

Why we need signed poetry in bilingual education¹

Por que precisamos de poesia sinalizada em educação bilíngue

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ABSTRACT

A truly bilingual and bicultural education for deaf children requires them to learn about the deaf art-form of sign language poetry. In this article I outline the advantages and challenges of doing this. Reviewing the scarce literature on teaching deaf children signed poetry, whether translated or original, I relate it to the use of literature in L2-learning settings. Reflections of deaf teacher-poets from the UK show that deaf children readily relate to signed poetry, and with informed language focus from teachers it helps them to develop a range of language skills, and express their emotions. Barriers to this, however, include lack of training and awareness for both deaf and hearing teachers – even when the teachers are poets.

Keywords: sign language poetry; bilingual education; deaf poet-teachers; signed literature in l1 learning; signed literature in l2 learning.

RESUMO

Uma verdadeira educação bilíngue e bicultural para crianças surdas requer que elas aprendam a forma de arte surda de poesia em língua de sinais. Neste artigo apresento as vantagens e desvantagens de se fazer isto. Revisando a escassa literatura sobre o ensino de poesia sinalizada para crianças surdas, seja traduzida ou original, eu a relaciono ao uso de literatura em cenários de aprendizagem de L2. Reflexões de professores-poetas surdos do Reino Unido mostram que a criança surda prontamente se simpatiza com a poesia sinalizada, e com o foco linguístico adequado dos professores, isto as ajuda

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a desenvolver uma gama de habilidades linguísticas e a expressar suas emoções. Barreiras para isto, contudo, incluem a falta de treinamento e apreensão de professores surdos e ouvintes – mesmo quando os professores são poetas.

Palavras-chave: poesia em língua de sinais; educação bilíngue; poetas-professores surdos; aprendizagem de literatura sinalizada em L1; aprendizagem de literatura sinalizada em L2.

‘The work of Deaf poets serves as a prism through which Deaf people can know themselves better and through which the rest of the world can see life in a new light.’
(Clark, 2009, 7)

Introduction

Sign language has been increasingly accepted as an L1 medium of instruction for deaf children, beginning in the 1970s, and strengthening especially from the 1990s following Johnson, Liddell & Erting’s seminal work ‘Unlocking the curriculum’ in 1989. Lange et al. (2013) review evidence of cognitive advantages of sign language-spoken language bilingual education and its benefits for deaf children’s reading skills. Sign language is also widely taught as an L2 subject to (mostly) adults (see, for example, Myers and Fernandes, 2010, with respect to American Sign Language, ASL, or Sutton-Spence and Woll, 2011, for British Sign Language, BSL) and they, too, can benefit from the exposure to signed poetry, but this will not be explored further here.

Reported research frequently focuses on the measurable language outcomes of bilingual education, but language learning is more than simply acquiring competence in the L1 or L2. As Paran (2008, p. 14) observes, literature in language learning is also important ‘because language is learned by human beings, and the interest and love of literature for its various qualities is a human characteristic’. Thus, I will ask here how one aspect of teaching in a bilingual environment – using signed poetry – can impact on teachers, learners and their learning experience.

Although there are relatively few bilingual classrooms for deaf children (with the majority of deaf children currently educated in the mainstream in many countries), the general principle of bilingual classroom environments is accepted, so we can begin to explore in more depth the diversity of forms of

signed languages that should be introduced in the classroom. Here I consider the role that signed poetry as a creative genre of sign languages can play in bilingual education environments. Brazilian researchers have begun to consider this, especially in relation to bringing Deaf culture and literature to bilingual classrooms (e.g. STROBEL, 2008; SANTOS et al., 2011; MOURÃO, 2011). I will focus here on the important connection between literature, language, language learning and the language learner. I argue that children should see signed poetry as part of their signed L1 development in schools as it impacts on their language skills and their own sense of self and identity. I hope the points raised here will inspire educators working with sign language in the classroom to adopt signed poetry as part of the curriculum and maybe encourage those who are yet to be convinced of the benefits of signed bilingualism to explore its potential.

Skliar and Quadros have observed:

[...] bilingual education should only be the starting point of Deaf education, since it is the beginning of policies about Deaf identity, Deaf and hearing knowledge and power, Deaf resistance movements, ideologies, hegemonic discourses, school roles and public policies (SKLIAR; QUADROS, 2004, p. 369).

Sign language poetry is inextricably bound with the same phenomena, as elements of Deaf identity, Deaf and hearing knowledge and power, Deaf resistance movements, ideologies and hegemonic discourses, that have all been noted as key in many signed poems (e.g. MILES, 1998; QUADROS; SUTTON-SPENCE, 2006; SUTTON-SPENCE, 2006; CHRISTIE; WILKINS, 2007). Thus we can see that signed poetry, bilingual education and Deaf education are tightly interconnected and anyone wishing to engage in the 'Deaf World' (LANE; HOFFMEISTER; BAHAN, 1996) needs to be aware of those issues.

All students can watch signed poetry simply for enjoyment, but they can also study it as a linguistic art-form that can develop awareness and love of language and understanding of words (signed or written) and language form. Paran (2008) has described the effects of literature on language learning, showing how classes using literature may have a language learning focus, a literary learning focus, or both. I will show how a language focus can result in increased and more enjoyable language learning. With a more literary focus, the themes and meaning contained within the poetry can also increase understanding of emotion and complex ideas such as metaphors, especially for younger students. Studying signed poetry opens students to ideas of poetry literacy, so they learn

the conventions within which poetry is understood – whether it is written or signed. Having enjoyed and studied other signed poems, students should also be encouraged to perform and create their own signed poetry, expressing their emotions, developing confidence in social and linguistic interactions, taking pride in self-expression and developing their own sign language skills.

In this work I will consider poetry performed as an original sign language composition or a sign language translation of a written poem. I will use the term ‘signed poetry’ to refer to any poetry that is performed in sign language – whether it is in translation or was composed in sign language.

The observations and proposals I put forward here draw on work by practitioners and academics (following PARAN, 2008, in his comprehensive review of the effectiveness of literature in foreign language teaching and learning). Published research that reports on teachers’ experiences with signed poetry in the classroom (and I have found very little) is complemented with reflective testimonies by three signing deaf poets and teachers. Although my informants are based in the UK I expect it will resonate with readers in Brazil and other countries. Rosa and Klein (2011) have reported on ground-breaking work asking deaf teachers for their opinions on the signed literature available for deaf children in Brazil, focusing on the language used, the technical and performance elements of the pieces and the aspects of culture portrayed. I will continue with this approach, considering reflections by deaf poets and teachers on the use of signed poetry for teaching.

Observations and testimonies

Paran (2008, p. 17) notes that a great deal of valuable evidence for the successful use of literature in language teaching comes from teachers’ observations, and that ‘classroom interaction can be explored through the testimony of a practitioner reflecting on what they do in class’. Qualitative research in Deaf Studies focuses on giving a ‘voice’ to people who are rarely noticed by researchers and policy-makers – in this case deaf poets and teachers.

Paul Scott, Richard Carter and John Wilson are well-known, widely respected British deaf poets who compose and perform sign language poetry, and all three have taught signed poetry to deaf children. Paul and Richard have worked in bilingual schools with deaf children. I have been privileged to be present at a range of one-to-one interviews, seminars or small-group discussions between 2006 and 2013 in which they have reflected on and explained their work

and philosophies behind their poetry and their teaching. In all cases the events were filmed and transcribed and the poets gave their permission for the material to be analysed and represented as part of research into sign language literature. There is a great deal of quantitative work that investigates the effectiveness of bilingual approaches in deaf education (HERMANS, 2007; HUMPHRIES; MACDOUGALL, 2000, are two of many) reporting on the “facts” of educational achievement. To complement this broad, generalisable and objective work, I aim to show the human ‘voices’ – that is, as much of the signed presence as possible – of deaf people who reveal their experience and thoughts (COLEMAN; BRIGGS, 2002). Their comments may resonate and present a recognisable reality to the reader, some may turn out to be generalisable and transferable, but the variety of opinion and experience reflects the diversity and complexity of the use of signed poetry in classroom situations.

Why teach poetry to deaf children?

In 1979, Robert Panara, an American deaf poet and teacher, advocated teaching written poetry to deaf children through the medium of sign language. He wrote that teaching poetry

[...] helps to stimulate creativity and self expression, and it encourages the development of a student’s intellectual faculties – imagination, thinking, and interpretation [...] As in exposure to dramatics or dancing, it makes students react emotionally and sensitively to artistry of expression. [...] Through the language of poetry, students can learn to perceive how the commonplace is made to seem uncommon, how old words can be expressed with freshness, originality, and beauty (PANARA, 1979, p. 825).

This reasoning can also apply to teaching original sign language poetry. The benefits of teaching poetry to deaf children are as great as they are for hearing children. Indeed signed poetry could be more important for deaf children if it gives them access to extended creative sign language that they would not get otherwise. If the teacher is a poet, this can provide an extra dimension to learning, but all classes can explore poetry, whether it was originally composed in writing or sign language.

Signed and Written poetry

There is no doubt that some deaf people enjoy reading written poetry. This is particularly the case for post-lingually deaf people (CLARK, 2009) but there are other skilled deaf readers who also enjoy the linguistic challenges of reading, for whom written poetry could be enjoyable (KELSTONE, 2012). However, many deaf people struggle to understand or appreciate written poetry because of difficulties in understanding the language or cultural references used or because they are unfamiliar with the conventions needed (SHETLEY, 1993; VALLI; GRAYBILL *apud* NATHAN LERNER; FEIGEL, 2009).

As Paul Scott, commented:

I take [a poetry book] down from the shelf and start to read it and I don't understand it. Maybe it's beautiful with lovely words all musically arranged on the page. I read 'blah blah blah' and hearing people will see the metaphors and the figurative language and so on but I look at it and it doesn't make sense to me. Hearing people understand it and deaf people don't.

John Wilson, considering his early experiences of poetry said:

My school had taught me poetry – all about rhyme, denotation, connotation, verse – and I had no idea what it was all about. At that time my English was so limited. We had to write our own poems. It was such a struggle. I hated it. I recoiled from it.

This seems not to have changed much since John's school days as Arensen and Kerschmer (2010) report that the six students in their poetry class either had no experience of it or declared it 'boring'. Richard Carter described a workshop he gave at a deaf school:

They asked me to talk about English poetry because their teacher had made them repeatedly read English poetry and they didn't understand. "We don't like English poetry." So I said "I don't know what written

English poetry looks like. Show me your book.” [...] They asked me to explain and I said “I don’t understand this, either”. The teacher for the deaf told me they don’t understand what poetry means.

There is enough evidence that sign language supports written language development (JOHNSON; LIDDELL; ERTING, 1989), so there is no need to rehearse the arguments here. It is clear, too, from the pioneering work of poet-teachers like Robert Panara in the USA in the 1940s that, although students usually respond more strongly to sign language poetry, seeing written poetry translated into sign language and discussing it in sign language teaches students about general poetry literacy. It enables them to approach poetry critically and explore the cultural, linguistic and attitudinal difficulties that can create such barriers to enjoyment (SHETLEY, 1993), so they begin to truly understand the meaning of the poems and the words that create them (PANARA, 1979; ARENSON; KRETSCHMER, 2010). As Lang (2007) has observed, signing about written poetry gets the ideas across to students. Paran (2008) observes that literature in a language class is usually discussed in the students’ L1. For deaf students for whom sign language is their L1, this is a perfect opportunity to encourage signed discussion. Words in poetry are ‘beautiful’ words only to students who know how to use them. Lang (2007, p. 63) quotes Bernard Bragg, an American Deaf poet, describing the effect of Panara’s teaching written poetry through sign language:

He taught us something about English, until then a strange second language to us native signers, by interpreting in sign not just the overall meaning but every individual word in lines of poetry, [...] thus making them finally come alive for us.

Teachers need to be aware of the fragility of students’ new-found poetic confidence, however, and use it cautiously. Paul Scott described an incident in which an English teacher tried to persuade students to translate their creative sign language work into English, with disappointing results:

The teacher came in and was fascinated [by the students’ creative signing] [...] She thought it was perfect because she wanted them to write these stories in their English class, so she could teach them how to write it in

good English, but the children just weren't motivated. So why did they stop? They signed fine for me and in the English lesson the teacher praised them for signing so well and said "Now we want you to write them". The force/pressure/obligation/oppression [the BSL sign here carries all these meanings] on them to polish their English put the children off. When they came back to my class they didn't want to do it [the creative signing] anymore, because they'd just been in the English class. It was frustrating.

Benefits of seeing signed poetry

Seeing poetry in sign language opens a whole new dimension where the beauty and challenges of the poetic form are still there but the barriers of language are removed. The impact of exposure to signed poetry cannot be underestimated.

John Wilson, said:

I remember seeing my first BSL poem long ago when I was a child. [A school friend from a deaf family] signed a simple poem about a tree by the river, blowing in the wind. Watching it had a really powerful impact on me. I laughed for ages afterwards. I wasn't laughing at her but at the delight of seeing her poem. It was like a slap across the face – the first time I'd ever seen anything so clear. I felt like I was inside the scene. I became part of it. I was inside that picture with the big tree there and the river at my feet. It was all inside my head. It was amazing. I grew up in a fog of information. Sometimes a little bit of information would penetrate that fog but when I saw that poem the fog cleared totally and I could see everything so clearly.

John went on to explain that 'Deaf people can access poetry through signing and it can show really powerful ideas. It can give you [literally: you can take in] very strong emotions – happiness, sadness, anger.' Written poetry had not given him that before he understood signed poetry.

Signed poetry can also help unite deaf children of different language backgrounds. In an educational environment that can be divisive with its language policies, this is important as it strengthens the sense of deaf identity for all children. Richard Carter gave an example of this when he discussed a poetry project he was involved with:

There were about 20 deaf students – 14, 15 and 16 years old. Some were strongly oral and some were fluent signers. Very varied. This was mainstream [...] The oral kids didn't sign much but they understood English poetry but didn't understand BSL poetry. The others understood signed poetry but didn't understand English. So they were opposite. I needed to think what would happen with the two groups if I gave them the same poem. Interestingly, they all understood. When they were playing, the oral kids signed too but in school they were oral. [...] So I gave them a piece of fruit each [for inspiration] and they created something poetic for themselves. Even the oral children made some beautiful stuff. So then they got the idea of BSL poetry.

Improving language skills of L1 signers

Poetry is particularly suited for language learning because students must understand the form to understand the poem. It draws our attention to the language and its rules (SUTTON-SPENCE, 2001). Because the language used in signed poetry often deviates from everyday signing, it draws attention to the rules of 'correct' sign language by disregarding them (LEECH, 1969). Deaf children need to develop an explicit understanding and appreciation of the language they are using, and poetry can be a way of helping them do that. For this to occur, teachers need to focus on the language in the poem, and for students to understand the aim of the lesson (SCOTT, 2010). Frequently, literature classes and language classes are balkanised in the timetable and learners' minds, but teachers can help students appreciate that poetry can be an opportunity to learn about language as well as literature.

Lang quotes Bernard Bragg again saying of Robert Panara's poetic signing:

[...] in contrast to the choppy, abrupt, and often homemade signs we normally used among ourselves, his signs were a miracle of vividness and eloquence [...] we had never realized that this, our native language, could be such a powerful vehicle for expressing the richest and subtlest feelings and conveying nuances of meaning as sophisticated as those of the most articulate English speakers and writers (LANG, 2007, p. 61-62).

John Wilson explained that in teaching signed poetry, he encourages children to push the boundaries of their signing skills by using more non-manual

features and emotions, focusing on handshape, speed of signing and use of symmetry and space. Richard Carter has emphasised exploring the potential of classifiers with older children (including introducing them to surreal poetic signing ‘where the child grabs the orange sun and eats it’) and Paul Scott encourages children to think about all these and also repetition, signing space and handshape. John Wilson showed how poetry can draw on deaf children’s existing skills when they create poems using only one handshape:

[...] when teachers watch me play this with their pupils they are astonished by their vocabulary. They expect low-level vocabulary and see all sorts of signs, so they say, “I didn’t know you know that sign. Oh, you clever boy!” It’s so patronising! The children fling out vocabulary thick and fast.

The children do not always find it easy to develop their expressive language skills and teachers need to protect and nurture them carefully. Paul Scott explained the importance of building children’s enthusiasm for creative signing, and how it can be crushed by teachers who did not understand, or by constraining, inflexible rules for how to use language that prevented them from exploring the potential for language. Thus, when the children saw Paul’s creative signing in a formal classroom environment they would ask him ‘Is that allowed?’ When they learn that they have ‘permission’ from an adult to play with language, their skills improve. ‘When I sign [...] way out of the signing space the children look on, amazed. “Wow! That’s allowed! So we can, we’re allowed, too.”’

Emotions and personal experiences

While there are perhaps as many definitions of poetry as there are poets, one widely held opinion is that it shows ‘emotion expressed in strong compact language’ so that ‘poetry is a container for emotions’ (BOUDREAU, 2009, p. 2). It is also a way for poets to describe their experiences. Boudreau (2009, p. 3) notes: ‘Children need to choose and create poetry that expresses their own personal lives’, to describe their experiences and express their emotions and signed poetry can provide an outlet for these. John Wilson observed:

[...] signed poetry is one way of expressing our personal experience and that's why signed poetry is an important part of Deaf culture. The experience might be positive or negative but it is valuable. The poets can show these, audiences can watch and enjoy the poems so they are important. It's important to include celebration of our history and our experiences of oppression. All this is valuable, so that's why signed poetry like this is important.

Deaf children relate to this expression of personal experience in sign language poetry. Arenson and Kretschmer (2010, p. 112) found that their deaf students naturally responded better to signed poems than written poems during poetry classes. When they gave students a selection of English and ASL poems and asked them to choose a poem that they could connect to their personal experience, all six students chose ASL poems over written English poems. They further found that:

Student responses [to an ASL poem by Clayton Valli] indicate that they connected deeply with the message of the poem. For example, four students [...] wrote reactions to the poem that provided personal stories echoing the poem's themes of loneliness, boredom, the feeling of being ignored, and the failure of others to communicate (2010, p. 113).

This is clear evidence that students can use discussions of literature to promote their communicative competence generally (KIM, 2004).

John Wilson has found many young deaf people felt unable to be critical of non-signing hearing people, often those in authority over them. He successfully encouraged Deaf teenagers to put their strong feelings into sign language poems in the freedom of an all-sign environment where they felt safe to express themselves without fear of retribution. Allowing deaf students to create sign language poetry also shifts the balance of deaf power. When John organised poetry performances of the deaf teenagers' work he emphasised that 'It was all deaf – no voice over. Interpretation was the hearing people's problem. They didn't know any sign so they sat and smiled inately at the angry poems.'

The importance of signing poets as teachers

Teachers who are not poets can teach about poetry, using videos of performances (ROSA; KLEIN, 2011; ARENSON; KRETSCHMER, 2010) but if a teacher is a poet and a poet is a teacher, students can develop an even greater understanding of poetry. John Lee Clark's anthology of Deaf American poetry (2009) refers to many deaf poets who taught in deaf schools, colleges and universities, from the 19th century onwards, showing the crucial role they play in supporting and promoting signed poetry and signing poets. Many deaf poets today have worked in deaf schools at some time or have conducted poetry workshops with deaf children, deaf adults and hearing adults learning sign language. Campello (2007) has noted how teachers with a gift for highly visual signing can be a great asset to bilingual education.

Poet-teachers are able to explain poems in sign language or translate them into sign language to give students the meaning of the poem. However, the poet-teacher needs training in poetic literacy. Indeed, there is a need to train all teachers how to treat signed poetry formally in a culturally appropriate way that suits deaf culture.

Richard Carter explained:

I especially enjoy poetry for children. I love signing/giving/telling it [the BSL sign carries all these meanings]. It's good for them because it means in future they can produce their own poetry and become poets because I have steadily influenced them, because before no-one influenced me. I was by myself. No-one explained to me. I was alone and didn't know things.

And Paul Scott recalled a time he worked with deaf children in his class to enter a signed poetry competition. He and the children all relied on their existing skills and they won, but explicit awareness was lacking:

They all had innate skills and I had a good teaching relationship with them. So the poems had to have the same handshape, repetition, words, clarity, feeling – for example, the sun, feeling hot or cold – changing signs and so on [...] But [...] I feel I knew how to use poetry but not how to teach

it. I'm not sure – I need someone to teach it who knows about the rules. When I was doing the poems I didn't know that stuff.

Books, signed poetry and sign language poetry

There is plenty of evidence that original sign language poetry can help students appreciate and engage with written poetry (ARENSEN; KERSCHMER, 2010; LANG, 2007) but it is also the case that signed poetry that is a highly visual translation of written words may provide a 'stepping stone' to appreciating and creating original sign language poetry.

John Wilson says:

Dorothy's [Miles – a pioneering deaf sign language poet] journey from written poetry to BSL poetry is really the story of sign language poetry in Britain. She brought together the two forms. Her first workshop was taught in English [...] That course was a struggle for us all as we discussed and debated and refined things and slowly worked our way over to BSL poetry. But I felt sad because she died just as she got there [...] Now we can focus entirely on BSL. Deaf people are free to express themselves without being hindered by English. That fog of English I talked about before is swept away.

Signed haiku can also come from visual images (for example Paul Scott's haiku poem *Turkey* was inspired by a single picture card) or be based upon the visual image created by a written haiku (e.g. Jack Cain's haiku 'an empty elevator/opens/closes' inspired John Wilson's 2010 haiku *Lift*). In another example of original signed poetry inspired by written poetry, John Wilson's BSL poem *Two Communities* is derived from the English poem *Explosion* by Philip Larkin. John's poem includes deaf characters, deaf lifestyles and deaf culture, and does not follow English language patterns, but it was inspired by a written text. Children may be encouraged to take part in any of these activities to develop language and poetry skills that draw on signing, books and the written word.

Conclusions

I have considered the views of hearing adults who appreciate the benefits of signed poetry and those of deaf adults who, looking back on their childhood, can recall how they would have liked access to signed poetry and can see the benefits for children today. The next important step will be to find out from deaf children today how they experience and appreciate signed poetry in school.

Until then, however, the reflections from these three teacher-poets show the benefits of introducing signed poetry into the bilingual classroom. When provided teachers are sufficiently well trained and resources are available, signed poetry can avoid some of the barriers often created when deaf people see written poetry without the literacy skills to appreciate it, increasing opportunities to enjoy written poetry and signed poetry. It can unite deaf children with different language backgrounds, providing them with an opportunity to express emotions, learn about deaf culture and the hearing world and develop their language skills by exploring the potential of the language.

As the argument for signed poetry in the classroom from deaf poets and teachers is so strong, we should enquire about the barriers to using it. The biggest barrier lies in the lack of training in sign language poetry for deaf and hearing teachers. Additionally, teachers may lack access to good resources or may argue there is not enough time in class for poetry as it is not in a curriculum. We need to increase training and provide more resources. Perhaps, however, much of it comes down to lack of awareness, and if so, I hope this text can increase awareness a little more.

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