

Brazilian sign language teaching and applied linguistics: a possible bridge

Abstract

Applied Linguistics (AL) can be found in all teaching and learning processes. Its main characteristic is interdisciplinarity, which contributes to other disciplines with research that offers a better understanding of the linguistic problems to which we are exposed. Therefore, according to the social context and historical, political, economic, cultural and identity processes, AL can also take on a transdisciplinary character. In this study, we will address the application of LA to the teaching of Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) by briefly discussing the identity and culture as a guide in the teaching-learning process of Sign Language (SL). AL is growing in Brazil and its ramifications suggest exploring new ways as there is a wide range of methods that have emerged due to the need to develop analysis methods. This study will explore the analytical procedures developed by Systemic Functional linguistics, initially developed by Halliday, which explores the metafunctional character of the language. Nevertheless, initially, we will address methods that allow researchers to identify issues from the appraisal found in the construction of statements expressed by individuals working in Libras training.

Keywords: applied linguistics, libras, teaching learning

Volume 7 Issue 6 - 2023

Wáquila Pereira Neigrames,¹ Lucas Eduardo Marques Santos,² Fabíola Aparecida Sartin Dutra Almeida²

¹Professor of Technical Engineering and Superior, Instituto Federal no campus Itumbiara, Brazil

²Translator and interpreter in sign language, Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil

³Department of Letters, Universidade Federal de Catalonia, Brazil

Correspondence: Fabíola Aparecida Sartin Dutra Almeida, Adjunct professor of the Department of Letters of UFCAT, Universidade Federal de Catalonia, Brazil, Tel 55 64 999076 164, Email fabiolasarti@gmail.com

Received: August 01, 2023 | **Published:** December 20, 2023

Introduction

What is applied linguistics - AL?

This study is motivated by investigating the methodological practices that permeate the study and teaching of Sign Language (Libras) based on social interaction, taking into consideration the hypothesis that the deaf community needs professionals prepared to apply reflective strategies and use both the educational context within these students are inserted, as well as the linguistic environment in which they are immersed.

Human beings are communicative considering their relational community nature. A subject is born with the mental capacity to develop any language, and in the social interaction process he/she is simultaneously engaged in builds up his/her language and identity, which generates a culture.

In this context, we understand that no one is born with the capacity of speaking, but a language takes on a constitutive characteristic, as Coseriu points out (1959), which indicates that there is, in fact, a trilogy regarding the language as a psychic reality and that can be linguistic, a social institution and a functional system. It also characterizes language studies between system, norm and speech. [...] The distinction between system and norm is important because it solves the difficulties of the langue-parole dichotomy and contributes to clarifying the functioning of language, linguistic activity such as creation and repetition (recreation), forced movement and free movement in the framework possibilities offered by the system.

For this purpose, it can be considered that culture and language present, in certain instances, a kind of bond as one influences another in a dichotomous relationship and it is from this concept that the subject learns the uses of communication taking into account his/her people's culture and customs, which will lead to the formation of an identity. Thus, we affirm that, there is a spoken/sign language acquired naturally through the child's contact with peers and that schools assume the responsibility to teach, especially the established rules and norms, that is, grammar, which through writing becomes a unifying

character of a given community. Standard grammar, in this case, is a set of artificial rules of a language that is taught by language teachers in institutions of common teaching. Standard grammar cannot be classified as the mother tongue of anybody, as Andrade, Santa and Ribeiro explain, because it does not reflect the actual grammar of the spoken language. In this sense, we understand the functionalist character of language studies. Quadros¹ conceptualizes acquisition of language as the contact and interaction between the familiar and school environment, which causes learning.

Sign languages are considered natural languages and therefore share a series of characteristics that assign them a specific character and distinguish them from other communication systems, [...] Stokoe noted that the signs were not images but complex abstract symbols, with an interior structure.¹

Therefore, it is necessary to recognize some specifications that mark the meaning of the term language learning, because it is organized, planned, has very precise objectives, a methodology and is evaluated. These characteristics differentiate it from the natural acquisition of language.

From this perspective, Applied Linguistics emerged from the provocation of real-world problems arising from the use of language and being concerned with issues related to the teaching and learning of languages in its various fields of research. This means that AL focuses on teaching and learning languages (mother tongue/second/foreign), and it is interested in problems of communication disorder, participates in teacher training, pedagogical practices, as well as in the development of programs and teaching materials.²

Even today, there is a great paradigmatic discussion about the area of action of AL that is outlined in its autonomous and investigative character, which generates a discussion regarding the division of areas between Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. The linguistic investigation of these two disciplines involves analyzing the use of language in real life and in social practice, which exceeds the limit of linguistics, boosting research focused on Applied Linguistics.

Applied Linguistics is not an embedded science that requires or articulates correct methodologies to be adopted in language teaching, that is, there is no right or wrong model. For applied linguists, each learning situation is specific and involves a specific type of student, which indicates a variation in the performance considering the different situations and real contexts.

The cultural and linguistic diversity that is found in the teaching process is still a challenge for language teachers. Thus, AL is an inter/multi/pluridisciplinary research area, aiming to achieve a balance and production of new knowledge through the collaboration of disciplines and providing solid links.

In order to dialogue with other fields of knowledge, Celani² presents the articulation of AL in accordance with the other disciplines, in order to draw an interdisciplinary characteristic to Applied Linguistics. Not only a relation between theory and practice, but an understanding of the real needs of society, drawing an ideological basis for producing and applying knowledge. The author's opinion is important as in AL no discipline is separate from the others. All sciences contribute directly or indirectly to the formation of the individual.

Applied Linguistics is a field of interdisciplinary research and practice dealing with practical problems of language and communication, which can be identified, analyzed or solved by applying theories, methods and results of works offered by Linguistics, or by developing new theoretical frameworks and methodologies in Linguistics to work with these problems. Applied Linguistics differs from Linguistics in general with respect to its orientation towards practical, everyday problems related to language and communication.³

Thus, from our perspective, a teacher who is aware of his/her professional growth should learn more about AL to better deal with the teaching and learning process that takes place in schools. According to Celani,² "AL as an area of knowledge is today seen as an articulator of multiple domains of knowledge, in constant dialogue with various fields that are concerned with language."

From the needs to learn a language, be it mother tongue, second or foreign, studies in AL arise from the desire to encourage discussions, foster the emergence of new theoretical approaches that fill the gaps in methodological research in teaching, in order to understand the use of language in the context of social practice.

It has long been believed that AL was an attempt at linguistic application, associating theory with practice from a perspective that does not correspond to the truth. Cavalcante⁴ further states that AL is focused on questions of methods and techniques of language teaching.

According to Menezes, Silva and Gomes,⁵ LA has three strands, namely: "teaching and learning, application of linguistics and applied research on language studies as a social practice". According to Menezes, Silva and Gomes,⁵ AL has three aspects: "teaching and learning, application of linguistics and research applied to language studies as a social practice". The first part includes work on strategies in language learning, as well as pointing out ways that help to facilitate teaching and learning.

The second strand investigates the positions and attitudes that must be taken in the process. It supports the creation of didactic materials that help to make the process of teaching and learning more motivating. The third one relates to the practical application of the language to be taught. Celani² reinforces the idea that AL should never distance itself from the language used in society because if so,

the teaching will be mechanical and will not allow the student to be autonomous in his speech. Thus, it can be affirmed that: AL can only be established as an area of research in its own right, respectable in the academic world, if applied linguists are willing to do AL without the unjustifiable inferiority complex, instead of applying Linguistics. It seems that this subservient phase is outdated, and this is recognized by applied linguists.⁶

For a long time, AL was seen as another discipline linked to the domain of knowledge, but since its theoretical and historical emergence, clarification was needed in other disciplinary fields from this perspective. Celani² presents the concept of transdisciplinarity, in which several disciplines collaborate and integrate in a unified way between certain fields of research, exploring with greater vigor the objects of study. The author divides the relationships of transdisciplinary research into four major groups:

- 1) Interaction in institutional and informal contexts: studies on specific contexts such as business, academia, literary text, classroom (bilingual, bidialectal and monolingual), doctor/patient, critical discourse analysis
- 2) Interaction in learning: projects in literacy, second language learning, transcultural and intercultural interactions in pedagogical contexts, in which the focus is sociocultural, discursive and psychological.
- 3) Acquisition and development of language (mother tongue, foreign, [oral and signs]: includes situations of both first and second language, includes projects on acquisition and development of writing, reading, oral skills, literacy and literacy.
- 4) Language teaching: includes, in particular, translation projects from the point of view of theory, practice and teaching.⁶

In view of this argument, we can observe that the International Association of Applied Linguistics - AILA, in its last meetings, extended the research topics, which used to be based on the main focus of foreign language teaching and learning. Celani⁶ presents the range of topics in which AL becomes increasingly broad: "mother tongue teaching/learning, multilingualism, testing, linguistic planning, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, lexicography, computational linguistics, stylistics, literacy, among others."

Studies related to the education of the deaf in Brazil and the Brazilian Sign Language have been researched, mostly from the point of view of AL, although this is still a recent language to be researched in universities. Nevertheless, it has contributed to delineate aspects related to the formation of the teacher of Libras, besides making the construction of a new teaching-learning approach possible for this very specific public.

Bilingualism of the deaf may also involve the use of other sign languages, other oral languages, and other communicative forms other than Portuguese.⁷ However, if we compare ourselves to the situation of linguistic groups of oral languages, the situation of the deaf minority group is more complex and framed by specific aspects.⁷

This new vision of research/teaching/learning associated with the studies that are related to the area of deafness involves much more than a simple relation between the different areas of knowledge, and also reveal the need to explore questions focused on the specificity of this linguistic minority. This requires an interaction between the disciplines to trace a new axis, trajectory and practice of knowledge, as we will see next.

AL and the Brazilian sign language teaching

Initially, AL was applied to research on language teaching. Kaplan⁸ states that it was due to the strong preponderance of behaviorism and also linguistic structuralism. The main focus of AL is language teaching and learning, but not excluding the planning of practices or touching on other areas of knowledge.

Prioritize work that develops specific connections between theoretical language studies, educational research, and the planning and implementation of practical programs. With this perspective, the journal accepts contributions in areas of interest such as first and second language teaching and learning, bilingualism and bilingual education, discourse analysis, translation, testing, language teaching, methodology, language planning, study of interlanguage, stylistic, and lexicography.⁸

Talking about teaching approaches, Gesser⁷ shows that, in the history of didactics, there have been several teaching methods. According to Brown,⁷ the methodology would be “the study of pedagogical practices in a more comprehensive way”, therefore teaching Libras needs a didactic-pedagogical preparation so that the teacher can do the work consistently. There are several pedagogical practices. Firstly, it should be understood that each student has his/her own style of learning. There should also be a diversification of activities to include all learning styles in language teaching.

AL should, to a certain extent, work with reflective teaching,⁷ where practice is reflected in the application itself. Reflective teaching prioritizes the communicative approach in which learning a language takes place through real communication situations. The communicative approach prioritizes using authentic materials and works with real and spontaneous dialogues and not created/invented ones.

The aim of AL, concerning Libras, is to train professionals regarding the practice of language teaching. Cavalcanti⁹ encourages a new cultural view of the teacher questioning him/herself, explaining and revising his/her practices. He adds that by looking at one’s own practices, the teacher can detect contradictions in speech and practice, and then be inspired.

Considering that it is not a production of theories, Celani⁶ confirms that “AL would be a mediator between theoretical descriptions and diverse practical activities”, making it clear that it consists of activities, not only theoretical studies, requiring results of studies carried out for language teaching. It is very clear that although language is at the center of AL studies, it is not yet fully dominated by linguistics.

This theory-practice relationship in AL research may also be the subject of studies that corroborate the teaching/learning of Libras as the mother tongue for the deaf and as a foreign language for listeners, encouraging research and analysis in this area, even having doubts and the lack of a definition of Applied Linguistics.

Aiming to overcome social problems in an attempt to intervene to solve them, Moita Lopes¹⁰ prefers to oppose the task of renarrating/redescribing social life, a project that has a direct connection with the need to understand it. In this line of reasoning, teaching/learning Libras is a means of understanding the cultural diversity of the deaf community and being able to pay attention to the problem of communication and the teaching of sign language.

The identity, culture and socialization in AL

As a factor for strengthening the discipline and studies in

Linguistics, the importance of social identity and culture for learning a language in the form of grammar should be treated with great relevance, considering the customs of the environment in which it is (will be) inserted. An exposure to multiculturalism can bring new reflections and research that lead to the AL.

The AL “as an articulator of multiple domains of knowledge concerns with the language”² valuing identity and linguistic culture. Consequently, the conception that language and culture¹¹ are closely linked is clear. In language teaching, such as Libras, we teach a culture, a deaf one. This means that those who do not know the deaf culture will have serious difficulties in dealing with the teaching and learning of this language.

Thus, it is important to discuss the issues of identity and culture from the perspective of AL, because they contribute significantly to the quality of teaching work. First, we will present a brief definition of identity to later bring the discussion of the concept of culture to later explain how the two interfere in the teaching of a language whether it is the mother tongue, second or foreign.

Everyone has peculiar characteristics that differentiate one from the others. Houaiss Dictionary defines “identity” as being the “set of characteristics that distinguish a person or a thing and through which it is possible to individualize it”. These characteristics must be related to the ways of being in a society. Thus, linguistic identity would be the set of linguistic traits that distinguish the subject from others in the relations of communication through speech, writing and signs. Every subject has a peculiar characteristic of its own that can manifest itself in the sign, in the timbre of the voice, in the traces of writing (calligraphy) or even in the way he/she sees the language through his/her culture.

The identity of the subject is recorded in his/her memory in order to play a preponderant role in his learning. In his work “Por uma linguística crítica: linguagem, identidade e a questão ética”, the applied linguist, Rajagopalan,¹² raises the question that shows how AL should always consider the identity of the subject, understanding and allowing learning to develop without affecting the reality of the subject. All interaction in the teaching and learning process implies the decoding of the signs. The decoding of meaning and semantic values can only be understood within the social context and this all goes through the manifestation of the identity of the subject.

When showing respect for the identity of subjects, AL has to make a commitment to the community. These signs only make sense within a social context. Thus, “the first commitment of a critical pedagogue is with the community, of which the classroom is a small but faithful sample”.¹² From this perspective, it can be said that each member who belongs to a group has an identity that contributes to the community linguistic identity.

There is an individual identity and a collective identity. None of these is enacted by law, which means that who formats identities is society through their daily practices. It is important to emphasize that “a collective identity can only be that which is related to what is shared, that is, to the production of a collective sense”.¹³

Therefore, AL needs to prepare a set of methodologies that help the teacher in the teaching process in a way that can meet the realities of the class. In a complex language such as Libras, “the hand(s) of the enunciator represents the object, while the space in which the movement takes place (the enunciation space) is the area around the body of the enunciator”.¹ These Libras specifications illustrate how each language has its own identity.

Looking specifically at the deaf community, we can say that every deaf person represents an identity that must be respected. Both the teacher and the students within the school or in the school space need to be unanimous in understanding the identity boundaries of the other. Deaf identity must be understood in a dichotomous way as the deaf subject is inserted in his/her community both individually and collectively. Listeners, even those who have learned to communicate with the Libras, need to develop psycho-cultural skills to understand how the deaf can deal with their identity in the midst of a largely Ottoman society.

In this linguistic context, Perlin¹⁴ points out five types of deaf identities that are operative in the communities:

- a) Deaf identity - which admits deafness and experience a whole visual world;
- b) Hybrid identity - deaf people who have already experienced the listening universe, but have lost their hearing, having contact with two languages and later becoming deaf;
- c) Deaf identity of transition - deaf children of listeners, who throughout their development assume deaf identity, but with traces of their listening contact;
- d) Incomplete deaf identity - deaf people who experience deafness, but in contrast to the listener's gaze that may have degrees of inferiority in the absorption of deaf identity; and finally;
- e) Floating deaf identity - deaf people who want to be "listened to" by neglecting the deaf culture and believing that oration is better than learning sign language.

The way the subject interprets the world results from the way identity is constructed. In some indigenous languages, the moon and sun have the same name. Why? Because "the speakers of these languages identify these two celestial objects as belonging to the same category of things".¹⁵ Thus, the applied linguist must, firstly, understand how the identity of the subject is manifested to better interpret, as this occurs in the process of teaching learning. According to Ilari: Insertion into a culture language always takes place in a very special historical context, not only because each person has his/her own history, but also because the language, without ceasing to be itself, changes with time, circumstances, genres and types of media in which it is used, and all this is unstable.

Libras is a national language, and it is different from Gestuno. Gestuno is understood to mean "an artificial language, created with the aim of enabling communication between deaf people of different countries".¹⁶ Artificial languages do not have identities because they do not have the following characteristics: flexibility and adaptability, arbitrariness, double articulation, productivity and heterogeneity.

Another aspect inherent to AL is the understanding that language can never be dissociated from culture. Many meanings (which are merely linguistic) are closely linked to culture. Jr. Chamber defines culture as the set of all that man has created (in the physical and biological world) at the base of his human faculties. Therefore, Jr. Chamber advocates that language is the result of culture. While in Portuguese we designate named the table which is in the "living room" as "center table", in French it is table base and in English it is "coffee table". These examples illustrate how, for a single object, naming is linked to the way the speakers see the world and culture. While in Brazilian Portuguese the first meal of the day is called "morning coffee" (even if there is no coffee, maybe tea or only milk) in Portuguese from Portugal it is called "small lunch". This example

shows how, in the same language, we find varieties that express the culture of the linguistic community.

Looking at Libras, AL must understand the value of iconicity. Libras is represented by signs that clearly convey its message as "[...] many signs seem to establish a direct, almost transparent relationship with the concept to which they refer [...]".¹⁶ The authors further argue that this characteristic differs from oral languages which have an arbitrary relationship, agreed upon and not motivated by the similarity between the object and the word used. Therefore, there is a unitary representation of the language, widely shared in different cultures, which states that individuals identify with a unique collective, thanks to the mirror of a common language that each would extend to the other and in which everyone would recognize each other.¹³

Charaudeau's statement leads us to understand that there are collective cultures (characteristics of the human being), but there are others that characterize a specific people. When preparing teaching materials, for example, learners' needs should be considered. It is the applied linguist who must analyze whether the contents are appropriate for a particular sociocultural group or not. Mendes¹⁷ warns us that our society is immersed in specific social, cultural, historical and political environments. Thus, we need to:

- a) rethink the acquisition of language considering its different contexts of occurrence, race, gender and other relations of power and inequality;
- b) consider the individual as multiple, multifaceted, multidiscursive and construct an LA as a critical project.¹⁷

The Libras teacher should develop the teaching-learning process looking at the linguistic-communicative competence.⁷ The hearing teacher and the deaf teacher live in different environments and cultures. Sign languages are visual acquisition/learning and their production is spatial and motor (we call this the visual-spatial mode). Thus, they differ from the oral languages that use sound as the main instrument. Writing, which is artificial, uses mechanisms agreed and ordered by law (Orthographic Agreement, grammar). For example, "as hearing learners know the letters of the alphabet of the Portuguese language, one would expect it to be the easiest aspect of Libras for them to master".¹⁶ This means that it uses new patterns that are characteristic of the language.

Technologies have taken advantage of AL to develop some projects that support and improve the lives of deaf community members: luminous bells, luminous alarm clocks, and telephones for deaf people, and cellphones with applications for the deaf, simultaneous translations from the Internet, as well as closed captions that allow access to information through written text transmitted on television. The success of this information and communication technologies depends largely on the contributions of AL in its different spheres of activity.¹⁸

As identified in this paper, the contribution of Applied Linguistics for Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) studies rises especially in the social interventions that can be investigated under the LA scope. Thus, when studies focus different aspects, since the teaching of Sign Language until the discourse analysis of people who deal with it in everyday life create the opportunity for many more studies to come in the postmodern world.¹⁹

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the present work.

Funding

None.

References

1. Quadros Ronice Muller de, Karnoop Lodenir Becker. Brazilian sign language: linguistic studies. *Porto Alegre*. Artmed; 2004.
2. Celani Maria Antonieta Alba. Relevance of applied linguistics in the formulation of a Brazilian educational policy. In: Fortkamp MB, Tomitch LMB, editors. *Aspects of applied linguistics: studies in homage to professor Hilário Inácio Bohn*. Florianópolis: Insular; 2000. p. 17–32.
3. Ilari Rodolfo. Reflections on language and identity. In: Borba Lilian do Rocio, Leite Cândida Mara Britto, editors. *Dialogues between language, culture and society*. SP: Mercado de Letras; 2013. p. 17–50.
4. Cavalcanti Marilda C, Angela Kleiman. For the purpose of applied linguistics. *Works in Applied Linguistics*. 1986;7:5–12.
5. Menezes Vera Lucia, Silva Marina Morena dos Santos, Gomes Iran Felipe Alvarenga. Sixty years of applied linguistics: from where we live and to where we will go. In: Pereira Regina Celi, Roca Pilar, editors. *Applied Linguistics: a path with different accesses*. São Paulo: Contexto; 2009. 24 p.
6. Afinal, what is LA? In: Paschoal MSZ, Celani Maria Antonieta Alba, editors. *Linguistics applied: the application of linguistics to transdisciplinary linguistics*. São Paulo: EDUC; 1992. p. 15–23.
7. Gesser Audrei. O ovinde and a surdez: about teaching and learning a Libras. São Paulo: parabola Editorial; 2012.
8. Kaplan Richard Baldauf. Applied Linguistics, the state of the art: is there one? *English Teaching Forum*. 1985. p. 1–6.
9. Reflections on practice as a source of topics for research projects for the training of LE teachers. In: Almeida Filho, José Carlos Paes, editors. *O professor of foreign language in formation*. Campinas: Pontes; 1999. 180 p.
10. Moita Lopes, Luiz Paulo da. Office of applied linguistics. A social and educational nature of the processes of teaching/learning of languages. SP: Market of Letters; 1996.
11. Camara JR, Joaquim Mattoso. Language and culture. *Letters*. 1995;4:51–59.
12. Rajagopalan Kanavillil. For a linguistic critique: language, identity and an ethical question. São Paulo: Parabola Editorial; 2003.
13. Charaudeau Patrick. Linguistic identity, cultural identity: a paradoxical relationship. In: Lara Glauca Poença, Limberti Rita Pacheco, editors. *Discourse and inequality social*. Trad. Clebson Luiz de Brito and Wander Immediato de Souza. São Paulo: Contexto; 2015. p. 13–29.
14. Transdisciplinarity in Linguistics Applied in Brazil. In: Signorini I, Cavalcanti Marilda, editors. *Linguística Aplicada e Transdisciplinaridade*. Campinas: Mercado de Letras; 1998.
15. Cunha Angélica Furtado da, Costa Marcos Antônio, Martelotta Mário Eduardo. Linguistics. In: Martelotta Mário Eduardo, editor. *Linguistic manual*. São Paulo: Contexto; 2009. p. 15–29.
16. Pereira Maria Cristina da Cunha. Libras: knowledge beyond the signs. São Paulo: Pearson; 2011.
17. Mendes Edleise. Because teaching language as culture. In: Santos Percília, Alvarez Maria Luisa Ortiz, editors. *Language and culture in the context of Portuguese foreign language*. SP: Pontes Editores; 2010. p. 53–75.
18. Davis Alice. Editorial. *Language learning*. 1948;1(1):1–2.
19. John Robert Schmitz. For an applied linguistics interdisciplinary. São Paulo: Parábola; 2006. 279 p.