

We Need to Talk about the (Deaf) Elephant in the Room: How Should We Teach (Oral) Foreign Languages to Deaf Students in Mainstreamed Schools?

By Leonardo Neves Correa, State University of Montes Claros, Brazil

In 2014, the Portuguese Government, in order to assess the level of English language proficiency of its students, offered 9th grade students the opportunity to take a PET exam, organized by the University of Cambridge. About 100 students, however, were “excused” from taking this test. The reason? They were deaf and, according to local authorities, would not be able to perform the comprehension and oral production sections of the exam. In order to “fix” the problem, in the following year the Ministry of Education suggested that: “Audio CD be adapted to the students, with the possibility of lip reading or with slow-speed speech” (Monteiro, 2015, n.p).

The "solutions" presented by the Portuguese government did not meet the needs of those students, since, contrary to the belief of many, not every deaf person performs lip reading and, because they are deaf, obviously could not perform the oral comprehension of the CD audio, even at a slow speed. This unfortunate episode is in fact a symptom of an illness that affects deaf communities (not just the Portuguese) around the globe: the lack of knowledge regarding the condition of the deaf and hard of hearing individuals, and their marginal representation in decision-making processes.

In many countries, the deaf are deprived of basic rights by the belief that they are unable to perform the simplest everyday actions. According to a report published in 2012 by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), 19 national deaf associations reported that in their countries the deaf population does not have the same rights as the hearing population. In these countries (including Armenia, Bolivia, Chile, Haiti, Laos, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nepal, Qatar, among others) they do not have the right to vote, to have a driver's license or even the right to adopt a child (WFD, 2012). These (prejudiced) beliefs which understand deafness as

synonymous with disability, underpin violations of deaf rights.

In Brazil, the enactment of Law 10.436/02, which establishes Libras¹ (BSL) as an official language throughout the national territory, and Decree 5.626/05, which guarantees the rights of deaf and hard of hearing in the areas of education, health and well-being, contribute to our country taking a more prominent position in the WFD (2012) ranking compared to those countries previously mentioned. However, this does not mean that we are free from the harmful effects of these prejudices. In an interview to the G1² Education news portal, Professor Sylvia Witkoski, who became deaf after a pregnancy complication, reveals how people reacted to her hearing loss:

I lost the image of a teacher to receive instead a stamp, an image I did not recognize: that of the hearing impaired. From "normality" I moved to "abnormality," and as such, everything that I was, what I did, and what I had achieved was no longer rightfully mine, in the eyes of others, because of the immense prejudice and stigma attached to people with disabilities, including deaf people. (Guilherme, 2011, n.p)

Professor Witkoski's speech demonstrates that our policies are still unable to change the Brazilian's imaginary in regard to the potentialities of deaf and hard of hearing individuals. We keep perceiving the deaf from the perspective of the "defect," the "deficiency," the "least able". This not only negatively impacts the daily lives of around 10 million Brazilians, but it socially and discursively determines what the deaf are, and/or are not able to do.

The discourse of disability also comes up when we address the issue of teaching English to the deaf. The (few) ethnographic studies conducted in this area in Brazil (Brito, 2010; Medeiros, 2011; Oliveira, 2007; Rubio, 2010; Silva, 2005; Victor, 2010) indicate that this type of discourse is present in teachers' beliefs, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

¹ In Brazil, LIBRAS is translated as Brazilian Sign language. It has its own grammar, syntax, morphology, etc. LIBRAS (and also American Sign Language) are a creole of 18th century French Sign Language. For this reason, there are quite a few similarities between.

² G1 is an online portal from the TV channel Globo which broadcasts local, national and international News in the country.

- “Teaching foreign languages to deaf people is unnecessary, since [deaf] students are not even able to learn Portuguese;”
- Because they do not use oral language, deaf students have a limited knowledge of the world;”
- "The lack of vocabulary of the deaf student prevents the implementation of reading classes;”
- " Deaf students are unable to develop reading skills in foreign languages.”

In addition to presenting teachers' (dis) belief in the deaf 's ability to learn English, the quotes also draw attention to gaps in the training of pre service teachers with regard to pedagogies and inclusive policies. One of the goals of Decree 5.626/05 is to guarantee deaf and hard of hearing access to full education. To this end, it is established, among other measures, that all undergraduate teaching courses should include the teaching of Libras in their curricula. The offer of the subject does not guarantee, however, that the students of these courses will necessarily discuss pedagogical aspects of teaching for the deaf during the course. In this sense, it would be necessary to provide students with a specific course for the study of teaching methodologies for deaf and/or pupils with special educational needs - an ideal that seems far from becoming a reality.

Analyzing the curriculum guidelines of undergraduate courses, Vitaliano & Dell'Acqua (2012) show a lack of guidance on the teaching practices of students with special needs in undergraduate degrees in Brazil. Therefore, questions such as: “How to teach English to deaf students in an inclusive context?;” “How to deal with the language DELTA (Libras - Portuguese - English) established in the English class?;” “How do we teach oral skills (practice suggested by the High School Curriculum Guidelines (BRAZIL, 2006) in the classroom with deaf students?”

One of the possible reasons for the invisibility of this issue in pre-service teaching context, is the fact that policies and guidelines for foreign language teaching do not mention the issue. The National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (BRASIL, 2008) is a document that regulates inclusive educational processes in the country. Among other official guidelines, the document does not refer to the

challenges of teaching additional oral languages to deaf students. But the case is different when it comes to teaching Portuguese (Brazilian's first language).

The Decree 5.626/05 in its sixth chapter deals specifically with the teaching of Libras and the Portuguese language (in the written modality) for the deaf. The teaching of Portuguese was already problematized in the sphere of public educational policies, as it can be seen in "Portuguese Language Teaching for the deaf: Paths to practice," volumes 1 and 2 (Brazil, 2004), published by the National Program for the Support of Deaf Education, organized by the Ministry of Education. Foreign languages, perhaps due to the status of unofficial languages in the national territory, did not have the same prominence as the Portuguese language in the political-educational scenario. If this topic is not prioritized in the official educational agenda, it will not likely be part of the undergraduate curriculum, and as a result, the problem of teaching deaf English in inclusive schools will remain in limbo.

In this scenario, it is urgent that we promote a policy for the teaching of English to deaf that takes into account the challenges met by teachers and students in inclusive contexts. Because, after all, who/what institutions should initiate this process? Would it be the Ministry of Education? Expert teachers and researchers? Before policy-makers and language specialists, it is the people who experience the problem in their daily lives who must take the first steps toward proposing an educational policy. Of course, for this policy to be put on the agenda in the future, it must subsequently go beyond the school context and have the approval of society as a whole and thus have a chance to be validated. For now, we need to think of viable ways to project these voices of these stakeholders (deaf students, teachers, Libras interpreters and the school community as a whole) out of the classroom and into the policy making agenda.

In order to propel the issue in the public agenda, the project "Towards an inclusive English: Fostering public policies for the teaching of English (as a foreign language) to deaf students in mainstreamed educational contexts," aims at creating mechanisms for the promotion of inclusive public policies based on deliberative democracy composed by David Matthews (2014). The author suggests a series of 6 (six) "democratic practices" that involve citizens' political actions when trying to solve a

public problem collectively, the following: 1) naming issues in public terms (Identifying problems that affect the community); 2) framing the problems in order to identify possible action plans, as well as considering their advantages and disadvantages; 3) make decisions deliberately, considering the pros and cons of each option; 4) identify the resources available to implement the actions; 5) implement the selected actions; and 6) promote collective learning. The referred project focuses on the 3 (three) first democratic practices and aims to respond to the demand presented as follows:

1. Naming issues: During the months of November - December 2019, a series of interviews and focus groups were carried out with i) Deaf students; ii) English teachers; iii) Libras interpreters and listening students who experience (or have experienced) teaching English in an inclusive classroom on a daily basis. The purpose of the interviews was to identify what were the main concerns of these stakeholders in relation to the problem, as well as the way in which they define the issue.

2. Framing for public deliberation: Currently, the interviewers are being analyzed from the thematic content analysis proposal (Bardin, 2011). After analysis, these reports will be organized in an issue guide for public deliberation; including diverse perspectives on how to deal with the problem.

3. Making decisions deliberately: In the last phase of the project a series of deliberative forums will be held in order to verify possible directions for writing, and proposing a public educational policy that addresses the problem.

I hope that the results of the project can, in fact, highlight this problem on the public agenda and, consequently, encourage the writing of educational guidelines that consider the condition and reflect the needs of the deaf community in this context.

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Leonardo Neves Correa is an assistant professor in the Department of Languages and Communication at the State University of Montes Claros (Unimontes) in Minas Gerais, Brazil. He is currently a PhD candidate at Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC - SP), where he is developing research on public policy-making for the teaching of deaf students in mainstreamed school contexts.