

The Importance of Sign Language for Deaf Students' Literacy

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This paper aims to analyze the role of Sign Language in the literacy process of deaf students. Consistent with Tfouni's (1995) ideas, we consider literacy as a process which goes beyond the acquisition of basic abilities in reading and writing. Thus, a literate person is one who is able to use the discursive practices that are basic to the organization of a literate society.

In order to discuss the importance of Sign Language in the process of literacy of the deaf, we have selected some writing samples of two deaf students, whose ages and schooling levels differ although both have minimal performance in oral language.

Using Brazilian Sign Language, the same joke was told to both of them. The joke was about a foreigner who comes to work in Brazil, and sees many things and beautiful women. One day, he stops in front of an ice-cream parlour, goes in, points to the ice-cream boxes, and asks what they are. The waitress explains that it is ice-cream, it tastes sweet and it is very good. The person asks for a popsickle and he likes it, so he asks the waitress to wrap one up because he wants to take it to his wife in his own country. He puts it in his pocket. When he arrives in his country, he puts his hand in his pocket and only finds the stick. He says, «Dang! I have been robbed. Who could have done it?»

In the first example, the joke was told by Patrícia, a deaf adult who is fluent in Sign Language and has good knowledge of Portuguese grammar. As she told the joke, she wrote the word *sorveteria* (ice-cream parlour) on the blackboard.

When Patrícia finished telling the joke, all the students laughed, which is contrary to the idea that the deaf are not unable to understand jokes. One of them, Armando, 24, who has profound congenital deafness, had only begun his schooling very recently (6 months ago) and is a sign user only, asked Patrícia what was a «sorveteria», pointing to the word on the blackboard. Patrícia went to the blackboard, drew a vertical line, so that the word «sorveteria» was on the left side. On the other side, she wrote: *sapataria* (shoe-shop), *padaria* (bakery), *pastelaria*. She explained each word using Sign Language. She pointed to the word «sapataria», translating it as *SAPATO-CASA* (shoe-house) and explaining *L-O-J-A COMPRAR SAPATO* (S-H-O-P buy shoes). *PÃO-CASA* (bread shop), *L-O-J-A COMPRAR PÃO* (S-H-O-P buy bread). Next, Patrícia pointed to the word «sorvete» and asked Armando: WHAT? He didn't answer right away. So, Patrícia covered the suffix «ria» and signed *SORVETE*. She pointed to the same suffix in «sapataria» and «padaria», repeating the same explanations signing «*L-O-J-A COMPRAR SAPATO, PÃO*» (S-H-O-P buy shoe, bread). Armando interrupted her and signed (pointing to the word «sorveteria»): *L-O-J-A COMPRAR SORVETE* for «sorveteria» (S-H-O-P buy ice-cream).

Using this strategy, Patrícia showed Armando the possibilities of understanding certain aspects of language, i. e. the use of suffixes to make new words. She called his attention to the suffix and gave it meaning, using finger spelling (*L-O-J-A*) (shop), and Sign Language (*CASA COMPRAR*). By covering first the suffix and then the noun, she was able to interpret the suffix

R-I-A as meaning L-O-J-A COMPRAR. It is interesting to observe that Patrícia let Armando deduce the rule for himself and apply it to the word «sorveteria».

The next step was to ask each student to write the joke as they had understood it. Armando wrote the following:

«The ice-cream joke

went I worked the buy sell there are shaps (shops) buy tak (take), ice-cream, Brasil women I saw beautiful buy ice-cream tak (take) melts»

Although the sample deserves a more extensive linguistic analysis, our objective here is to point out a few aspects that show how important Sign Language is in Armando's literacy process. So, the word order seems to follow the sequence used by Patrícia, when she told the joke. The phrase «shaps buy», though imprecise, is a collage of the statement L-O-J-A COMPRAR, an unmistakable mark of the presence of someone else's «voice». There is some indication that Armando might be constructing the notion of time in Portuguese, as can be seen in the different uses of verb tenses. Sign Language permeates such construction (i.e. no verbal inflection change in *comprar* and *vender* - *buy* and *sell*), showing how one language affects the other.

In the second example, Gustavo's aunt told him the same joke, using signs. Gustavo, 15, was in the 6th grade of a special school for the deaf.

Below we have Gustavo's production:

The man that came to Brasil and he saw the people womon (mulhares instead of mulheres) were very beautiful.

After that he went to the shopping area, to the ice-cream parlour and asked: What is this? The woman answered (respondou instead of respondeu): it's ice-cream.

– He said he never see that and so I'll try to eat it.

– He thematized: UAAAAU! GOOOOSH, how good, wonderful, prefect! And then he goes to buy ice-cream, takes it and gives it to his family and after that he kept in his pocket.

When he arrived and got out the ice-cream, he saw the stick what happens, he thought it is the stolen one.

Gustavo drew a person with a laughing face, and a bubble where he wrote AAAHHH and, under the drawing, he wrote:

Because the man do not know, he necessary keep in the refrigerator.

He skipped a line and wrote:

The man his head is small.

In writing his text, Gustavo combined both the knowledge he had of the world and what he already knew about language. There are, for example, his attempts to make use of direct and indirect discourse, even though, in doing so, his difficulties become evident (in the use of punctuation marks, verbal inflections and personal pronouns). Far from being errors, such difficulties must be considered cues which show the dialectic nature of the process of construction of the linguistic object which Gustavo uses; which are the result of take and revision of someone else's speech (such as the teacher's explanation about the dash). The same can be said about the fact that he underlined two occurrences of the pronoun «he». When asked about this, Gustavo explained that his Portuguese teacher had said that «it was not correct» to repeat the same word too many times. This underlining is clear evidence of the teacher's speech, already transformed or on the way to being transformed into monologue form.

The presence of the other echoes in the use he made of words such as «thematized», used a few days before by classmates. He hadn't known the meaning of «theme», so he looked it up in the dictionary. «Thematized» is at one and the same time a collage someone else's speech and evidence of how language acts upon the subject.

By means of the examples of Armando and Gustavo it is possible to conclude that:

1. the process of attributing meaning involves the intervention of an other. In the case of Armando, a bilingual deaf teacher had an important role in co-authoring the hypotheses he was beginning to build about the mechanism of derivation in Portuguese. As for Gustavo, the role of co-authorship was played by his hearing bilingual aunt. In our opinion, it is because the «other» were bilingual (know both Sign Language and Portuguese) that enabled them to act as interpreters and co-authors in the construction of knowledge in the two languages by the students.
2. not only the voice of the other, but also Sign Language leaves its mark on the written productions we have presented here.
3. the appropriation of the writing system by the deaf, supported by Sign Language, does not preclude the mediation of speech. According to Vygotsky (1979), writing does not repeat the process of speech acquisition; on the contrary, it constitutes distinct knowledge of language, which differs from oral language in structure as well as in function.
4. linguistic hypothesis, established in sign, are used by the subject to confer meaning to Portuguese forms, in a process which is similar to what occurs in learning a second language.

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