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Libras discipline inclusion in graduation courses: future teacher's vision

A inclusão da disciplina de Libras nos cursos de licenciatura: visão do futuro docente

Luci Teixeira Iachinski¹, Ana Paula Berberian¹, Adriano de Souza Pereira¹, Ana Cristina Guarinello¹ 

ABSTRACT

Purpose: To describe undergraduates' perceptions about Libras discipline, regarding its organization and its importance for their professional training, as well as undergraduates' understanding of Libras and deafness. **Methods:** Research was held with 59 undergraduates from two universities located in a city in the South of Brazil, who attended graduation courses and had already attended that discipline, answered a questionnaire about Libras discipline and its organization and purpose. **Results:** Undergraduates' answers show that the organization and purpose of this discipline follow the trend of teaching vocabulary and grammar of the language, instead of broader issues such as deafness, deaf people and inclusion. Most of them claimed that the discipline had a positive impact on their perception about deafness and Libras. **Conclusion:** Further studies related to the inclusion of Libras discipline in graduation courses are necessary, so that students not only have contact with the Sign Language as a linguistic system, but also with more comprehensive discussions about deaf education.

Keywords: Sign language; Higher education; Deafness; Legislation; Educational inclusion

RESUMO

Objetivo: Descrever a percepção de acadêmicos de licenciatura a respeito da disciplina Língua Brasileira de Sinais - Libras, quanto à sua organização e importância na formação profissional, bem como o entendimento dos acadêmicos sobre a Libras e a surdez. **Métodos:** Foi realizada uma pesquisa com 59 acadêmicos de duas universidades localizadas em uma cidade no Sul do Brasil, que cursavam licenciaturas e que já haviam finalizado essa disciplina. A coleta dos dados ocorreu por meio da aplicação de questionário sobre a disciplina de Libras, sua organização e propósito. **Resultados:** Notou-se, nas respostas dos discentes, que a organização e o funcionamento da disciplina, pelos docentes, parecem seguir uma tendência de ensino de vocabulário e gramática da língua, em detrimento de questões mais abrangentes sobre a surdez, os surdos e sua própria inclusão. A maioria dos participantes afirmou que a disciplina teve um impacto importante na sua visão com relação aos surdos e à Libras. **Conclusão:** Destaca-se a necessidade de mais estudos relacionados à inserção da disciplina de Libras nos cursos de licenciatura, para que os discentes não tenham contato apenas com a língua de sinais, enquanto sistema linguístico, mas sim com discussões mais abrangentes a respeito da educação de surdos.

Palavras-chave: Linguagem de sinais; Ensino superior; Surdez; Legislação; Inclusão educacional

Study carried out at Programa de Pós-graduação em Distúrbios da Comunicação, Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná – UTP, bounded to Laboratório de Linguagem, UTP – Curitiba (PR), Brasil.

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INTRODUCTION

Education of the deaf population in Brazil has been broadly discussed along the past decades. Concerning measures that promote the inclusion of this population, Bill 10.436, from April 24, 2002⁽¹⁾ recognized Brazilian Sign Language–Libras—as the means of communication and expression among the deaf community, and Decree 626/2005⁽²⁾ reassured deaf students with the right to Education. Such documents also demand the inclusion of Libras as a discipline in teaching training courses, including academic courses and Speech-Language Therapy Courses.

A study⁽³⁾ clarified the relevance of Libras discipline as mandatory in teaching graduation courses, not only to put down misconceptions on deafness, but also to favor future teachers with the use of more efficient teaching practices to deaf people at regular schools, and the expansion of the sign language in these settings.

Another study⁽⁴⁾ addressed the importance for professionals to know Libras language, mainly future educators who will teach deaf children and teenagers at regular schools. That study also clarified that the use of Libras at regular schools may favor the teaching-learning process among deaf students. Moreover, the authors claimed that Libras discipline in Higher Education may foster teachers, at institutions and within the community, to use differing teaching strategies and practices, thus enabling the inclusion of deaf users of the sign language.

The inclusion of the Libras discipline in Higher Education is fundamental, once it may help future educators to understand their deaf students, and provide more effective interaction in the classroom⁽⁵⁾.

Although several studies⁽⁶⁻⁸⁾ have pointed out the importance of Libras discipline in Higher Education, research addressing this issue^(3,9) argued if only a discipline, attended along a graduation course, would be enough to prepare teachers for interacting with deaf students in school settings.

Therefore, it is fundamental to analyze how that discipline has been taught, and other studies and discussions on this theme may be implemented, in order to review its function and organizational ways; in addition, in-depth studies should be held around deaf individuals' inclusion and accessibility processes in Brazil.

This study aims to describe undergraduates' perception on Libras discipline regarding its organization and importance in their professional qualification, and their understanding on Libras and deafness.

METHOD

It is a mixed cross-sectional study with qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Data collection was carried out in graduation courses of two private universities located in a city in Southern Brazil, which, from now on, will be named as University 1 and University 2 (U1 and U2).

Study participants were 59 undergraduates, selected among those who had already attended Libras discipline, but still attending the graduation course (inclusion criterion). Students, who had studied Libras before entering the university, were excluded from the research.

In the U1, 42 students, attending Education, Social Sciences, Mathematics and Physics were selected, and in the U2, 17 students, who attended Physical Education, History and Education, were selected. The number of participants varied among the courses, according to the participants' adherence to the research. Students will be identified by the letter P and by numbers from 1 to 59.

At first, one of the researchers contacted the coordinators of the graduation courses from each institution in order to get the permission to apply the questionnaire. Then, undergraduates were contacted and meetings were scheduled in their classrooms. After the research purpose had been explained, each participant signed the Free Informed Consent Form. Each student, then, answered a questionnaire with 18 open and closed questions on the Libras discipline, its organization and significance to his or her professional training, in addition to questions on his or her understanding of the deaf and deafness. Questionnaires were answered in writing, without the researcher's interference.

For the exploratory qualitative research, content analysis⁽¹⁰⁾ was used by means of the category or thematic technique. This type of analysis considers the frequency of the themes taken from the participants' discourse, that is, it takes the greatest number of similar answers, cluster them in order to organize a certain category. Therefore, by identifying the present categories while ordering the answers, it was possible to recognize the information similarities and group them in three axes of analysis: Axis 1 – Contact with deaf people and knowledge of the sign language, Axis 2 – Organization of the Libras discipline, Axis 3 – Impact of the discipline.

For the quantitative data analysis, descriptive statistics was used by means of the values of the absolute frequency, relative frequency, graphs and tables. The variables were analyzed by examining the minimum and maximum values, calculation of means, standard deviation and medians.

This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board from Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná, CAAE (Certificate of Ethics Appreciation – Ministry of Health) protocol number 56025316.0.0000.0093.

RESULTS

Undergraduates from two universities participated in this research: University 1 (U1), 42 students, mean age 22.38 years, 69% females and 31% males, attending Mathematics, Physics, Education and Social Sciences; University 2 (U2), 17 students attending Physical Education, History and Education. Mean age was 21.66 years. Unlike U1, 60% were males and 40% were females, which probably occurred due to the analyzed courses.

Concerning Libras discipline, in both institutions, most participants attended it in the 4th, 5th and/or 6th semester, except for the Education undergraduates from U1, who attended it in the last semester.

It was perceived that, from the total of 59 participants (both universities), 25 did not work, while 34 did. Among the latter, 20 worked in the education field, and the other 14 undergraduates worked in other fields.

Axis 1: Contact with deaf people and knowledge of the sign language

Twenty-five participants (42.37%) reported that they had had contact with deaf individuals before entering the university. Among them, 11 answered that they had studied with a deaf person; 3 had worked with a deaf person; 2 had deaf family members, and 9 participants had their answers clustered in the “others” category, as they considered having contact with a deaf person just because they had already seen one, with answers like *“I observed deaf individuals talking on the bus”*.

The participants were also asked if they had any knowledge of Libras before entering the university. Among the 59 participants, 17 (28.81%) answered “yes”, and 13.55% of the respondents (8 subjects) said that they knew the manual alphabet and had some basic knowledge about it before entering the university. Other 6 participants explained that they knew Libras from TV by means of the Libras interpreters’ windows or boxes on TV programs or ads. In the “others” category of the questionnaire, selected by 3 participants, there were answers like the one from P4: *“I went to a specific course of Libras with a family member”*. Again, it was perceived that, despite some participants answered that they knew Libras, 9 evidenced in their answers that they knew the sign language from the interpreter window or box on TV, or they had seen someone using the sign language, which does not evidence any knowledge on the language.

Axis 2: Organization of the Libras discipline

Regarding the organization of the Libras discipline, the participants answered about their view on the discipline hour load. From a total of 59 subjects, 43 stated that it was not enough.

The participants were asked about the teachers, and if it was theoretical/practical or distance learning. In U1, there was a hearing teacher, and classes were theoretical, practical and in the classroom. When asked if the teacher should be deaf or a hearing one, in U1, 26 out of 42 undergraduates did not answer. Among the ones who answered, only 3 answered that the teacher of the discipline should be deaf. P3 justified it by writing: *“That makes us learn more”*. On the other hand, the other 13 respondents stated that it did not matter if the teacher was a deaf or hearing person, as long as he/she masters the discipline content, that will not hinder learning.

In the U2, the Libras teacher was deaf. Ten (10) out of seventeen participants did not answer the question about the students’ preference for deaf or hearing teachers, 6 answered

that they would rather have deaf teachers, who would teach the whole class in Libras, thus they could learn more, as in P5’s answer: *“It makes you practice while you communicate”*. Only one student said that he would rather have a hearing instructor, justifying that it would facilitate learning because listeners speak Portuguese, as stated in P4’s speech: *“As a listener, you must have a corresponding speaker”*.

Regarding the discipline, whether it is theoretical or practical, 3 out of 17 students from U2 answered that the discipline was primarily practical; 8 stated that it was theoretical and practical; 3 reported that it was taught in the classroom; 1 did not respond that question, and 2 reported that they had a hearing teacher in a distance-learning course. These students thought that Libras should be attended in the classroom, not as a distance-learning course. As students from U2 were attending different graduation courses, some had in-classroom Libras training, while others distance-learning training, that is why there were differing answers among them.

In the participants’ point of view, the discipline contents shown in Table 1, with answers divided in 5 subcategories, should be covered in greater depth during the course.

Among the participants who reported that the discipline contents should be taught in greater depth, P1 and P3’s answers were respectively evidenced: *“The signs, expressions, vocabulary”*, *“Daily-use contents, because they should be helpful, from daily use”*. It was observed that these participants would like to practice more vocabulary during the training, especially daily-use expressions. Moreover, other participants would like to have had more practice in the sign language, as well as more conversation, that is, practice which would highlight the use of the sign language within the conversation, not only learning isolated signs. That can be illustrated by P2’s responses: *“To develop more practice with long sentences and even texts”*; P10: *“Mainly conversation, contextualized sentences, not isolated expressions, such as colors, means of transport, etc.”*, and P1: *“Basic contents, the language rules, not only mere word translations, examples on how to sign objects”*. Five participants answered that they would like all the discipline content to be practiced in greater depth.

Clustered in “others”, we can find answers such as the one by P19: *“Inclusion policies, I believe the discipline hour load should be extended”*. In this category, some answers also pointed that the undergraduates wanted to learn signs that they would probably use with deaf students in class, and related to their professional field. For example, P4 answered that they should practice, during classes, *“contents related to my professional field, or related to the Education course”*, and P1: *“Specific words from the math language”*.

Table 1. Contents of the discipline demanding deeper study

Axis 2 Category	Number of participants	Percentage
Vocabulary	10	16.94%
Practice of signs and conversation	7	11.86%
Deeper learning of all contents	5	8.47%
Others	5	8.47%
Did not answer	32	54.24%
Total of participants	59	100%

Source: Authors

Axis 3: Impact of the discipline

Participants were asked about the positive aspects in having attended Libras discipline and its impact. Answer distribution is shown in Table 2.

Among the participants, some answered that a positive aspect in attending this discipline is to interact with the deaf, such as P1's response: *"A little understanding of Libras and greater interaction with the deaf"*

Other participants answered that the discipline helped them get basic knowledge on the language, as P2 stated: *"To have basic knowledge on the theme"*.

Five participants pointed that the discipline is important to learn about the deaf inclusion, as P3's response illustrates: *"The awareness on the importance of the inclusion of people with some kind of disabilities"*.

Among the answers coded in the "others" category, P4 stated: *"To get to know and practice a new language"*.

When asked whether they had any difficulties in the Libras discipline, 40 participants (67.79%) answered "no", without justifying their answer. Among those who answered "yes", they pointed the motor part of the language and the memorization of the signs. In this sense, P38 stated that: *"A little difficulty in the motor coordination, and some signs are similar and end up being a little confusing"*.

Participants were asked if they felt prepared for teaching deaf students after attending the Libras training, and only 3 of them (5%) answered "yes." When they justified a negative answer to that question, the following response by P5 could be observed: *"I don't know any applications of this language in education"*.

When they were asked if they considered important that Libras training be mandatory in graduation courses, most of them, 57 (91.52%) answered "yes" and, among the justifications, the following can be pointed out: P12: *"We need to know how to communicate with deaf/mute students, who can be in our*

future classes"; P5: *"Mainly because of those people's inclusion. I don't think that's enough, but it's a beginning"*.

When questioned about the impact of the discipline on the knowledge about deaf subjects and the sign language, 42 participants, or 71.18%, answered that question, as shown in Table 3.

Among all participants, some said that their understanding about the deaf increased with Libras training, favoring their interaction with that population, as P10 pointed out: *"Knowledge on the subject and possibility of interaction"*.

For other participants, the discipline contributed to increase their knowledge about the sign language, as evidenced in P2's answer: *"Understanding that Libras is a language, and has the same relevance as learning English, for example"*.

Some participants reported that the discipline had impact on the way that they perceived deaf inclusion. To P29, the discipline broke down preconceptions: *"The deaf culture, in addition to breaking up preconceptions"*.

In the "others" category, answers were clustered, such as this one by P16: *"It is an alternative way to communicate, shouldn't be mystified"*.

The participants were asked if they thought that they would need additional training on Libras after attending the discipline, and 48 (81.35%) answered "yes".

Participants' age and some answers to the questionnaire were crossed. In the statistical analysis, held by means of the Chi-square test, significance level 0.05 (5%), it was verified significant relation between age and the first question ($p=0.0009$), that is, whether there had already been any contact with deaf subjects before entering the university.

When questions were crossed with the participants' gender, in the analysis held by means of the Chi-square test, significance level of 0.05 (5%), there was no significant relation between gender and the considered questions, that is, gender did not influence the answers to those questions.

Table 2. Positive aspects in attending the Libras discipline (Brazilian Sign Language)

Axis 3 Category 1	Number of participants	Percentage
Communication and interaction	19	32.20%
Basic knowledge	17	28.81%
Deaf inclusion	5	8.47%
Others	8	13.55%
Did not answer	10	16.94%
Total of participants	59	100%

Source: Authors

Table 3. Impact of the discipline on the knowledge about the deaf and the sign language

Axis 3 Category 2	Number of participants	Percentage
Understanding/communication	14	23.72%
Libras/language	7	11.86%
Deaf inclusion	3	5.00%
Others	18	30.50%
Did not answer	20	33.89%
Total of subjects	59	100%

Source: Authors

DISCUSSION

Analyzing the answers related to Axis 1 – Contact with deaf individuals and knowledge on the sign language – among the participants who had met deaf people before the university, almost half of them reported studying with a deaf person at school. This fact can be related to the inclusion movement, when greater number of deaf subjects started studying at a regular school.

Data from the School Census by the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP)⁽¹¹⁾ pointed that there were 70,823 deaf students and with hearing impairment enrolled in the Basic Education in 2010. Among those, 22,249 deaf students, and 30,251 hearing impaired were enrolled in regular schools. Between 2003 and 2010, the number of enrolments of that population in those institutions increased 105%.

Regarding the knowledge of the sign language before entering the university, data unveiled that some participants answered that they knew the manual alphabet. It should be explained that the manual alphabet is used in sign languages to enable the word spelling to the deaf; it is used for words which do not have a representative sign⁽¹²⁾.

Additionally, many participants were observed to answer that they knew the sign language before entering the university. Actually, they had just seen someone using the language and they knew it was used by the deaf, but they did not really know it. Such answers can be justified by the fact that Libras is a new language, used by a Brazilian linguistic minority.

This study corroborated research⁽¹³⁾ which showed that Brazilian linguistic policies usually privilege Portuguese Language as the language of greater impact, primarily in educational practices with deaf subjects. Thus, according to the author, policies of accessibility, which should enable the use and promotion of Libras in school settings, have not been put in practice in most Brazilian schools. Such policies should definitely favor school settings for the appropriation and use of the sign language.

Concerning the answers in Axis 2, which refer to the organization of academic Libras discipline, most participants mentioned that the discipline hour load was not enough. It should be clarified that discipline curriculum and hourload are not specified in the law. In spite of that, some Brazilian studies^(9,14,15) evidenced that the hour load for Libras learning has been proved insufficient. According to these studies, future teachers or learners lack certain knowledge when they consider learning this language, very often, within less than 50 hours of practice.

Such lack of guidelines for the hour load and organization of the Libras discipline, according to a study⁽⁵⁾, is worrisome; besides, inadequate learning the sign language way may cause mischievous knowledge of the discipline, of the deaf and deafness.

In relation to the discipline being taught by deaf or hearing teachers, most participants answered that they did not care about teachers' hearing condition. The law regulating the discipline evidences the preference, not the requirement of deaf subjects teaching the discipline. A study⁽¹⁰⁾ reported that some students pointed their preference for hearing teachers, justifying that deaf teachers would enable them to learn only the basic contents. Other research⁽⁹⁾, with similar data to those found in this study,

showed that undergraduates had no preference for either deaf or hearing teachers, as for these students, professional competence matters more than hearing or not..

Regarding the content of the Libras discipline, several participants claimed that they would like to learn vocabulary in greater depth. The discipline has been taught, at some universities, by means of isolated signs, as mentioned in a study⁽⁹⁾ which stated that this kind of teaching does not consider Libras as a different, visual- spatial kind of language. This study still reported that Libras should not be treated as a closed system, whose learning is by means of a booklet, not taking dialogical interactions in this language into account, but the use of isolated signs.

Another aspect addressed by some participants in this research was that the contact with “any signs” is not enough to interact with deaf students. It is necessary to have contact with signs related to the university course that they are attending. This data corroborates another study⁽¹⁰⁾, which investigated the implementation of Libras discipline in graduation courses of state and federal Higher Education Institutions (HEI). In the mentioned study, undergraduates stated that one of the objectives of Libras discipline should be the training of specific signs related to each professional field.

It can be concluded, by the responses of the participants from both universities, that the contents practiced in Libras discipline stress the sign training, disregarding the discursive aspects of the sign language. Learning some signs will not help these future teachers with deaf students in the inclusive context of a classroom. This research corroborates another study⁽³⁾, as it evidenced that only the basic knowledge of the sign language is not enough to provide a future teacher with fluency.

Great part of the sample did not respond which contents of the discipline should be taught in greater depth. It can be inferred that, maybe, the discipline had fulfilled its goals and, to the participants, nothing else should be deepened, or the participants did not think over that. To several undergraduates, Libras discipline is understood as a chance to learn signs from the sign language.

This study also agrees with research⁽⁵⁾ that claims a content selection for the planning of Libras discipline while training teachers, so that the discipline cannot be compared to a basic course of Libras. The linguistic uniqueness manifested by deaf students could be one of the main goals to include the sign language in the curriculum of graduation courses, as well as in the other courses reported by Decree 5626/2005⁽²⁾.

Data in this study corroborate research⁽¹⁶⁾ about the implementation of Libras discipline in a municipality from São Paulo State, Brazil, where the authors carried out interviews with university administrators from the same municipality. The study pointed that the objective of the discipline would not be the qualification of bilingual subjects, but individuals acquainted with the deaf. Moreover, the study evidenced the need to break up the conception that the mere inclusion of a discipline in the curriculum of a Higher Education institution, for legal demand, is enough⁽⁹⁾.

Research⁽³⁾ highlighted that the objective of Libras discipline in Higher Education should be the guidance of future teachers' educational task, so that they can teach their students how the language was built, and set it in the historical, social and cultural context. Thus, the discipline will not solve all the issues

regarding deaf education, but it can be considered a gateway to new struggles and conquests by the deaf community.

Regarding the impact of the discipline featured in Axis 3, some participants mentioned difficulties in attending the discipline, similar to the ones found in another study⁽⁹⁾, which pointed participants' difficulties in the discipline due to the complexity of the contents, motor coordination or memorization, and difficulty in learning due to its reduced hour load.

The responses of some participants in this study also showed that Libras discipline helped them with the knowledge of the deaf and the sign language. Such responses meet the result of other studies^(9,16), where the participants claimed that, by attending the discipline, they got more knowledge in order to communicate with deaf subjects. Similarly, in another research study⁽¹⁴⁾, sign language is viewed by the participants as a way to interact deaf and hearing subjects. According to the study, knowledge of the sign language is considered fundamental for a favorable attitude, which will reflect on the professional practice within school settings⁽¹⁶⁾.

Thus, Libras is a language that facilitates the assimilation of its users' cultural and social aspects. In this sense, research⁽¹⁶⁾ contended that educators, who recognize the deaf and their language, can be better prepared for the development of their autonomy, as those educators can interact with the deaf and even empower them by doing that.

Data collected in this study showed that Libras is a new discipline, and universities, faculty and students have gradually been delimiting its organization. The discipline is evolving, which can be observed in the literature and by the data, evidencing that the law has come into effect in this regard, as higher education institutions had ten years, from 2005, to include the discipline in the curricula of their graduation courses.

The undergraduates' responses also evidenced that the organization and administration of the discipline by their teachers seem to follow the trend of teaching vocabulary and grammar of the language, disregarding broader issues on deafness, the deaf and their inclusion. Additionally, in the students' view, discipline hour load is not enough, as most of them claimed that if the discipline hour load were longer, they could become proficient in the language.

The need of a more comprehensive training for the undergraduates is verified, taking into account the demands of each course, time, location, and the fleeting nature of events. As Libras is a recently evolved language, used by a linguistic minority, there does not seem to be the same emphasis given to the Portuguese language by authorities and society itself. Thus, legislation demands that schools have to be bilingual, and educational institutions, as well as social institutions should reassure its use and promotion; however, Brazil is still a monolingual country. Reflection and project implementation, valuing Libras and its users, are necessary, so that they have more possibilities for cultural, social, economic and political access.

CONCLUSION

The participants in this study, students from graduation courses, mostly perceive the importance of the Libras discipline to their professional training. Before attending

the discipline, most of them had never had any contact with deaf people or sign language. Therefore, the discipline was fundamental for them to broaden their concepts on the deaf and the sign language.

Discussion about the organization and functioning of the discipline is fundamental for the reflection on its importance for the deaf accessibility to basic education. It can be inferred that the discipline hour load and organization do not make students fluent in the sign language, nor future professionals are reassured that they have conditions to promote deaf students' inclusion in the classroom.

The need of further studies, related to the academic inclusion of Libras discipline in graduation courses, is pointed out, so that undergraduates not only have contact with the sign language as a linguistic system, but also with broader discussions about deaf education.

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