

## FOREWORD

# SIGN LANGUAGE LITERACY

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The definitions of *literacy* traditionally refer to reading and writing, although, today (2024), the term encompasses much more, such as the abilities to engage with language, to construct, and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily life. Under this definition, the term is not limited to the skills of spoken languages (to read write, speak, and listen) only, but also to those of deaf people's signed languages. In line with this, and due to the fact that today sign language curricula start appearing in deaf education worldwide, this volume aimed at bringing together scholars from four countries - Brazil, Canada, Greece, and Italy - with the aim at contributing with their research in the literacy of deaf people, and with a special focus on signed language literacy.

Thus, this volume starts a discussion on the meaning and the ways deaf children and/or a hearing native signers - Coda (Children of deaf adults) - can become literate by learning a signed language as a mother tongue or first language (L1). To present, deaf children are given only the opportunity of becoming literate in spoken languages, even though their signed languages appear (to the degree they appear) in their school settings, mainly as instruction languages and not as subjects of study. Additionally, for Codas, there were never given this opportunity, since their "hearingness" is equated to the exclusive learning of spoken languages, even though they are brought in a native signing environment.

Signed language literacy is in its infancy, yet the nine works of this volume address many of its facets. From the moment the deaf or Coda child is born, the literacy journey begins in his/her family and community. The paper by Lucienne Matos da Costa Vieira-Machado, "Sign language as the language of a CODA generation: Family aprendicement and literacy", discusses the significance of such journey, by sharing the *family literacy* of four Codas. The children's bimodal bilingual abilities (from Portuguese, to a home sign language, to Libras, and vice versa) are the focus of these narratives, the sign language *aprendicement* practices, according to Vieira-Machado, as well as on the ancestral language of their deaf parents. This paper raises questions about the possibilities of including signed languages in the school curriculum for these hearing children, besides deaf children.

Entering the school life, literacy can take various forms, although its learning refers to the learning of reading and writing of spoken languages as necessary skills and capabilities for peoples' personal or professional lives. However, as Heather Gibson and Andrew Byrne note in their paper "ASL literacy and critical thinking development", these definitions do not fully capture literacy as the

skills needed for everyday life in and outside of work or those fostering critical thinking development. In particular, they do not explicitly apply to American Sign Language (ASL) literacy. Through the presentation of the ASL curriculum in the current ASL bilingual-biliteracy pedagogy in Canada and the USA, Gibson and Byrne discuss how ASL language and culture are connected to critical thinking development and to the use of metalinguistic and metacognitive skills in cultural and social practices. In this sense, ASL literacy is seen as greater than the definition of skills needed for work and study, extending its meaning to skills needed for life (e.g., at home, at school, in the ASL community, and in the global community).

The papers by Adriana Di Donato Chaves and Ednéia de Oliveira Alves, “Pre-reading practices and visual literacy with deaf children: Working with museum institutions”; and by Cássia Geciauskas Sofiato, “Repetition and accumulative tales: multiple experiences in teaching Libras”; focus on the deaf child’s *visual literacy* through the combination of multisemiotic tools and signed languages. For example, Chaves and Alves discuss the museum experience of deaf students in Brasil, combined with dramatization activities in the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras). In her article, Sofiato addresses the importance of discursive practices in Libras using the visual power of picturebooks, even when the latter are written in a spoken language.

This power is also discussed by Maria Mertzani in her paper “Signed picturebooks for sign language literacy”, where she presents the theoretical foundations for the construction of signed picturebooks, a new visual book as a teaching and learning tool in the L1 signed language classroom. In particular, the material is a series of signed picturebooks, which integrates visual-graphics and videos to support deaf children’s early sign language literacy and teacher’s practice in the kindergarten and the first year of elementary education. It has been developed by the *Libras em primeiro* project, (2022 - 2024), with funding received from FAPERGS (in Portuguese, A Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul), in the postgraduate program Programa de pós-graduação em Letras, University of Santa Cruz do Sul, RS-Brasil.

The construction of didactic material is also the focus of the paper “Developing materials for sign and written language literacy” by Marianna Hatzopoulou, Spyridoula Karipi, and Vassilis Kourbetis. Early exposure to Greek Sign Language (GSL) fosters the steady growth of linguistic skills and facilitates the acquisition of sign language literacy. The knowledge of GSL is also essential for the development of deaf and hard of hearing children’s literacy skills on the written language of the larger hearing community. Based on the National Curriculum of GSL, the authors present the educational materials developed for the teaching of GSL as an L1, including a grammar teaching program for preschool to fourth grade students; and for the support the hearing families of deaf/hard of hearing children in learning signed languages (SLs).

Apart from the pure linguistic view of signed language literacy, Maria Tagarelli De Monte in her paper “Reflections on Sign Language Literacy and Sign Language Literature, with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages” reflects on what makes sign language literacy in a context where the literature of reference is signed literature, living and thriving along with the broader written literature of spoken languages. 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. This discussion also involves other forms of literacies, such as multiliteracies, multimodality, real literacies, materiality and affect. For example, the Common European Framework of References for Languages - CEFR has evolved to include different ways to intend contents that are meant to vehicle socio-cultural values and ideas.

Of course sign language literacy raises the issue of sign language acquisition, since the majority of deaf children, coming from a hearing family background in which the cochlear dominates, do not hold any sign language knowledge. The latter is learned as an L1 through proficient users (e.g., from interpreters, proficient teachers, peers signing) the moment they enter school. For Virgínia Maria Zilio and Pedro Henrique Witches, in their paper “Bimodal bilingual environments: possibilities for welcoming linguistic diversity”, sign language literacy can be accomplished next to spoken language literacy through translanguaging practices. Under this notion, they discuss 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.

As a last note, and a very significant one, comes the sign language assessment of deaf students. To present, when the deaf child is assessed, the assessment (semestral and annual) takes place in a L2 and not in his/her L1. Felipe Venâncio Barbosa and Sylvia Lia Grespan Neves in their paper “Sign language assessment, sign language acquisition and sign language literacy”, discuss the necessity of well-designed assessment instruments, that can be used especially on atypical sign language interventions in educational and clinical contexts. In particular, the authors describe an assessment instrument that is already applied in the clinic - school interaction in Brasil.

The theme of this volume is extremely important nationally and internationally in the field of bilingual-bimodal education for deaf students. In Brasil, just recently the Law nº 14.191/2021 passed the education of deaf children through the bilingual modality. Since then, there is an increasing interest in discussing the types of programs, materials and methodologies for the application of bilingual education. We are very grateful that this volume under this specific topic - Sign Language Literacy - is published in national journal *Revista Brasileira de Alfabetização* of ABAIf - Associação Brasileira de Alfabetização (in English, the Brazilian Association of Literacy).

The works in this volume have been developed through close collaboration between deaf and hearing researchers and academics. Their bilingual presentation set out in the following pages will contribute to leveraging the discussions, broadening the theoretical spectrum, and enriching the dialogue with what has been and can be produced in different countries.

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Received: 12/01/2024

Accepted: 19/03/2024