

BIMODAL BILINGUAL ENVIRONMENTS: POSSIBILITIES FOR WELCOMING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

AMBIENTES BILÍNGUES BIMODAIS: POSSIBILIDADES DE ACOLHER A DIVERSIDADE LINGUÍSTICA

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ABSTRACT

Literacy stands out among the main concerns of family members and teachers of children entering school, and its learning presupposes involvement with a language. In general, language acquisition is not usually as much of a concern as children's reading and writing skills. When it is perceived, deafness is understood as an impeding disability and not as an experience that enables a different communication form, leading to language acquisition implications and consequences. As a result, those responsible for deaf children tend to focus on their literacy, ignoring the fact that in order to be literate, a minimally established language is necessary. Based on the theoretical assumptions of translanguaging and using the concept of host language, this paper discusses possible ways of addressing deaf children's linguistic issues, considering the present Brazilian educational context. To this end, a brief mapping of Brazilian public policies on deaf education is carried out in order to think about a school environment capable of welcoming signers' linguistic diversity and of promoting their development while respecting their conditions. Based on this discussion, there is encouragement for bimodal bilingual educational environments that are not limited only to deaf people, but welcome other linguistically diverse profiles.

Keywords: Bimodal bilingualism. Linguistic diversity. Language acquisition. Deaf education.

RESUMO

Dentre as principais preocupações de familiares e professores de crianças que ingressam na escola, a alfabetização se destaca, e seu processo de aprendizagem pressupõe o envolvimento com uma língua. De modo geral, a aquisição linguística não costuma representar uma preocupação como representam as habilidades de leitura e escrita de crianças. Quando percebida, a surdez passa a ser compreendida como uma deficiência impeditiva e não como uma experiência que possibilita uma forma de comunicação diferente, levando a implicações na aquisição linguística e suas consequências. Assim, os responsáveis pela criança surda costumam se ocupar da alfabetização da criança, ignorando que, para alfabetizar, é necessário haver uma língua minimamente estabelecida. Partindo dos pressupostos teóricos da translanguagem e utilizando o conceito de língua de acolhimento, este artigo objetiva discutir possíveis formas de atender às questões linguísticas de crianças surdas considerando as condições educacionais brasileiras. Desse modo, realiza-se um breve mapeamento das políticas públicas focadas na educação de surdos vigentes no Brasil para pensar um ambiente escolar capaz de acolher a diversidade linguística de sinalizantes e de promover seu desenvolvimento respeitando suas condições. A partir da discussão desenvolvida, mostra-se conveniente o incentivo de ambientes educacionais bilíngues bimodais, que não se limitem apenas ao público surdo, mas que acolham outros perfis de diversidade linguística.

Palavras-chave: Bilinguismo bimodal. Diversidade linguística. Aquisição linguística. Educação de surdos.

Introduction

Starting school is marked by a series of new challenges, such as parents' and educators' concerns regarding children's literacy, a learning process that is only possible when linguistic acquisition and development precedes this stage. The initial learning of written language, literacy, is extremely important because the writing system is the "structuring language that functions as a prerequisite for accessing other languages, and its appropriation has a cultural and social character" (Vale, 2023, p. 97). Language acquisition and manifestation in children is only noticed when unexpected characteristics appear, such as delays in speech production or difficulties in expressing themselves in a conventional way. When identified in a child, deafness ends up being considered a limitation that prevents communication. It is difficult to develop an understanding of this experience that enables the development of a communication form which escapes an hegemonic vocal language. This situation can often have implications for language acquisition and, consequently, linguistic, cognitive, and social development, among others. For linguistic minorities, as in the case of deaf people, mother tongue instruction means using the students' first language (L1) in the early literacy process and then, gradually, introducing them to the second language (L2), such as Portuguese, and their literacy (Mertzani, 2022). However, the need for an established linguistic basis is often overlooked due to a lack of knowledge about the deafness experience.

A concept that has proved opportune for reflecting on deaf education is that of *translanguage*. According to Li Wei (2018), who takes it as a practical theory of language, translanguaging has been used in a variety of educational contexts in which the language of instruction is different from students' languages. The author contextualises translanguaging in the linguistic reality of the 21st century, mainly due to its fluid and dynamic practices that move beyond the boundaries of named languages, linguistic varieties, and other semiotic systems. For Swanwick (2017), in the context of deaf education, translanguaging is a promising innovation, with its great potential to recognise deaf students' diverse linguistic repertoires. However, the author warns that this perspective can only represent an advance in linguistic development and learning in deaf education, if their repertoires are truly recognised, and if translanguaging is inserted in an inclusive and additive linguistic context. In this sense, we bring to this discussion the concept of *host language*, in order to ensure that it reaches this inclusive and additive dimension when thinking about deaf educational contexts. This concept comes from the field of teaching Portuguese as a Host Language (in Portuguese, Língua de Acolhimento - PLAc). According to São Bernardo (2016, p. 66),

[...] the PLAc concept transcends the linguistic and cultural perspective, and also refers to the emotional and subjective prism of language and the conflicting relationship present in the immigrant's initial contact with the host society, judging by the vulnerable situation that these people face.

Although the focus of this discussion is not on refugees, the use of the host language is applicable in the deaf educational context, which is also characterised by a series of specificities, often similar to those of refugee migrants, like linguistic and cultural vulnerability in linguistic incompatibility in hearing family contexts.

Motivated by the theoretical assumptions of translanguaging and the concept of host language, we discuss possible ways of addressing deaf children's linguistic issues, taking into consideration current Brazilian educational conditions. To this end, we briefly present the contextual scenario of

deaf education in Brazil by mapping the public policies in this field. Therefore, we have undertaken a discussion involving the linguistic specificities of the deaf experience with the intention of thinking a linguistically favourable educational environment for signers.

In the following section, *Educational contexts for the deaf in Brazil*, we briefly map out possible educational configurations concerning the schooling of the deaf in the Brazilian context, based on an overview of the educational policies that guide basic education in relation to deafness. In this same section, we discuss the existing problems arising from the condition of deafness, such as referral forms, knowledge and ignorance in the family environment, and the ways school institutions deal with deaf children. In the next section, *Translingualising for rethinking and updating deaf education*, we present certain authors who study translanguaging in deaf education and rethink it on the basis of its potential. In line with this, in the section *A creative exercise: the sign school*, using the concepts of translanguage and host language, we set out on a creative exercise in an attempt to think about deaf education beyond the ways we usually think about it. Following this discussion, it seems appropriate to establish more comprehensive bimodal bilingual environments, characterised by linguistic acceptance and openness to diversity.

Deaf educational contexts in Brazil

In order to contextualise deaf bilingual education, it is necessary to consider the complexity involved not only in guaranteeing access to a sign language, such as Libras, the Brazilian sign language, but also in promoting bilingualism as an approach that respects the cultural and linguistic specificities of deaf communities. Historically, deaf communities have fought for bilingual education, both in families and at schools, as a way of breaking with the prestige of the predominant oral-auditory language (Müller et al., 2013). This fight is fundamental if deaf children are to have the opportunity to build the minimum knowledge at school and in the family. This battle, though, faces significant challenges, especially in the Brazilian national context.

Overall, the responsibility for deaf bilingual education falls mainly on schools, with little emphasis on family training in relation to deaf children's bilingual development. Currently, bills such as Bill No. 562 of 2019, presently before the Chamber of Deputies, and Bill No. 5961 of 2019, presently before the Federal Senate, propose changes to the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (in Portuguese, Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional) with the aim of promoting the teaching of Libras in schools. The proposals would contribute to facilitating and establishing communicative relationships, raising social awareness of the country's linguistic and cultural diversity, and understanding the importance of sign language and the need to respect deaf culture in various spheres. However, these initiatives should not be viewed as isolated measures or absolute solutions, but rather as part of an ongoing effort to build a more comprehensive and inclusive language education.

In view of this, it is essential to realise that the National Special Education Policy in Brazil (in Portuguese, Política Nacional de Educação Especial no Brasil) is guided by the perspective of Inclusive Education, enabling deaf students to attend regular education institutions alongside hearing students. However, the legislation does not provide a well-defined framework for the implementation of bilingual education that guarantees sign language as a first language. In this sense, when we seek to describe the necessary conditions for establishing the development of deaf people's bilingualism, three aspects are under consideration: possibilities for language acquisition; proficient and conscious linguistic use by those who share the environment; and the promotion of social belonging through the

languages used (Witchs; Zilio, 2018). However, the lack of objectivity in the organisation and of the guidelines of the policies regulating deaf education, give rise to an extremely diverse scenario that does not always guarantee adequate linguistic environments for deaf children's development.

In Brazil, inclusive education is a model that includes disabled students in classes with non-disabled students, deaf students inclusively. Despite the criticism, this model deserves recognition for the significant changes in favour of the inclusion of people with disabilities. However, the linguistic crossings that permeate the experience of deafness make aspects of this inclusive education policy more complex. For example, this is the case with Decree No. 5.626 (Brazil, 2005), which establishes the possibility of access to education through translation and interpretation from Portuguese to Libras and vice versa, carried out by translators and interpreters in the classroom. Also, there is the alternative of specific classes for the deaf in mainstream schools, where bilingual teachers, translators and interpreters can be found. To a lesser extent, there are special and/or bilingual schools for the deaf, which cater only for deaf pupils due to their linguistic condition and in which Libras is established as the first language. In this school model, it is assumed that all professionals are bilingual. However, there is no mechanism in place to guarantee effectively bilingual professionals working in these institutions. As Giroto, Ciclino and Poker (2018) point out, there is still no clarity as to what teachers' training should be like, what a pedagogy course that prepares teachers of deaf students should include, or even how these teaching models are organised. Worth noting that the last educational model mentioned, the school for the deaf, is characterised by an inclusive environment, specifically with regard to the linguistic conditions of its students.

In addition to issues concerning the educational structure, there is lack of a language policy that supports and guides deaf children's hearing families in relation to the children's linguistic condition and bilingualism (Ribeiro; Bertonha; Castro, 2020). Often, these families are supported by health professionals who are unaware of or do not recognise the potential of bilingualism for deaf children's integral development. As a result, many children spend their first years of life without access to sign language, which is fundamental for their communication and cognitive development.

Although some institutions specialising in deaf education offer Libras courses for the school community, the demand for a family language education programme at national level is evident. This programme would function not only for sign language teaching, but also for promoting the use of these languages in everyday family life; in their routine and in affective and playful interactions that are fundamental for the child's development. Furthermore, such an initiative would primarily make public aware of its responsibility for deaf children's linguistic development, which is currently attributed exclusively to educational institutions.

The educational context for deaf people is permeated by a series of needs that seem very basic, but require us to abandon hegemonic logics and conventional means in order to enable the entry of concepts beyond those known ones. In the following section, we look at translanguaging as a productive concept for thinking about new possibilities.

Translanguaging for rethinking and updating deaf education

Deaf education is intrinsically linked to linguistic issues and it is in this sense in this paper that we have taken translanguaging as a reading approach. In characterising translanguaging, García and Li Wei (2014) explain that the languages we use are components of a large linguistic repertoire. For Canagarajah (2011, p. 401), translanguaging is "the ability of multilingual speakers to move

between languages, treating the various languages that make up their repertoire as an integrated system.” In this sense, there are no hierarchies or choice of one language over another; we are the result of a diverse linguistic composition that constitutes us and we make use of all this diversity according to our needs.

According to Rocha (2019), language practices can be seen as socio-historically situated experiences, capable of revealing various dimensions of engagement, whether multimodalised, multi-sensory, embodied, spatial, and ideologically marked in relations of meaning production concerning people, animals, spatial contexts, and other elements that make up our existences. These experiences take place in specific contexts and spaces according to our life trajectories and repertoires, thus producing specific points of view and socioculturally and historically (re)constructed values (Rocha, 2019). In this way, the translanguage perspective emerges in order to question policies that are orientated in a monolingual sense (Rocha, 2019). Furthermore, the perspective offers lenses that allow us to highlight the linguistic practices of speakers who are unable to avoid having their “languages inscribed on their bodies, and [who] nevertheless live among different social and semiotic contexts as they [...] interact with a complex range of other speakers” (García; Wei, 2014, p. 18).

Translanguaging, according to García and Wei (2014, p. 21), “does not refer to two separate languages, nor to the synthesis of different language practices, nor to a hybrid mixture” between them. Translanguaging breaks the rigid ways of thinking that end up delimiting languages, and it refers to new linguistic practices that make visible the complexity of linguistic relationships among people with different backgrounds (Rocha, 2019). This rupture also allows for the manifestation of “histories and understandings that had been buried in the midst of fixed identities, limited by the nation-state” (García; Wei, 2014, p. 21).

This understanding allows us to distinguish concepts that have the potential to rethink and update deaf people’s educational context (Pinheiro et al., 2021). In line with this, Swanwick (2017) states that translanguaging offers a valuable perspective on deaf children’s linguistic repertoires and competences. By promoting a broader and more holistic view of language, and favouring the integration of different forms of communication, the approach allows communicative skills to be developed in a more comprehensive way, adapted to each child specific needs. In contexts such as those described in the previous section, it is possible to imagine the diversity of communication conditions; from children of deaf parents (also known by the acronym *Coda - Children of Deaf Adults*) fluent in sign languages, to children, adolescents and adults at various ages from hearing families who have not acquired a conventional¹ sign language.

For making translanguaging visible, we bring up an analogy proposed by Fu, Hadjioannou and Zhou (2019), who use the spatial layout of a house to represent linguistic repertoires. In a monolingual way, each room in the house would represent a single language, and we would choose a room/language when we needed to use a particular language, switching from one room/language to another, when necessary. In a translanguage way, though, there is a single, large, multifunctional space that accommodates the entire linguistic repertoire, and which we use as required. It is a concept that encompasses linguistic resources all at once, rather than separately by language (rooms). Resources are accessed based on the needs of each situation, without a rigid distinction among languages.

1 According to Teixeira and Cerqueira (2014), the fact that deaf people born in hearing families who do not use Libras early on but make use of homemade signs or gestures, does not mean that they are “language-less”. This language, developed at home before their contact with Libras or with another conventional sign language, serves their needs and, thus, can have a language status.

Translanguaging, then, has been very productive as an alternative approach in linguistic contexts where different languages coexist, such as in institutions that receive refugee immigrants, and in research on historically colonised regions where immigrant languages coexist with the dominant national language. Duarte, Aires and Lebedeff (2021) discuss the different situations of bilingual speakers; those who use predominant languages such as English or Spanish, which are considered prestigious languages, and those who do not enjoy the same advantage, such as descendants of German and Italian immigrants in southern Brazil, as well as deaf people who use sign languages. Most deaf people live among hearing people, a situation that indicates the predominant use of Portuguese to the detriment of sign language, which, in turn, is considered a minority language. In this scheme, also fits the historical constitution of deafblind people's linguistic vulnerability (Witchs; Lopes, 2020).

Based on the above, the concept of translanguaging is appropriate for discussing deaf education, which has been calling for bilingualism for many years, and, certainly, has a lot to gain, as we discuss in the following section.

A creative exercise: the sign school

For Li Wei (2017), translanguaging seems to have captured our imaginations. According to the author, this concept is often confused with other practices. In fact, the concept leads us to an inventiveness that encourages us to exercise abstraction in proposing another educational model for deaf people, but not just for them. By highlighting the abilities of children of deaf parents as the first users of a sign language, Robert Hoffmeister, in an interview, indicates the need to develop discussions around these abilities in deaf education (Mertzani; Barbosa; Fernandes, 2022). The question raised by the author brings up interesting reflections such as a proposal for a school that is not only for the deaf, but for bimodal bilinguals like Codas (deaf or hearing), who can be considered *native signers* in this context. For Quadros and Massutti (2007), the bilingual perspective of Codas in hearing schools ends up being neglected. The cultural, social and linguistic characteristics of these subjects have relevant elements that should be taken into account in their school interaction process, but go unnoticed due to the fact that the hearing school does not have an eye that perceives these characteristics (Quadros; Massutti, 2007).

In addition to Codas, the space we have idealized is designed for those who, like the deaf, have conditions that prevent their linguistic development in a conventional way, such as children with different language issues who can benefit from a relationship with sign language; children with deafblindness, or even children living on the autistic spectrum. Such a proposal requires adapting language teaching according to each student's possibilities, offering Portuguese classes both as a first language (for hearing students) and as an additional or second language, as well as providing specific language acquisition spaces for students from hearing families who did not develop sign language early on. It is certainly an extremely diverse and complex context. However, this is just an exercise in inspiration, intended only to stimulate the idealisation of more comprehensive educational spaces that prioritise linguistic respect and that can promote language acquisition, proficient and conscious language use, and linguistic social belonging. In no way do we intend to diminish the political and educational importance of exclusive institutions for the deaf, considering that they are currently configured as spaces that respect and guarantee the promotion and development of bimodal bilingualism for the deaf and, therefore, are configured as equally inclusive spaces.

In order to strengthen the inclusive nature of the space in question, we have added to this exercise a concept that helps us think about its constitution: that of a host language. In Brazil, the teaching of Portuguese as a Language of Reception (PLAc) emerged as a branch of the Portuguese as an Additional Language (PLA), which focuses on research and teaching Portuguese to immigrants, especially those forced to move from their country, consequently they are in a situation of vulnerability and with no knowledge of Portuguese (Lopez; Diniz, 2018). According to Borges (2020), language as reception is linked to a decolonial perspective of language, since the target language does not establish a competitive relationship in terms of quality and importance with the student's natural or first language. For the author, the concept is opportune in Portuguese teaching for the deaf because it shows students the possibility of exercising their citizenship, and because it is teaching orientated by an additive logic, inverting the predominant movement that takes deafness for absence.

When dealing with PLAc, Lopez and Diniz (2018) warn that this knowledge is permeated by essentialist and totalising discourses that end up reducing immigrants to a lack, as needy subjects worthy of pity. Lopez (2016) argues that, in this representation, there is the impossibility of PLAc interculturality, since subjects are considered from lacking (culturally, linguistically, among others) the place in which they arrive to someone who has something to share. Likewise, the same care must be taken not to fall into the reductionism of looking at deafness through its absence, but as a different possibility of experience. In this sense, thinking about an environment frequented not only by deaf people, but by all those who share the same linguistic code, is also a way of reversing a way of looking at things.

By gathering the reality of several schools in the United States, Fu, Hadjioannou and Zhou (2019) show that some of these institutions face linguistic diversity with up to 26 different languages being used in the same environment. PLAc and translanguaging are concepts that arise in scenarios like this. For migrant and refugee children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, it is common to feel uncomfortable and helpless due to the language and cultural barrier. The difficulty of communicating with new peers in the school environment contrasts with the familiarity and comfort of the mother tongue at home, where communication flows naturally in a *language of comfort*. This is how they have learnt to understand and interpret the world in a meaningful and complete way, to express their thoughts and feelings (Santiago; Andrade, 2013).

The situation is reversed when we look at the context of deaf people, for whom the home is often a place of linguistic mismatch and lack of understanding (Zilio, 2023). By enabling communication and the acquisition of an accessible language, the school becomes a space for linguistic understanding, which provides opportunities for meaningful communication and interaction. In this sense, translingual and welcoming adjectives describe the possibility of a school space effective for inclusion for it has the capacity to establish dialogue through a common language. Translanguaging ensures that even if a bilingual environment is bimodal due to the access language, it is not limited to just two languages, but guarantees part of them as a basic condition. As a welcoming space, it guarantees openness to diverse conditions, without giving up the right to adequate language acquisition and development.

Final considerations

Deafness, as an experience with much history, is constituted by the trajectories of individuals who experience it in a plural way. In this paper, we started from this plurality of deaf education with the intend to discuss possible ways of attending to deaf children's linguistic issues in Brazil's educational conditions. Thus, we explored the educational configurations of deaf schooling on the national scene and their relationship with family-dominated language policies that often favour deaf children's development of vocal-auditory languages.

Taking translanguaging and the notion of host language as our perspective, we worked on the concept of a potential deaf education in bimodal bilingual environments. In this way, we have developed a discussion around the possibility of an educational environment orientated by visual language, which allows the circulation, interaction and education not only of deaf children, but also of Coda children, children with deafblindness, among others, who, for whatever reason, may find advantages from their sign language development. This is already happening in a bilingual school for the deaf in the municipality of Rio Grande, in Rio Grande do Sul (Mertzani; Fernandes; Barbosa, 2022). Among its students, the institution enrolls hearing Codas, providing a space of interest for studies into how interaction, learning, language acquisition and communication develop (among other aspects) in an environment where sign language-speaking students with different hearing conditions live together.

We therefore assume that the promotion of more comprehensive bimodal bilingual environments, characterised by linguistic acceptance and openness to diversity, can become a convenient strategy for the development of deaf bilingual education in the face of inclusive educational policies that tend to reduce sign languages to a mere pedagogical communication tool. By considering sign languages as host languages in these environments, we can also turn them into learning languages, from which knowledge can be produced and shared on equal terms for an increasingly plural group that can join forces with deaf communities.

We reiterate that this discussion is not intended to delegitimise or reduce the importance of bilingual schools that are characterised as exclusive for the deaf, adequate spaces that respect and guarantee their linguistic rights. Moreover, we reinforce through this translanguaging perspective that the establishment of sign language (as an L1) and Portuguese (as an L2) is a starting point, representing minimum conditions for deaf people to access other knowledge and interact with other contexts. Transitioning through other languages is a fundamental objective that should be included in deaf education, as well as in the education of any student in this century.

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