Non-Manual Expression – Sign Language as L2

Cayley Guimarães;Rita de Cássia Maestri

Abstract

Sign Language is fundamental for Deaf communication, culture and citizenship. The Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) is a complete linguistic system, of visual-spatial modality, with specificities that present a challenge for teaching and learning as L2. Non-Manual Expression is on attribute of the language for meaning attribution. Meaning attribution occurs from visual symbolic processes where non-manual expressions acquire a central role, and differs from those used in the oral language. This requires adequate educational practices and pedagogical material for the acquisition of Libras as L2. This research proposes a learning object and a methodology for teaching and learning of Libras in the form of a game that focus on non-manual expressions. The proposed methodology comprises the context, the theme of the communication situation, the utterance of the sign in Libras, along with learning fixation activities. Validation shows the importance of valuing the grammar of Libras as a pedagogical strategy that is adequate to teaching and learning non-manual expression in Libras.

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Cayley Guimarães (Corresponding author)

Dept. of Industrial Design, Federal Technological University of Parana - UTFPR,

Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil.

cayleyg@utfpr.edu.br

Rita de Cássia Maestri

Dept. of Education, UTFPR,

Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil.

Abstract

Sign Language is fundamental for Deaf communication, culture and citizenship. The Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) is a complete linguistic system, of visual-spatial modality, with specificities that present a challenge for teaching and learning as L2. Non-Manual Expression is on attribute of the language for meaning attribution. Meaning attribution occurs from visual symbolic processes where non-manual expressions acquire a central role, and differs from those used in the oral language. This requires adequate educational practices and pedagogical material for the acquisition of Libras as L2. This research proposes a learning object and a methodology for teaching and learning of Libras in the form of a game that focus on non-manual expressions. The proposed methodology comprises the context, the theme of the communication situation, the utterance of the sign in Libras, along with learning fixation activities. Validation shows the importance of valuing the grammar of Libras as a pedagogical strategy that is adequate to teaching and learning non-manual expression in Libras.

Keywords: sign language; sign language parameters; sign language as L2;

1. Introduction

We use the oral language (Portuguese) in our daily lives for our interactions and communications, which includes social constructions, identity creation, cultural actions, and the exercise of citizenship, among other activities. Language, therefore, is an important part of the benefits that society provides to its members; and it is paramount for human development in all human potentialities. The lack of use of language that is shared socially exclude entire communities. We are talking about members of the Deaf community, whose members speak only their sign language (i.e. Libras) as their natural language, and have little to no access to the oral language. Deaf, with capital D, refers to the denomination of the members of the Deaf community (as opposed to deaf, a condition of those who do not hear). Libras serves the members of the Deaf community in their complex linguistic needs, in their intellectual, cultural and social development and inclusion. Despite years of struggles and fights for their rights to use Libras, there is some progress towards acceptance of Libras, including the teaching and learning of Libras as L2 for non-Deaf

persons [1] [2] [3].

Libras allows for the production of all complex utterances of all themes and topic of conversation, it allows for knowledge production and meaning creation. Libras is a vibrant, creative language that is adequate for the communication, social and cognitive functions and it is able to express complex and abstract thoughts [1] [2] [3]. According to Vigotsky (1984) [3], language and its meanings are central and fundamental for the understanding of the self and superior thought: the meaning of a word is both a phenomenon of the utterance as it is of the thought – thus, language is indispensable in the processes of interaction and cognition.

The Deaf have difficulties to learn and communicate in the oral language, which causes dire consequences, such as lack of access to social activities and public services, schools etc. Adding to the problem is the lack of non-Deaf people who do not know Libras. Thus, the Deaf is deprived of full access to citizenship. Citizenship can be understood as the access to social, economical and political rights. Our society should not impose the oral language on the Deaf - a clear call for teaching and learning of Libras methodologies for the non-Deaf [4].

The Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) is an official language of Brasil (Law 10.098) since 19 December, 2000. This legal status is a necessary condition because it provides a place from which policies and strategies can be created to guarantee the inclusion of the Deaf. But, it is not sufficient, given that few users of the oral language know Libras. There is a need for Libras education [5].

Lemos and Chaves (2012, p. 2286) [5] show that even after the advent of the law, there are few public services in Libras, in total "[…] disrespect of the law". The authors conclude that the courses of Libras are not efficient. Martins (2008) [6] tells us that the lower status of Libras comes from decades of prejudice and the lack of pedagogical methodologies. However, the legal acceptance of Libras is a first step, and it implies that the non-Deaf should learn Libras [7].

Given the rights of the prejudice in one hand, and the achievements of the Deaf communities, how should the teaching and learning of Libras as L2 play a role in this new environment? What are the berries and difficulties? How to teach a non-oral language to the non-Deaf? This article addresses those issues by proposing some educational practices to teach Libras as L2 with focus on one of Libras' parameters: non-manual expressions.

2. Specificities of Libras

Teaching a second language comes after the subject has already acquired a first language. More than stating the obvious, this affirmation points to the difficulties faced by teachers and learners of Libras [8]. For the speakers of an oral language, sign languages such as Libras seem very strange and inaccessible: there is no recognisable grammar, the hand configurations are not natural, the Deaf make a lot of undistinguishable

noises and "faces". Given these perceived barriers for the learner of Libras as L2, the teaching should go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge towards an immersion of communication situations in which the different parameters of Libras become accessible and make sense to the non-Deaf [1][2]. This is a process of acquisition, and not of mere transposition of abilities, and it requires the understanding of cultural values, and requires innovative approaches [9]. Rossi (2010) [10] reminds us that Libras utterances have some iconic representations of ideas. Since Stokoe (1960) [11] we know that sign languages are composed of parameters (such as hand configuration, location, movement etc.), and that non-manual expressions are one of these parameters, and part of the grammar and lexicon.

The non-manual expressions are facial expressions, movements of torso, shoulders, eyes, mouth etc. Facial expressions are also used in the oral language to emphasise and provide connotation. However, the use of facial expression in sign languages differ from that of the oral language: they can be part of the lexicon, they can serve grammatical functions, they are related to the structure, morphology (for example, they express intensity, size), they are part of the syntax (negation, interrogation, emphasis). The non-manual expression may be a lexicon by themselves, and they are used to express feelings (happiness, angst, suffering etc.). A gaze may indicate a direction, a person, an object; it can coordinate the turns of the speech [12]. Gesser (2010) [13] shows how hard it is for the non-Deaf to understand those differences. Figure 1 shows an utterance of SUN in which the facial expression indicates the impact that the sun has on the face, the eyes and the vision:

Figure 1. SUN. The facial expression denotes the damage the sun causes to the eyes.

The studies and reflections about teaching and learning of Libras as L2 include the complex discussions of the acquisition of non-manual expressions of Libras by non-Deaf learners. Existing practices are insufficient [1][2]. Learning occurs when meaning attribution is possible, in an environment of social creation and communicational practices that will eventually become symbolic. Literacy is a development process of use and signification of Libras in a social behaviour that values Libras and its specificities.

3. Teaching Libras as L2

Non-Manual expressions, including facial expressions, are a part of the human *repertoire*, used to by non-

Deaf people to express emotions - and thus, there is a genuine difficulty to understand the real grammatical value of the facial expressions by the non-Dear learners. Most learners find these non-manual expressions unnecessary, ugly, inaccessible - specially when the society undervalues Libras as a language of Culture [10][14]. Additionally, the non-Deaf fear being ridiculed which amounts to a complex environment, not conducive of adequate teaching and learning. Therefore, literacy em L2 should consider cultural and communicational relations that value Libras in real use situations. According to Rossi (2010) [10], prejudices negatively affect the learning when one considers that the existing methodologies do not promote cultural understanding.

Richards and Rogers (2014) [15] proposes a teaching environment that is ludic and fun, that motivates and promotes autonomy. An environment where there is no perception of effort or failure and that provides a sense of achievement. The authors also value creativity, belonging and participation in the communication activities. The activities should be enticing and challenging. These aspects of teaching and learning a second language should be incorporated in the literacy process that values meaning attribution in situations of use and interaction. This research proposes the use of a game that focus on emotions (in which the signs have a higher incidence of facial expressions) and the goal of turning the learners more conscious of the need for the facial expressions as an agent of communication and part of Libras. Therefore, participating in activities that are ludic, realistic, non-repetitive, the learner realises her own mechanisms of meaning signification, and the process occurs in dynamic interactions [16].

3.1 The ludic

The process of teaching and learning requires a comprehension of social interactions of the individuals in a communication context. Santana and Queiros (2010) [17] tell that when the environment promotes laughter, e creates a more adequate learning situation. Lacerda, Caporali and Lodi (2004) [14] show that the use of games break inhibitions, but should be accompanied by a receptive and communicational attitude. The activities proposed indicate a valuing of Libras. Krashen and Terrell (1983) [18] call for natural approaches from which the acquisition of the language occurs when the learners are able to create meanings when they receive comprehensible information. Richard-Amaro (1988) [19] links theory and practice in the instructions for teaching and learning a second language, inviting the teacher to prepare lessons that promote meaningful interactions in a communicational environment that includes the use of games and affective activities.

Vygotsky (1993) [3] reminds us that the process of internalisation of a language demands mental operations in a semiotic process. This process of signification must provide a material motivation (visual, tactile etc.) in order for the language to be perceived, mediated by the social group and acquired by the learner. This semiosis should not be limited to a reduced view of the human abilities that are activated just by the oral language as the basis for learning a second language - specially when the second language is not oral, but rather based on signs. Semiosis is the semiotic process from which meaning is derived.

There is a lack of materials and methodologies that explore teaching and learning of non-manual expressions of Libras. The proposed methodology is thus based on a card game that emphasises this parameter as necessary for meaning creation of the utterances. Next we propose a game that aims at establishing engagement.

3.2 Playing and learning Libras

The proposed methodology of learning and fixation of the non-manual expression of Libras is based on a game of "complete the sign". The signs that were used were chosen from the translation to Libras "O Patinho Surdo" (The Deaf duck), a video adaptation by Rosa and Karnopp (2005) [20], in Libras of "Den grimme ælling" (The Ugly Duckling), a short story from Hans Christian Andersen. The chosen signs were a set of feelings and sensations that were present on the video. This short story is widely known, and part of the world collection of general knowledge. There are multiple videos of the version in Libras on the Internet. This text was the basis for the knowledge fixation exercise and learning using the card and the pedagogy proposed by this research.

The research aimed at value the non-manual expression, more specifically the facial expressions, as an important part of the structure of sign languages in general and Libras in particular. The text provided the context from which the learners could derive subsidies for meaning attribution and utterances. The text is a linguistic unity of meanings that results from the interaction between the reader and the text. The term comes from Latim TEXTUM and can be understood as an interwoven cloth. The text is a complex sign that mobilizes cognitive functions in meaning attribution. It can be constructed in a myriad of forms, sizes, media, genres etc.

The signs were represented on cards with the written word of the oral language, and just some of the parameters of the Libras (for example, just the hand configuration, or the facial expression, or the movement), as seen on Figure 2. Figure 2 shows us how FELICIDADE (happiness) could be uttered in Libras, but it doesn't provide all the parameters of the sign.

Figure 2. HAPPINESS (Felicidade). A card of the game showing the facial expression, the hand

configuration and the movement.

Figure 2 shows the feeling to be transmitted by the teacher, with the feeling in the oral language, and a few parameters (the facial expression, the hand configuration and the movement). Initially, the teacher try to convey the feeling by using the facial expression and asks the students to try to guess the Libras sign. Then, the teacher begins to incorporate other parameters; the teacher may also choose to utter the sign without the facial expression, evidencing the difficulties to understand the incomplete signs (that is, a sign that is missing a parameter).

Figure 3 shows one way the teacher may present the sign (with little facial expression and only the hand configuration, without the movement).

Figure 3. The teacher presenting the sign for HAPPINESS (Felicidade), as per the card.

The learners should then try to utter the correct form of the sign, with all its parameters. The card in the example on Figure 2 provides the clues that the teacher could use to entice the students to pay attention to the various parameters - mostly in the moments when the students might find it difficult to utter the complete sign. The cards were created by designers from the research team based on the signs selected from the video, and as uttered by the Deaf teacher. Figure 4 shows a compilation of other cards (SAUDADE - missing you; FRIO - cold; TRISTEZA - sadness; ALEGRIA - happiness).
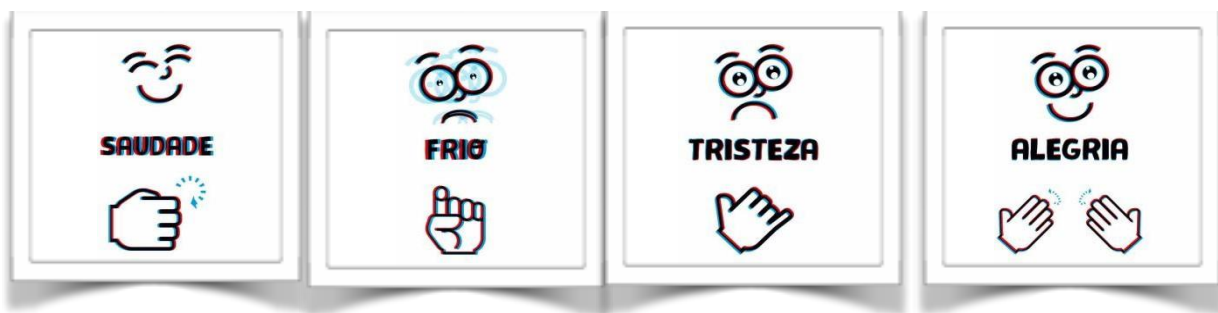

Figure 4. Example of cards containing a representation of the signs.

Figure 4 shows some of the cards with just a few of the parameters to be used as clues by the teacher to invite the students to reconstruct the correct Libras utterance. The research team created 20 of such cards containing feelings and sensations taken from the video - signs that were already shown to the students prior to the fixation exercise.

The cards are used in the game as a manner to provide clues to the students so they can activate their memory of the signs, and complete the missing parameters. The exercise begins with the teacher uttering the first sign from a chosen card (Figure 2). The learners are invited to complete the sign in Libras. If necessary, additional clues, taken from the card, are used to help the learners. The next round continues with the student who first "completed" the card and explained the parameters. This student is then asked to formulate a sentence based on the context of the story. Then, all the other learners participate in a dialogue recounting some part of the story using the sign.

4. Validation

The simple use of games is not enough to overcome the difficulties of teaching Libras as a second language - the structure of sign languages and the lack of use of sound, plus the use of hands and body make it seem inaccessible to a non-Deaf learner. A motivating practice is needed, within a context that takes into account the communicational aspects of the language. Teachers and learners have their own previous knowledge and experiences, habits and values that must be used in order to create new knowledge. This research chose sentiments, feelings, taken from a previously studied sign language video of a well-known story to fixate the learning.

The validation was conducted in two separate occasions: first the researches worked with a group of 10 volunteers who agreed to participate in the study, non-Deaf Libras teachers of a Bachelors course in Linguistic Libras. Then, the same dynamic was used on a study conducted with 10 non-Deaf Libras students of a Bachelors course of Linguistics from a public university in Brazil. Next we present the dynamic used:
- All the volunteers had already read the text and seen the video used to provide context
- All the volunteers gave written consent about their participation
- The research and the dynamic was explained and a first run was executed to exemplify the dynamic
- The "game" started with one of the researchers selecting a card from the deck. The researcher reproduced part of the Libras sign parameters that were the clues from the card (for example, the hand configuration, the movement). The facial expression was to be the last parameter to be used
- The volunteers started to try to complete the sign
- The first volunteer to complete the sign was invited to explain his process of "guessing" the sign
- The first volunteer was invited to sign in Libras a passage from the short story where that sign might have appeared
- The other volunteers were also invited to create sentences using the sign
- This first volunteer was the next to choose a card, and present the partial sign for the other colleagues
- The dynamic finished when all the cards had been used.

The volunteers where then asked to answer the following questions using a likert scale (1 completely disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, 5 completely agree), and make comments about the material, and the practice:

A) The use of the cards and the dynamic is easy to understand

B) It is easy to use the cards

C) The dynamic helps me to learn the importance of the parameters of Libras

D) The cards can be used in multiple moments

E) The cards can be used in multiple places

F) I can use the cards to complement and fixate teaching and learning of the parameters

G) I can use the cards to create communication situations

H) The cards help me to augment my fluency and conversation skills

5. Results and discussions

The volunteers found that the use of the cards and the dynamic is easy to understand (4.87). They were unanimous in finding that it is easy to use the cards (5.0). The cards can be used in multiples moments (4.23) but they were not sure if they could be used in multiple places (3.26). The volunteers responded that they could use the cards to help them learn and teach the parameters (4.65). The cards can be used to create communication situations (4.17) and help to improve fluency and conversational skills (5.0).

During the comments, the volunteers said that the cards "[…] were very import for teaching and learning the parameters and the lexicon", but they raised the issue of making sure that the use of the cards should guarantee "[…] communication experiences". This is important, because teaching and learning of a second language requires a real context of communication, with fluid sentences that allow for effective acquisition of the second language. The volunteers suggested that the pronouns and structure could also be part of the material. They all agreed that the card and the dynamic were an innovative way to show the non-Deaf students the grammatical importance of the non-manual expressions. Also, the fact that it was a game, and the learners were invited to participate, there was no pressure to try, given that all were playing to utter the correct sign (they were not being graded, judged or corrected).

The first major observation from the validation process happened with the card for FRIO (cold) used by the first group of teachers. Even though they were teachers of Libras, and thus more attuned to the parameters, they offered two possibilities for the hand configuration: FRIO (cold) and DIFÍCIL (difficult). Both have the same hand configuration and similar facial expression, even though the location and movement were different. The location was a major point of confusion: when the volunteer formed the hand configuration, the location was in a neutral region (not on the location on the body for any specific sign). Additionally, the Libras utterance of FRIO (cold) uses a non-manual expression - the shrugging of the shoulders. This difference was deemed fundamental for figuring out the correct sign intended. There were other differences: the sign for DIFÍCIL (difficult) had a local movement. All of these variations of

parameters were considered. The volunteers expressed that they really felt the importance of using all the parameters correctly. Figure 5 shows the representations of FRIO (hand located on the chin, the facial expression, and the shrugging of the shoulders) and DIFÍCIL (with two movements - the hand goes from
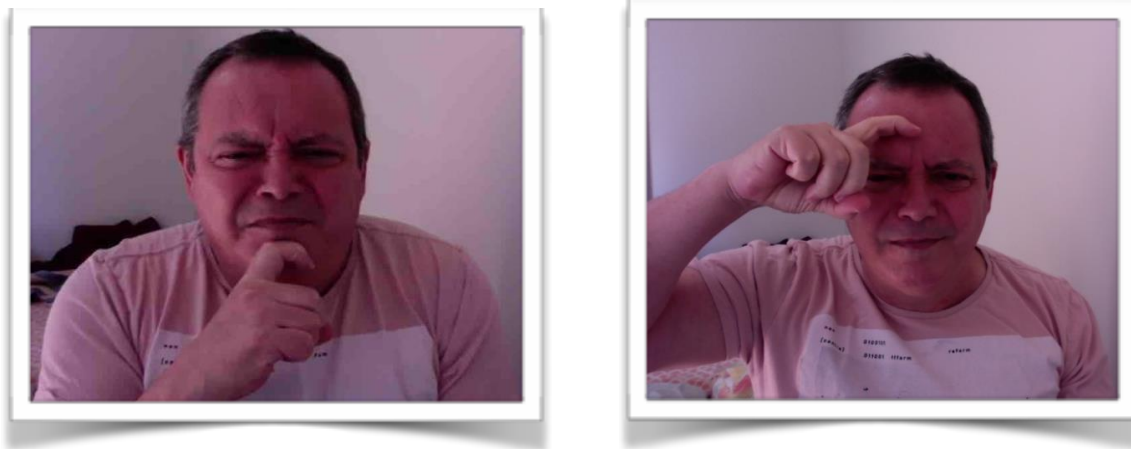
one side of the forehead to the other, while the finger wiggles like a worm).

Figure 5. Example of cards containing a representation of the signs for FRIO (cold) and DIFÍCIL (difficult).

As shown in Figure 5, the signs for FRIO and DIFÍCIL have the same hand configuration, and basically the same facial expression, but they have different locations (the former sign is located on the chin; the latter on the forehead) and FRIO has an additional non-manual expression - the shrugging of the shoulders. Non-Deaf learners find it difficult to notice such differences. The exercise provided for the discussion of the importance of the correct use of all the parameters of a given sign, valuing the use of non-manual expressions in Libras, and the importance for the teachers and learners to create opportunities for understanding and acquiring the language properly.

Another important observation was that the use of the game, in which the volunteers tried to "complete" the sign, provided for a participation of all involved: the volunteers used a suggestion given from other volunteers to approximate their own construction of the sign. There was a collective creation of the utterance. All the participants were "helping" one another, allowing for the contribution of all.

  After the first volunteer "completed" the sign correctly, she was invited to create a sentence using the sign. Initially, the sentences were a direct reference of the story used as the basis of the game, which indicated that the text fulfilled its role of supporting the process of teaching and learning. As the game progressed, the volunteers created sentences that were somewhat free from the text, showing that they grew in confidence, autonomy and independency in creating the knowledge - a clear sign that the signs had been acquired and used.

5. Conclusion

Sign languages, such as the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) are necessary cognitive tool fo the intellectual, cultural and social development of the Deaf person. They allow for full exercise of citizenship. However, the Deaf is immersed in the oral language, and don't have means to communicate in their daily needs. These cultural and communicational encounters have a better chance to occur if the non-Deaf learns Libras as a second language.

However, teaching and learning of a sign language is not without effort, specially when one considers the multiple differences in the modality of the oral language versus a visual-spatial language. The fact that sign languages are of visual-spatial modality makes its linguistics aspects seem inaccessible to non-Deaf learners: sign languages have a different structure, and parameters (such as hand configuration, movement, location, and non-manual expressions). These parameters may represent a barrier for the non-Deaf, who would no attribute grammatical importance for non-manual expressions, for example.

This research addresses the lack of material and methods for teaching and learning Libras as a second language, with focus on the most difficult parameter: the non-manual expressions. The researchers proposed a set of cards and a dynamic to use them that involved teachers and learners in creating the knowledge about the sign in Libras that would be grammatically correct, in a ludic manner. Results from the study show that the proposal is valid and should be further investigates.

Additionally, other material will be created in the future, to deal with other grammatical elements of Libras, such as pronouns, verbal tenses etc.

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