

Deafness and bilingualism

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Bilingualism is increasingly being considered as the latest achievement among deaf educators and specialists in the area of deaf education, in Brazil. Doors are beginning to open to this new perspective, but to many people it still appears as a last resort rather than a really conscious option.

Bilingualism is not an educational method. It can be defined as the capacity of an individual to use two languages. Education with bilingualism is not, therefore, in its essence, a new educational proposal in itself, but an educational proposal through which bilingualism acts as a possibility of the individual's integration into the socio-cultural environment to which he naturally belongs, i.e., to the deaf and the hearers's communities. What we are proposing is a new model for deaf education in Brazil, following the present trends in more advanced countries. It is a new form of viewing not only the educational process of the deaf but also their space in society. Educating with bilingualism is to see that through access to two languages it becomes possible to ensure the preservation of the individual's natural processes of development, in which language proves to be an indispensable instrument. This occurs through the acquisition of a linguistic system at as early an age as possible, considering Sign Language as the first language to be learned, in most cases. Education with bilingualism is not, then, a new form of education. It is a way to guarantee a greater possibility of access to education.

What we are proposing is a reflection about a new form of looking not only at the educational process of a deaf person, in a more restrictive pedagogical sense of the term, but also at his development as an individual and his participation in society. In this latter sense, education with bilingualism is an expression that should be used in close connection with the the cultural characteristics of the deaf and the hearers's communities. In other words, it should mean a commitment to a socio-political-academic attitude.

To choose a proposal for education with bilingualism is to admit that Education is integrated in the social and political environment of a community and so must be considered and respected. The educational process is, therefore, from this point of view, part of a whole where the process of integration is no longer an attempt to integrate the deaf into the normal hearing community but a sort of two-way road: the deaf being well integrated in their own community and in the hearer's community, while all of us, who deal with them, are in the same way integrated in both communities. The commitment, then, should be mutual in order to bring this proposal to concrete development.

It should be stressed, at this point, that any proposal for bilingualism can only be considered as such if – and only if – in the school environment both languages are respected in their integrity, i.e., if there is no interference and use of communication processes such as bimodalism, for example. In principle, this will require that professionals master the Brazilian Sign Language and the deaf come to master Portuguese as a second language, i.e., acquire Sign Language as their first language and, then, learn Portuguese. We are certainly conscious that it

is not yet possible to establish bilingualism in all its extent, for in Brazil we have a very small number of professionals who master the Brazilian Sign Language. A proposal for education with bilingualism, which has a socio-political-academic commitment, however, will attempt to establish favorable conditions as soon as possible so that the professionals in this area will have access to the Brazilian Sign Language and will begin to use it with competence. On the other side, that proposal will favor the teaching of Portuguese to the deaf as a second language. It is also indispensable that we should create opportunities and fight for the pedagogical training of deaf adults who wish to dedicate themselves to education. Their presence in the educational process, not only as teachers, but also as monitors to a hearing teacher in charge of a class, has proved to be of fundamental importance in our project.

We should not ignore, from a point of view of education with bilingualism – although we are at this moment more specifically concerned with the process of teaching to read – that we face two equally important educational phases if we wish the bilingual process to be really viewed as a factor of integration of these two communities in contact, the deaf and the hearers: the establishment of an educational model, strictly speaking, and the transition phase.

The establishment refers exclusively to the process of starting the task, i.e., to the start of the accompanying process of the deaf child's development, which is his entrance in school. This way, we will be sure that the two languages are taught to the deaf, the Brazilian Sign Language being acquired first as their native language, and Portuguese as a second language. To assure the deaf a means of communication that can be rapidly and easily acquired is to assure that his cognitive development will be preserved with no delays since it has already been scientifically proved that the acquisition of a language is an indispensable support to the natural development of mental processes. As Portuguese is not acquired without difficulty, no matter how competent are the professionals involved in the educational process, Sign Language appears as the natural means of cognitive support. Portuguese then will be the second language to be acquired. In the development of this process, the professionals involved should master the Brazilian Sign Language, at least reasonably, and the deaf should be in constant contact with deaf and hearers's communities.

For the time being, however, it is important to emphasize that if on one hand we know that the proposal for education with bilingualism is committed to the use of the two languages, both by the deaf and by the professionals in the area, on the other hand we do know that in the process of transition we are now experiencing, to start from this principle is to admit a priori a utopic situation: we still cannot count on trained professionals to begin this process in ideal conditions. And this transition phase refers in particular to the students who are already in school and need specific assistance because they do not master Portuguese and, in most cases, their teachers do not master the Brazilian Sign Language either. The "price of transition" is high and risky. It requires a specific adaptation to allow access to the curriculum. It is necessary to respect those students who do not master Portuguese as well as those professionals who do not master the Brazilian Sign Language. All the resources should be used with caution, a correct linguistic and didactic-pedagogic orientation being indispensable. If based on science and wisdom we are able to deal with school children of this age, in the next years the development of this new educational proposal will happen, as a natural consequence, in the classes that, after having gone through this process, will expand throughout junior and senior high school levels. It is, therefore, a slow process that should, however, be developed firmly and clearly as concerns principles and methods.

Is that possible? Yes. Conscious that professionals should work interconnected, whether they are linguists, educators, teachers, audiologists, psychologists, social workers or other specialists

in the area, expanding the idea of integration not only to the deaf and the hearers's communities, but also to the integrated work of such professionals, we are sure that this commitment to the education and correct integration of deaf and hearing individuals will not be seen as another trend, another utopia or just another option. Should there be a political will – we are here referring to academic policy – the concept of real integration among individuals will make this new deaf/hearers's community a model to be followed by those who wish to see their ideals of true citizenship accomplished.

In an effort to carry out this political will, the establishment phase of the Project began through an Agreement signed between the State University of Rio de Janeiro (**UERJ**) and the National Institute for Deaf Education (**INES**). The Project started to be developed in May 1996, in a Child Education class, and in February 1997 in two of such classes, under the responsibility of **UERJ**, through the Extension Department of the Office of the Dean of Extension Programs and Cultural Activities, of the Institute of Letters and the Master's Program in Education, represented by the General Coordinator, who is also the Project Linguist, by the Pedagogical Advisors and a Research Assistant; under the responsibility of **INES**, through the Institute Board of Directors, the Technical-Pedagogical Department, represented by their coordinators, two teachers of Child Education classes, two Deaf Educators, a Physical Education instructor, a Music Teacher, two Audiologists, a Psychologist and a Social Worker.

Joining the efforts of these professionals and through a constant interchange between these two Institutions, we think not only to be doing our duty but also to be exercising our citizen's rights, because we are at last achieving academic ideals and objectives, which are part of the activities of different professionals and institutions in the search for new solutions to educational projects in Brazil.

In consequence of the evaluations of the results achieved in the **INES** High School, we are sure that this Project can serve as a reference for other initiatives of the same type in our country.

The theoretical construct on which the Project is based is the socio-interactionist line, the works of Vygotsky (1983, 1988, 1989) being, therefore, specially relevant among the book references. Additional readings of Elliot (1982), Fernandes (1990, 1994) confirm studies on the acquisition of language and bilingualism; Furth (1968) contributes reflections on thinking without language; Luria (1987, 1990) expresses the project concerns as to cognitive development; Petitto and Marantette (1991) through the discovery of the manual form of babbling, bring into focus language ontogeny and stress the importance of Sign Language as the first language for deaf children; Sacks (1990), as a neurologist, contributes his clinical view about the phenomena involving deafness.

These readings are the basis of this researcher's studies and support her work with the pedagogical advisor of the Project, giving her the necessary help in the areas in which she works as Psycholinguist.

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