REFLECTIONS ON SIGN LANGUAGE LITERACY AND SIGN LANGUAGE LITERATURE, WITH REFERENCE TO THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES

REFLEXÕES SOBRE ALFABETIZAÇÃO EM LÍNGUA DE SINAIS E LITERATURA EM LÍNGUA DE SINAIS, COM REFERÊNCIA AO QUADRO EUROPEU COMUM DE REFERÊNCIA PARA LÍNGUAS

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ABSTRACT

The definition of literacy has evolved from its original definition as a cognitive ability towards written texts. Following the increase in the study of multilingualism and the form that written text can take, new theoretical approaches evolved to include other forms or literacies such as multiliteracies, multimodality, real literacies, materiality and affect (Papen, 2023). Similarly, educational tools and linguistic frameworks such as the Common European Framework of References for Languages - CEFR have evolved to include different ways to intend contents that are meant to vehicle socio-cultural values and ideas. This article reflects on what makes sign language literacy in a context where the literature of reference is signed literature, living and thriving along with the written literature. In such a context, a real inclusion of the deaf and their signing culture shall consider the signed contents generated by the signing community, and find new ways to include them in the education of deaf children.
Keywords: Deaf literacy. Sign language literacy. Sign language. Common European Framework of References for Languages - CEFR. Signed literature.

RESUMO

A definição de alfabetização evoluiu de sua definição original como uma habilidade cognitiva em relação a textos escritos. Após o aumento do estudo do multilinguismo e da forma que o texto escrito pode assumir, novas abordagens teóricas evoluíram para incluir outras formas ou alfabetizações, como multiliteracias, multimodalidade, alfabetizações reais, materialidade e afeto (Papen, 2023). Da mesma forma, as ferramentas educacionais e as estruturas linguísticas, como o Quadro Europeu Comum de Referências para Línguas (CEFR), evoluíram para incluir diferentes formas de intenção de conteúdos que visam transmitir valores e ideias socioculturais. Este artigo reflete sobre o que torna a alfabetização em língua de sinais em um contexto em que a literatura de referência é a literatura sinalizada, que vive e prospera junto com a literatura escrita. Nesse contexto, uma inclusão real dos surdos e de sua cultura de sinais deve considerar os conteúdos em sinais gerados pela comunidade de sinais e encontrar novas maneiras de incluí-los na educação das crianças surdas.
Palavras-chave: Alfabetização de surdos. Alfabetização em língua de sinais. Língua de sinais. Quadro Europeu Comum de Referências para Línguas - CEFR. Literatura de sinais.

Literacy and deafness

When speaking about 'literacy', the most neutral definition that can be provided is the one given in Jacobs (2013), as "the ability to acquire a written code by developing decoding (reading) and encoding (writing) skills of typographic texts" (in Mertzani, 2022). This definition, which was originally tied to a mere cognitive ability towards written texts, gained cultural value as studies on literacy and bilingualism continued to progress:

> From the 1980s onwards, literacy is understood to be a socially and historically determined construct rather than a neutral process, and what counts as a text and literate behavior are determined by the community's socio-cultural, historical, and political context. Literacy then encompasses understanding these contexts in which it is practiced, and its learning is enabled and/or constrained by power relations that may privilege some of its types and subjugate others, especially when two (or more) languages are involved. (Mertzani, 2022, p. 450-451)

In the case of the deaf, the existing power play around their community becomes evident when looking at the history of their education and the way in which sign language has been banned from it. The result is a paradoxical situation where deaf people can be considered as bilinguals, when both signed and spoken language are present, or monolinguals, when exposed to spoken language only (Groves, De Monte, & Orletti, 2013). The matter is emerging more and more in the field of deaf studies, where recent articles published by deaf and hearing researchers sees a frequent use of words such as 'ableism', 'audism', 'phonocentrism', 'antideaf biases', among others. This terminology, which started to gain more visibility and power around the year 2000, relates to an approach to deaf studies that condemn the long-standing ambition, held by the majority of hearing people, to "cure" deafness, regardless of the opinion on their own condition by those who are directly interested. These theories are based on the idea that a general "paternalistic" perspective on deafness has, avertedly or not, created a culture that keeps the deaf in an eternal childhood state where they are not allowed to express their opinion or, if so, it is hardly considered as valuable as that of their hearing peers.

Neologisms such as the ones seen above are the result of the need to define deafness and their position into society in a new and distinctive way, owned by the deaf and in which they can fully feel represented. Thus, 'audism' defines "the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears'' (Humphries, 1977, p. 12), and 'phonocentrism', as a logical consequence, is the belief that sounds and speech are inherently superior to written or sign language (Bauman, 2008). 'Antideaf biases' "include the fictitious notion that deaf people can and should be "fixed" by oral-aural training regimens or assistive listening technologies" which actually "kills" the deaf identity in favor of a hearing-like one (Skyer & Cochell, 2020, p. 4).

The empowerment of these positions could probably be related to the increase in the number of deaf people who receive a cochlear implant; the recent discussions around its effectiveness (see Gomez, 2023 for a critical review on the existing literature). In fact, with the increase of cochlear implantation on deaf children and adults came the evidence that, despite of the high success rate of the implant itself (over 90%, Kim SY, 2020), this is not always a real "solution" to deafness and sometimes fails to keep its promises. Other than the device survival rate, factors such as the daily maintenance of the device and the way it still influences the development of a "deaf identity" in the wearer are still under discussion. Nonetheless, implanted deaf children are led to a prevalently oral education to spoken and written language, where sign language is seen as superficial or unnecessary (if not harmful). In such a

context, education in sign language is left to informal learning, often met by chance, making it difficult to define an "organic" way to build sign language literacy and to study possible transferring effects on the literacy in the main spoken language. Consequently, the level of sign language literacy in deaf signers remains quite diverse.

In countries that have a sign language curriculum for public education, chances are that the level of literacy in sign language will be higher, as opposed to countries where sign language is completely excluded in children education (Mertzani, De Monte, Fernandes, 2023). In Italy, a gradual opening towards the construction of a sign language curriculum came with the passage of the law recognizing Italian Sign Language (LIS) as the minority language of the Italian deaf community (Law 69/2021, article 34ter). Thus, the past few years have seen a raising interest, by some regional institutions, in teaching LIS to middle-school aged students. Despite of these slow changes, the situation stays critical. Given the diversity in the education of the deaf, which reflects in a plurality of educational approaches, students will receive formal education in sign language only where possible (De Monte, 2023) and, even in those cases, information on the way in which it is built are obscure and require further research. Recently, the reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a candidate to fill that gap, although a lot remains to be done to meet the developing needs of deaf children (De Monte, 2022; Council of Europe L. P., 2018).

## The CEFR for the development of a sign language literacy idea

CEFR is a framework that describes the levels of language proficiency for learning, teaching, and assessment (Council of Europe, 2006). It has six levels, from A1 (basic user) to C2 (proficient user), which are further divided into three broad categories: Basic User, Independent User, and Proficient User. Each level is defined by a set of descriptors that describe what a learner can do in different skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) and contexts (general, academic, professional, etc.). The CEFR also has other dimensions, such as the action-oriented approach, which views language users as social agents performing tasks using language; mediation, which involves facilitating communication between others or making sense of complex information; plurilingualism, which refers to the ability to use and switch between different languages and varieties; and online interaction, which covers the skills and strategies needed for communicating in digital environments. The CEFR was designed to provide a reference for all European languages, for language learners to be aware of their progress and for employers to refer to a unique scheme for their assessment. The fact that it is also used for non-European languages proves its versatility and utility for any language and any social context. The CEFR is a flexible and adaptable tool that can be used for various purposes, such as designing curricula, developing materials, assessing learners, and certifying qualifications. It is widely used in Europe and beyond, and it is available in 40 languages. Since its adoption in language education, the CEFR has favored a standardization of language education across Europe, making it easier for people to work abroad and have their skills recognized.

CEFR's first edition, published in 2001, was the result of a process that started in 1960 and continued as the European Union was being built and recognized as a supranational entity (Figure 1). This first edition represented a cornerstone in the education of the European languages and it has been long adopted, analyzed and assessed before coming to the 2018 compendium that finally considers sign language among the other European languages (Council of Europe L. P., 2018). While the process for the creation of a standard for spoken language is well known, the inclusion of sign language is the

result of a process that begins with its recognition as a full language, and continues with the definition of a methodology for its study (Stokoe, 1960). It is also followed by the description of its grammar for each variant in use throughout Europe and, finally, aligns its education to CEFR's milestones and descriptors.

Figure 1 visualizes the steps followed in this process with reference to the CEFR development stages in the wider context of the creation of the European Union (EU). The top line reports the cornerstone moments in building the identity of the EU, and the lines below mark the milestones in CEFR's construction and the parallel work done on sign language. As it can be seen, although the resolution on sign language has passed in 1988, it is only in 2011 that the inclusion of sign language in the CEFR is actually considered. That is, more than 20 years after the beginning of any work on the standardization of language description in Europe.

Figure 1: milestones in building the CEFR for European languages
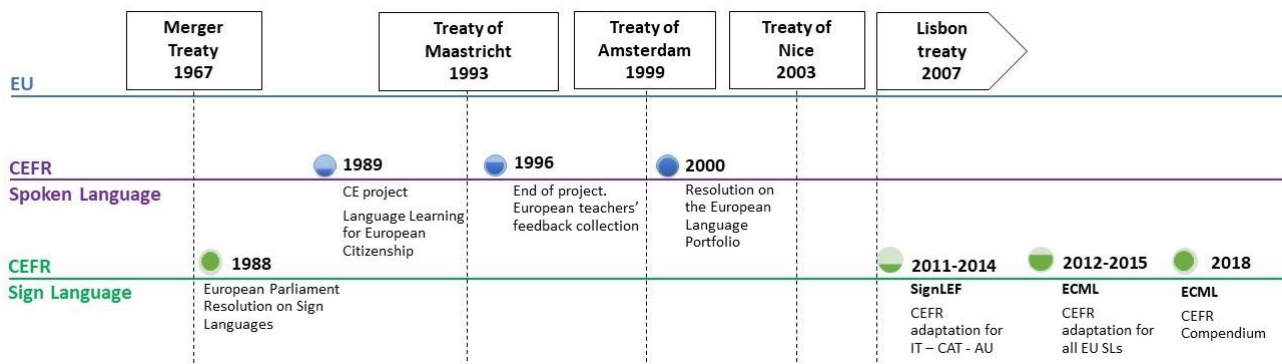
The project that marked the beginning of most CEFR-related works on sign language is the Pro-sign project. This latter is among the projects that led to the Compendium publication in 2018, providing descriptors for sign language for the first time. The Pro-sign project has considered many other similar projects for its outcomes and resulted in the following repertoire (Table1):

Table 1: CEFR Sign Language Repertoire across levels

Sign language repertoire	
C2	Can express him/herself in abstract, poetic signing. Can formulate abstract expressions and concepts, e.g. in the academic and scientific domain. Can produce with the one hand a productive or lexical sign (e.g. a classifier or a lexical verb like "search for "), whilst simultaneously using the other hand and mimic for 'constructive action' (e.g. scratching his/her head in different places as if searching for something). Can present a complex action in a linguistically aesthetic way, for example by employing hand shapes as a means of playful expression.
C1	Can express actions, objects and relations between these by using suitable (substitutor)-classifiers (one- and two-handed) in varying ways with ease. Can employ the appropriate classifier in order to highlight a particular meaning. Can sign comprehensibly using just one hand (the dominant hand). Can use a sentence to specify the precisely intended meaning of a vague term (e.g. specify "murder" by mimicking the weapon used). Can give a very broad coverage of a topic, taking account of different aspects involved. Can switch between direct and indirect speech.

B2+	Can sign comprehensibly and precisely on a complex subject. Can adapt the signing style to the content and/or object being described. Can present a simple productive action with just mimic and an appropriate classifier. Can use a differentiated choice of words that corresponds to the type of text concerned. Can employ 'constructed action' (actions are imitated 1:1).
B2	Can always express his/her own opinion, even when the positions taken and opinions expressed by others are being presented. Can express the same content in different language. Can alternate between productive and lexical signing. Can communicate information using only productive signing, without lexical signs. Can replace lexical signing with productive signing, for example by using classifier predicates.
B1	Can spell foreign words quickly and accurately with the finger alphabet. Can, in order to facilitate understanding, make a relevant comparison with other things/images/circumstances that the recipient already knows (e.g. "A porcupine looks like a big hedgehog"). Can employ different classifiers (e.g. manipulators and substitutors) when describing an action. Can employ mouth shapes in a differentiated manner that is appropriate to context. Can employ different means (e.g. mimic, handshape, hand orientation, movement) in order to describe the size and shape of an object. Can present characteristics just with mouth gestures and mimic.
B1	Can describe important characteristics of a person or object with the appropriate handshapes. Can modify productive signing appropriately to the context. Can make part of his/her contribution by using 'constructed action' to present individual, simple actions. Can express character and qualities of a person or protagonist by using mimic. Can present actions through productive signing. Can vary the scale of his/her signing (larger, smaller) dependent on the situation. Can give a comprehensive description of a person, including facial expression, skin colour, make up, hairstyle and profession. Can employ appropriate classifiers to refer to, for example, animals instead of lexical signs. Can use mouth shapes precisely to express specific content (e.g. PFF).
A2	Can use a range of signs. Can present different aspects of the plot or storyline (e.g. duration: as in "work through the night". Can employ examples in order to illustrate something. Can make the distinction between different things clear. Can relay information in a short and minimal, yet intelligible way. Can, with preparation, use the right names and terminology related to the topic at hand. Can describe a person in terms of their characteristic features. Can express his/her own opinion. Can present visually simple information like actions and relationships (e.g. in the family). Can sign a direct demand. Can express an amount/quantity through mimic. Can express proximity and distance by using appropriate mimic or other non-manual means, for example by, in DGS, using the tongue to express 'round the corner'. Can describe the design, colour and texture of clothes
A1	Can produce correct mouth shapes and employ them to differentiate between otherwise identical signs. Can spell names and technical expressions, among other things, using the finger alphabet. Can describe physical shape (height, width, length). Can sign direct requests. Can sign conventional greetings and leave taking expressions. Can describe a person from facial expressions, hair and physical characteristics or through things the person often wears. Can produce clear and unambiguous hand shapes. Can indicate the lexical signs for months, days of the week and times of the day. Can state his/her opinion (AGREE; DISAGREE)

Source: Council of Europe (2018, p. 146-147).

Having a framework of reference for sign language within other spoken languages not only adds linguistic value to the language itself, but also makes it easier to recognize the level reached by the learner and to standardize its assessment. When used in educational settings, it allows teachers to decide which educational goals to aim for, and to set up smaller goals to organize training. General descriptors of language proficiency can be cut to the needs of specific learners by using Reference Level Descriptions (RLD). RLDs provide detailed content specifications for different CEFR levels and can be adapted and used for multiple contexts and languages. RLDs are normally developed by associations and institutions to suit the peculiar features of each language and learner group, thus, also children in their school age can be considered.

## A "literature" for sign language: on paper

The already mentioned definition of literacy given by Jacobs (2013), has, as a necessary condition, "a written code and typographic texts" which are consolidated for that specific language and culture. Populations having languages that come with a written code tend to easily forget that writing came in a much later age than speaking and that it is the product of formal learning (Ong, 1986; Both, 2009). Thus, wherever there is a discussion around literacy, there is to consider an underlying idea of "literature" involved. The "typographic texts" to which Jacobs refers, then, will most likely be part of a greater collection of texts that, within a given culture, builds the 'literature' of that culture. Literature is a broad term that refers to written works that are considered to have artistic or intellectual value. Literature can include various genres, such as fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction, and can be written in different languages and cultural contexts.

In the case of Sign language, there is no existing form of writing that can be considered as "official" for sign language. Apart from phonological annotation systems, such as Stokoe's notation system (Stokoe, 1960) or Hamnosys (Prillwitz, 1987), the attempts to write sign language on paper have often failed to be naturally adopted by the signing community. Such is the case of Sign Writing, an evolution of the original dance writing developed by Valerie Sutton in 1972 for the annotation of dance movements (Sutton, 2000). Its adaptation to sign language came in 1974 by the University of Copenhagen, and its first use on a publication was in 1981, with *the SignWriter Newspaper*, which was entirely (sign)written in American Sign Language (ASL), published from 1981 to 1984. However, it is only from 1988 that this methodology started to spread throughout the world, thanks to the promotional activities done by the Deaf Action Committee for SignWriting (DAC), a group of ASL signers led by Lucinda O'Grady.

One of the advantages of SignWriting, reported by signers, is that the symbols for the signs are easily "readable" by expert signers, once the code of this writing system is learned. Among the sign languages that have tested and adopted this form of writing, American Sign Language (ASL), Nicaraguan Sign Language (Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua – ISN) and Brasilian Sign Language (Língua de Sinais Brasileira - LIBRAS) are among those with a longer testing experience. In Italy, researches around the adoption of SignWriting as a way to use pen-and-paper to transcribe sign language begun informally in 1998 by Elena Antinoro Pizzuto but started to improve only since 2005 (Volterra, Roccaforte, Di Renzo, & Fontana, 2022).

Nowadays, SignWriting is often used together with signs description or in signed video to expose children and adults to a written alternative to depicting single signs or filming it. Figure 2 shows an example of such use taken from the third edition of the *Dicionário da Língua de Sinais do Brasil: a Libras em suas mãos*, edited, in its various editions, by Fernando Cesar Capovilla and collaborators (Capovilla, Raphael, Temoteo, & Martins, 2017). The figure shows the sign 'doença' (in English, illness) annotated in graphic form, in SignWriting, followed by an image for its meaning representation. Next to the sign, there is also the transposition of the word into fingerspelling, followed by the definition in both written Portuguese and English.

Figure 2: The sign DOENÇA in LIBRAS and in SignWriting
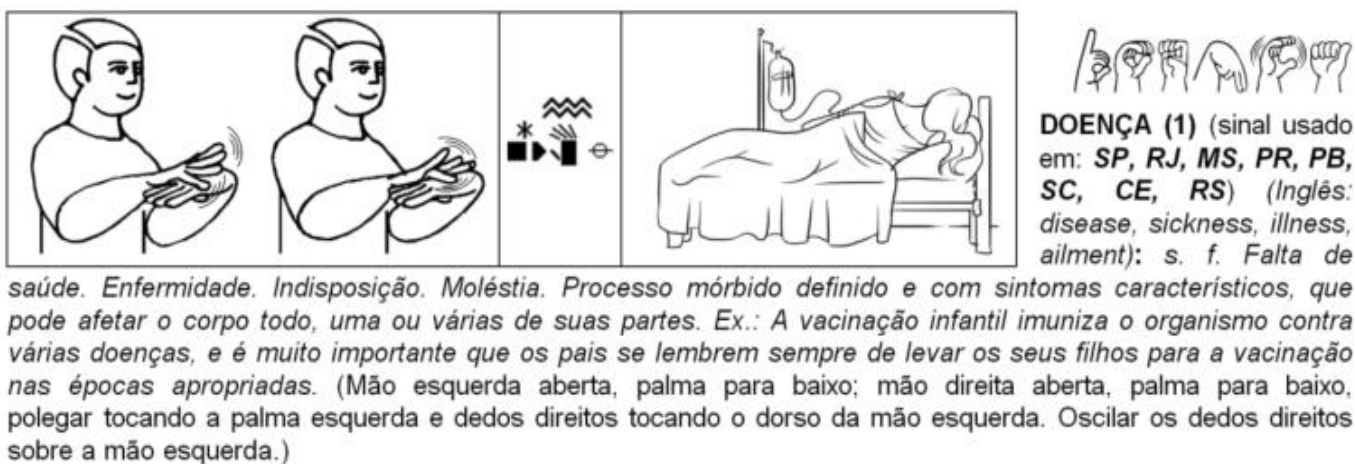
Source: Capovilla et al. (2017).

While its use as a written form for sign language can be an interesting adopt, facts are that, despite of the above attempts, its use is very limited and there are struggles in being fully adopted by deaf people on a daily basis. Supporters of this writing system claim that formal education and hence, formal use, may improve its adoption and, by extension, the level of deaf learners' literacy. However, at the moment its use is very limited and thus, as such, it cannot be considered as an equivalent of spoken language writing.

A "literature" for sign language: videos

Video recording and the construction and maintenance of websites for storing signed content grows continuously, generating reference and storing habits in the deaf community. If we consider sign language literature as the product of the performance by Deaf or hard of hearing people who share a common culture and language, what probably comes to mind are sign language poems, videos specifically designed to inform, tell stories - for children or adults - for recipes, to discuss about personal or political position involving the rights of the community, promote new products, and so on. By all means, videos in sign language collect and distribute the culture of the deaf community in a very effective way.

Figure 3: Screenshot taken from the second episode on Feminism on the YouTube channel OpemaTV on December 8, 2020

OPEMA TV - 2° puntata di Femminismo - LIS

Source: Opema TV. Link: < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMFyRzYfYfA>.

The development of video technology use to share thoughts in sign language has followed the evolution of technology itself. It started with the small revolution of using written texts in portable devices back in the 90s. Then, this portable technology has evolved as its cost decreased, and the Internet allowed for more data upload and sharing. Currently, the existence of social media for user-generated contents makes it possible for the deaf to access to information and signed contents in a way that proves to be even more inclusive than any attempt done this far in formal settings. This far, most social media contents are created to entertain, inform, discuss topics that are relevant for the community (recognizing sign language, discussing the representatives of big associations for the deaf, etc.). Figure 3 shows a screenshot of a video taken form a popular signed channel on Youtube, OpemaTV. The channel's goal is to inform the signing population by conveying popular contents and/or information in sign language. In the creation of the videos, a lot of attention is on the choice of a color-distinctive background, use of images to complete the contents, and clear visibility of the signer.

Overall, pages as OpemaTV allows the creation of threads, which, in turn, builds a background of videos that can be easily considered as part of a "literature" of signed contents designated to certain signer groups. Social media are also becoming a place to share and comment on videos depicting signed poetry, jokes, ABC or number stories and nursery rhymes. More recently, younger signers are proposing contents on their lifestyle, showing what it means to live in a hearing community and what their coping strategies are. These contents are often proposed in a combination with other, lighter ones, in the attempt to provide a fuller perspective on the life of a deaf person, which includes other things than deafness itself. Some of these become viral and/or become an interesting object of study for the scientific community, for their value in defining the underlying constructive rules of sign language and in building a sense of community despite of the physical distances. Also, the progressive ease in creating subtitles is helping their diffusion towards the hearing audience, bringing them near to any other content online.

Discussion

When discussing sign language literacy, it is crucial to consider it as an *oral language* without any written form involved, thus, referring to the concept of *oral literature*, which is a genre of literature that is spoken or sung rather than written. Oral literature is often associated with pre-literate societies, but it can also exist alongside written literature in complex cultures. It includes various forms of oral expression, such as stories, legends, myths, songs, proverbs, and riddles that are transmitted by word of mouth in a living community. Oral literature can reflect the values, history, and identity of a people, and challenge the oppression and marginalization they may face. In our case, oral literature involves signed contents and their recordings, which needs to be considered as a *signed literature* having its own relevance to deaf peoples' construction of literacy skills.

It is time to consider the positions by those deaf researchers and the people that they represent to not look at them only as people with a disability, but as people who build their identity and culture through sign language. The definition of literacy thus needs to expand to include other forms of literacy. The field of research known as (New) Literacy Studies (NLS) may be a first answer to this need. This approach, which was first developed in the Eighties, is now gaining new value as new theoretical ideas have been added to their canon. These include multiliteracies, multimodality, real literacies, materiality and affect (Papen, 2023). NLS has put forward a sociocultural understanding of literacy as *practice*, as opposed to the definition of literacy as a set of cognitive abilities. After all, despite of the oral nature of sign language, it lives and thrives in a community of people who speaks at least one language with at least one written form. Thus, a form of mutual influence and conditioning must be considered, especially when considering the sign language use as a mediating language in educating deaf people reading and writing.

The use of sign language as a mediator for deaf children's education is embedded in the history of deaf education. Starting from de l'Épée onwards, sign language has always been used to facilitate communication with the deaf and to teach them how to understand and reproduce the written symbols of spoken language. As is already known in the history of sign language studies, very little attention has been given on the underlying structure of this visual-gestural language. After all, the grammar of sign language is still an an ever-evolving discovery that roots deeper into the linguistic abilities of humans.

Figure 4: Screenshot from Boa Noite, a video-tale in LIBRAS.
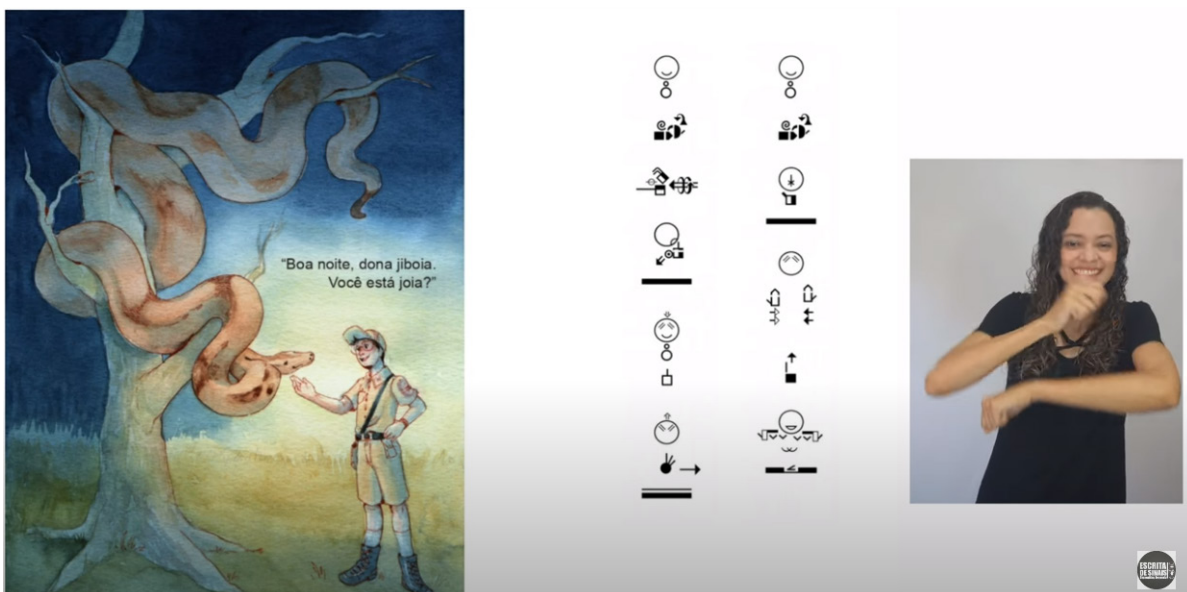
Obs.: Contents are provided in multiple formats. Source: Author's archive and elaboration.

With the evolution of video-recording and data-sharing technologies, the possibility to share and use sign language for education have increased even more. Educational materials (see, for example, Hatzopoulou et al. in this volume) can include stories which record audio, video, sign language, text and SignWriting in a multimodality content that allow access in formats preferred by the student and/or the teacher, allowing at the same time the exploration of other modalities (Figure 4).

Using contents like the one in Figure 4, where multiple linguistic codes are used in the same time, respects the linguistic choices of the deaf child, allowing the teacher to work on the recognition of the parametric components of each language, and the learner to improve their knowledge in a comparative context.

Conclusion

The definition of literacy for sign language is a developing one, searching its way out of a general – phonocentric - idea that defines literacy exclusively as a competence on written language and sign language as tool for learning a spoken language. As the definition of literacy expands to include other forms of literacy, such as stories, tales and other forms of transmission tied to oral traditions, new standards are created to include other forms of language transmission such as signed video contents, discussed in this paper in an attempt to define an emerging signed literature that chooses video-recordings for its existence and transmission.

If, on the one hand, sign language literacy in the deaf is not considered as a priority in their education, on the other hand it has traditionally focused on comparing deaf learners with hearing ones, lacking to consider deaf people as visual learners with different learning behaviors. The social cost of this situation is that deaf people are often excluded from written communication and, in many cases, they cannot perform professional tasks involving minimum competences in written language and cannot access higher levels of education. In such a context, the survival of "paternalistic" perspectives on deafness cannot be surprising.

Sign language literature is an important part of the Deaf community, as it helps to preserve and transmit its history, values, and identity. As for any oral culture, sign language literature can also be a way of challenging the oppression and marginalization that Deaf people face from the dominant hearing society.

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