

## CRITICAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR ETHNIC-RACIAL RELATIONS IN BRAZILIAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

This article aims to reflect on teaching practices related to the development of materials for English as an additional language in a Brazilian high school, linking them to ethnic-racial relations and critical language pedagogy. By analyzing our practice as we re-examined the activities first developed over a decade ago, we may track our development as socially engaged educators from a critical perspective (Freire, 1996/2021). Our analysis identified that despite progress in policies and student diversity, racism is still a major issue in schools. The findings reinforce the continued relevance of our emancipatory teaching approach.

**Keywords:** education for ethnic-racial relations; critical language pedagogy; English as an additional language for high school; critical reflection on teaching.

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## Introduction

Over the last two decades, public policies in Brazil have led to significant efforts to include ethnic representation in school books and legislation. The increasing number of publishers subscribing to a National Book and Didactic Material Program (PNLD) is evidence of this movement. Still, it is a fact that the non-white population is underrepresented in didactic material. A 2019 study showed that the black and brown-skinned population in Brazil was over 54%, while their representation in school books corresponded to 24% (Ferreira & Barbosa, 2019, p. 12). With more and more Brazilians self-identifying as non-white (IBGE, 2022), critical debates on race and ethnicity are urgently needed to fight against racism and social inequalities inside and outside the school environment.

This article presents a critical reflection on our own teaching and learning practice, dialoguing with documents from the Brazilian government, language teachers, and researchers who have provided a range of insights to improve education about ethnic-racial relations. We agree with Gomes (2012) that changes in representation and practice require decolonizing the curriculum by questioning places of power to deal with the tense ethnic-racial relations that accompany Brazilian social and cultural education (p. 100). Silva et al. (2017) claim that more examples of how to enhance critical language teaching are needed. In that sense, we propose to review our own teaching and learning experience through a critical reflection on practice, as suggested by Paulo Freire (1996/2021). Based on Freire, we define the critically reflective teacher as one who embodies the dialectical relationship between teaching and learning, doing and thinking about doing, training and retraining, opening space for the collective construction of knowledge. Critically reflective teachers exercise the ethical commitment inherent to the profession: transforming naive curiosity into critical curiosity, while continually reflecting on their pedagogical practice.

As an example of antiracist practice in English language classes, we describe a set of activities developed in 2011 within an interdisciplinary project *Em cada Vereda uma Canção* (“On every path, a song”) with adolescent students enrolled in the first year of high school at a federal public school in the South of Brazil. These activities aimed to provide an international critical perspective of black culture and history and to counteract negative representations of black people worldwide. This project represented to us the beginning of the pursuit of a dream we have so far: to work collectively, as Paulo Freire puts it, “as part of the teaching adventure” (1996/2021, p. 50).

The project took place in 2011 and 2012 and led to several other actions that reshaped our educational practices for ethnic-racial relations within the school. It was based on the Curricular Recommendations for Midlevel Education (Brasil, 2006), National Curriculum Parameters (Brasil, 2000), on Law 10639/2003, which incentivizes action against racism and social inequalities, and on Law

11645/2008, which makes teaching of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous history and culture compulsory in Brazilian public and private schools. More specifically, our objectives within these activities were:

- To use music and film in fostering language acquisition and to raise awareness about issues that show the need for social transformation
- To investigate the possible intertextuality between the lyrics of socially oriented songs in English and protest songs in Portuguese.

The development of critical thinking within the school environment occurs over the years, so that younger children develop it as they go through school, as social change takes time and requires collective effort. Our research question, to be answered throughout this article, is “How can we offer a critical reflection based on studies about ethnic-racial relations in English language classes?”. In the next section, we review the literature concerning our main topics. Next, we describe the context in which the project was developed, summarize our method, and discuss the development of the activities in our lessons. Finally, we reflect on changes in the school environment and the current relevance of the topic, as well as on adaptations considering the analysis of the context.

### **Literature Review**

In this section, we review theoretical discussions on racism and social inequalities in Brazilian education. We highlight the difficulties that English language teachers face when dealing with ethnic-racial relations and briefly present the concept of critical racial literacy, pointing to the need for long and continued education of teachers on race and ethnicity. Next, we propose a dialogue with critical language pedagogy, in search of theory and information to support the promotion of our critical reflection on ethnic-racial relations and English teaching.

### **The fight against racism and social inequalities in Brazilian education**

Although the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) (Brasil, 1998) defend the school as a privileged place for promoting equality and eliminating discrimination and racism (Mayer, 2024), there is much room for improvement in respect to dealing with racism in the school environment. To Cavalleiro (2024), formal education is highly relevant in forming critical citizens who are aware of their civil, political, and social rights (p. 114). Schools are spaces in which people with different ethnic, cultural, and religious origins coexist and interact. They should enable cultural and political action for the transformation of social relations because they provide intentional, constant, and compulsory action (Mayer 2024, p. 80). However, in many Brazilian educational environments, racial stereotypes are still reinforced, with racist attitudes also coming from teachers (Cavalleiro, 2024; Ferreira, 2012).

In the field of teaching additional languages, many English language teachers have difficulties proposing critical activities to their students that deal with ethnic-racial relations (Ferreira & Barbosa, 2019; Santos, 2021; Santos, et al., 2021). To discuss possible strategies to work with ethnic-racial relations in language teaching, we present the definition of racism by the Inter-American Convention against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance (2022), which states that

racism consists of any theory, doctrine, ideology, or sets of ideas that assert a causal link between the phenotypic or genotypic characteristics of individuals or groups and their intellectual, cultural, and personality traits, including the false concept of racial superiority (OAS, Chapter 1, Article 1, par. 4).

This important human rights instrument also affirms that social inequalities are a consequence of racism, and that racist ideas, theories, and ideologies are scientifically false, socially unjust, and morally reprehensible (OAS, Chapter 1, Article 1, par. 4).

One of the ways to deal with situations of discrimination in schools is to ensure that teachers, pedagogical coordinators, principals, and other school agents are informed and engaged in critical views over their daily practice and the materials they use. If citizenship is experienced and taught in schools, then these school materials should favor dialogue, experience, and questioning, as their curricula progressively include multiple cultures and voices. These actions do not mean helping marginalized children to endure racism, but giving black and non-black children the opportunity to create new ways of relating and living together (Mayer, 2024). Besides stimulating critical view and inclusion, a decolonization of the curriculum - which avoids simplifications and stereotypes about racial issues - implies confrontation and negotiations between different historical and economic experiences, as well as world views (Gomes, 2012).

In the more than two decades since Law 10.639/03 was passed, teachers, politicians, and scholars have been debating its importance amidst a reality in which professionals may disrespect its principles, despite research showing how racism harms daily life in schools (Cavalleiro, 2024). More recently, the “Protocol for Judgment with a Racial Perspective” by the National Council of Justice (Barroso, et al., 2024) have been guiding judicial decisions with a racial perspective, clarifying which areas should receive public investment, such as teacher training and education for ethnic-racial relations. The existence of laws and protocols, however, is not sufficient to ensure that anti-racist actions are carried out in Brazilian schools, as only an education based on information and questioning about social inequalities, issues related to prejudice and discrimination, can transform a society that has systematically prevented individuals from accessing their civil rights (Cavalleiro, 2024).

Together with national policies such as the aforementioned laws, anti-racist language education is being discussed and put into practice in Brazil (Ferreira, 2007, 2012; Santos, 2021; Gonzaga & Sól, 2024; Campos, 2021; Santos et al., 2021). This movement takes place alongside affirmative action policies, which promote opportunities for people who have been discriminated against and victimized by socioeconomic exclusion. To Feres Júnior (2018), affirmative action refers to a set of programs, public or private, that aim to provide special resources or rights to members of a disadvantaged social group, with a view to achieving a collective good. The most common categories in such policies, according to Feres Júnior, are ethnicity, race, class, occupation, gender, religion, and caste (p. 13).

In the specific field of English Language teaching and learning, Aparecida de Jesus Ferreira was a pioneering black female researcher to publish on black social identities in Brazil, including the theme of critical racial literacy (Ferreira & Barbosa, 2019). In the article *What has race/ethnicity got to do with EFL teaching?* (2007) Ferreira draws on critical race theory to examine EFL teachers' perceptions of cultural plurality as a cross-curricular issue. She recalls Gillborn's (1995) concept of 'race' as usually associated with physical differences (phenotype, color) and 'ethnic' as referring to groups separated by cultural identity (history, religion, language) (p. 213). Through a qualitative investigation, Ferreira argues that, in the perception of EFL teachers, the discourse that celebrates diversity overshadows possible challenges and the deconstruction of racism. To support this argument, Ferreira shows Brazilian population numbers and their self-declared color/race, compared to the number of students in school years by color/race. This comparison shows a smaller presence of black and brown-skinned people<sup>1</sup> in schools and universities compared to that of the white population, which historically has had much better educational opportunities in Brazil. The myth of racial democracy and color-blindness, according to Ferreira, still reinforces stereotypical views of race and ethnicity in this country.

In another article based on class observations, Ferreira (2012) affirms that there is a need for a long period of continued training on the subject of race/ethnicity so that teachers can adapt their practices and be better prepared to address racism. Time is also needed to open up spaces of discussion with students who, in our experience, demonstrate great curiosity about issues related to race and ethnicity. In the same vein, Gonzaga and Sól (2024) argue for the necessity of working with critical racial literacy. This framework consists of: promoting discussions about race; questioning official documents and didactic materials that reinforce stereotypes; reflecting on how diversity is taught during teacher training; and analyzing the impact of these discourses on the identity of black people (Gonzaga & Sól, 2024; Ferreira & Barbosa, 2019). When discussing identity issues in foreign language courses, one should also take into consideration social and gender identities. As Campos (2021) states,

anti-racist actions at schools should not be limited to black dolls, black literature, History or Art classes, nor to the celebration of specific dates. It is necessary that all the people who make the school day-to-day dynamics can be seen and identified by students as participants, rather than invisible people (p. 26).

To search for more connections between theory and practice, we now try to join the dots between education for ethnic-racial relations and critical language pedagogy.

### *A dialogue with critical language pedagogy*

Ethnic-racial relations in the school environment are very much in tune with critical language pedagogy, also referred to as “teaching languages for social justice.” This pedagogical framework provides important support for teachers to reflect on values such as equality, freedom, and solidarity, although the term “social justice” remains open to interpretations (Crookes, 2021). Critical language pedagogy is grounded in the works of the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire, whose ideas spread to other continents and have been vigorously debated in discussions of education in Brazil.

Since the 1960s, when the dictatorship in Brazil began and Freire was exiled, his reflections on literacy and social justice have been published in different languages. Freire’s ideas almost immediately influenced teachers and scholars of additional languages in the Global North, helping them to elaborate new perspectives on teaching and learning in general and on the teaching and learning of languages, specifically. These teachers and scholars found in Freire’s works a reasoning that helps connect educational practice with free, autonomous, and democratic actions. American educator bell hooks, for instance, mentions Paulo Freire was her first introduction to critical pedagogy (2014). Freire, she states, helped her learn “new ways of thinking about social reality that were liberatory” (p. 45).

Crookes (2021) cites several authors who applied Freire’s ideas to language teaching and learning: Akbari, Pennycook, Giroux and Kramsch, Crawford, and Crookes himself, to name but a few. Some of the principles reviewed by these authors through the lens of critical language pedagogy include contributing to society in distinct cultural, social, and political ways; engaging with ethics; relating to differences in terms of class, race, and gender; creating alternative forms of culture and knowledge; and combining reflection and action. The role of teachers within this framework is that of transformative intellectuals, as they raise questions and contribute with their ideas and opinions in a dialogic way (Crookes, 2021, pp. 248 - 249). The works of Freire, together with the principles mentioned above, are in tune with more recent anti-racist language education

and actions. These frameworks are a rich source of guidance for current teachers and education professionals.

In discussing guiding principles for teacher education, Farias and Wielewicki (2023) identify and question some beliefs about critical thinking in additional language classes. In tune with Crookes (2021), the authors define additional languages as an umbrella term for foreign languages, second languages, heritage languages, and other possibilities (p. 3), a definition we borrow in the present article. According to Farias and Wielewicki, choosing controversial or social themes within the scope of social justice does not guarantee critical teaching practices, nor is there a fixed method to be applied. On the contrary, there are several ways of joining theory and practice in critical education. The authors point to elements that are closely articulated in language classes: paying special attention and planning the language used in activities; clarifying values; analyzing teaching context; negotiating about the curriculum and assessment tasks with students; using attractive visual and symbolic resources; understanding that perspectives are never neutral; and fomenting actions that transform reality (p. 11).

A constant concern of scholars who identify with critical education is examining the context in which educational practices happen. Paulo Freire himself advised that anyone who wants to put his thoughts and experiences into practice should recreate new practices and rethink his ideas. To Freire, “no educational practice takes place in the air, but in concrete, historical, social, cultural, economic, political contexts, which are not necessarily identical to one another” (2019, p. 22). Moreover, in *Pedagogia da autonomia* (1996/2021), Freire advocates that critical-reflective educators should be aware of their ethical responsibilities and seek to transform society together with their students. The learning process, therefore, is always connected to social and economic circumstances. Transformation and autonomy happen through outlining objectives, having critical qualities, creativity, and experience. In a dialogue between Farias, Silva, and Siqueira (2023), Silva states that

If critical education is contextualized, it is necessary to understand both micro contexts (such as the classroom) as well as macro contexts (including sociopolitical issues) and how these can influence each other (p. 4).

As racism is current in our society, fighting against it in schools, as we have been arguing, is a daily issue that must not be ignored. With this reflective practice, we aimed at the possible deconstruction of stereotypes concerning race and ethnicity, and discussed the history of antiracist movements worldwide through film and music. More specifically, we emphasize the integration of linguistic and cultural aspects, and the development of lessons through the collaboration of teachers and students in search for a more critical and autonomous learning.

Apartheid in South Africa and the protests against it around the world are just one example of how the world reacted to segregation.

The process of raising students' awareness towards social justice is conducted via language. In our case, through the study of an additional language, English. To do so, we adopt a perspective of language as social practice as defined by Gee (2004), who claims that English learners learn social languages that are a variety of English, which are tailored towards specific circumstances. Johnson (2009) also explains that, from this perspective, language does not depart from disconnected linguistic aspects, but from conceptual meaning. In other words, we understand that language as social practice is the foundation for critical pedagogy to take place, as they are intertwined concepts (Ruhmke-Ramos, 2018). In the next section, we describe the context in which our set of activities was developed.

### **Our teaching and learning context**

Prior to teaching, we conducted a “needs analysis” as proposed by Benesch (1996). According to the author, needs analysis comprehends the identification and description “of existing elements of the target situation to provide the basis for curriculum development” (p. 723). At the time the activities described in this article were developed, we were a group of three female teachers, one black and two white (one of us on the autism spectrum). One worked as a short-term substitute teacher, and two were tenured teachers. All of us had Master's Degrees in Language and Literature, and we all had previous experience as teachers of English as an additional language. We shared a common interest in connecting educational practice and research, and wanted to improve our additional languages teaching skills in ways that we believe were meaningful to us and to our students.

Our teaching context was of a well-resourced public school of approximately 900 students from both elementary to high school. At the time, very few students were declared (by their parents) black or brown-skinned. Even the brown-skinned students did not declare themselves as being so, since this terminology only became more widespread with the later population census. Statistically, when the project and the set of activities were developed, the huge majority of our 91 students in the first year of high school identified as white, as can be seen in the table below.

**Table 1 - Students' color/race in 2011**

2011 – 1st year of high school (1º ano)		
Students' color/race	Number of students	Percentage
White	75	79,78%
Brown-skinned	3	3,2%
Black	3	3,2%



Indigenous	2	2,12%
Not stated	11	11,70% %
Total	94	100%

*Note.* Source: official reports from the institutions on the total number of students by race (Accessed in April, 2025).

This data contrasts with the declarations of race/color of the local population in the official census, showing that black and brown-skinned people do not access our school in the same proportions despite the efforts to publicize the access entry to school based on the affirmative action policy. In 2010, in our city, around 48% of the population declared themselves white, 29% brown-skinned, 7,6% black, 7,2% yellow (Asian), and 0,5% indigenous (IBGE, 2010).

Today, as we will see below, more students are being declared by their families as black, brown-skinned, or indigenous due to the affirmative action policy of the school. Still, the fact that there was a majority of white students in the first year of high school in 2011 (and there still is in 2025, as we will discuss) does not mean we should not deal with ethnic and racial diversity. We agree with Cavalleiro that the fight against racism is not a task of the black population alone (2024). Although the Brazilian population is considered multiethnic, the country's historical and social experience is marked by processes in which there is discrimination and hierarchy based on ethnic-racial belonging.

At the time the activities were developed, the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) served as guidelines for us, as they mentioned that some of the objectives of Elementary Education were: a) understanding citizenship as social and political participation, and b) knowing and valuing the plurality of Brazil's sociocultural heritage, positioning oneself against any form of discrimination (BRASIL, 1998). These parameters helped to confirm the importance of bringing up these issues in our classes. Since the struggles of social movements are longstanding, we have learned that we need to understand ongoing racism by looking at history and art.

Those parameters served as the macro level of the needs analysis, as this is an instrument to assist teachers in defining the socially relevant issues to be addressed in the classroom. In our context, starting from a macro level, we narrowed our focus down to our context. As there were no affirmative action policies at that time, we felt the need to create safe spaces to approach ethnicity as we taught English. Therefore, the micro level of the needs analysis resulted in the research project *Em cada Vereda uma Canção* ("On every path, a song") that will be described below as we present and discuss the set of activities we created for our English language classes.

### **"On every path, a song": Summarizing our method**

Together with the needs analysis described above, this study was developed in an ethnographic (Spradley, 1979) interpretivist fashion (Denzin; Lincoln,

2005) following a teacher-as-researcher perspective (Bortoni-Ricardo, 2008). The interpretative paradigm assumes the need to study social life, in this case, teaching and learning the English language in our school, in an attempt to interpret phenomena in relation to the meanings people bring to them. As for the ethnographic research, the instruments used to collect data were lesson plans, field notes, and group meeting discussions, in addition to the needs analysis of the groups taught. Within this approach, we ground our practice on a critical reflection on teaching (Freire, 1996/2021) as we developed the set of activities that will be described and discussed in Section 5.

The school project *Em cada Vereda uma Canção* (“On every path, a song”) aimed to revisit the world’s historical, social, and cultural memory through protest songs from different ethnic groups and historical periods. It stemmed from the study developed by Piana (2009, 2010), who researched the presence and function of songs in social movement organizations. The project encompassed interdisciplinary lessons taught to students enrolled in the first year of high school (range 15 to 18 years old) in a Brazilian federal public school. Integrating different school subjects towards a common goal through a long-term school project, however, presented some challenges. In the first year of the project, teachers of additional languages (English, Spanish, and German) worked together with teachers of sociology, philosophy, Portuguese, chemistry, history, and arts (drama).

To answer our research question “How can we offer a critical reflection based on studies about ethnic-racial relations in English language classes?”, we first describe the set of activities created as part of this school project. For the participation of the English language subject in the project, its scope was expanded from Latin American issues to include Apartheid in South Africa. The reason was twofold: (1) racism is a current, relevant issue that must be fought against in Brazil, and (2) the cultural and historical connections between Africa and America can provide rich material on which to base education for ethnic-racial relations. Moreover, we chose the first year of school because the school project integrated teachers from different courses who were willing to develop interdisciplinary classes at this level.

Once we had decided that we would deal with ethnic-racial relations within an intercultural and international perspective, we needed to develop the teaching project and the activities that would generate English as an additional language learning and critical development. At that time, we did not label our practice as critical pedagogy, but used literature focused on postmethod pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2006), communicative approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), intercultural approach (Corbett, 2003) and the development of didactic materials (Paiva, 2009) because PNLND was in its first edition. We did see language from a social practice perspective (Johnson, 2009) and a critical perspective, as we had in mind that learning languages and cultures could help to foster social justice.

Having considered our teaching and learning context, we designed our objectives within the theoretical approaches mentioned above and on education for ethnic-racial relations as recommended in the government documents. Then we established that we would design the activities to try to deconstruct stereotypes concerning South Africa, deepen knowledge of intercultural aspects, and emphasize the integration of language and culture. Teachers and students collaborated on the development of the activities through discussions that helped to reshape the details of the proposal. Our set of activities included the documentary “Apartheid did not die” (1988), the movie “Cry Freedom” (1987) directed by Richard Attenborough, the song “Biko” (1980) by the English singer Peter Gabriel and the song *Oração pela Libertação da África do Sul* (1985) by the Brazilian artist Gilberto Gil.

To develop the activities, we used different media content to trigger students’ interest and build their acquaintance with the theme. Students produced essays, comments, posters, and some guided research throughout the period of the project. Next, we came up with a 5-part set of activities and worked on them for 10 weeks (which corresponded to 20 hours of English lessons). The five interconnected activities of the project were:

**Table 2 - Activities designed for the project**

Activities	Goals
“Apartheid Did Not Die” (documentary)	To introduce and contextualize the theme; To research get to know Apartheid: (a) its main impact on the world; (b) actions done to stop it (United Nations, governments, world leaders, pop stars, religious leaders); (c) the Brazilian participation (movements, protest marches, songs, TV programs and documentaries); (d) and the current situation. To practice the description of events in the past, make comparisons, express hope, express current situations.
Cry Freedom (movie)	To identify the conflict, main characters and historical events in South Africa; To practice writing by summarizing the movie To reread and rewrite their own text after feedback in order to reflect and rethink ideas;
Biko (Song)	To develop oral comprehension; To recall previous facts about Apartheid seen in the movie Cry Freedom To establish context for the analysis of the two songs in this set of activities;

Oração pela Libertação da África do Sul (Song)	To raise awareness on mechanisms of dominance used by whites, such as marginalization of black people’s language and religion; To identify intertextuality between the genres of the song and prayer; To identify links between the song in English and in Portuguese;
Social issues in the 80s	To describe the situation in the 1980s and its main impacts on the lives of people around the world, especially in Brazil; To establish a parallel between the situation in the 1980s and current events; To explore the issue through protest songs; To create visual material to raise the school community’s awareness on the issue researched;

These activities were the starting point for the creation of a research group entitled *Integração de Saberes na Educação Básica* (Integration of Knowledge in Basic Education), which proposed an outreach project called “Baobás”. This outreach project lasted for two years and promoted activities that integrated school and community during Black Consciousness Week. Additionally, we sought to advance the discussion on race and ethnicity and the development of activities about ethnic-racial relations on a daily basis. All these actions were necessary considering the socio-political situation we identified at our school.

**Figure 1** - Logo of the event promoted by the outreach project Baobás - Ethnicity in debate



Source: Authors

**Development of activities in class, students’ reactions, and contributions**

This set of activities asked us to reflect upon the experience of black people in South Africa in the 1980s, the historical events surrounding segregation, the world’s concern and actions against the regime, as well as the portrayal of Apartheid in different media content: documentary, film, and songs.

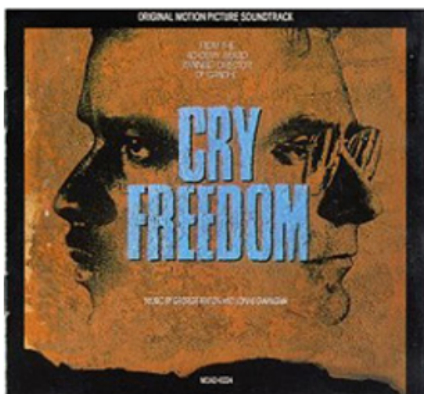
When we proposed the activities to students, there was some initial resistance. Students asked us why they were learning such themes in an English class if they were to learn about Apartheid in a History or Geography class. We explained that the courses intertwined and would contribute to each other as part of an interdisciplinary project. To set up the mood for the project, we started by asking students about their previous knowledge of Apartheid. We gave them a few minutes to express their ideas. Then, we asked them to try to see similarities between Apartheid in South Africa and racism in Brazil. We observed that students' knowledge of both topics was limited, a fact that reinforced the relevance of studying the topic.

To trigger knowledge exchange, we watched the documentary "Apartheid Did Not Die" (1998). As the video is in English and it has no subtitles, we asked students to analyze its title and take notes of the main ideas they could understand from dialogue and images. Although some students had more difficulties with English than others, all of them were able to grasp the main idea of the documentary and discuss the implications of the title and images. By the time the activity was completed, we had set the mood for the rest of the project. We could, then, discuss the severity of Apartheid with students and raise awareness about racism in our country. Together, we observed that we are not free from racial prejudice in Brazil.

In the second part of the project, students watched the movie "Cry Freedom." As it is a long movie, it took us three weeks to finish watching it. In order to try to keep the flow of the movie despite the interruptions, at each new class we asked students what they remembered from the last part they had watched. We used this moment to highlight parts of the narrative and to inquire about their interpretation of the facts they had seen so far.

**Figure 2** - Excerpt of *Cry Freedom* movie activity with image of the movie poster (1987)

#### MOVIE ACTIVITY – CRY FREEDOM (1987) - (APARTHEID)



*Cry Freedom* is the story of South Africa's freedom fighter, Stephen Biko. An hour or so into the movie, Stephen Biko (Denzel Washington) dies and it changes into a story about how a white South African newspaper editor, Donald Woods (Kevin Kline), flees the South African police to publish the truth.

Adapted from: [http://www.ram.org/ramblings/movies/cry\\_freedom.html](http://www.ram.org/ramblings/movies/cry_freedom.html)

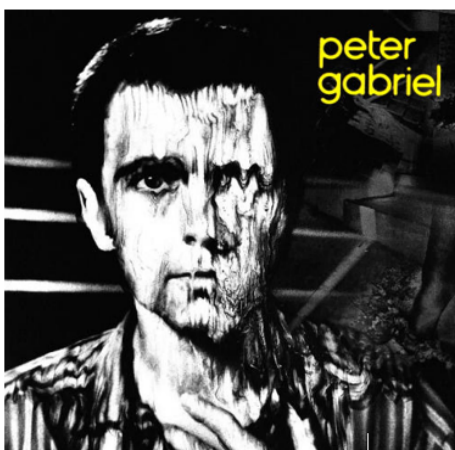
Source: Authors

After watching the movie, we asked them to write a summary about it in English, including the major historical events, conflicts, and characters. This was the moment to practice language skills. Students wrote the summary in the computer lab with the help of teachers and student-teachers who were doing part of their practice teaching in one of the groups. The teachers revised the drafts, and students were asked to rewrite their texts based on the comments and observations. In the third part of the project, students received a handout with the song “Biko” by Peter Gabriel, along with a short biography of this songwriter and singer.

We assumed students would not know about Peter Gabriel because of their age and the context that surrounded the production of the song. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gabriel was involved in several human rights and environmental activities and expressed his thoughts as an innovative musician, writer, and video maker. We then asked students how much of the information provided in the biography they already knew, followed by questions regarding new information in the text. Once they had discussed who the singer was and what his role had been in the protest against Apartheid, we moved to the next step, the song itself. In order to call students’ attention to the lyrics and provide them with oral comprehension practice, we decided to scramble some of the song lines so that students would listen to it and put the words in order.

**Figure 3** - Excerpt of the “Biko” song activity with the image of Peter Gabriel (self-titled album, 1980 - cover art)

#### SONG ACTIVITY – 1 PETER GABRIEL’S BIKO



1. September '77
2. Port Elizabeth weather fine
3. It was business as usual
4. Police /619/ Room /In

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5. Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko
6. Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko
7. Yihla Moja, Yihla Moja
8. The man is dead
9. The man is dead
10. sleep /I / to / at /When /night / try

---

11. I can only dream in red
12. white / world /is /black /The /outside /and

---

13. With only one colour dead
14. Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko

Source: Authors

When we proposed to listen to the song *Biko* with the classroom, we were not sure what the students’ reaction would be to it, since this song was very different from the music they usually listened to. As the song started, to our surprise, with the chorus of people mourning Biko’s death, students associated the singing with

the scenes from the movie, showing engagement and interest in the lyrics. They connected the first stanza of the song (“September ‘77”) with the scene from the movie “Cry Freedom” that portrayed the cell that imprisoned Stephen Biko, and where he eventually died after brutal torture.

When they had finished listening to and unscrambling some lines of the song, they asked about the meaning of “*Yihla Moja*,” words that also appear in the movie. Instead of giving them the answer, we took advantage of the fact that they had computers in class and asked them to search for their meaning and the language they correspond to, reminding them of the different official languages in South Africa. After a few minutes, they came up with the expression “come spirit” and found out that these words are in Xhosa, one of the official languages of South Africa. Thus, they could immediately explain the meaning of the expression, even though the websites they researched were in English.

At the end of this activity, it was clear to teachers and students that using an English song in class meant much more than only practicing listening or having fun. Students came up with the understanding that cultural and historical facts permeate the creation of songs, and a song can be full of symbolic meaning. We then reinforced the idea that music can rebuild and resignify concepts and traditions and transform previous knowledge. We also brought to the debate Piana’s argument (2010) that protest songs (or any songs produced within social movements) are relevant because culture permeates these movements even before they become icons of social and political struggle.

In the second part of the song activities, we introduced *Oração pela libertação da África do Sul* by Gilberto Gil. As this song is Portuguese, we decided to focus on Afro-Brazilian culture, more specifically on the religious traces present in the song. We asked students to research the different vocabulary of the song, and then we examined the song’s genre. We asked students if they could identify elements in the song that characterized it as a prayer and if they could relate it to any Brazilian religion.

**Figure 4** - Excerpt of the *Oração pela Libertação da África do Sul* song activity

## SONG ACTIVITY - 2

GILBERTO GIL'S *ORAÇÃO PELA LIBERTAÇÃO DA ÁFRICA DO SUL* & PETER GABRIEL'S *BIKO***Oração pela libertação da África do Sul****Gilberto Gil**

Se o rei zulu já não pode andar nu  
 Se o rei zulu já não pode andar nu  
 Salve a batina do bispo tutu  
 Salve a batina do bispo tutu  
 Ó deus do céu da África do sul  
 Do céu azul da África do sul  
 Tornai vermelho todo sangue azul  
 Tornai vermelho todo sangue azul  
 Já que vermelho tem sido  
 Todo sangue derramado  
 Todo corpo  
 Todo irmão, chicoteado, yê

Senhor da selva africana  
 Irmã da selva americana  
 Nossa selva brasileira, de tupã

A. Research on the Internet about these words from the lyric "Oração pela libertação da África do Sul":

1. Bishop Tutu- \_\_\_\_\_
2. Zulu- \_\_\_\_\_
3. Oxalufã- \_\_\_\_\_
4. Yihla Moja- \_\_\_\_\_

B. Gilberto Gil names his song "Oração Pela Libertação da África do Sul." Write down words from the lyrics that may characterize it as a prayer.

Salve, \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Source: Authors

In one of the follow-up questions, we explored some of the mechanisms used to marginalize groups of people, such as language, religion, costumes, clothing, music, food, beliefs, dance, age, gender, class, and ethnicity (Corbett, 2003). We asked students which songwriter points out the erasure of religion of the discriminated group. By comparing the two songs, students could understand that both songs were portraying the same topic from different perspectives in different languages, with several elements in common.

While the first song described Stephen Biko's death and what came after it, the second focused on the religious discrimination and the imposition of a religion on a social group. By comparing Peter Gabriel's song in English with Gilberto Gil's in Portuguese, we observed the similarities between Apartheid in South Africa and racism in Brazil. They used English to describe events in the past, make comparisons, express hope, and discuss the current political situation in both countries. However, students did not notice the religious aspects of Gilberto Gil's song. But if the same activity were applied today, the answers could be different, considering the increased publicity surrounding the persecution of African-based religions in Brazil and Gil's growing popularity after his 80th birthday and last tour in 2025.

Lastly, we developed some guidelines for the students' assessment project. They described some social issues of the 1980s and their impact on people around the world. They analyzed the racial issue in Brazil, establishing a parallel between South Africa in the 1980s and our reality in 2011. In groups, students chose two songs, one in English and one in Portuguese, whose theme had to do with the topics they were investigating. To contextualize the songs, they summarized the artists' biographies. For the English song, they were asked to prepare one activity with the lyrics as a task for their classmates. Finally, in



groups, they created posters to illustrate the song they chose. The presentation of their final projects was assessed by means of a group assessment tool in which students had the criteria describing what the presentations should include. This way, they could not only understand the pedagogical reasoning behind each activity but also practice fairness by assigning grades without being influenced by friendship, so they could be objective.

If, on the one hand, there was some resistance in the first stages of the project, by the end of it, we could clearly see students' engagement with the whole set of activities. They were particularly touched by the film, as they knew about Nelson Mandela but were unfamiliar with the figure of Steve Biko. During the song activities, when we dealt with the intertextuality between protest songs abroad and in Brazil, students demonstrated great interest, and the activities were well received, calling our attention to the high levels of engagement with it.

### **Now and then: rethinking our antiracist practice**

The activities described above represented the beginning of our collective practices to promote critical education for ethnic-racial relations. They meant an important step in our ongoing training as teachers. Having discussed our framework and described the development of the activities during our classes, in this section we refer back to the main question posed in this study: How can we offer a critical reflection based on studies about ethnic-racial relations in English language classes today? Moreover, we add a present concern: How would we adapt this project to the present day within our context? Examining each teaching and learning circumstance is crucial to answering these questions, as we have done in section 3 and expand now.

Nowadays, our school has a policy of affirmative action, unlike the time when the project was carried out. Table 1 previously displayed students' color/race, showing that in 2011 only 6,4% of students declared themselves to be brown-skinned or black. Today, despite the smaller number of students enrolled in the 1st year of high school, 24% of them are declared brown-skinned or black, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 - Students' color/race in 2025**

2025 – 1st year of high school (1º ano) - Students' color/race		
	Number of students	Percentage
White	55	73%
Brown-skinned	13	17,3,2%
Black	5	6,6%
Yellow (eastern origin)	1	1,4%

Indigenous	0	0%
Not stated	1	1,4% %
Total	75	100%

*Note.* Source: official reports from the institution on the total number of students by race (Accessed in April, 2025).

This piece of evidence, together with current reports of school incidents involving racism and current legislation, highlights the importance of developing pedagogical projects about ethnic-racial relations to this day. We understand that when people demonstrate or declare their racial affiliation, they begin to transform their environment by demanding that their identity be recognized through curricula, daily school activities, teaching, and learning materials. An example of changes in school materials is the collection of didactic books *Black Matters Matter* (Santos, 2022), which deals with complex concepts such as identity, culture, ancestry, and diversity. The demand for recognition also reflects in the number of reports of racism in schools. With evidence of racism permeating relationships, racial literacy becomes an urgent matter that requires ongoing reflection and training of the professionals working in the school.

In adapting or creating new activities to foster ethnic-racial education today, it would also be fruitful to explore with students the idea of “whiteness”. The concept of whiteness has been little studied in Brazil, but it seems fundamental to enrich the ethnic-racial debate. In English, the complete term is “critical whiteness studies”, presenting multiple layers and local variations (Schuchman, 2022). Addressing whiteness means bringing white people to the center of the debate, examining their responsibility on issues of racial violence (Bento, 2021). This is why the activities proposed should be adapted taking into consideration changes in students and the school’s reality, and recent debates on race and social relations.

These ideas do not need to be developed by means of an institutional research project. They can be included in our regular school courses, as students watch videos and listen to music as part of their daily lives. School subjects can benefit from including students’ music and video preferences to set the grounds for the development of critical thinking for ethnic-racial relations towards the promotion of social justice. Furthermore, our school adopts an inclusion perspective. This means that, in addition to affirmative actions, there are students whose enrollment is the consequence of targets set for special education from a social model of inclusion. For this reason, we suggest that the documentary used at the beginning of the project needs to include subtitles or a presentation on key concepts for all students to follow and participate in discussions. These adaptations may benefit not only students with disabilities, but also students with different English language proficiency levels.

Another aspect we should consider for future practice is the length and complexity of the activities. Students have been demonstrating shorter focus

times and higher degrees of frustration on a daily basis (Haidt, 2024). For this reason, we should assess whether it would still be possible to watch whole movies and to what extent it would be necessary to create smaller tasks to be completed while watching them. When students were required to write summaries and create presentations with the aim of revisiting their writings, we would probably divide each written production into smaller tasks.

Nowadays, students are no longer permitted to use their phones at school unless it is strictly for pedagogical purposes - and some do not bring their phones to school. The school does not have a computer lab anymore for students to do research. For these reasons, smaller tasks would be more appropriate, as students would be able to interact with their peers and try to learn with each other.

Regarding the theme of the project, we would perhaps maintain the main topics of the activities (protest songs, racism, history, and culture), adapting them to our current reality: students with different needs and proficiency levels, short attention span, and the absence of technological devices. We would also ground our proposal in more updated discussions within critical language pedagogy and in anti-racist education (including the concept of whiteness), reminding ourselves that, rather than being fixed, teaching and learning methods should aim at freeing students, teachers, and society in general from unreflected attitudes.

Moreover, in recreating activities to foster ethnic-racial education, we would have to work more with historical issues. We would keep developing interdisciplinary work together with history and geography teachers, as we did at the time, to have the necessary historical and geographical contextualization. Perhaps in our school today, this proposal would be more appropriate for groups of the second year of high school, when geopolitics is studied. A possibility to work with first-year high school students would be within the topic “English around the World”. We could propose a research project on South Africa, a country in which English is one of the official languages. Based on what students would have researched about the country, we could gather information about history and geography, apartheid, the figure of Nelson Mandela, and other personalities such as Desmond Tutu.

### **Final remarks**

Drawing on Freire’s principles that teaching requires critical reflection on practice, in this article, we have described and re-examined our own practice. Looking back at our first collective project, we observed that our own development as teachers has changed, and luckily, educational policies have changed as well. Today, more initiatives promote student belonging within the school environment than in 2011, but racism is still a major issue faced by school communities and society as a whole.

To develop the activities described in this article, we looked at the macro level (Brazilian government documents, guidelines, and laws) and the micro

level (school context, declarations of race/color, etc.). Despite the majority of students in our school being declared as white, we believe that approaching social-ethnic relations in an additional language classroom also means debating about whiteness nowadays. Our work included drawing on students' previous knowledge and challenging them, as together we negotiated new information. The resistance they demonstrated at first was replaced by enthusiasm as they were able to establish connections among the different resources used in the classroom. In the end, students became agents as they actively engaged in the final project, researching, presenting, and assessing relevant production to their classmates. As a critical reflection on our teaching practice, we observed in this article the development of critical education by articulating a socially relevant topic, ethnic-racial relations, to the subject we were in charge of teaching, that is, English as an additional/foreign language.

Dealing with socially relevant issues in an additional language classroom encompasses a perspective of language as social practice, as its activities promote agency and critical thinking towards citizenship. To do so, we need to think about learning goals through language. This means that we should tailor the activities to our students' needs as well as to teaching approaches that favor learning. If we were to redo this project today, we would, for instance, include more images, explore other music and video references, organize each activity into smaller tasks with shorter instructions, encourage pair work, and focus on one ability at a time. We would also compare political figures of the past and present, for example, which South African personalities were in the media in the 1980s, and which are now? What are these people's thoughts (and actions) towards ethnic-racial and human rights issues?

Before deciding to deal with social-ethnic relations in language classes, we understand that a careful needs analysis should be thoroughly conducted with students. Relevant questions in this investigation could be: What are the current issues faced by students regarding social-ethnic relations? What are their feelings about it? How do they relate these to teaching and learning materials? It feels important to us to measure students' openness to learn about other cultures so that the teaching of additional languages is not restricted to the "safe" linguistic aspects of communication. Moreover, as agents of transformation, teachers need to have the courage to propose debating sensitive issues with students. We are aware that structural changes do not happen overnight; they take time and require the agency of people involved in such initiatives.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT:** Datasets related to this research will be available upon contact with the corresponding author.

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## End notes

1. The first census was conducted in 1872 and aimed at estimating numbers concerning slavery. “Brown-skinned”, the term used as a racial category since then, was replaced by “mixed” in 1890. In 1940, the category “race” was replaced by “color”. The classifications like “white”, “brown-skinned” and “yellow” were applied by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) from 1940 to 1960. The color matter was excluded from the census in 1970, but black movements forced the Institute to resume that in 1991. As a partial victory of the black movements, the categories “black” (preto) and brown-skinned (pardo) were grouped under the broader term “Blacks”. Daflon, V. T. (2018). *Tão longe, tão perto: identidades, discriminação e estereótipos de pretos e pardos no Brasil*. Mauad Editora Ltda.

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