a concern in

qualifying teachers' training, as well as in selecting them better. Ideally, teachers working in bilingual schools should be deeply knowledgeable about the biopsychosocial conditions of the students, as well as fluent in Libras.

Articles 78-A and 78-C include two important actions that could considerably affect the way Libras is seen and taught. Article 78-A mentions that “integrated teaching and research programs will be developed to offer bilingual and intercultural school education” with the objective of “providing the deaf with the recovery of their historical memories, the reaffirmation of their identities and specificities and the appreciation of their language and culture”, and guarantee “access to information and technical and scientific knowledge of the national society and other deaf and non-deaf societies.” In both objectives, Libras is closely intertwined, as it is part of historical memories, assists the reaffirmation of their identities and, at the same time, is valued as a language that is part of a culture. Also, when access to information and knowledge of society is guaranteed for deaf people, this will be possible through Libras itself.

Article 78-C continues to present the integrated teaching and research programs, determining that they will be technically and financially supported by the education systems and that they will be planned “with the participation of deaf communities, higher education institutions and of entities representing deaf people”. Such programs will be included in the National Education Plan (PNE) and will have some main objectives. Among them is the strengthening of Libras, which will be possible through the training of specialized personnel and, mainly, through the development of curricula, methods, training and specific programs that meet the culture of deaf people. And, finally, the development of bilingual teaching materials, which will enable and strengthen students' learning of Libras.

As it was seen in this section, Libras is present in political documents and its importance has been intensified throughout the years. However, as is common, what is foreseen in the Law does not always happen. It is true that the Law 14.191 is very recent. Thus, it did not pass much time for the envisaged actions to be implemented therein. Besides understanding the current practice of students' bilingual teaching, it is important to think of realizing such legal intentions.

Libras in the practice of a bilingual school

In the State of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), twelve schools are dedicated to teaching deaf students. Of these, ten were created a long time ago as special schools and, little by little, are changing the name to bilingual schools, as they are committed, in practice, to building this type of education. Two schools were created more recently and already with the nomenclature of the bilingual school: the Municipal School of Elementary Education for the Bilingual Deaf Salomão Watnick, located in the RS capital, Porto Alegre; and the other in the city of Rio Grande, which is the Municipal School of Bilingual Education Professor Carmen Regina Teixeira Baldino (EMEB).

In RS, the School Forum for the Deaf in Rio Grande do Sul (FESURS) takes place, with meetings fortnightly to discuss issues, methodologies and possibilities in schools. Among the participants, there are principals and teachers who work in these spaces. One of its constant concerns is the teaching of Libras in relation to the curriculum, teaching methodologies, the reduced number of deaf teachers in schools, and students' late language acquisition, among others. Most schools for the deaf in RS, as well as in the rest of the country, include Libras in their syllabus. This curriculum, very often, involves cultural aspects through the presentation of the historical movement of deaf people and glossaries as lists to be learned, without an in-depth study of the linguistic issues of the functions of the language.

EMEB also used to teach this way, since much of what made up its curriculum came from past school experiences for the deaf, before its creation. There was no formal teaching of Libras for deaf students, similar to that of the Portuguese language in the regular schools for hearing students. It was interesting to notice that, although hearing students enter the regular school fluent in their oral language, they still have to learn, since the beginning of their schooling, the formal functioning of their language. For deaf students, this was very far from happening, and we always question this in the Forum. The learning of Libras used to take place informally, through the contact of the deaf at school, who were often not fluent, and also through their contact with the teachers, most of whom were not fluent either. Thus, schools do not have a Libras curriculum based on its linguistic aspects, but it is designed to meet the need for vocabulary expansion and the appropriation of the deaf culture. The Forum, which started

in the second half of 2020, aims to bring together experiences, discuss issues and exchange such experiences on how practice can be improved so that the school becomes bilingual.

From this point forward, I will report some practical experience with regards the teaching of Libras at EMEB, since I participated in its creation and acted as a Headteacher (the years 2015 - 2018). Today, I continue to monitor and guide the work through the Federal University of Rio Grande – FURG, where I am currently a Libras instructor.

The school EMEB Prof. Carmen Regina Teixeira Baldino

EMEB was created through the Municipal Decree No. 13.200 on the 5th February 2015, having initially twelve deaf students enrolled. Approximately six months later the number increased to 21 students. Almost two years later – between 2016 and 2017 – there were 64 students enrolled in Elementary Education, from kindergarten to the 9th grade. In 2017, with the partnership between the municipality and the state, the bilingual secondary school was offered and the number reached to 85 enrolled students.

Most students were transferred from regular schools, especially when they reached the 3rd year of Elementary Education, a period that ends the literacy cycle. In these schools, as it is not possible to teach them reading and writing, teachers convince families to transfer students to EMEB in order to learn Libras. At this stage, between 9-10 years old, children enter school without having any knowledge of Libras, and in very rare cases, they have a little understanding of the oral language. Most children learn Libras very quickly. Many are able to communicate well in the first month of school attendance, mainly through direct contact with their deaf classmates. In fact, the school's experience shows that the children are welcoming and care about teaching Libras to their new classmates. Students who are oralized have a little more resistance or difficulty in learning Libras, because they are used to and attached to the oral language, which was, until then, their language of contact with the world. However, over time, and with an increasingly stronger bond with the colleagues, everyone ends up learning Libras, and communicate both in Libras and oral language.

EMEB also serves deaf students with additional conditions, such as deaf people with cerebral palsy, deaf people with low vision, with various levels of intellectual disability, with syndromes, etc. They attend school precisely because language is the link that unites them all.

In addition, there are hearing children of deaf parents, the CODAS. They attend mainly because they need to learn the language of their parents, although there are cases, in which they do not understand either Libras or oral Portuguese. The school, then, is dedicated to help children learn both languages, and when they feel comfortable, they are transferred to the regular school. However, many of them remain at EMEB for several years, as it is the space that includes both them and their parents.

It is a full-time school. Children enter at 7:45 am and stay until 4:30 pm. The intention of creating a full-time school was to allow students to immerse themselves in the language for as many hours as possible. Every day they attend classes in the various curricular components taught in the school's language of instruction, Libras. EMEB's hearing teachers know Libras, but not all of them are fluent. In these cases, a sign language interpreter participates to mediate the communication. Although some teachers have been in the school for a few years, they do not manage to acquire fluency since they have little contact with fluent deaf adults. The city of Rio Grande does not have an active deaf association and those who attend school during the day are rare. The Education of Deaf Youth and Adults takes place at night and in small numbers. Thus, teachers maintain contact with Libras only with their students, who in turn, depend on these teachers to learn Libras. In other words, it is a cycle that does not favor the fluency of either the hearing teacher or the deaf student.

Teaching Libras at EMEB

During the first five years, the school had a contracted deaf teacher who taught Libras to all grades. In the political pedagogical project of the school, it was envisaged that the unit would have a teaching hour equivalent to Portuguese, since they are the two languages of the school. However, as there was only one Libras teacher, the only alternative was to reduce the teaching hour so that she could enter to all grades since she was deaf and, hence, an identity reference for the children.

This teacher acquired Libras as an adult, grew up being oral, and had very little contact with the deaf community. Therefore, the linguistic aspects of the language were not always incorporated into teaching. This focused more on the sign itself rather than on the structure and function of the language. There is a great lack of deaf teachers in the city and there has not yet

been a specific contest (professional) for Libras teachers by the City Hall. All EMEB teachers have some training in the field of deaf education, a requirement for their stay in school. Moreover, all staff, from concierge to cleaning and lunch service, attended the Libras course in order to be able to communicate with the students in all spaces.

The school prioritises the teaching of Libras and the language permeates all years, from kindergarten to the 5th grade in an integral way; their discussions should take place throughout the term and by all teachers. From the 6th to the 9th grade, there is a Libras module taught by a specific teacher, but all other teachers are advised to focus first and preferably on Libras, and then contextualize the themes in Portuguese writing. At the beginning years of the school, the Libras module focused on teaching vocabulary, in the same way as other schools in RS. It was often the case that the teachers of the different curricular components took advantage of the presence of the deaf teacher to ask questions about the signs of their subjects.

Teachers used videos they found on the internet to meet the content that should teach to students. However, not all of them had the language fluency close to the students' fluency level, who, generally, were less fluent than the signers in the videos. Teachers often did not fully understand the signs (of the videos) or did not have an in-depth linguistic knowledge to explain to students the strategies used in the signing. In these cases, the presence of fluent deaf teachers would make a big difference. One of the most used strategies was the signing performed by the teachers, but was also limited due to their lack of fluency. In addition, teachers reported that students used to forget very quickly what was taught and, for some, for certain subjects, they seemed they were never taught in the classroom (TERRA-FERNANDES, 2018). With the passing of time, we noticed that students' learning was not happening the way we expected. Such facts were making the teaching repetitive, but without great advances.

The aggravating factor in this situation – which is a reality in most schools for the deaf – is that the teacher of Libras is not fluent. How, then, can the student achieve fluency and learn the other curricular components, which, in turn, depend on the language to be understood?

Story Time in Theater

This situation motivated me to start my doctorate in Science Education at FURG, in search of deepening my knowledge and being able to reverse the teaching at school. An idea

that emerged during my doctoral study and became practice at EMEB is the *Story Time in Theatre*, which started in the second half of 2017. In addition to the situation exposed above, we noticed the children's lack of abstraction. This lack was one of the main reasons for giving birth to this project. Children had difficulty in understanding the stories, in differentiating who were the characters and who were their teachers, thus confusing the real with the imaginary. Students could not detach a drawing from reality, even though the teachers asked them to imagine, create a scene and later draw it; they always drew something that had really happened.

The Story Time in Theater is a theatrical presentation of any story chosen and elaborated by the teachers. The important thing is to always consider topics that are needed by the students at any moment, and allow the unfolding of so many others. The presentations take place at least once a month and for all students in school. The costumes and scenery are elaborated, as well as the script and signing for each character, taking care that the signing accords to the one of the students, who are always anxiously awaiting the presentation. The entire play is recorded so that teachers can review the performance with the students several times during their subsequent classes. After the play, everyone talks about what they understand, asks questions, and discusses various topics that the stories raise.

It is an important moment of interaction between older and younger children, as well as a unique opportunity to discuss issues with which they did not have contact outside the school, or they were not well understood while living with family members who do not sign. In the classes to follow, each group separately with their respective teachers, watches the recording of the play scenes, discusses the topics arising, debates about the signing, reproduces the scenes, hence developing the skills and competences of the Libras curriculum as well as of the other curricular components. On average, depending on the story, some discussions may last for two weeks.

One of the first stories played in the project was *The Deaf Tree*. The opening scene showed an evil woodcutter slashing at trees to bring them down. One teacher was dressed as a lumberjack and played the role very fiercely. Another four teachers were dressed as trees and were wounded by the axes. At the beginning of the presentation, it was impressive to see the despair of the children, because their teachers were being hurt. The children's panic was such that we interrupted the presentation to explain that the teachers were not getting hurt, that they

were happy and having fun under their costumes. After the reassuring conversation, we resumed the presentation. We knew that children had difficulties in abstracting due to delays in language acquisition, but we had no idea of the extent of this difficulty. After the presentation, the children asked several questions, as they were deeply saddened by the felling of the trees. We had the first conversations around the usefulness of wood, the need for reforestation, among others. As the story unfolded, each teacher worked in the following days on some topics that were most appropriate for the series. One class worked on the parts of the plant; another organized a vegetable garden in the schoolyard; and two classes together built a sofa with pallets for the school's living room. Together, we all went to a woodworking shop to learn about the process of building a wooden furniture.

As the project progressed, the students began to separate reality from fiction and as the time passed, they began to create their own stories, drawings, and tellings to their colleagues. At the end of the following year, we held the Bilingual Short Film Show, in which the theater videos were presented to the school community. In 2017, only the teachers' theater was presented. But in 2018 and 2019, students encouraged each other and created their own plays, which were also filmed and performed. During the 2020 and 2021, when teaching took place remotely, the Story Time in Theater was suspended.

The curriculum of Libras as a first language at EMEB

During the period I finished my doctorate, EMEB established a partnership between the Institute of Education and Maria Mertzani, coordinator of the *INST 15 Curriculum of Libras as a first language project*, the FURG Institute of Language and Arts (with my participation) and the Municipal Secretary of Education (SMED) to organize the Libras curriculum as a first language at school. The curriculum was developed with the external collaboration of Prof. Felipe Venâncio, from the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sao Paulo, and of Dr. Vassilis Kourbetis, Counselor A in Special Education at the Ministry of Education in Athens, Greece, as the curriculum is based on the 2004 Greek Sign Language Curriculum.

The project was organized in three stages: (1) the production of the curriculum of Libras as a first language for deaf children of all grades of Elementary Education; (2) the continuing education course for school teachers, as they will apply the curriculum and need to have an in-

depth knowledge and mastery of all the skills and competencies listed therein; and (3) the development of teaching materials concomitant with the teachers' continuing education, providing teaching methodologies, strategies and assessment approaches.

The Libras Curriculum was published in 2020 and aims at providing teachers the parameters for teaching and developing Libras, from early childhood education to the ninth grade of Elementary Education. "The presented parameters must be developed by the students at each stage of their linguistic and educational progress and must accompany the interdisciplinarity among the curricular components" (MERTZANI, TERRA, DUARTE, 2020). It is important to note that the curriculum does not separate Libras from its community, but teaches the language holistically, including its productions.

The curriculum is organized in two main axes:

1. Language functioning: covers the structure of Libras, vocabulary acquisition and use, sign concepts, phonological awareness, morphological awareness. The objective is to promote students' understanding and practical knowledge of the concepts of the five parameters (hand configuration, movement, non-manual markers, location, orientation), the manual alphabet and its use, and the basic structure of Libras. From the functioning of the language, students should understand that there is a structural form of signing, rules to follow so that other signers understand it, respecting the culture of the language itself.

2. Language use and production: comprises speech and presentation, literature and informational texts. The idea is to provide instruction to help students gain mastery of a variety of skills in developing Libras, including students' understanding and knowledge of text types and purposes, signing in video recordings, understanding and strategic use of digital media, and the habit of developing research to build and present knowledge.

In the same year of publication, we started the training course for teachers at EMEB. However, we were impacted by Covid-19, which made it impossible to continue the course in person, transferring our meetings to the remote format. With all the impositions arising from the pandemic, the course resisted until the month of August, and it was not possible to continue even remotely, due to the various necessary adaptations that the remote teaching of deaf and hearing students, in general, demanded. Thus, we chose to postpone the continuity of the course

and proceed with the third stage, the development of teaching materials, which is currently in progress. The materials we produced during the pandemic will be published soon.

Resuming the Curriculum of Libras as L1

At the end of 2021, with the possibility of a face-to-face return to classes, it took time for teachers to evaluate the students' signing conditions due to the necessary distancing during the pandemic. As it was expected, both students and teachers had their signing fluency impacted. More than ever, there was a need to intensify the curriculum appropriation by the teachers, so that they can start implementing it as soon as possible with the students, and enhance the fluency of everyone at school. Thus, we resumed the continuing education and, so far, two meetings have taken place. One of the difficulties expressed by the teachers was to articulate the Libras Curriculum to the Guiding Document of the Territory of Rio Grande (DOCTRG²), which guides and conducts the activities of all schools in the Municipality. Therefore, we reorganized the course to meet this need.

In April 2022, in collaboration between EMEB and the Institute of Language Arts-FURG, the course is resumed and will last for two years, taking place every Friday morning, with the participation of five Libras teachers from FURG, three deaf and two hearing ones. The focus is to promote teachers' fluency through the contact with fluent deaf individuals, through signing and analyzing stories, and studying the curriculum. Each meeting consists of:

1. presenting to the teachers a video of a signed story, emphasizing and debating the linguistic and grammatical aspects of its signing;
2. articulating the highlighted aspects in the story based on the skills and competences of the Libras Curriculum as L1;
3. asking the teachers, in pairs or in threes, who teach the same class, to organize an interdisciplinary planning based on the story, listing the skills and competence of the Libras Curriculum as L1, and articulating them to the skills and competencies of the DOCTRG;
4. using a weekly planning to present an experience report in the meetings to come.

In the weeks in which the school will present the story of the Story Time Theater, we will not present a video story and its signing, but we will use the theater script to assist teachers

² This document follows the BNCC guidelines.

in choosing and training in best ways the signing of the play dialogues. Planning will be based on this presentation too.

The project considers that by becoming fluent and improving the lesson planning, the teacher will promote students' fluency. At the end of 2022 and 2023, we will publish the teachers' videos and plans that will be developed during the course.

Reflections from the Libras Curriculum as L1

From this brief report on the teaching experiences of Libras at EMEB, it is possible to infer some issues. The first is that bilingual education recommends that Libras is the first language at school and it must be learned by deaf students as soon as they enter school. However, when thinking about the EMEB experience and of many other schools, we realize how much greater effort is still needed from the part of the teachers to enable meaningful experiences with Libras so that students can acquire it fluently. Promoting the interaction between peers, especially the one between children and deaf adults who are fluent signers, and the permanence of deaf teachers at school, are topics of paramount importance so that Libras can be really the first language at school. At the same time, the practice of a curriculum that prioritizes the linguistic issues of Libras is fundamental. And not only that. Fluent teachers who understand all the skills and competences exposed in the curriculum are the ministers and enhancers of the teaching and the students' Libras acquisition.

Based on this experience, we are able to think how much we are still lacking in initial and continuing training for bilingual teachers. It is necessary to think of training teachers who are in the classroom and who work with the different curricular components, which, in turn, demand the most diverse vocabularies. It is necessary to think of training beyond the graduation in Language Arts: Libras, which is so scarce. Such training can teach school teachers how Libras actually works, in addition to the sign lists of each unit group that also need to know. It is urgent to learn differences in the structure of signing, so as to detach from the signed Portuguese.

One way to see if we are fluent in a language is to think using the language. The training course prioritizes this exercise, provoking the teacher to rethink and relearn the real strategies while signing in Libras in the classroom. When the teacher does not make an effort to be fluent,

the student is greatly impaired in the way he/she acquires Libras. When the teacher is not fluent in Libras, he/she thinks in Portuguese, his/her first language, and produces isolated signs for the students. In his/her mind, the signing is coherent as it is accompanied by his/her language. But, how does the deaf student understand those few and isolated signs, often unconnected with each other? For the teacher to see if the signing is coherent, a tip is to record a signed text and watch it without audio or its original written text. In this way, he/she can check if the signing makes sense or not. If not, there will be the opportunity to think of other forms of signing, more coherent and complete.

There is a need to implement Libras as a language of instruction and, in doing so, students need to learn Libras metalinguistically, and not just a vastness of vocabulary. First, teachers need to focus on becoming fluent in Libras, appropriating the necessary knowledge for developing the curriculum and for promoting healthy experiences for their students to achieve the expected skills and competences. Second, the teacher needs to obtain information related to the students' biopsychosocial conditions, in order to understand how to organize their classes in a way that really meets the needs of the bilingual school.

In many moments, the Portuguese language is offered and taught more than Libras. As long as deaf students do not have access to Libras in an abundant and fluent way; as long as they do not understand that it is their language and how it works, it will not be possible for them to learn the written Portuguese language, nor to develop other skills and competences required from the other curricular components. The lack of exposure to a natural language such as sign language impacts children's neural processing, a condition that requires greater efforts to compensate and reduce damage, which is sometimes irreparable (TERRA-FERNANDES, 2018).

Where and how Libras needs to be in the practice of bilingual teaching

Following current Brazilian legislation, Libras is the first language of the school and the language of instruction. Therefore, Libras needs to be fluently present in all school spaces; at the entrance, in the hallways, in the cafeteria, in the courtyard and not just in the classroom. It is the language that teachers must use to communicate with each other; the language to use for all subjects and to develop the content; and the language they teach in the Libras unit. It is the

language that should be used to teach the L2, written Portuguese. Once again: Libras is the language of the school.

Libras should be the language learned when the child enters school, as he/she does not have the opportunity to learn it previously, in most cases. However, it is not enough to have informal contacts with her. Teachers should promote conversations in which students think about what they are signing or what has been signed, and develop their metalinguistic skills in Libras. Students need to see themselves signing and, for this, the teacher must promote the recording of informal or formal moments of interaction. When watching the videos, it is necessary to be calm and confident to talk about the signs and alert to what was signed, thinking and rethinking other forms and vocabularies used for signing. It is important that the teacher invites the student to reflect on his/her signing and repeat when necessary. There are numerous possibilities for interaction in the classroom for students to practice signing, in the same way hearing students practice Portuguese. It is possible to create signed texts, promote dialogues between two or more students, tell and retell stories, create stories from images, among many other strategies. The important thing is that teachers record these moments and invite students to review, think and rethink the signing.

When the teacher is dedicated to learning Libras fluently and using teaching strategies consistent with it, it is not necessary for deaf culture to be an objective, skill or competence in the curriculum, as the language carries with it several cultural aspects. However, the teacher must be aware that every language carries the culture of its people, independently of the way it is produced, with the proper use of space, the direction of the gaze, the positioning of topics and, also, in the themes that it permeates, the use of expressions and slang. It is also necessary for the teacher to pay attention to new signs that appear in the community since it is a living language. As in spoken languages, many new terms emerge over time or are sometimes modified.

The Libras Curriculum practiced at EMEB must be taught systematically at all stages of schooling. In the early years, Libras is taught by all teachers who develop activities with the class. They need to be in sync about the ways in which the language is presented and taught to develop the corresponding skills and competences each year. In line with this, in the final years, teachers also need to be attentive to the teaching of Libras. Even if there is a discipline of Libras

– and it must exist at least with the same teaching hours as Portuguese – all teachers of the other disciplines are responsible for the development of the Libras curriculum. There must be an articulation between the Libras teacher and the other teachers so that, in each subject, students can see the aspects of their language signed clearly and coherently.

When the Libras teacher teaches, for example, how to position elements in the signing space, teachers of Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, etc. also need to sign by correctly positioning the elements in space. If not, it doesn't make sense to the student, and learning the language is confusing. The student is put in doubt and the opportunity to reinforce correct signing is lost. When he/she observes several teachers signing correctly, there is greater possibility of acquiring correct signing. Students will reproduce Libras in the same way they have contact with it. Thus, each teacher dedicates himself to sign correctly, since, apart from being a teacher of a curricular component, he/she is also modeling Libras to his/her students. Perhaps this is what still needs to be realized: the teacher teaches beyond content; the teacher teaches the students' language.

National evaluators: what about Libras?

In Brazil, there are mainly two periodic assessments that are carried out with Brazilian students in Basic Education: the Prova Brasil and Provinha Brasil. Both are prepared by the Ministry of Education, through the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira – INEP and are applied by the schools. These assessments are intended to support the formulation and implementation of public policies for the educational area. They also aim to provide clear and reliable information for managers, researchers, educators and the general public.

The Provinha Brasil is applied to children who are in the literacy cycle, specifically in the second year of schooling, in Brazilian public schools. At the beginning of the school year, children carry out the first stage of the assessment, and at the end of the same year, the second stage. Thus, it is possible to perceive what was added throughout the year in the children's learning regarding the reading skills of the Portuguese language.

The Prova Brasil is applied to students who are in the 5th and 9th year of Elementary Education in public schools, as long as they have at least 20 students enrolled in the class.

Assessments take place every two years and focus on Portuguese Language and Mathematics. There is also a questionnaire on socioeconomic issues for students.

These two assessments are important as they provide an overview of students' learning. Even if they do not agree with reality for being elaborated by an organ so far distant from the school, they may indicate some urgent needs. However, how are these assessments prepared to indicate deaf students' learning and of Libras?

There are two important issues here. If the assessment is the same as that presented for hearing students, that is, in Portuguese, it will be used as proof of the student's proficiency in Portuguese and not of the content learned, as in the case of the Prova Brasil. On the other hand, the Provinha Brasil assesses students' learning of Portuguese during the literacy cycle. Detail: Portuguese is the first language of hearing students. How is then the assessment of the deaf students' first language, of Libras?

The PNA will propose the development "of indicators of fluency in reading, writing proficiency, and proficiency in Libras for the service of special education" (BRASIL, 2019). But for that, it is necessary to think of a way to evaluate the learning of deaf students in bilingual schools, but not from the point of simply translating the two tests in Libras. The linguistic and cultural differences of the students must be taken into account, so that the test is thought beyond signing and from the students' own experiences in hearing families, whose members, in most cases, do not communicate fluently with the children.

Final considerations

The article presented several questions around Libras, the legal possibilities and the school experience of a bilingual school. We have the laws. However, there is still need, for example, to enhance the teachers' training. We need more teachers who are aware of students' linguistic uniqueness and are fluent in their first language. We need teachers who are aware of their role in promoting not only the development of skills and competences (of the curriculum), but also in teaching students' own language through which they can present the world.

In line with this, there is need to make Libras a strong language in schools, the majority language in terms of use and potency. For this, we need Libras curricula that promote an understanding of the structure and function of the language, that can assist students in

compreending the signing and in producing an understandable one. In the same way, we need more training for teachers to become fluent in this language, with a deep knowledge of signing strategies and structures.

Not every hearing person can be a teacher of his or her own spoken language. They have to dedicate to its learning in a wide and acculturated way, even if they are in contact with it since birth. Now, a hearing teacher of Libras or one who uses Libras for teaching, also needs to dedicate to its learning fluently, so that students may not be prevented from learning it in its completeness.

Libras in the law and school practice are still not in tune. After the recognition of Libras in 2002, for some time the deaf community was on stand-by, as if all problems had been solved simply because of this publication of the law. No. The problems are not solved and there is still a lot to be done. The deaf community has realized this and began to move forward. Even today, with so many laws supporting a bilingual education paradigm, there is still much to be done. May we refine our discourse and practice and bridge the gaps between what we have and what we need!

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Submitted in: 03/06/2022

Accepted in: 08/06/2022

Citations and references
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