

# **The Relevance of Learning Brazilian Sign Language to The Socialization of Deaf People**

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## **Abstract**

*Through Law nº 10.436 of April 24, 2002, the Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) was made official as a way of communication and expression. From it, the visual-motor language system, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a language system for transmitting ideas and facts, originating from deaf people communities in Brazil. The Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Law nº 13.146 of July 6, 2015) establishes, among others, the provision of bilingual education, with LIBRAS as the first language, and the writing mode of Portuguese as a second language in bilingual schools and classes, as well as in inclusive schools. Within this context, a descriptive exploratory research was conducted at the Center for the Training and Support of Deaf People (CAS), in São Luís/MA. We aimed at investigating the relevance of learning Brazilian Sign Language in the socialization of deaf people, considering the perception of CAS students. Ten deaf students who were currently learning LIBRAS at the Center participated in the study, out of which seven were males and three were females aged between 17 and 36 years old. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, considering the ethical procedures involving human beings. Results indicated that deaf students learning LIBRAS at CAS do so due to a number of reasons, such as communicating with hearing people, learning, working, having autonomy, being able to leave home, making friends, and spending time with other people. Within this context, the LIBRAS interpreter is of great relevance to the social, educational and professional inclusion of deaf people, as well as a communication mediator between deaf and hearing people. However, the LIBRAS teaching-learning process still requires a more efficient socialization and/or operationalization, aiming to reach society in general, and to include deaf people, thus breaking up myths, stigmas, prejudices, discriminations and unfavorable social actions related to the disability and their human potential. Employing a sensitive look and listening to the exclusion situations many deaf people are suffering is urgently needed to safeguard the respect to the human being and to the deaf people's culture.*

**Keywords:** Deafness, Libras, Relevance, Learning, Inclusion.

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Sign language is the communication channel used by deaf communities worldwide. However, it is not universal, as each country has its own language.

In 1857, invited by the Emperor D. Pedro I, Professor Ernet Hwet founded the National Institute for Deaf People Education (INES), which contributed to the creation of the Brazilian Sign Language – LIBRAS. However, it was only recognized as the language of the Brazilian deaf people’s community and thus as the country’s official second language over four and a half decades after its creation (Instituto Nacional de Educação de Surdos - INES, 2014).

According to Silva and Treml (2009), communication is the greatest challenge faced by the deaf, which is eased by using sign language, considered as a specific language of the deaf community. When hearing people learn LIBRAS, it enables the wider social inclusion of deaf people, considering their right to be included in society through language.

In this context, the primary objective of this study was to understand the relevance attributed to sign language learning in the socialization of deaf people, by assessing the perception of deaf students from the Center for the Training and Support of Deaf People (CAS) in the city of São Luís, Maranhão, Brazil.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

A descriptive exploratory research was conducted aiming for a qualitative approach. This was done according to Gil (2008), who reported that this type of research is appropriate for poorly known and poorly explored cases, while also allowing to describe the studied phenomenon.

In total, 10 deaf students who were learning Libras at CAS participated in the study. Out of that total, seven students were males and three were females, with ages ranging between 17 and 36 years. Regarding their level of education, one student was pursuing its undergraduate studies, four had finished only high school, and two had finished only elementary school. All three women had finished high school. Male students’ occupation included packaging, vigilance and general services. Female students worked as supermarket cashiers and in general services.

To preserve their identities, participants in this study were identified as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9 and S10.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, because according to Triviños (1987) this technique “[...] favors not only the description of social phenomena, but also its explanation and the comprehension of its entirety [...] besides maintaining the conscious and active presence of the researcher in the process of gathering information” (p.152). Moreover, it allows more flexibility and the possibility for the interviewer to reformulate the question, aiming for a better comprehension by the interviewee. Two sign language interpreters helped with conducting the interviews.

All procedures followed the ethic criteria involving human beings, and participants signed an informed consent form agreeing to participate and aware that results would be published in scientific conferences and journals.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Regarding interviews, when questioned about the reason that led them to learn Libras at CAS, data revealed that students (S1 and S8) wanted to break out of their usual routine and to be socially included, since having special needs does not make them disabled, despite the imposed social limitations. Participants (S2, S3, S4, S5, S6 and S9) were seeking to have autonomy, to be financially independent, to study, and build friendship bonds. Students (S7 and S10) reported that they wanted to go beyond, to be truly included, and to experience having the same rights and opportunities as those with no disability; they wanted to learn Libras to improve their self-esteem and to see themselves as participants in the social context together with other people, which is facilitated by learning the new language.

Based on that, it is important to cite Magalhães Junior (2007), who highlights the relevance of the Libras teaching-learning process within a social and educational context. In a similar manner, Fernandes (2008) explains that dominating a language is not limited to knowing a few words, but it also involves establishing a conversation and good communication. Therefore, data agree with this principle, since participants learn Libras to establish a communication with other deaf people, within a social, educational and professional context.

Furthermore, Pinto (2010) states that it is through the meanings created consciously between groups of society that interaction and interactivity happen, since people who seek to learn Libras are aware of the relevance of communication in a social, educational and professional context.

When asked whether they needed a Libras interpreter and, in case of positive answers, in which situation this interpreter was most required, participants were unanimous in saying that Libras interpreters are of paramount importance in teaching institutions, as they mediate interactions between deaf and hearing people, enabling communication and thus the access to formal education.

Additionally, it is also known that the relevance of interpreters extends to the social and professional contexts. As highlighted by Gesser (1971), "the interpreter is of great importance in regards to the interaction between deaf and hearing people" (p.47) since, although deaf people communicate mostly with their families and other deaf people, it is through the Libras interpreter that this communication reaches society in general.

Within this context, it should be highlighted that Libras has signs with contextualized meanings, thus increasing the importance of the interpreter in mediating communication between deaf and hearing people. It is also valid to mention Law n° 12.319 of September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010, which brings regulations on the profession of Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) translators and interpreters. It also resolves that this professional is competent to interpret both languages simultaneously or consecutively, and is proficient in Libras and Portuguese translation and interpretation.

In its Article n° 6, the aforementioned Law assigns to the Libras translator and interpreter, in the exercise of their powers: to perform the communication between deaf and hearing people, deaf people and deaf people, deaf and deaf-blind people, and deaf-blind and hearing people to the oral language using Libras, and vice-versa; to interpret, in Brazilian Sign Language – Portuguese Language, educational and cultural activities developed at teaching institutions in primary, secondary and tertiary schools, as a way to enable the access to curricular contents; to act in recruitment processes of courses from teaching institutions

and of public tenders; to act in support of service accessibility and of core activities of teaching institutions and public offices; to provide their services in sworn testimonies, in administrative or police agencies.

In a similar manner, in its Article nº 7, the Law further states that the Libras translator and interpreter should exercise its occupation with technical rigor, caring for the inherent ethical values, for the respect to the human being and the culture of deaf people, as well as: for honesty and discretion, protecting the right for the confidentiality of the information received; for a practice free of prejudices related to origin, race, religious belief, age, sex or sexual orientation or gender; for the impartiality and fidelity to the contents fit for its translation; for the adequate posture and manner in environments it attends to as a result of its professional practice; for the solidarity and awareness that the right for expression is a social right, regardless of the social and economic condition of those who need it; for the knowledge on the specificities of the deaf people community.

As noted, the Libras interpreter and translator is of great relevance in the process of including deaf people in a social, educational and professional context. Therefore, investing in these professionals is necessary, in order for them to be able to mediate the communication between deaf and hearing people, as well as to guarantee the right for deaf people to exercise citizenship.

When asked whether there is anyone in their families who knows Libras, data revealed that within a family context, half of deaf students (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5) had only one family member who knew Libras. For the remaining half (S6, S7, S8, S9, S10), no other family member living with them knew the Brazilian Sign Language. It can thus be inferred that most deaf students have no one within their families who knows how to communicate with them through Libras, hampering the interaction and interactivity between them.

The communication between deaf and hearing people needs to be seen as one of the interaction priorities, mainly in primary socialization, since according to Stelling (1996) the basis of all knowledge we have comes from family. Furthermore, the beginning of lessons on attitudes, principles and values that guide us through our lives lies in our families. Therefore, the communication between deaf people and their family members should start in the family itself, and then be extended into the social, educational, and professional contexts, because this is how inclusion should be established.

Still pertaining to the context of communication between deaf and hearing people, the studies by Negrelli and Marcon (2006) highlight that “the participation of family in the deaf person communication through signs, will allow this individual to interact with the world, and will create a more pleasant and happy coexistence” (p.103).

In regards to the question on the importance of learning Libras, data showed that learning Libras is important for attending school and being able to study for the majority of deaf students, as well as for being able to work, taking classes, having friends, being understood, leaving home and visiting other places.

It is therefore noticeable that these students seek to learn Libras to communicate in a social, educational, and professional context, as well as to feel included in all parts of society. On this the me, Skliar (1998) highlights that the deaf person can and should be included in society through sign language, taking into consideration its potential and its rights as a citizen. Similarly, Laraia (2001) states that the person is a product of the environment it belongs to, its history can be written differently and the interactions between people can favor the acceptance of those with different needs and its potential development.

Law nº 10.436 of April 24, 2002, defines Libras as a way of communication and expression, in which the visual-motor language system, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a language system for transmitting ideas and facts, originating from deaf people communities in Brazil.

Decree nº 5.626, of December 22, 2005, Chapter IV, Art. 14, §1º II, emphasizes that it is mandatory to offer the teaching of Libras from Early Childhood Education, and the teaching of Portuguese as a second language to deaf people.

Still on this matter, Damásio (2005) points that Libras enables the “linguistic, social, and intellectual development of those who use it as a communication tool, favoring their access to cultural and scientific knowledge, as well as the integration into the social group to which they belong” (p.61).

Similarly, studies by Carvalho (2007) found that “[...] Libras is the initial resource necessary for the true emancipation of the deaf and their educational and social inclusion” (p.33).

When asked about whether learning Libras is easy, data showed that participants found it to be easy, but that they need to pay close attention to the signs, since it takes time, patience and persistence to learn them. It is also perceived that the ease and/or desire in learning is directly linked to the need for communication in the social, educational, and professional contexts they are or need to be a part of.

Data agree with what Lacerda (2000) stated, when signaling that the deaf person should learn its language as soon as possible, so that the adaptation process is easier, not waiting for special situations to occur to then seek learning it.

In the same sense, Quadros (1997) reports that the process of learning Libras is similar to the process of learning Portuguese, as it also requires a lot of attention and practice. However, the ease is in the context of the person wanting to learn, its interests and/or objectives even in face of the complexity of both languages.

Therefore, Sacks (2010) is quoted for clarifying that “besides representing an achievement for the deaf, Libras is a stimulus for new achievements and for the broadening of horizons for deaf and hearing people” (p.82).

Regarding the question on the reason that most hearing people do not know Libras, data showed that according to the participants’ perceptions, this occurs for several reasons, among them: not needing the language to communicate; not liking Libras; finding it difficult and/or not wanting to learn.

Similarly, for most participants, hearing people do not seek to learn Libras because they do not need it to communicate, as they are able to speak and hear.

In regard to the importance of Libras for the interaction between deaf and hearing people, there is a great need for this language to be included in the curricula of all teaching institutions. Considering that the number of deaf people in Maranhão state has increased, this becomes even more important, which makes learning Libras necessary, aiming for the social, educational, and professional inclusion of the deaf person.

On this matter, Sá (2002) reports that there are still situations of great disadvantage for the deaf, who require more support so they can interact with everything in their surroundings.

Regarding the question of whether the deaf person can communicate with those who do not know LIBRAS, data revealed that, although three deaf students (S4, S5, and S6) answered yes, two of them said

that the communication is not understandable and confusing. For the remaining seven deaf students (S1, S2, S3, S7, S8, S9, S10), few and/or very few can communicate with those who do not know sign language.

Therefore, the facts allow us to infer that most deaf students have no understandable communication with those who do not know Libras.

It is therefore worth quoting Skliar (1998), who emphasizes that “when a deaf person is treated the same as a hearing person, it is in disadvantage” (p.37). To the author, learning sign language is just as important as learning English so the individual feels included, similar to when visiting an English-speaking country. If it is inclusion, and if inclusion is democracy, it is important that both deaf and hearing people learn Libras. Only then everyone will be treated the same, and only then the deaf person will be included into different contexts.

Still on this matter, Honora and Frizanco (2009) state that sign language is a living language like any other. Therefore, it is constantly transforming, always adapting to the inclusion conditions for understanding. In the specific case of deaf people, Libras needs to be seen as a necessity and, because of that, society needs to be aware about the relevance of everyone learning Libras, in respect to the inclusion of deaf people in their own country.

According to Goldfel (1997), most of society still has a negative view about deaf people, and many of their rights have not been respected. Therefore, the matter of inclusion should be faced seriously, since all persons must understand themselves within learning possibilities, and accept differences as an integral part of a large diverse group.

When asked about how they felt when speaking to those who do not know Libras, data showed a great dissatisfaction from deaf students in relation to hearing people who cannot understand Libras. This makes their lives more difficult, considering most of them feel lost in communication, and are upset for not feeling socially included.

When asked whether they have ever felt socially excluded due to a lack of communication with hearing people, participants were unanimous in saying that there have been several situations in which they needed to communicate with hearing people but an understandable communication between both parties was not possible because the latter did not know Libras. This led to the exclusion of the deaf person from a social and educational context.

On this matter, Lacerda (1996) emphasizes that deaf people use a language still unknown to most people and are therefore isolated despite having good relationships with those around them.

When asked whether a Libras interpreter was indispensable in educational institutions, results revealed that this professional is of extreme relevance, since the majority of deaf people are left on the margins of the information and/or knowledge in social, educational and professional spaces without the mediation it provides.

In this sense, it was found that the absence of a Libras interpreter in the educational context hampers learning for most students. Thus, it is noticeable that these interpreters are of paramount importance in the teaching-learning process of those students, and throughout their socialization in the world they are included in.

Therefore, we quote the clarifications obtained through the Portal Educação (2013), when emphasizing that the importance of the Libras interpreter is due to it performing

[...] the function of being the communication channel between the deaf student, the teacher, colleagues and the school team”, as well as “being a translator between people who share different languages and cultures, [...] however, its contact with the deaf student cannot be higher than the contact of the students with the class teacher (p.1).

However, according to Quadros (2007), the “acquisition process of the deaf in Brazil is completely atypical, since they are late Libras learners, which ends up hindering their written Portuguese learning, thus requiring a more reconsidered and significant pedagogical practice” (p.12).

In the same context, Silva (2007) raises attention to the fact that “pedagogical practices constitute the greatest problem in the schooling of deaf people” (p.21). The author further emphasizes that rethinking these practices is necessary for deaf students to know that their difficulties in reading and writing are not solely linked to the disability, but rather to the methodologies used in the teaching-learning process.

Therefore, in regards to the teaching-learning process of deaf people, Perlin and Miranda (2011), explain that it must include a linguistic and cultural proximity, so that learning is effective, as well as significant, i.e., respecting the human person and the culture of the deaf.

Regarding the question of what is missing for more people to learn LIBRAS, data showed that this is linked to understanding that this knowledge is very important to communicate with deaf people, as well as caring for the socialization process of the deaf person. This also includes respecting their culture, showing solidarity to their specific communication needs, wanting to learn and optimizing their time for learning.

In this sense, Stumpf (2009) is cited for explaining that people belong to organized groups and have their own form of communication. Therefore, there must be interest in learning Libras because deaf people must be able to understand what hearing people say and to communicate with them, considering that it is through interaction that everyone can live and talk understandably. Thus, Libras learning needs to be a conscious search to everyone towards inclusion.

## **4 CONCLUSIONS**

Revisiting the proposed objective, which was to understand the relevance attributed to learning Libras, and considering the perception of students from the CAS in São Luís city, Maranhão, a diverse group was found seeking to learn Libras, which included deaf people, family members of deaf people, various professionals and other members of the community in general.

Deaf students learning Libras at the CAS do so for a variety of reasons, such as communicating with hearing people in study and work situations, having autonomy, being able to leave home, making friends and living with other people.

The Libras interpreter is of great relevance to the social, educational, and professional inclusion of the deaf, as well as in the mediation of communication between deaf and hearing people. The CAS is also of great relevance in this process.

Most family members of deaf students do not know Libras, which shows just how much deaf people are on the margins of interaction and interactivity during primary socialization, as in general society.

For most deaf students from CAS, learning Libras is easy but requires a lot of studying, attention, and practice, since the language has several signs, many of which are similar and highly variable.

According to deaf students, most hearing people do not know Libras because they do not need it to communicate and/or because they are not interested in learning it; because they have no deaf family members; and because of the difficulty in learning.

Communication between deaf and hearing people is hampered without Libras. On this matter, everyone highlights the importance of Libras in the social, educational, and professional inclusion of deaf people.

Deaf students feel lost and excluded when trying to communicate with those who do not know Libras. In specific cases, they also feel angry, upset, and sad, with the sensation that no one understands them.

All deaf students have already felt and still feel socially excluded due to the lack of communication and understanding between them and most hearing people. This occurs mainly due to situations where their human potential and/or abilities are discredited; due to the lack of interest of hearing people to communicate with them; due to the stigmas and prejudices related to hearing disabilities and/or deafness; due to the feeling of pity directed at them; due to the socially imposed neglect and limitations.

Summarizing the findings of this research, according to deaf students from CAS, the aspects missing for people to learn Libras are, first, wanting to learn, as well as feeling the need to communicate with deaf people and being sensitive about the exclusion condition which the deaf are in.

In this sense, including Libras is necessary both during primary and continued education, so the communication and/or interaction and interactivity between deaf and hearing people can be efficiently established in social, educational, and professional contexts.

Therefore, based on facts, the relevance of Libras in the process of including hearing disabled and/or deaf people in society cannot be dismissed. Moreover, we highlight the urgent need to debunk myths, stigmas, prejudices, and unfavorable social actions related to the disability and the human potential of those people.

We expect this study will bring attention to authorities and other people to develop a sensitive look and listen to the exclusion situation many deaf people are put in, directly linked to them being withheld from their right to exercise citizenship, from the respect for the human being, and for the culture of deaf people.

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