

REPETITION AND ACCUMULATIVE TALES: MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING LIBRAS

CONTOS DE REPETIÇÃO E ACUMULATIVOS:
MÚLTIPLAS EXPERIÊNCIAS NO ENSINO DE LIBRAS

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ABSTRACT

Some issues are at the centre of contemporary debates on deaf education, concerning the process of learning/improving sign language and literacy in Portuguese. In fact, most bilingual schools for the deaf in Brazil prescribe in their curriculum the teaching and development of sign language and written Portuguese, both of which are considered languages of instruction. As such, this study aims to reflect on the teaching of Brazilian sign language in bilingual schools, as part of discursive practices, with a view to expanding the linguistic repertoire of deaf people and guaranteeing their progress at school. The study is bibliographical, based on theoretical references from the field of deaf education, as well as some children's literature books. It is hoped that the development of this study will contribute to the debate on the appropriation of Brazilian sign language, experiences in Portuguese and its possible meanings within social contexts.

Keywords: Deaf Education. Brazilian Sign Language. Children's literature.

RESUMO

Algumas questões centralizam os debates sobre a educação de surdos na contemporaneidade e dizem respeito ao processo de aprendizado/ampliação da língua de sinais e letramento em língua portuguesa. De fato, a maioria das escolas bilíngues para surdos no Brasil, prescreve em sua matriz curricular o ensino e desenvolvimento da língua de sinais e língua portuguesa na modalidade escrita e ambas são consideradas línguas de instrução. Assim sendo, este estudo objetiva mobilizar reflexões a respeito do ensino de língua de sinais brasileira na escola bilíngue, inserido em práticas discursivas, com vistas a ampliar o repertório linguístico do surdo e garantir o avanço de sua escolarização. O estudo é bibliográfico, baseando-se em referências teóricas da área da educação de surdos, além de alguns livros de literatura infantil. Espera-se que o desenvolvimento deste estudo possa contribuir com o debate sobre a apropriação da língua brasileira de sinais, experiências em língua portuguesa e seus possíveis sentidos dentro de contextos sociais.

Palavras-chave: Educação de surdos. Língua de sinais brasileira. Literatura infantil.

Introduction

The teaching of Portuguese and Brazilian Sign Language is one of the most recurrent topics in teacher training, both initial and continuing, as a result of legal achievements in the field of deaf education and academic research on the subject. Given that in 2021, Law No. 9.394 of 20 December 1996 (the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law) was amended to provide deaf bilingual education, discussing and enhancing the process of teaching both languages has become even more imperative in schools with deaf students. According to this law, deaf bilingual education is configured as one:

A form of school education offered in Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) as a first language, and written Portuguese as a second language, in bilingual schools for the deaf, bilingual classes for the deaf, ordinary schools or in bilingual education centres for the deaf, for deafblind, deafblind people with hearing impairments, deaf people with high abilities or giftedness, or with other associated disabilities who opt for bilingual education for the deaf. (BRASIL, 2021, n.p.)

In bilingual education schools for the deaf, according to Decree 5626 of 2005, Portuguese and Brazilian sign language are considered languages of instruction, therefore languages involved in the entire pedagogical process and of different modalities; respectively, oral-auditory and spatial-visual, a fact that should mobilise the development of pedagogical practices that consider the specificities of each language, with a view to promoting the effective linguistic development of deaf students. In addition, both languages should be taught systematically, using strategies that consider visual language and appropriate didactics, taking into account the visual experience and its relevance for deaf students.

It is important to note that the teaching of Portuguese in deaf education has taken place since the 19th century in Brazil, when the Imperial Institute for the Deaf-Mute prescribed the teaching of the National Language and its grammar in written and oral form at the end of the century (SOFIATO, 2018).

In the 20th century, Portuguese continued to occupy centre stage in deaf education curricula, often due to the influence of oralism¹ and total communication², both in oral and written form. Although sign language has been present in deaf schools since their inception in Brazil, it was not part of the prescribed curriculum and, when it was considered, it was on the initiative of a few teachers or schools. This horizon gradually began to change with the recognition of Brazilian Sign Language, through Law 10436 of 2002, as a means of communication and expression for the deaf community in Brazil.

The invisibility and often denial of sign language has historically occurred due to a number of factors, such as the fact that deaf children are mostly children of hearing parents (RIBEIRO; BARBOSA; MARTINS, 2019); that it is considered inferior to Portuguese, and hence the creation of societal stereotypes and prejudiced views about this language at different times (QUADROS, 2019); and the lack of linguistic knowledge on the part of teachers, among others. At the end of the 20th century, there was a change in perceiving this language, also motivated by various linguistic studies (STOKOE, 1960; KLIMA; BELLUGI, 1979; FERREIRA-BRITO, 1995; QUADROS; KARNOPP, 2004), thus shifting the conception of deaf education, the representation of deafness, the deaf person and cultural studies, and considering the the deaf community on the basis of bilingualism.

1 Oralism is an educational approach whose goal is to teach the spoken language (CRUZ, 2011).

2 Total communication is an educational approach that uses various resources, such as reading, writing, dramatisation, drawing, auditory stimulation, individual sound amplification devices, among others, to enable the deaf to communicate and develop (CICCONI, 1990).

That said, in the 21st century, these advances have been compounded by the increasing realisation of bilingualism and the recognition of the right to deaf bilingual education, following new legal provisions. Decree No. 5626 of 2005 not only regulated Law No. 10,436 of 24 April 2002, but in its nine chapters, brought a new panorama of deaf people's rights, and in this context, different possibilities for the educational field, considering the development of both Portuguese in a written form and sign language, which are essential languages in deaf education, and the guarantee of other actors in the educational process, like Libras instructors, sign language translators, and interpreters. Based on this new scenario, the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) acquired a new *status* and its inclusion in the curricula of deaf bilingual schools began to take effect in some places in Brazil, such as in Sao Paulo.

The scientific recognition of the sign language potential, and the guarantee of a deaf bilingual education, reinforce the priority of teaching it to deaf children in the family context (which often does not happen for reasons already mentioned) and at school. As such, bilingual schools take on the great responsibility of promoting and teaching at least two languages, sign language and Portuguese in the written modality, as the basis for educational work.

Thus, teaching sign language, which is not part of a tradition in deaf education, requires specific methodologies for its development and systematic work, in order to provide deaf children and young people with what hearing people have throughout their schooling: the right to learn languages (for example, Portuguese and foreign languages). That said, some questions arise: how are deaf children learning sign language in the school context, after the prerogatives brought in by the Decree 5626 of 2005? What strategies are mobilised to teach this language by deaf teachers or instructors?

Faced with these questions, and without the intention of providing prescriptive answers, the aim of this article is to mobilise reflections on the teaching of Brazilian sign language in bilingual schools, as part of discursive practices that view at expanding deaf people's linguistic repertoire and at guaranteeing their progress at school.

Teaching sign language: a discursive perspective

According to Lacerda, Albres and Drago (2013, p.68), "language and language are central pillars in any educational context" and it would be no different in deaf education. Generally, deaf children, especially those born to hearing parents, enter school without having a developed sign language, as well as being unfamiliar with Portuguese, except for the visual experience, which, depending on stimulation, can result in more significant learning. This is due to a number of factors, such as lack of contact with deaf people, lack of sign language access, non-acceptance of sign language by some families, and lack of motivation, among others. If nothing is done, this can result in deaf children being left without linguistic *input* for a long time (CRUZ, 2011), causing a delay in their development.

For many deaf children, entering a bilingual school is a milestone, because this is where contact with sign language will occur, if the school has sign language and Portuguese as the languages of instruction, as stipulated by the laws in force. Based on this assumption, sign language should be taught as part of the curriculum, taking into account the need to strengthen the socio-cultural practices of the deaf community, as well as the linguistic knowledge of the language itself. However, teaching sign language has been a challenge, given its *recent systematised* inclusion in school work, the lack of specific methodologies for teaching this language (SOLER; MARTINS; 2022), and the lack of teacher proficiency and training for this purpose in the Brazilian educational context.

Gesser (2012), discussing language teacher training, mentions some of the arguments put forward by Cavalcanti and Lopes (1991). According to the author, degree courses develop the linguistic proficiency of the future language teacher, but teaching practice, the way it is organised, “succumbs to a recipe of activities, without including or providing for training that defends critical-reflective teaching...” (p. 24). This also sometimes applies to sign language teaching. It is not enough to list a series of activities and put them into practice without planning teaching based on the horizontality and verticality of the curriculum; considering the language in operation, without forgetting that knowledge relating to linguistic analysis must also be mobilised. This is the great confrontation that the field of deaf education needs to take on, and the bilingual school is the favoured *place* for this.

Bakhtin’s (2000) theoretical elaboration takes a dialogical approach to language, i.e. language as a form of interaction, as a place where differences converge, as a process that is constructed in the relationship with the other. This way of conceiving language underpins studies into linguistic and cultural variations, as well as the conditions of language production. These aspects highlight language as a social, dynamic, living object that changes, expands, and takes on different forms of manifestation and use.

The attribution of meanings, interaction through language, the confluence of differences, are constitutive aspects of a discursive perspective on the appropriation of written language, which centres on interlocution between participants in different situations of language use. This is an assumption that is still a major challenge in the literacy process for hearing children today. Working from a discursive perspective in deaf education has also been a proposal for teaching Portuguese, but in this study the focus is on sign language teaching. It is important to us that deaf children become subjects of language, that they can take the “word” and tell us about themselves, what they know, and what they want to know. So it is up to us to realise the right that is theirs.

Assuming that Libras teaching is marked by discursivity, it means, in the Bakhtinian conception, it considers the relationship between subject and language and, thus, the role of interactions with other subjects for children’s insertion in dynamic interlocution contexts. What contexts of interlocution can we build in the classroom for deaf children to appropriate sign language? What discursive experiences could help expand the deaf child’s linguistic repertoire?

Some proposals for teaching sign language have invested in organising teaching by semantic field. Signs are taught or trained on thematic lists linked to: fruit, school objects, animals, colours, etc. This is not a discursive practice. Children attribute meaning to that list but that does not turn dialogue into an educational principle or interlocution as a classroom dynamic. It is important to emphasise that teaching sign language is not just about teaching “isolated signs”, detached from broader and more meaningful contexts, and that, appropriating signs in this context, does not guarantee knowledge and effective language use. In this sense, we believe that sign language appropriation should be permeated by practices that value interaction among peers or fluent users:

Deaf children of hearing parents can only acquire sign language through interaction with deaf adults who introduce them to the linguistic functioning of sign language through discursive activities that involve its use, such as dialogues, storytelling, i.e. in activities similar to those experienced by hearing or deaf children of deaf parents when interacting with their parents. Interaction with deaf adults will be provided by a school for the deaf that has deaf teachers and professionals who use sign language, fluent hearing teachers who use it in communication and in the development of the syllabus. (PEREIRA; VIEIRA, 2009, p.65)

Some bilingual schools for deaf students have invested in the presence of deaf teachers/instructors on their teaching staff, but this is not the case nationwide. Hearing teachers, fluent in sign language or not, are often in charge of language work in the bilingual school. Investing in the development and implementation of the Bilingual Education Policy for the Deaf in Brazil is one of the goals of the current government (BRASIL, 2023). This is essential if Brazilian Sign Language, as part of the curriculum, is to be an instruction language, a language studied and respected by the school community. Based on the Bakhtinian perspective, according to which discourse genres are organisers of interlocution, sign language teaching can be enhanced through the use of different discourse genres, with the aim of developing deaf students' discursive competence and valuing Portuguese, the official and compulsory language of learning in Brazil.

Bakhtin (2000), in establishing relationships between utterances, discursive genres, and meaning construction, allows us to assume that activity in and through language is an event. The interaction between the different interlocutors constituted in the activity context, is understood here as a dialogical action among all those involved. In this sense, the right of deaf children to establish themselves as subjects in discursive practices in order to appropriate/expand their Libras repertoire will be realised only in contexts where the meaning production is constitutive of the various statements that circulate in the classroom. For the author, the utterances that make up a discursive situation take into account the interlocutor(s), their knowledge, their opinions, and their understanding of the situation. This set of factors defines the discourse genre, its composition and style, which refers to the resources to be used and is of a personal nature. Bakhtin (2000) also defines two groups of discourse genres; the primary ones, which are contained in everyday situations of interlocution; and the secondary ones, which refer to more complex communication situations.

In this way, children's literature materialises a discursive context, in which the meaning production relies on visual support and interaction through language in its different possibilities. In addition, we propose a reflection on repetitive and cumulative tales for teaching Libras in bilingual schools.

Repetitive and cumulative tales: experiences in Libras

The use of children's literature in deaf education has gained ground in contemporary times, given the urgency of working with visual language. According to Reily (2003, p. 161), "deaf children in initial contact with sign language, need visual language references with which they can interact in order to achieve meaning." Agreeing with the author, we emphasise that the use of visual language plays an essential role in deaf education, regardless of age or school level. Furthermore, we assume that this perspective considers

Man as a social being, whose relationships with the world, with others and with himself are mediated by sign systems. Interacting through socially constituted signs, man constructs and appropriates meanings, signifying his experience in the world. (REILY, 2003, p. 161)

Reily (2003) confirms Bakhtin's (2000) assumptions in relation to the production of meaning, bringing together sign materiality and the power of human activity. Therefore, the choice of children's literature books as a reference for pedagogical work in deaf education values the image, which is a powerful resource for knowledge appropriation (PAIXÃO; SOFIATO, 2016) and, in this sense, opting for children's literature books for teaching sign language, enhances the process, as well as offers those involved a motivating, dynamic, and culturally valued environment.

Amongst the multiple possibilities of choice, the tales of repetition and accumulation stand out. Repetitive tales “have a structure that contains sequences that are repeated throughout the plot, linking one episode to another in a curious and amusing way”. The repetitive structure of this type of tale can trigger a series of choices, from emphasising a more interactive or dramatic reading (CADERNOS DE APOIO E APRENDIZAGEM: LÍNGUA PORTUGUESA, 2010, p. 25).

In these tales, some structures may be repeated, whether they are words, phrases or others, and this feature gives the reader autonomy when reading and favours the memorisation of some elements that appear with a certain recurrence. They also stimulate curiosity by inserting new elements that are incorporated throughout the text. Another relevant point is usually the images present and, depending on the quality of the illustration, many elements can be read from the dialogue with the pictorial representation. Examples of repetitive tales include: “Witch, witch, come to my party” by Arden Druce; “The Little Redhead Hen” by Andre Koogan Breitman; “The Cookie Case” by Tatiana Belinki; “Crazy Monkey” by Julia Donaldson; and “The Salome Witch” by Audrey Wood. Despite the element of repetition, these are charming narratives that whet the reader’s enthusiasm.

According to Farias (2014), tales are part of the universe of oral texts and reflect the culture of a people and its manifestations. Especially the cumulative tale:

[...] is characteristically popular, as it is intended to be oralised. They clearly show the marks of orality, as they use formulas and constantly refer the reader to memorisation. They have the power to arouse the curiosity of the reader, who is always invited to use their memory by repeating something that is added as they read. Curiosity makes the reader feel instigated to read the book in an engaging way of presenting the text. It is important to point out that these tales, which can be considered Accumulative Tales, bear visible marks of orality, considering that, according to Ong (1988), the formulaic style and recourse to memorisation are their main and most obvious characteristics (FARIAS, 2014, p. 66).

Examples of cumulative short stories include Audrey Wood’s “The sleepy house”, Ana Maria Machado’s “Camillo, the glutton”, Eric Carle’s “The very hungry caterpillar”, Tatiana Belinki’s “The big radish”, Maria Clara Machado’s “The little elephant fell into the well”, and João de Barro’s “The little ant and the snow”. Accumulative tales are similar to repetitive tales, although they have their specificities, and according to Faria (2014, p.60), “this type of text functions as messages spoken out loud and are marked by the presence of orality, as they tend to use clear and public language to deal with subjects that are understandable to everyone”. This type of text can also be favoured in the context of deaf bilingual education, both because of its compositional characteristics and because of deaf children’s right to literature and culture.

It is worth pointing out that, according to Gesser (2012, p. 153 in Richards, 2006, p. 70), text can be understood as “structural sequences of language, used in specific contexts and in specific ways, which can be oral, written or visual, and whose significant unit is related to the context of interlocution, i.e. in an instance of use”. Therefore, using the text as a trigger for language teaching is an option that favours discursiveness, as it opens up the possibility of exploring different layers of meaning. This provides an opportunity to analyse language in a contextualised way. This also applies to the images that commonly accompany the content, which need intervention in order to constitute coherent meanings as a visual sign, for all students, and especially for deaf students.

In the case of deaf students, reading the text in sign language by a fluent mediator tends to be the first important element in bringing them closer to the written medium and understanding it. Therefore, working with text and images requires a lot of pedagogical interventions and the need for constant

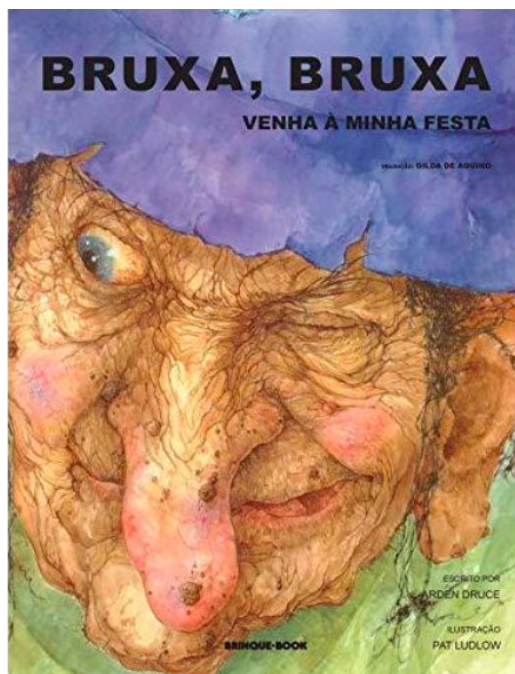
retakes. It is not enough to just read once and expect all the layers of meaning to be appropriated by deaf readers. This does not usually happen with hearing students either. Therefore, according to Reily (2017):

It is not enough to attach corresponding images to written words and believe that this type of practice will automatically be able to interpret visual meanings. We need to think of images as compositions of a complex, polysemous nature, made up of various symbolic elements with their own grammar. Using images merely for identification, without exploring the breadth of meanings conveyed, can result in pedagogical work that is too shallow. (REILY, 2017, p. 105)

Furthermore, when this type of work is chosen, many signs make up the lexicon of the narrative. The lexical emphasis must take into account the sign language appropriation process of the participating students, and it is up to the mediator to plan the language work and use different strategies for teaching sign language. Repetitive and cumulative tales can contribute greatly to the process of sign language acquisition, as they are usually full of images that can be explored with a view to developing visual literacy, refined visual perception, acquisition of new signs and construction of new utterances. Other aspects can be glimpsed, such as comprehension and expression in Libras, the use of signing space (GESSER, 2012), and aspects concerning grammar.

Expanding the linguistic repertoire is the responsibility of the school, whether it is for hearing or deaf people. And in the case of the deaf, it is important to provide different forms of interaction with sign language. The more playful and meaningful the experience, the more sense it will make for their school and personal journey.

Figura 1: Cover of the book “Witch, witch, come to my party”



Fonte: Druce (2023).

Another important point to emphasise is the regularity of composing repetitive and cumulative tales. Strictly speaking, various elements recur in the narrative and this can favour the learning of the signs that are part of these works as it mobilises mnemonic elements. Let's take the short story “Witch, Witch, Come to My Party” by Arden Druce (2023) as an example.

In this repetition tale, the narrative begins with the narrator inviting a witch to a party. The witch thanks him and makes one condition for going; that the invitation be extended to the cat as well. The narrator invites the cat, who makes another condition for taking part: inviting the scarecrow; The scarecrow also thanks him and makes a condition that the owl be invited. The narrative continues with the same context - an invitation to a party. Each guest, after saying thank you, presents the same condition, which refers to the request that another guest be included. The owl, the tree, the goblin, the dragon, the pirate, the shark, the snake, the unicorn, the ghost, the baboon, the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood, who also thanks and makes it a condition that the children be invited. The children thank her and make it a condition that the witch be invited. That is the end of the story. It closes the cycle of possible participants with the appointment of the witch, who was the first to be invited.

We can see that as the narrative progresses, new elements appear in the story and this play on words generates interest in the reader to find out who the next guest will be. Therefore, "two actions are repeated, in series, from beginning to end: an invitation, followed by acceptance on one condition" (CADERNOS DE APOIO E APRENDIZAGEM: LÍNGUA PORTUGUESA, 2010, p. 26). Many aspects can be developed, in addition to exploring the signs referring to the characters in the narrative and contextualising the situation that triggers the story. The meanings that can circulate from the text articulate the children's imagination, fantasy and real life, around the situation of a party, perhaps a birthday, and the conditions imposed by each guest. The dilemmas of whether or not to be invited, whether or not to give in to the conditions, the dilemma of thinking about the size of the possible party, among many others, mobilise varied forms of interlocution and interaction with this narrative.

In this story, both the structure of the invitation sentence and that of the thanking conditional on another character coming are the same, with only the names varying, which allows us, for example, to reflect on what remains and what changes in each part (CADERNOS DE APOIO E APRENDIZAGEM: LÍNGUA PORTUGUESA, 2010, p. 26).

Signing the story in Libras, dramatising it so that it takes on new interpretive contours, and expanding the linguistic repertoire can make the language experience an event, in the Bakhtinian conception. There is also the possibility of expanding it to other textual supports: guest lists, invitations, posters, menus and thank you cards, for example. Furthermore, we would point out that the playfulness that marks this movement around the story brings play as a possibility, given the contexts of suspense, curiosity and fun promoted by the signed reading of the work.

Learning sign language while immersed in discursive and playful practices makes the experience richer and more effective. The situation of sequential repetition with the addition of a new element helps all children - hearing and deaf. It gives them the opportunity to understand the intricacies of the discursive context with each repetition, providing the possibility and time for reflection, positioning themselves in the face of situations, anticipations, and appropriating ways of "saying" and representing the narrative.

Another aspect that can be considered is the collaborative reading of the story, starting with an initial explanation of the material. Providing the experience of retelling the story based on what was understood by the students, helps us to evaluate each person's expression, in this case in sign language. The experience of collaborative reading helps us understand the importance of alternating turns of "speech", respecting others and mobilising the collective production of meanings of the story. In the context of the classroom, it is up to the teacher to distribute the speaking turns "in such a way as to allow everyone to participate in the proposed activities" (ROSA, 2008, p.35).

This context created through children's literature and, in particular, through repetitive and cumulative tales, fulfils what Soares (2022) advocates as fundamental to the learning process. Although, in the specific case, the author refers to the learning of written language, it can also be applied in the context of sign language learning.

Soares (2022) shows a learning process in three layers: the cultural and social contexts in which writing is used; the uses of writing at school; and the alphabetic writing system itself. In this sense, we can consider that children's literature and the tales mentioned are artefacts of culture and therefore comprise the first layer. Working with repetitive and cumulative tales at school, relates to the second layer - the reasons for writing, speaking, signing and dramatising at school. The two layers mentioned above provide an opportunity to reflect on and analyse how writing works, as well as articulating the sign, the context, and the written word. "Learnings that overlap make up the whole. Each learning is differentiated from the others by its own processes, but they are interdependent - each learning depends on the others (...)" (SOARES, 2022, p. 19).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that teaching Libras to deaf students from a discursive perspective is an opportunity to make use of materials that circulate in society, particularly in the world of children and young people, and which can become great allies for the mediation of knowledge and multiple learning. Developing language in the context of discursive practices considers the different ways of saying, signifying, inserting oneself, and situating oneself. Students learn that we express ourselves and interact through written, spoken, and sign language. They learn that there are different situations of language production, which lead to specificities of style and composition, as Bakhtin (2000) addresses when discussing discourse genres.

Final considerations

Thinking about deaf bilingual education in contemporary times requires different working possibilities and teaching resources, considering the visual experience as a power to be stimulated and developed. With the prospect of two languages circulating in the school space, teaching practices need to take this specificity into account. In the case of this study, building proposals for sign language teaching that are effective and that arouse deaf students' interest and motivation is a challenge that bilingual schools need to face.

The use of repetitive and cumulative tales, as well as other types of discursive genres in deaf education, can contribute to the development of various skills, if used in a planned and didactic accessible way. We can consider that the way these works are prepared and structured provides a myriad of possibilities for intervention, considering the appropriation and understanding of sign language through knowledge of new signs, uses, and language functioning; and, if it is in line with the pedagogical objectives, linguistic analysis in a broad and meaningful context.

In addition, the use of repetitive and cumulative stories can enhance the use of anticipatory reading strategies in sign language, in a fun way that can evolve into other discursive contexts, depending on the pedagogical mediation and strategies selected. As discussed in this study, exploring the material in layers of meaning helps us to think about pedagogical action and prioritisation, because school work is dynamic and each reality requires the teacher to make specific decisions. In the case of deaf education, the urgency of effective linguistic work has always been part of the history of education and nowadays it has taken on new contours, based on legal prerogatives, on an increasingly present research into Brazilian sign language, and on its inclusion in prescribed curricula.

Encouraging the reading and retelling of stories in sign language, can encourage a taste for literature and an appreciation of national and international literary production, which is so important and necessary in today's context of misinformation and attachment to superficial content. Recognising the cultural heritage of childhood is recommended as one of the premises of language work, and this also applies to bilingual schools for deaf students.

"Witch, Witch, please come to my party. Thank you! Yes, I will, only if you invite" the deaf students...

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