

Analyzing a Curriculum Proposal for Brazilian Sign Language

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Abstract: With the aim to analyze a curriculum designed originally to teach Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) as a school subject for deaf students, this paper presents an analysis of the curriculum proposal described by Costa et al. (2013). The analysis was conducted in terms of needs analysis theory. After an introductory part, the paper is structured as follows: an overview on the teaching beliefs and the learning process; the relevance of needs analysis; a curriculum proposal designed to teach Libras as a first language; and the analysis of the curriculum presented. Reflecting on curricula queries is of utmost importance; it becomes an emerging challenge when it is about sign languages. In addition to other important issues discussed and presented in this paper, it is concluded that curriculum proposals for Libras may be a starting point to help the Ministry of Education in Brazil establish curricula guidelines for the area at stake.

Key words: education, curriculum, sign language, deaf education

1. Introduction

At first sight, dealing with queries regarding the curriculum of Brazilian Sign Language (also known as *Libras*), as a school subject, would seem easy if taken into account only the country context after Law 10436 (Brasil, 2002) and Decree 5626 (Brasil, 2005) were sanctioned. Ever since the approval of these bills, the history of deaf education in Brazil has not been the same. Costa et al. (2013) stresses that there is still a gap that has not yet been dealt with in legal documents, which is the lack of principles and guidelines for the Libras course taught at mainstream or special primary and secondary schools.

Considering the abovementioned conjuncture, this paper aims at analyzing a curriculum designed originally to teach Libras for the deaf at a special educational institution called “Sounds in the Silence Educational Center” (SSEC)¹, as described by Costa et al. (2013). Being a joint effort of deaf teachers, bilingual teachers, school coordinator and director at SSEC, this curriculum is an attempt towards the recognition of this subject as one that needs more guidance and support from educational authorities. It is appropriate to pose that policies concerning bilingual education for the deaf are under discussion and construction in Brazil.

Rather than adopting the term “hearing impaired” (in which it is embedded a pathological view of deafness), the term “deaf” will be adopted in this paper. From a pathological view, deafness is seen as “a physical defect”,

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¹ The school described as SSEC means *Centro Educacional Sons do Silêncio – CESS*. This school is located in the city of Salvador (Bahia), Brazil. As described above, it is a special educational institute that serves more than two hundred deaf students throughout the state of Bahia. More information concerning the institution which runs SSEC is available at: <http://aesosbahia.blogspot.com.br>.

but from a linguistic-cultural view it must be understood more than an ear that does not work. To start reflecting about it, we must agree with Sacks who posits:

The study of the deaf shows us that much of what is distinctively human in us — our capacities for language, for thought, for communication, and culture — do not develop automatically in us, are not just biological functions, but are, equally, social and historical in origin; that they are a gift — the most wonderful of gifts — from one generation to another. We see that Culture is as crucial as Nature (1990, p. xiii).

Not only Linguistics but also other fields of knowledge have confirmed what distinguishes human beings from the other animals is the faculty of language. Formerly, Linguistics was used to associate language with oral communication. From the 60s on, after Stokoe's first publication about American Sign Language (ASL), the area of Linguistics started to consider new perspectives or approaches on language studies. Because of that fact, sign language studies began to be performed all over the world.

After this introductory part, the sections which follow will present the teaching beliefs and the learning process, the relevance of needs analysis, a brief summary of the curriculum proposed by Costa et al. (2013), the analysis of this curriculum, and a few ending remarks.

2. A Brief Overview on the Teaching Beliefs and the Learning Process

Henceforth some issues concerning the teaching beliefs and the teaching/learning process will be approached concisely. In this sense, the assumptions of the theory defended by Brown (2000, 2001, 2004) and Nunan (1989, 1991, 1999) will be used to help us build a theoretical framework. Far from a traditional or behaviorist approach, the language teacher must adopt a holistic view in order to be a reflexive practitioner in terms of the teaching and learning processes.

A traditional model based on behaviorism in which the emphasis is on the teacher's authority could not help us think of a teacher as a "learner among other learners" (Nunan, 1999). By discussing the role of the learner involvement in the learning process, the same author states:

[...] it is necessary to turn from the concept of learner-centeredness to the closely related concept of learning-centeredness. A learning-centeredness classroom is designed to enable the learner to make critical pedagogical decisions by systematically training them in the skills they need to make such decisions. Such a classroom is constituted with complementary aims. While one set of aims is focused on language content, the other is focused on the learning process. Learners are therefore systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn. Rather than assuming that the learner comes to the learning arrangement possessing critical learning skills, the sensitive teacher accepts that many learners will only begin to develop such skills in the course of instruction (Nunan, 1999, pp. 11–12).

Most if not all teachers for the deaf are aware that the traditional model is not a proper way or basis to teach sign languages. According to Brown (2000), teacher's understanding of how the learner learns will determine his/her philosophy of education, his/her teaching style, his/her approach, methods, and classroom techniques. As a result, an appropriate approach to Libras teaching must be based on a sociocultural or constructivist theory.

Since the teacher is not a sage or a "know-it-all", it is presumed that he or she ought to be a facilitator/helper of the teaching and learning processes. Being a co-participator into this process, this professional plays an

important role. In this regard, the teacher of deaf Brazilian learners should be able to speak² Libras fluently not only to teach the language itself but also to learn it with the students.

Supposing that an educator had a set of different roles to play, the teacher would be a facilitator, a controller, a director, a manager, and an instructor. Thus, depending on the role he or she plays, it might affect considerably the student learning process. On one hand, if the teacher is definitely a facilitator, learners will be encouraged to find out their own learning strategies. Hence, they will remain happy and the learning process will be able to occur more easily. On the other hand, if the teacher tries to control the student all the time, it is likely that students will get demotivated to take part in the activities proposed.

In accordance with Nunan (1999), the learner is not an inactive person, because the learning process involves learning strategies in which the student plays a fundamental part. In this sense, “learning strategies are the mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language. Learning styles are the general orientations to the learning process exhibited by learners” (Nunan, 1999, p. 55).

As a matter of fact, the learning process is not a “thing” that can be controlled by the teacher, once such thing (that is much more than “a thing”) happens in learners’ mind. The language learner can learn explicitly or implicitly. The teacher can teach a given content objectively or straightforwardly, and the students, by their turn, are able to learn it subjectively, inductively or deductively. Taking into account that these learners learn all the time and in different ways, thus the learning process will be able to surpass the teacher’s expectations.

Paying attention to students’ reality, the emphasis of the teacher must rely on what is really relevant to contextualize in terms of subject matter, so the learners would get more motivated to take part in the tasks. To some extent, teaching and learning are not isolated processes for one depends on the other. If teachers and learners are walking on a one-way road, they will break new ground. Accordingly, knowledge could be built through the interaction between the sociocultural factors and the learning and teaching processes.

With regard to second language teaching and second language acquisition, it is assumed, if the mother tongue or the first language is valued in the sense of recognizing its importance in the acquisition of the second language, the insights of the learner will be able to come effortlessly. For that reason, it is a truism that sign language teaching, which is deemed to be first language for deaf students, should be taught to them prior to teaching a second language. Considering Brazilian deaf learners, Libras, which is their first language, must be first taught and secondly the second language, that is Portuguese.

Teachers for the deaf must be reflexive practitioners, too. Even though the term “reflexive teaching” sounds pleonastic, the teacher as a reflexive practitioner “can both pose and solve problems related to their educational practice” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 4). Accordingly, in the view of these authors, the reflexive practice movement implies an acknowledgment that teachers should be effective in formulating the aims and ends of their work, that they scrutinize “their own values and assumptions, and that they need to play leadership roles in curriculum development and school reform” (p. 5). Moreover, to be reflexive professionals, it is of utmost importance that teachers recognize their own possibilities and limitations.

According to Grant and Zeichner (1984), it was John Dewey who made a distinction between reflective and routine actions. In opposition to routine actions that are based on tradition and usual behaviors or habits, the prerequisites for reflective action involve three attitudes which are: (1) open-mindedness; (2) responsibility; and

² Surely, most authors and scholars in the field of sign languages agree that the verb “speak” does not only refer to oral languages. When using sign language to communicate, deaf persons are also speaking.

(3) wholeheartedness.³ Furthermore, the issue of “craft” should be considered:

If you as a prospective teacher are reflective, you do not passively absorb any and all of the skills and knowledge that others have decided are necessary for your education as a teacher. The craft knowledge and skills for teaching that you will gain during your formal preparation will originate from two major sources: your university instructors and supervisors, and the teachers and administrators with whom you will work during your practicum experiences in schools. If you are reflective about your own education for teaching, you will give some direction to the craft knowledge and skills that you learn in your training (Grant & Zeichner, 1984, p. 112).

So the reflective action should be omnipresent in teachers’ training and practice in order to help them become more and more reflective professionals. Assuming this has to be a basic principle, teachers for the deaf will be always involved in continuous training. By doing so, they are about to be more than mere teachers, once they are co-learners in the learning atmosphere.

At last, it is important to highlight that teaching and learning are not independent processes, so that if they are intertwined, a good learning atmosphere will be promoted. Bilingual and deaf teachers must be aware that they are guides or facilitators who lead up deaf students to knowledge, in spite of their limitations in the sense of not having the answers to all the questions. Indeed, if the teacher is precisely a facilitator of the learning process and strictly reflects on his or her practice, the students will be much more confident and comfortable for acquiring or getting knowledge without any damage.

3. Getting Acquainted with Needs Analysis

A comprehensive approach to designing and maintaining language curricula consists of six procedures: needs analysis, objectives, testing, materials, teaching, and evaluation (Brown, 1995). Without discarding the importance of all of them, for the purpose of the analysis that will be presented afterwards, the “Needs Analysis” procedure will be spotlighted.

First of all, in accordance with Richards (2001), “the term *needs* is not as straightforward as it might appear” (p. 54). It embeds a lot of meanings, and as stated by Brindley (1984, p. 28) it is occasionally used to refer to wants, desires, demands, expectation, motivations, lacks, constraints, and requirements. In the field of Applied Linguistics to teaching, needs are often described as either a linguistic deficiency or language needs. In the first case, the needs’ description refers to “the difference between what a learner can presently do in a language and what he or she should be able to do”, and in the second one it refers to “the language skills needed to survive in an English-dominant society” (Richards, 2001, p. 54).

Richards (2001) also states, “One of the basic assumptions of curriculum development is that a sound educational program should be based on analysis of learners’ needs” (p. 51). As defined by Brown (1995), a needs analysis is “the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context” (p. 36). Following that rationale, the purpose of such analysis is to understand better the students’ needs, motivation, and learning strategy preferences. It might be a powerful and useful tool if the teacher makes use of it to understand and improve the teaching/learning process.

Considering the context of language teaching, needs analysis may be used for a number of different purposes,

³ To a thorough understanding of these attitudes, you may consult Grant and Zeichner (1984).

such as:

- To find out what language skills a learner needs in order to perform a particular role, such as sales manager, tour guide, or university student;
- To help determine if an existing course adequately addresses the needs of potential students;
- To determine which students from a group are most in need of training in particular language skills;
- To identify a change of direction that people in a reference group feel is important;
- To identify a gap between what students are able to do and what they need to be able to do;
- To collect information about a particular problem learners are experiencing.

(Richards, 2001, p. 52)

Richards also asserts “a needs analysis may be conducted for a variety of different users” (2001, p. 55). Depending on the place or institution where the analysis will take place, the end users include: curriculum officers in the ministry of education; teachers; learners; writers; testing personnel; staff or tertiary institutions, among other professionals by private institutes of language. About planning, “a needs analysis involves deciding who will administer the needs analysis and collect and analyze the results.” (p. 58)

To design the needs analysis accurately, it is available a variety of procedures and it is important keep in mind the kind of information to be obtained before selecting a specific procedure. About the procedures for collecting information, Richards (2001) mentions the following: questionnaires, self-ratings, interviews, meetings, observation, collecting learner language samples, task analysis, case studies, and analysis of available information. Concerning this latter, he states, “An analysis of available information is normally the first step in a needs analysis because there are very few problems in language teaching that have not been written about or analyzed somewhere.” (p. 63)

By doing a literature review on the term “needs” in Needs Analysis Theory, Juan (2014) summarizes: “needs are described as perceived and felt, objective and subjective, situational or communicative, situation or language, target situation/goal-oriented and learning, process-oriented and product-oriented; in addition, there are necessities, wants and lacks” (p. 16). Additionally she poses that, having being introduced to describe the different factors and perspectives, each of these terms represents a dissimilar philosophy or educational value.

In light of this, by understanding students’ needs, the teacher will be able to plan a suitable course or class which attends their actual necessities in terms of learning. From this assumption, a course designed to teach a sign language must grasp deaf students’ needs. Otherwise, classes would become boring or humdrum once the students would have lost confidence or enthusiasm.

After having considered the importance of needs analysis, we assume that finding out students’ likes throughout their involvement in the class tasks is a challenge for the teacher. To deal with such challenge the educator could bring to class motivational activities, music according to students’ likes, interesting movies, among other thought-provoking and stimulating activities which are related somehow to the students’ way of life. This way, they will be motivated to learn not only inside but also outside of the class.

By following a careful needs analysis, teachers are able to design an appropriate curriculum. One or more aspects concerning grammar, vocabulary and/or pronunciation, depending on their preferences, may be therefore emphasized. Of course, for deaf students, whose first language is a sign language, pronunciation and speaking skills (in terms of oral skills) are not generally abilities to be fomented, nevertheless activities based on movies and songs might be also used if adapted to a sign language.

4. Presenting a Curriculum Designed to Teach Libras as A First Language

The curriculum planned to teach Libras as proposed by Costa et al. (2013) is structured as follows: (i) introduction; (ii) our view of curriculum; (iii) the methodology used; (iv) our proposed curriculum; (v) closing remarks. From now on, each one of these parts will be briefly described.

In the “introduction”, it was highlighted the country context in which the approval of Brazilian bills with regard to Deaf education were sanctioned. As some features of the school at stake were already posited in the beginning of this paper, it is not necessary to pose it again. One relevant thing, which was not mentioned so far, is that they consider building up that proposal as a challenge “taking into consideration the fact that there was no model of a Libras curriculum available in the legal documents to serve as a basis for the project at the time” (Costa et al., 2013, p. 498, my translation).

In the section “our view of curriculum”, the authors present some concepts which underpin their view of curriculum. In a post-structuralist view of curriculum, they adopt a curriculum designed with a critical perspective. Based on Moraes (2003), it is highlighted the importance of Brazilian National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) which had been motivated from the need of a curricular reform and afterwards culminated with the elaboration of the PCNs. The establishment of these parameters has started with the publication of Law 9394 (Brasil, 1996). According to Cuban (1992), a curriculum is defined as “a series of planned events aiming at the learning of certain knowledge, skills and values and organized to be conducted by managers and teachers. This definition of curriculum encompasses objectives, content, organization, relationships and student results” (p. 221). Additionally Costa et al. (2013) considers that “curricular planning means predicting all activities that the learner will take part in under teacher supervision” (p. 500).

The methodology used is underpinned by the following theories: Visual Pedagogy and Sociocultural Approach. Visual Pedagogy, also known as Deaf Pedagogy “has got its name from the fact that it can be understood as one which is supported by visual pillars, that is, it has the visual sign its most important allied in the process of teaching and learning” (Campello, 2008, p. 131, my translation). On the sociocultural approach, “education takes on a broad character and does not restrict itself to formal teaching-learning situations” (Mizukami, 2005, p. 102, my translation). Besides that SignWriting⁴ was chosen as the writing system to be adopted in the disciplines Libras and Deaf Literature.

In the part “our proposed curriculum”, they described their proposal for that discipline for grades one to nine. These grades are related to the primary school in Brazil. In addition to the fact that Libras would be taught as first language (L1), the basic axes, which guided their proposal, were interdisciplinarity and transversality. Those topics were inextricably linked to political-pedagogical project at SSEC.⁵ Believing that deaf can, through sign language, become fully aware citizens of their rights and duties in society, the discipline Libras will be taught to

⁴ SignWriting (also known as SW) is a system of writing sign languages. Valerie Sutton, a dancer who had two years earlier developed DanceWriting, developed it in 1974. For more information, several articles and papers are available at: <http://www.signwriting.org>.

⁵ On the Political-Pedagogical Project, the authors under analysis pose that: “It is also important to add that, according to the political-pedagogical project at SSEC, our proposal provides pedagogical content that aims at developing an awareness of deafness as presenting both cultural and linguistic differences so that the deaf learner becomes able to fight for a change in the fossilized concepts of deafness and the deaf person. These traditional ideas carry with them myths and prejudices which many hearing people have internalized (and also some deaf people who are not familiar with the world of sign language). In order to demystify these concepts learners will be involved in discussions about the history of the education of the deaf, public policies for the deaf, Libras sociolinguistic and cultural aspects among other topics (SSEC Political-Pedagogical Project)” (Costa et al., 2013, p. 502, my translation).

reach the goals which follow: (1) the broadening of the lexicon in the first language — Libras; (2) autonomy; (3) the understanding of problems and application of acquired knowledge to solve real problem situations; (4) knowledge and analysis of Libras grammatical structure; (5) cognitive and linguistic development; (6) narrative discourse development and fluency in Libras; (7) development of writing and reading skills in Libras; and (8) creative use of Libras. By showing a table for each grade they provided: a description of both general and specific objectives, estimated age group in each grade, content (or vocabulary) to be taught, and grammar.

In their “closing remarks”, it is considered that building a curriculum for Libras is still a challenge, taking into consideration that there are not any legal documents that set the principles for the organization or the offer of this curricular component in Brazil. As a result, the professionals of SSEC took up this challenge by designing the proposal aforesaid. It is expected that other schools for the deaf start thinking about the usefulness of exhibiting their proposal in order to debate queries concerning the curriculum of sign languages.

It is worth mentioning that the goal of this topic was to present briefly the curriculum proposed by Costa et al. (2013). In order to better understand it, we suggest the full reading of their paper. In the next section, their proposal will be analyzed in light of needs analysis theory.

5. Analyzing the Curriculum Proposed by Costa et al. (2013)

Needs analysis is often applied to second language teaching. From a critical perspective, it may seem that it doesn't sound good to conduct a needs analysis in terms of first language teaching. Nevertheless, it can still be demonstrated that assessing needs is of paramount importance at the time of designing a curriculum for language teaching (whether a first or a second language).

Starting from the assumption that designing a curriculum starts with planning, we could see clearly the proposal under analysis followed literally some criteria. In this regard, these criteria were already posited in the earlier section when it was presented in a specific paragraph their proposed curriculum. Yet it seems to us that either they did not establish a need analysis script or, if they had done so, this was not explicitly described.

It seems that needs analysis was implicitly considered from the fact that we could also see clearly a link among the parts which follow: a description of both general and specific objectives, estimated age group in each grade, content (or vocabulary) to be taught, and grammar. Those parts might be seen in the frame below (Frame 1). It is likely that teaching staff as well as the other professionals who took part in designing that proposal had taken into account the students' needs. In other words, it seems that the survey of relevant information was performed. In addition, the proposal considered the teaching/learning processes because it is plain to see that the contents and the goals are adequate to the age range. Some contents will be however very challenger in face of deaf children of hearing parents who have not been acquiring Libras as a first language at home.

On the other hand, when it is said that procedures of a needs analysis were not explicitly exposed, it is because those procedures — as suggested by Richards (2001) — were not noticeably perceived. In a way, teachers' meetings should be a way of collecting a large amount of information in a fairly short time, in the words of the author quoted. In the proposal at hand, it is evident that teachers of SSEC used to arrange meetings before designing the curriculum. However, meetings were not the best way to collect information, once “information obtained in this way may be impressionistic and subjective and reflect the ideas of more outspoken members of a group.” (Richards, 2001, p. 61).

Upon closer examination, it seems that the proposal was satisfactory since the main points to be considered

in a curriculum designing were demonstrated. Moreover, the missing procedures should have been presented in order to show a more accurate proposal. If those procedures had not been missing, the proposers should have thought about them.

| Grade: 1 | Age range: 6–8 years old | Primary school |
|--|--------------------------|----------------|
| The General Purpose is to stimulate the acquisition of Libras as a first language, with the aim to expand the vocabulary and the development of conversational skills. | | |
| Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Demonstrating different types of greetings and ways to answer them; ✓ Demonstrating expressions which indicate like/dislike; ✓ Introducing a basic vocabulary in order to help students develop conversational skills; ✓ Promoting specific vocabulary with the aim of helping students provide personal information; ✓ Helping students learn how to answer questions. | | |
| Contents/Vocabulary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Name and proper sign ✓ Manual alphabet ✓ Greetings and leave-takings ✓ Numbers ✓ Time ✓ Hours ✓ Colors ✓ Family ✓ School supplies ✓ Holidays or special days (Mothers’ Day; Fathers’ Day; Grandparents’ Day; Easter; Indian Day; “<i>São João</i>” Festival (St. John’s party); Children’s Day; Soldier’s Day; Christmas Day, the day of the deaf) ✓ Animals ✓ Fruits ✓ Deaf literature: Children stories; telling and retelling jokes in sign language. | | |
| Focus on Grammar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Fingerspelling Alphabet (Dactylology); ✓ Classifiers (with some Hand-shapes); ✓ Establishment of the look as a deictic reference; ✓ Facial expressions (Non-manual Signs); ✓ Numbers; ✓ Parameters: Hand Configuration, Movement and Orientation; ✓ Grammatical relations: comparison, condition, simultaneity and subordination; ✓ Affirmative and Negative Sentences. | | |

Frame 1 The Discipline Libras Taught in the First Year of Primary School at SSEC

Source: Costa et al., 2013, p. 503, my translation

So far considering that a curriculum is not only a simple file which describes a specific syllabus, we will conclude with the words of Power and Leigh:

The curriculum is more than a mere document or syllabus; it is much more than a collection of predetermined learning objectives and experiences. Curriculum refers not only to those elements but also to the actual effects on student learning of a variety of planned and unplanned arrangements and the interactions between participants in the educational process. These arrangements include variables as diverse as government and school policies, objectives, school administration and organization, and student assessment and reporting procedures. Broadly, then, curriculum refers to all of those arrangements that are made for students’ learning, both planned and ad hoc (Power & Leigh, 2011, p. 32).

6. A Few Ending Remarks

With the aim to analyze a curriculum designed originally to teach Libras for the deaf at a special educational institution, the analysis aforementioned has shown it is significant to reflect on curriculum proposals for Libras in order to make possible the dialogue among institutions whose focus is on deaf education. Moreover, considering the fact that parameters and/or guidelines have not yet been established by the Ministry of Education in Brazil, the discussion and the implementation of the queries approached are urgent.

Research in the field of Libras curriculum is still scarce in Brazil. It is thus meaningful to design and analyze curriculum proposals for Sign Languages in order to generate an important legacy for deaf education. Likewise, curriculum proposals for Libras may be a starting point to help the Ministry of Education in Brazil establish curricula guidelines for that area. In this process, needs analysis should not be discarded.

Finally I hope that deaf and bilingual teachers which work at a school for the deaf move from a traditional perspective to a sociocultural one, if and only if they have not yet done it. Then a suitable curriculum to teach a sign language may be established and implemented. Furthermore, we, as teachers for the deaf, must understand that the reflection about teaching beliefs and teaching/learning processes is the first step to be indeed reflective practitioners.

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