

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF CRITICAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN BRAZIL

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Abstract

The growing interest in critical English language education research within the Brazilian context highlights the need for a systematic review aimed at mapping the state of the art. I used Google Scholar to identify 143 articles which discussed the topic and met the inclusion criteria. The review shows that the growing prominence of critical English language education, linked to broader educational orientations and the rise of Critical Applied Linguistics in Brazil, emphasizes discussions on “critical themes”, particularly issues affecting minority groups. The review highlights a lack of research on the systematic teaching of language, though existing studies show notable progress. The findings can support educational policymakers in reimagining approaches to teaching language for social justice, grounded in a theme-based curriculum, moving away from the current model that emphasizes skills development.

Keywords: language; education; social justice.

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Introduction

Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1968, demonstrates that educational perspectives aimed at social transformation are not a recent phenomenon. Nevertheless, research on critical English language education in Brazil began to expand significantly only in the 2010s, reaching its peak in the 2020s. This growth has led a few scholars to conduct research to understand the state of the art in the field.

For example, Almeida and Sabota (2021) revisit three key concepts from critical pedagogy — dialogue, collaboration, and empowerment — offering reinterpretations based on contemporary authors, particularly those associated with Critical Applied Linguistics. Their study contributes to expanding these concepts and encourages a rethinking of the role of English teachers and their relationships with colleagues and students. Similarly, the literature review conducted by Oliveira, Souza and Leite (2022) aims to understand the foundational principles of what is referred to as critical education and its approach in classrooms. The authors identify major strands within critical language education and discuss the relevance of Freire's contributions, with an emphasis on critical literacies. Soares (2021) mapped and analyzed conceptions of multimodal reading in English language teaching in Brazil, drawing from theses and dissertations defended between 2009 and 2019. Based on the 49 studies analyzed, the results indicate significant growth in academic production in the field, particularly in critical approaches. The findings also point to an expanded view of reading as a situated, collaborative and critical practice.

By addressing relevant questions about critical English language education, the few existing literature reviews on the subject pave the way for further research. Accordingly, I used Google Scholar to select articles that allowed me to answer the following research questions: What do Brazilian studies reveal about critical English language education? In what ways do these studies approach the teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources with the goal of promoting social justice? Each of these questions will be further addressed in specific sections, following a description of the key concepts that support this article and the presentation of the methods.

A perspective on English language education

While one of the main characteristics of systematic literature reviews is to minimize researcher bias (Newman & Gough, 2020), the political, subjective nature of what it means to be “critical” (Pennycook, 2001) allows me to openly acknowledge certain assumptions that guide this work. The first research question I pose implies, at the very least, that I believe there are relevant Brazilian contributions that deserve to be examined. The second question reveals I consider meaningful to approach the teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources with the goal of promoting social justice. In fact, as a language teacher

working across both basic and university levels, I have increasingly turned my attention to critical perspectives. On this journey, I have been seeking ways to implement an approach that fully integrates the systematic teaching of language with discussions on social (in)justice. In this section, I introduce key notions from which I did not completely detach myself during the data analysis process.

I draw upon scholars who recognize that language extends beyond its verbal and monolingual dimension, encompassing one's dynamic linguistic repertoire (Jordão, 2019). Therefore, the term "language" used throughout this article — whether in reference to "English language" or otherwise — should be understood as an integrated activity of meaning-making, interaction, and social and political relations extending beyond notions of "standard" language and the "native speaker" construct.

While I align with Freire's (2015) advocacy for a critical education that challenges social inequalities, I also embrace the perspectives of Critical Applied Linguistics (Pennycook, 2001), which broadens the concept of "critical" to encompass not only power relations based on social class but also those affecting other marginalized groups. Furthermore, while Freire's approach to teaching language as means of equipping students with tools to resist social injustice is invaluable, it is also essential to raise awareness about the nature of language itself. This includes examining who has access to certain languages — particularly English, a dominant language — how language shapes and is shaped by identity (Moita Lopes, 2006), and the broader sociopolitical implications of linguistic choices.

Therefore, by "critical English language education", I refer to the (de/re) construction of knowledge mobilized in English language classrooms by both teachers and students, as they attempt to forge pathways for (self)understanding and social/self-transformation through language, with a focus on social justice. This implies a recognition of society as inherently unjust, where certain people are marginalized based on their identities, ethnicities, origins, and social roles, among other factors. This notion of critical English language education will be further developed throughout the analysis of the articles.

Methods

As the rigor and transparency of a systematic literature review process help minimize the risk of selecting references based solely on the author's bias, it is essential to establish predefined criteria for selecting the material to be analyzed as well as to incorporate the full body of relevant literature into the data discussion (Newman & Gough, 2020).

To conduct the review, I used Google Scholar, an academic search engine, applying two search combinations in Portuguese: "Inglês AND crítico OR crítica" and "Língua inglesa AND crítico OR crítica". These phrases translate roughly to "English AND critical" and "English language AND critical", respectively, and the search was restricted to article titles. No publication date limits were applied. The combination "English AND critical" yielded 239 results,

while “English language AND critical” returned 264 results. The results from both searches were imported into spreadsheets and then merged into a single document. Subsequently, book chapters, master’s theses, doctoral dissertations, conference papers, non-open access publications and duplicate records were excluded, leaving a total of 205 entries.

To determine whether the articles were relevant to the proposed research questions, I first reviewed their titles. This initial screening led to the exclusion of 50 articles that, although they contained the search terms, were not related to the research topic, leaving 155 articles. An example of excluded titles includes “Critical Period and Phonological Acquisition of English by Brazilian Speakers”. Next, I read the abstracts of the remaining 155 articles, which resulted in the exclusion of 12 additional works. Nine of them did not address the critical perspective on English language teaching, and three reported research conducted in non-Brazilian contexts. As a result, 143 articles remained.

Tables 1 and 2 clarify the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Table 1 — Inclusion/exclusion criteria (first research question)

Criteria	Reason
Exclusion	
Book chapters and conference papers	Typically not subjected to blind peer review.
Graduate theses	Exceed manageable size for the research scope.
Non-open access publications	Not accessible to the researcher.
Non-Brazilian productions	Do not meet the study’s geographical focus.
Inclusion	
Articles	Usually undergo blind peer review and are of manageable length.
All academic journals	Recognition of all scholarly contributions, regardless of journal impact.
All theoretical perspectives	General understanding of the field of “critical”.

Source: the author

Excluding articles that do not address the Brazilian context helped narrow the focus to a more specific setting and made the dataset more manageable. The inclusion of only open-access articles had minimal impact on the results, as most Brazilian journals are affiliated with public universities and are generally freely accessible. Including articles from all academic journals enabled the incorporation of work by non-doctoral authors, including schoolteachers, enriching the dataset with reports of pedagogical interventions. Finally, accepting all theoretical perspectives on “critical” helped minimize bias originated from my own theoretical orientation.

Table 2 — Inclusion/exclusion criteria (second research question)

Criteria	Reason
Exclusion	
Concept of “critical” not aligned with social justice.	Not relevant for answering the research question.
Inclusion	
Focus on the teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources.	Central to the research question.

Source: the author

The alignment between the selected studies and my theoretical perspective — grounded in a social justice approach to language education — allowed me to conduct a more in-depth and meaningful analysis concerning the second research question.

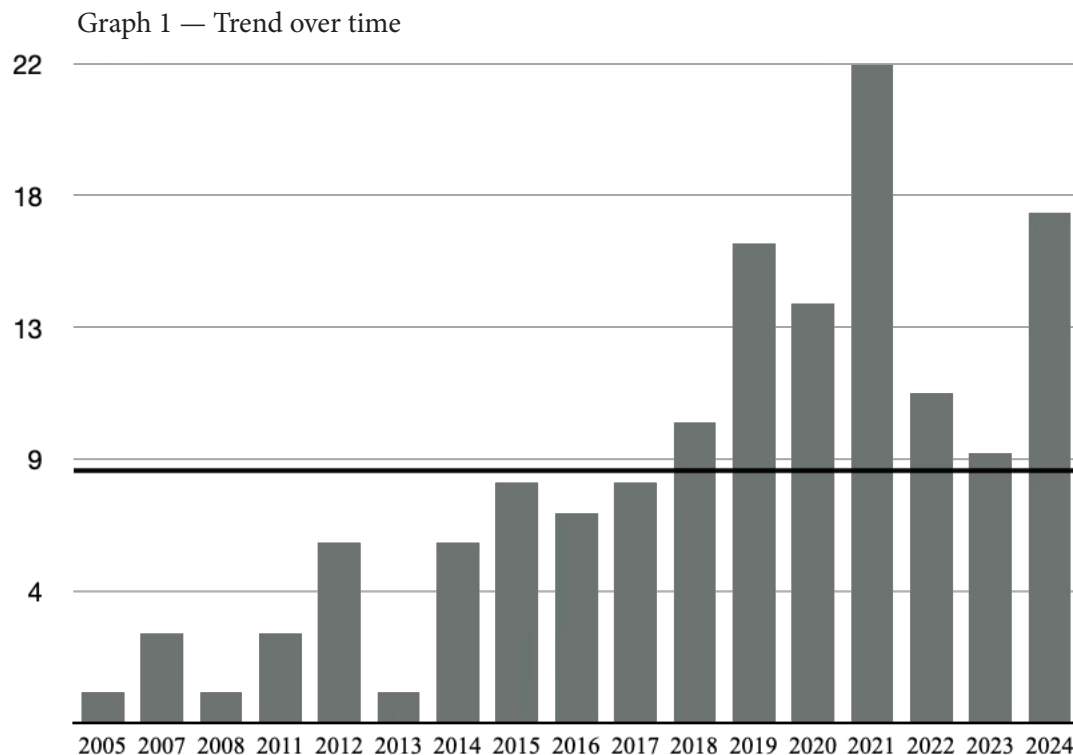
I read through all 143 identified articles. In addition to the data already available from the documents imported from Google Scholar (author, title, journal, volume, issue, pages, year), I added the following information to the spreadsheet: article access link, comment, noun modified by the adjective “critical”, methodological approach, central theme, and an additional note for those articles to be used in answering the second research question. Finally, I conducted a second full reading of the 13 works related to the second research question.

Discussion

The data discussion is organized into two parts, each addressing one of the research questions of this study. The first section offers a panoramic view of the articles, highlighting central themes, approaches, and theoretical frameworks that support research in the field. The second section narrows the lens to provide a zoomed-in perspective of how issues of social justice intersect with the systematic teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources.

Trends in critical English education in Brazil (2005-2024)

The temporal analysis of academic production on the topic of critical English language education, based on the 143 results found on Google Scholar, reveals a significant upward trend over time, as showed in graph 1.



Source: the author

Although Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was first published in 1968, no articles prior to 2005 were found, possibly due to the fact that the teaching of an additional language became mandatory in the Brazilian school curriculum only in 1996, following the enactment of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education [*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional*].

Between 2005 and 2011, there is a sporadic production, with only eight publications in this period. Such a small number suggests that the topic was not widely explored in the Brazilian academic literature, raising the question of whether the small volume of articles reflects the dominance of more traditional approaches to English language education in Brazil until the mid-2010s or the insufficient dissemination of critical perspectives in educational contexts.

From 2012 onward, there is a gradual increase in the number of publications. Between 2012 and 2017, the total rises to 36 articles. The period from 2018 to 2024 marks the peak in production ($n = 99$), with a high point in 2021 ($n = 22$). Since 2018, production has remained above the average ($n = 8$), suggesting that interest in critical English language education is still relevant and well established in the field.

The growing interest in research on the critical approaches to English language education in Brazil may be related to and influenced by factors such as contemporary debates on social (in)justice, the advancement of educational movements focused on equity and inclusion, and the strengthening of research in Critical Applied Linguistics.

For instance, Gomes (2011) highlights several advances in the field of ethno-racial diversity within Brazilian educational policies — among them, Law 10.639, sanctioned in 2003, which made the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in the school curriculum mandatory. The author emphasizes that these achievements are directly linked to the historical struggles of the Black population for a more equitable and representative education. In 2008, Brazilian Law 11.645 made the inclusion of Indigenous History and Culture in the school curriculum also mandatory. It is noteworthy that 13 of the articles found explicitly reference, in their titles, terms directly related to Black identity ($n = 9$ — between 2012 and 2024) or Indigenous peoples ($n = 4$ — between 2015 and 2024), highlighting the centrality of these themes within these works. In addition, the publication of Curriculum Guidelines for High School [*Orientações Curriculares para o Ensino Médio*], which emphasizes the importance of a critical English language education that questions discourses within social practices, contributed to the growing interest in critical perspectives in Brazil (Mattos & Pascoal, 2019).

Additionally, the increasing number of publications converges with the strengthening of research in Critical Applied Linguistics in Brazil. In 2001, Alastair Pennycook's influential book, *Critical applied linguistics: a critical introduction*, emerged in response to the perceived limitations of traditional applied linguistics, which often prioritized technical solutions and a stance of neutrality, while failing to address the need for transformative action in confronting issues of power, ideology and social justice. In Brazil, the publication of *Towards an indisciplinable and anti-disciplinary applied linguistics* [*Por uma Linguística Aplicada Indisciplinar*], edited by Luiz Paulo da Moita Lopes in 2006, represents a pivotal moment in the development of a critical approach to applied linguistics. The book consolidates a perspective that challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries, advocating instead for a politically engaged and epistemologically plural view committed to social transformation. Moita Lopes and the contributors to the volume align with a critical orientation, situating applied linguistics as a field that must actively interrogate power relations and contribute to social justice through transformative praxis. It is no coincidence that Pennycook and Moita Lopes are among the most frequently cited authors in the articles found on Google Scholar, as will be discussed later in this section.

Finally, many of the articles present research conducted during the authors' master's or doctoral studies. As Soares (2021) highlights in her literature review, the increase in academic research between 2009 and 2019 is directly linked to the expansion of graduate programs in Brazil — a development driven by public policies implemented during the Workers' Party administrations.

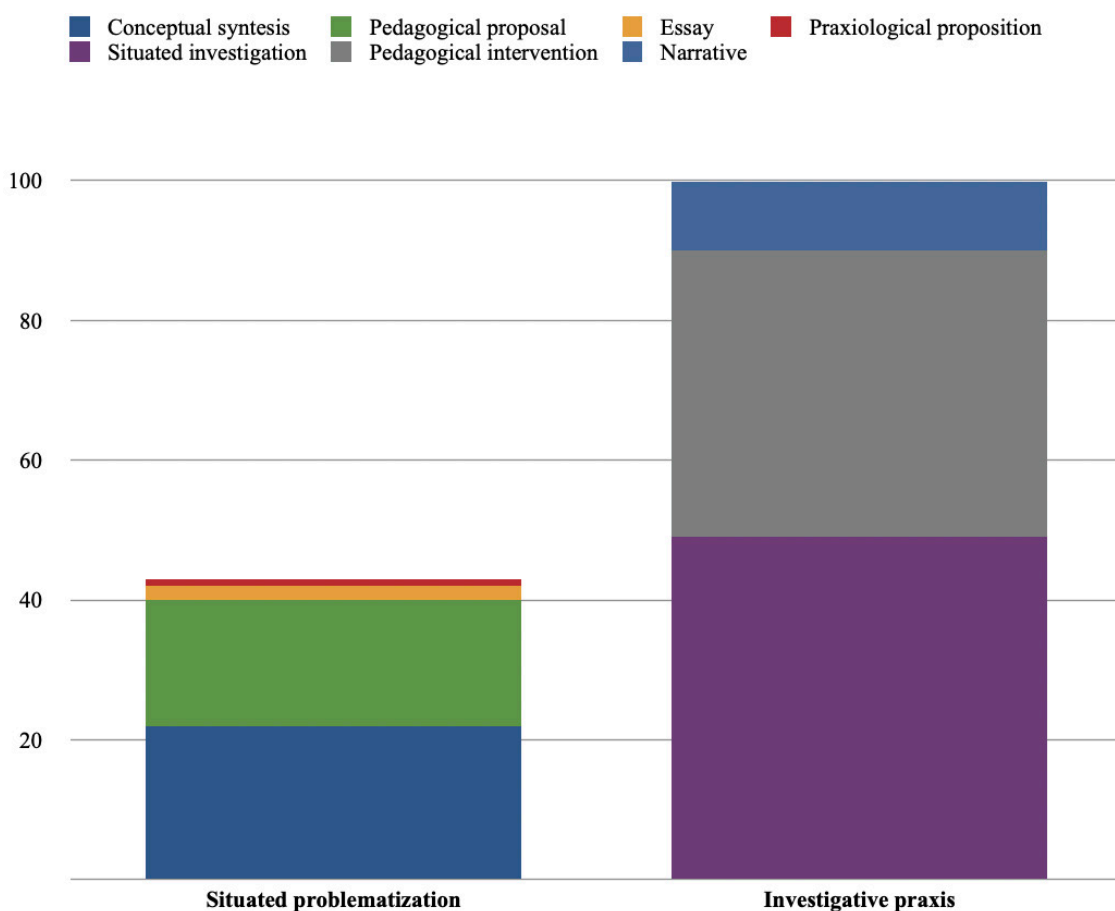
The temporal analysis shows that critical English language education has evolved from a marginal topic in Brazil to a rising and now consolidated field within educational/applied linguistics research. The trend indicates continued interest, likely driven by contemporary demands for more reflective, inclusive and politically engaged pedagogical praxis. The years in which the articles were

published coincide with the enactment of educational laws and the strengthening of Critical Applied Linguistics in Brazil.

Methodological approaches

The methodological approaches of the 143 articles were organized into two categories: “situated problematization” ($n = 43$) and “investigative praxis” ($n = 100$), thus avoiding a separatist view between theory and practice. For each category, subcategories were created based on the articles reviewed, as illustrated in graph 2.

Graph 2 — Methodological approaches



Source: the author

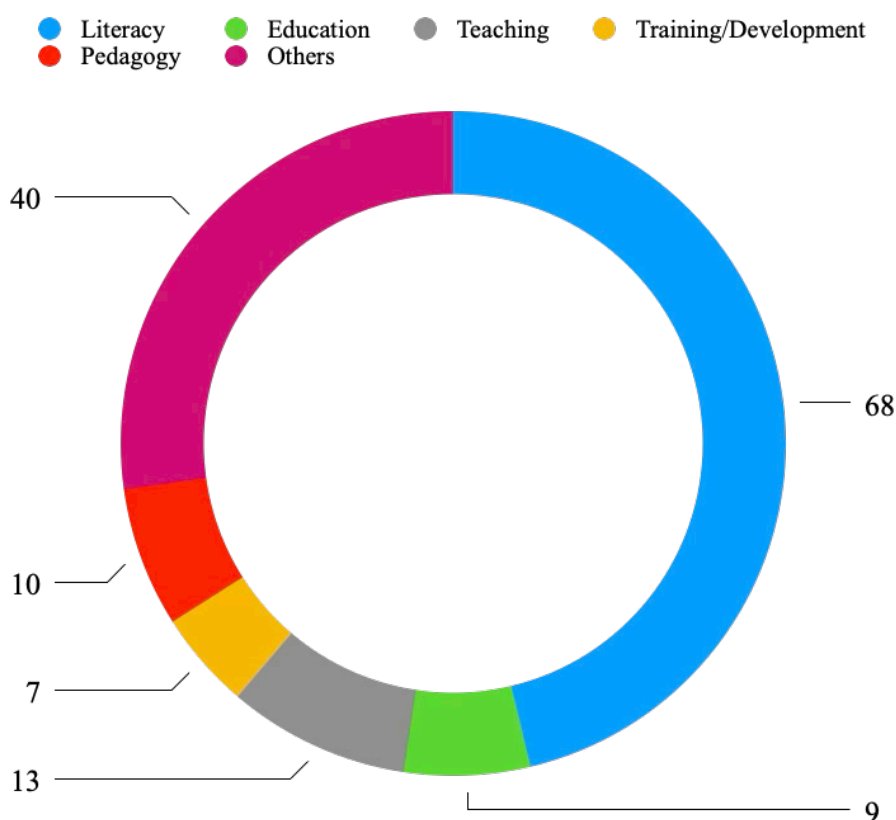
The most common approaches were: situated investigation ($n = 49$) – which includes analyses of textbooks, educational legislation, teachers’ conceptions of critical education, among other aspects; pedagogical intervention ($n = 41$) – involving English language education in both classroom settings and non-formal educational spaces; conceptual synthesis ($n = 22$) – characterized by the articulation of different concepts and bibliographic research; and pedagogical proposal ($n = 18$) – referring to the design of teaching activities proposed as suggestions, but not yet implemented in actual educational contexts.

This categorization aims to provide the reader with an overview of the articles found, but it is not a static structure. For example, some articles analyzed English textbooks and, based on this analysis, proposed activities for critical education. In these cases, the choice of certain subcategory was determined by the emphasis of the article, either through the author's explicit statements or, in the absence of that, through my own analysis.

Meanings of “critical”

Since the term “critical” — one of the keywords used in the search — is most commonly employed as an adjective, examining the nouns it modifies proved useful for gaining an overview of the field. As described in the methods section of this article, the search was conducted in Portuguese — a language in which adjectives are gendered. That is, “crítico” (masculine) and “crítica” (feminine) are both used depending on the noun they modify, whereas English uses the single form “critical”. The term “critical” appeared as a noun in two article titles and as an adjective in 141 article titles. Some titles included the adjective “critical” twice, which highlights the centrality of critical perspectives and may reflect layered theoretical frameworks – for example, the integration of critical literacy with critical teacher education. Graph 3 illustrates the frequency of noun usage.

Graph 3 — Noun-adjective combinations



Source: the author

The most frequently occurring noun modified by the adjective “critical” was “literacy” (*letramento*), with 68 instances — accounting for 46% of all cases. There were several variations with the noun “literacy”: critical literacy ($n = 52$) [*letramento crítico*], racial critical literacy ($n = 4$) [*letramento racial crítico*], multimodal critical literacy ($n = 3$) [*letramento multimodal crítico*], critical visual literacy ($n = 3$) [*letramento crítico visual* or *letramento visual crítico*], digital critical literacy ($n = 2$) [*letramento crítico digital* or *letramento digital crítico*], critical theatrical literacy ($n = 2$) [*letramento teatral crítico*], critical and multimodal literacy ($n = 1$) [*letramento crítico e multimodal*] and critical emotional literacy ($n = 1$) [*letramento emocional crítico*]. This strong frequency suggests that critical literacy has become a dominant framework within research on English language education in the context under review, inspired by theorists such as Paulo Freire and Clarissa Menezes Jordão – two of the most frequently cited authors, as discussed later in this section – emphasizing learners’ engagement with sociopolitical realities through language.

The term “teaching” [*ensino*] appeared in 13 titles, without variations. The noun “pedagogy” [*pedagogia*] was mentioned in 10 titles: critical pedagogy ($n = 6$) [*pedagogia crítica*], Historical-Critical Pedagogy ($n = 3$) [*Pedagogia Histórico-Crítica*] and critical multiliterate pedagogy ($n = 1$) [*pedagogia crítica multiletrada*]. The term “education” [*educação*] occurred in 9 titles: critical language education ($n = 5$) [*educação linguística crítica*], critical education ($n = 2$) [*educação crítica*], intercultural critical education ($n = 1$) [*educação intercultural crítica*] and critical-collaborative language education ($n = 1$) [*educação linguística crítico-colaborativa*]. Despite their differences in scope and emphasis, the terms “critical teaching”, “critical pedagogy” and “critical education” are linked to scholars such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, among others committed to fostering critical consciousness, challenging systemic inequities and using education as a tool for social transformation.

The term “training/development” [*formação*], often translated as “education” into English, appeared in 7 titles: critical teacher education ($n = 2$) [*formação crítica docente* or *formação docente crítica*], critical (self-)education ($n = 1$) [*(auto)formação crítica*], critical education in English language teaching ($n = 1$) [*formação crítica no ensino de inglês*], critical-reflexive education of English teachers ($n = 1$) [*formação crítico-reflexiva de professores de inglês*], critical education of English teachers ($n = 1$) [*formação crítica de professores de inglês*], education of the critical-reflexive English language teacher ($n = 1$) [*formação do professor de língua inglesa crítico-reflexivo*]. These frequencies indicate a solid interest in the formative aspects of English language teachers through a critical lens, including both initial and ongoing teacher education. The term “education” [*formação*] appears, not being modified by the adjective “critical”, in several other titles of the found articles.

In addition, 24 other nouns were found to co-occur with “critical”, totaling 40 additional mentions. Although each appeared less frequently (between one and four times), they reveal a wide range of conceptual intersections, involving

terms like “theory”, “practice”, “approach”, “perspective”, “reading”, among others. This lexical variety highlights the polysemous nature of the term “critical” and its broad integration across multiple subdomains of English language education. While the field of critical English language education is diverse, it is primarily anchored in discussions of critical literacy. Title analysis reveals that “critical” often stabilizes in pairings linked to educational praxis that aim to transform social realities through language.

Beyond the combination of a given noun with the adjective “critical”, the full reading of the 143 articles enabled the identification of main topics discussed in each article in relation to critical English education. The most frequently addressed topic is teacher education ($n = 30$), followed by multimodality ($n = 14$), textbooks/teaching materials ($n = 11$), anti-racist education ($n = 10$), interculturalism/multiculturalism ($n = 8$) and literature ($n = 6$). Some of the less frequent topics include: adult education ($n = 2$), teacher identity ($n = 3$), assessment ($n = 3$), and indigeneity ($n = 4$). While the field places strong emphasis on the role of teachers in building critical education and addresses key sociopolitical topics such as anti-racist education, the limited attention given to certain areas — particularly those involving marginalized communities, such as indigenous people and people who were disenfranchised from their right to education — reveals a significant gap in the literature, highlighting the need for broader inclusion and deeper critical engagement in future research in Brazil.

The articles reveal key patterns in English language education in Brazil. A common approach is to center lessons around sociopolitical themes, often involving discussions on issues related to minority groups – such as racism and sexism – as well as broader social topics such as eating habits and consumerism. Many of these articles, especially those addressing minority issues, explicitly aim to promote social justice. For instance, Pereira (2023) demonstrates how adopting critical perspectives to English language education can support social justice by addressing gender identities and challenging inequalities faced by LGBTQIA+ communities within traditional curricula. Other studies interpret critical education more broadly, focusing on fostering deep comprehension of texts without necessarily addressing social justice. For example, Silva (2020) shows that English lessons from a critical perspective help students understand literary texts more profoundly and reflect on their own roles as readers by analyzing the texts’ linguistic features.

Therefore, the articles are grounded on different notions of what being critical means, as described by Pennycook (2001, p. 4), who is aligned with a problematizing position: 1) “critical thinking”, “used to describe a way of bringing more rigorous analysis to problem solving or textual understanding”; 2) “modernist-emancipatory position”, which “argues that the most significant aspect of critical work is an engagement with political critiques of social relations” while “accepting the possibility that critical distance and objectivity are important”; and 3) “postmodern-problematizing position”, which “also insists on

the notion of critical as always engaging with questions of power and inequality” but rejects “any possibility of critical distance of objectivity”.

Most of the articles emphasize the importance of selecting themes that are relevant and engaging to students, including the resolution of local issues. In some cases, this relevance itself is understood as teaching critically – making learning more meaningful by bringing school and student closer together. While this approach is important in language education (Erickson, 1987), some discussions seem to be initiated merely for their rhetorical value rather than with the intention of promoting local change. For instance, Campbell and Ifa (2016) describe a teacher-led discussion on drug legalization, asking students whether drugs should be legalized in their city. This overlooks the fact that, in Brazil, drug policy is determined at the federal level. Nonetheless, the discussion proved valuable for developing students’ argumentative skills.

These discussions typically occur orally in a question-answer format, where teachers pose reflective questions and students respond. Although this approach encourages student participation, moving away from traditional, passive modes of teaching, it raises concerns about whether it fully realizes the potential of a dialogical critical education. If students are always guided by teacher-posed questions and rarely take on the role of questioners themselves, their engagement may remain limited.

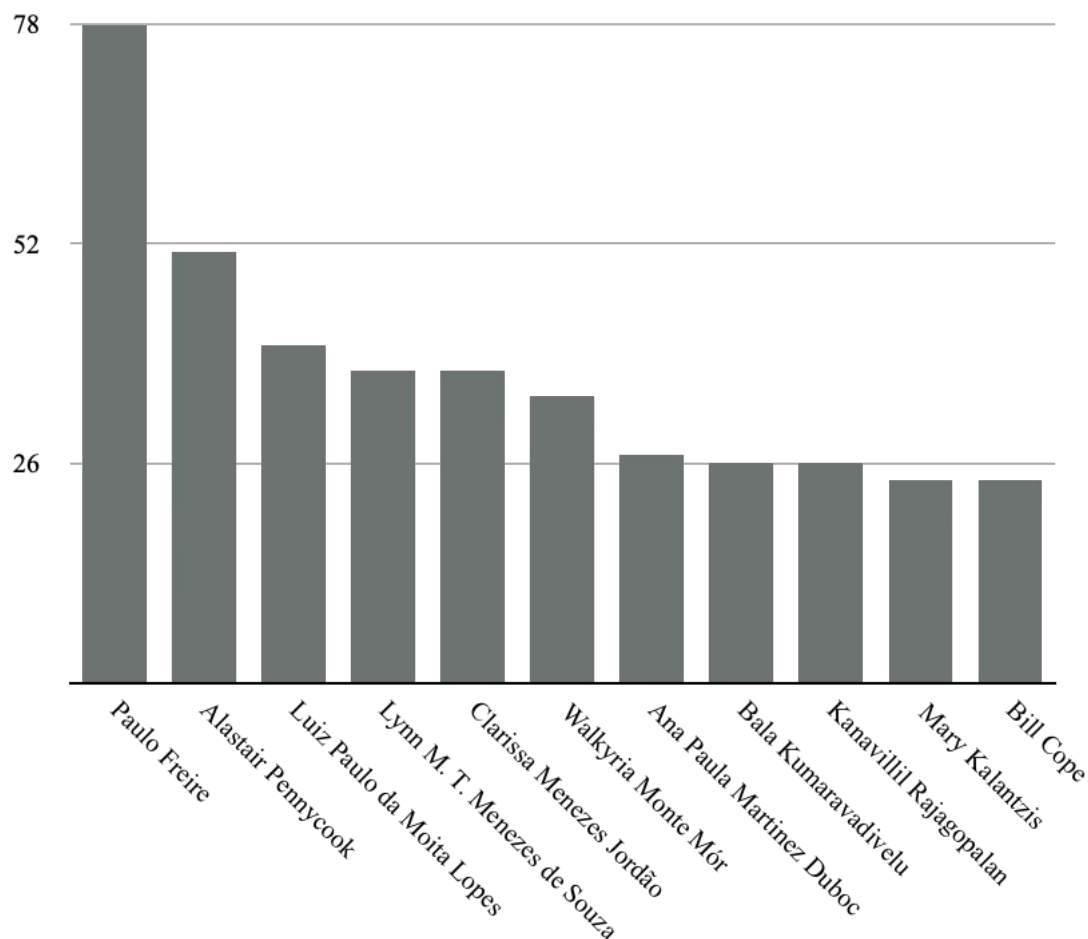
In most studies focused on regular education settings, discussions on sociopolitical themes are conducted in students’ first language (Portuguese), due to their limited proficiency in English. However, in studies carried out in language courses (11 articles report research conducted in university language centers), students are able to participate in these discussions using the target language.

The articles highlight the use of authentic materials in the classroom, especially for the interpretation of various text genres. This supports the idea that English can be taught effectively to Brazilian students, regardless of their proficiency, without relying solely on teacher-produced, simplified texts. However, when it comes to students’ own productions, challenges remain in achieving authenticity. Often, the teacher is the primary or only reader, even when the genre is intended for a broader audience. Moving in the direction of overcoming this artificiality, Caetano and Pinto (2018) propose student activities that begin with the study of constitutional rights. They suggest creating a campaign poster addressing rights violations to be displayed within the school, as well as writing a letter to the president of Brazil proposing changes. While the campaign poster remains within the school context, it is an authentic piece and may reach other English learners. In contrast, the letter, though intended for a broader audience, is problematic when written in English rather than Portuguese — the president’s first language — considering that most Brazilians, very often including political leaders, may not understand English. This illustrates a challenge in proposing authentic production in English that extends beyond the classroom.

Another useful way to grasp the conceptual framework of a work is by examining the theories and authors it references. Graph 4 shows the number of

scholars cited per article. If an author was cited multiple times within the same article, they were counted only once in the calculation.

Graph 4 — Most cited authors



Source: the author

The most frequently cited authors reveal a strong foundation in critical, post-structuralist, decolonial and/or sociocultural perspectives, particularly those that frame language education as a political practice. Freire's prominence as the most cited author signals the centrality of a critical pedagogical approach in the literature. As pointed out earlier in this section, 46% of the articles discuss literacy, a theme that was central to Freire's work. His concepts of conscientization, dialogue and emancipatory education translates into a pedagogy that values learners' lived experiences, challenges structures of oppression and promotes social justice.

Pennycook ($n = 51$), Moita Lopes ($n = 40$), Souza ($n = 37$), Kumaravadivelu ($n = 26$) and Rajagopalan ($n = 26$) approach Applied Linguistics through critical and decolonial lenses. Their work involves themes such as multilingualism, globalization, and the relationships between discourse and social practices. Moita Lopes (2006), for instance, argues that Applied Linguistics should bring to the forefront the lives of those marginalized through the intersections of identity involving social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Moita

Lopes and Souza also contribute to the field of literacies, the most prevalent theme in the corpora.

Similarly grounded on critical and decolonial perspectives, Jordão ($n = 37$), Monte Mór ($n = 34$) and Duboc ($n = 27$) focus on English education and critical literacies. They advocate for viewing language education as a discursive and political practice, interconnected with teacher identity, multiculturalism and other critical categories. Jordão (2019), for example, contends that applied linguistics in Brazil must be redefined through southern *onto-epistemologies*, frameworks that enable a critical reconceptualization of language, challenge monolingual bias and dismantle myths of linguistic inadequacy.

As the creators of the multiliteracies pedagogy, Kalantzis and Cope appear in 24 articles (always in co-authorship). Their work proposes an expanded view of literacy that considers both multimodal and multicultural elements/contexts. Their frequent citation suggests that literacy in this body of literature is understood as a social practice aimed at inclusion and democratic participation. While this article does not aim to analyze possible conceptual inconsistencies of the corpora, it is important to acknowledge a concern raised by Duboc and Souza (2021): the term *multiliteracies* has increasingly been reduced to a synonym for digital technology and is often treated as a fixed, universal methodology, despite its original intention to reflect multiple forms of literacy and maintain a flexible, non-linear pedagogical approach.

Regarding the background of the cited authors, it is noteworthy that, although 45% of the articles focus on literacy, scholars often regarded as foundational to the sociocultural perspective on literacy — such as Street, Gee, Barton and Heath — are not among the most frequently cited. Instead, the articles tend to reference scholars from the Global South — most of whom are based in Brazilian academia — while also maintaining a relative balance in terms of race and gender among the top-cited authors. On the other hand, when examining the most frequently cited Brazilian scholars, it becomes evident that most of them are currently affiliated with institutions in the Southeast region, the country's area with the highest socioeconomic indicators. Four of them are affiliated with institutions in the state of São Paulo, and three are based at the University of São Paulo. This suggests that knowledge production on critical English language education from other regions of Brazil has not achieved the same level of visibility, which may reinforce existing prejudices — such as the persistent notion that the Northeast, for instance, is a marginal region inhabited by cognitively inferior people (Silva, 2016).

Overall, the citation patterns highlight a strong alignment with critical, decolonial, and sociocultural theories that frame English language education as a transformative, socially engaged practice. The prominence of authors such as Freire, Moita Lopes, and Jordão reflects a shared commitment to challenging hegemonic norms, promoting equity and centering marginalized voices. The findings set the stage for further exploration of how such critical perspectives have informed pedagogical praxis within the Brazilian context. To shed some

light on this relationship, in the next section, I analyze the articles that focus on both social justice and the teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources.

Language praxis for social justice

In the recent years of my teaching experience, I have attempted to implement lessons that address the teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources as a pathway to social transformation. However, I have encountered few academic sources to support this approach. This review shows that most articles identified on Google Scholar tend to emphasize sociopolitical themes and encourage students to engage in discussions without necessarily addressing language's crucial role in social (in)justice.

My intention is not to discredit approaches that advocate for the “indirect” teaching of language through a critical lens. On the contrary, such approaches are essential in demonstrating that language education extends far beyond the teaching of grammar, genre conventions, pronunciation, etc. Several of the articles reviewed (Campbell & Ifa, 2016; Almeida, Lago & Figueiredo, 2021; to mention a few) demonstrate that lessons grounded in sociopolitical themes not only foster student engagement but also support the development of speaking and writing skills, as well as the comprehension of grammar, through peer interaction in English. This aligns with the understanding that language is primarily acquired through meaningful use in different contexts, rather than through isolated or decontextualized instruction. However, language is inherently ideological and embedded in power relations (Bakhtin, 2009). As such, language classrooms are uniquely positioned to foster critical reflection on how language works. They can empower students to deliberately analyze and use specific linguistic features to challenge dominant discourses and recognize themselves as reproducers of existing narratives and/or agents of/in constant change. My concern is, therefore, to understand how the teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources can support the goals of critical language education, namely, to challenge and reduce social injustice.

I identified 13 articles concerned with both the promotion of social justice and the systematic study of language. They were categorized into four groups: 1) isolated teaching of language ($n = 1$); contextualized teaching of language ($n = 5$); teaching of language analysis ($n = 3$); and understanding (oneself through) language ($n = 4$). Due to space limitations in this article, eight of these studies will be discussed in detail, with a focus on the fourth group. This categorization is based on my analysis of the full content of each article. Some studies, for instance, advocate for the teaching of language analysis in their theoretical framework; however, upon examining the work as a whole, I consider the examples provided to align more closely with contextualized language teaching. As I analyze these articles from the perspective of my own research goals, I occasionally note a “limited” integration between teaching for social justice and the study of language.

However, my intention is not to criticize these works negatively, but rather to highlight potential gaps based on a different pedagogical orientation.

Additionally, some articles mention the importance of students comprehending traces of social injustices through text analysis but I did not explore them further because this integration does not become clear throughout their work. This suggests that what I look for in the articles I review may not always be explicitly present, though it may have been addressed during the broader research process. However, the limited number of studies with this specific focus points to gaps that future research can aim to fill.

Isolated teaching of language

Bettoni and Gallego-Campos (2019) present a study in which students participated in two assessments: one before and one after lessons focused on the theme of domestic violence, using authentic materials. At the end of the study, a questionnaire was also administered. The assessments focused on grammatical items, such as prepositions. The lessons addressed both grammar and the topic of domestic violence. One example was the use of a song, employed in a listening activity where students filled in the blanks with the correct prepositions and discussed the central theme. The questionnaire investigated students' perceptions of domestic violence before and after the activities. According to Bettoni and Gallego-Campos (2019), students were engaged in the lessons and expressed interest in sociopolitical topics. They also showed changes in their attitudes toward domestic violence. In terms of language learning, the results indicate significant progress over the course of the lessons.

The first test included exercises such as: "They live ___ the first floor." During the lessons, students listened to a song and solved exercises as "I live ___ the second floor", filling in the blanks with prepositions. In the final test, a similar activity was proposed: "Paul lives ___ the sixth floor."

In their methods section, Bettoni and Gallego-Campos (2019, p. 45, *my translation*) justify the choice of the song used in class by stating that it "addresses the theme in a subtle and non-apologetic way, while also containing vocabulary and grammatical structures appropriate for beginner students [...], which were included in the course syllabus". It is reasonable to question whether the inclusion of prepositions in the tests and lessons was not solely due to a curricular requirement obliging the teachers/researchers to follow predetermined content. It is worth highlighting that, although the topic of domestic violence was not listed in the syllabus, it was included in the lessons as a way to implement critical education in that context.

Despite the promising results concerning the reflection on domestic violence and grammar learning, the approach to language teaching appears disconnected from context, as grammar did not seem to contribute directly to the discussion on domestic violence. A more contextualized approach to language teaching is detailed below.

Contextualized teaching of language

Mattos and Pascoal (2019) report on an experience of designing and administering tests that were developed to reflect the types of critical activities explored during class. They describe that “each project also includes a linguistic focus, selected from among a range of possibilities offered by the texts chosen for the discussions of each theme” (Mattos & Pascoal, 2019, p. 37, *my translation*). This type of selection is relevant because it is not the choice of a grammatical structure that guides the selection of texts, but rather the other way around.

A test illustrated in their article is structured into four parts: listening, reading, language in use, and writing. The listening section includes two exercises based on a commercial video that students watched. In the first, students are asked to fill in blanks based in the information from the commercial. In the second, they answer open-ended questions about the commercial’s intent and the relationship between the different texts within it. The reading section features the episode of a celebrity who suffered gender-based violence, followed by questions that assess comprehension of specific aspects of the text. Mattos and Pascoal (2019, p. 43) illustrate the language in use section with two exercises. One of them states: “Go back to the text and underline all the verb phrases that contain a modal. Rewrite these verb phrases below and state the meaning they convey”. The other presents the following instruction: “Rewrite the sentences below using the modals provided on the right in a way that they keep the same meaning of the original sentence”. One of the sentences provided is: “Rihanna surely felt embarrassed and ashamed of what happened”, followed by the modal “must”, leading students to rewrite it as: “Rihanna must have felt embarrassed and ashamed of what happened”. In the writing section, students choose one of three topics and write a paragraph about it. All three topics relate to domestic violence.

It is important to acknowledge the relevance of the assessment in relation to the objectives outlined by Mattos and Pascoal, which are successfully achieved in their study. Moreover, the design of the test as a whole exemplifies how critical perspectives can inform assessment practices in English language education. This is particularly significant given that critical approaches to language assessment remain an emerging research topic, as previously discussed in this article.

However, certain aspects of how the language in use section is structured deserve a closer look. Although it is evident that the exercises are built upon the text read in the previous section, it is not clear whether understanding modal verbs actually helps students critically engage with the central theme (domestic violence). In the first exercise, students may answer that “could” conveys the sense of possibility or ability, without necessarily connecting it to gender-based violence. The second exercise allows students to produce sentences based on a grammar item studied during the semester, while contextualized within the text and critical theme. To answer the exercise, students must understand the original sentences. Still, they are not prompted to critically reflect on how the use of specific modal verbs can relate to discourses surrounding domestic violence. This

connection tends to be more thoroughly addressed through the lens of language analysis, as discussed below.

Teaching of language analysis

The analysis of a textbook conducted by Kummer and Hendges (2020) suggests ways to systematize classroom work from the perspective of critical literacy. According to the authors, critical English language education emphasizes the analysis of linguistic and other semiotic resources with the goal of helping students, among other actions, to recognize worldviews, power relations, and discrimination. More than promoting textual comprehension, the authors argue that critical literacy enables students to intervene in their social context, going beyond the boundaries of the classroom and encouraging active participation in spaces that are meaningful to them. This participation takes shape through the texts produced by the students themselves.

Similarly, Santos, Santos and El Kadri (2021) contribute to the discussion on anti-racist education through a detailed proposal for English classes. The authors list a series of principles that support the development of anti-racist materials, ranging from the recognition of the racial issue in Brazil to the promotion of awareness-raising actions that encourage the engagement of all social actors within the school environment. Regarding the study of language, the authors focus on analyzing discursive constructions found in texts, aiming at understanding the social effects of these discourses. For example, when reading a protest poster with the phrase “If you aren’t anti-racist, you are complicit,” students are guided to answer the following questions: “What is the function of the linking word ‘if’ in the sentence in the poster? What kind of sentence is this and when is it used?”. The activities make up material that exemplifies how the teaching of language analysis can help identify and possibly deconstruct ideologies that reproduce racism.

Both the abovementioned articles base their approach to teaching language analysis on Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (this contrasts with the third article in this category, which is not discussed here due to space limitations; this third piece draws on Janks’ analytical tools). Although all three articles are grounded in critical literacy theories, they still exhibit a degree of adherence to the critical pedagogy approach. As Souza (2011) critiques, this view tends to suggest that meaning resides solely in the text, placing responsibility entirely on the author and downplaying the reader’s role in constructing meaning.

For instance, although Santos, Santos, and El Kadri value students’ voices in a discussion about racism, creating space for them to share personal experiences, the authors do not approach the linguistic analysis of the presented text as a means for students to understand their own (discursive) positions within the context of the Brazilian racial issue. This relationship is more comprehensively explored in the articles analyzed in the next subsection.

Understanding (oneself through) language

In a pedagogical intervention with students aged 2 to 5, Malta (2019) presented images of different fairies, some following the traditional body type and others breaking away from the standard typically portrayed in films and children's cartoons. She then asked the children to indicate which fairy they considered the most beautiful. The majority chose the blonde, slim, straight-haired, and average-height fairy. During a discussion on the topic, the students made statements in Portuguese such as: "My mom is slim, but she is beautiful" or "I have a beautiful friend, but she is fat". Malta then worked with these constructions, explaining the use of the conjunctions "but" and "and" and highlighting how certain linguistic choices could suggest prejudice. This encouraged the students to rephrase their sentences, creating expressions such as: "My mom is skinny and beautiful" and "My mom is fat and beautiful". Malta's study demonstrates the effectiveness of teaching specific linguistic items to help students, regardless of their age, reflect on their own reproduction of stereotypes, ultimately motivating them to change their views. As Malta's work suggests, this approach to teaching is not always pre-planned; instead, it often arises from the teacher's assessment of the students' needs.

Caetano (2020) proposes approaches for the systematization of English language teaching that include, among other elements, linguistic-textual analysis as a key step toward a language education aimed at promoting social justice. To illustrate this systematization, the author presents examples of classroom interventions carried out during her master's and doctoral studies. Her work emphasizes text analysis, similar to the articles discussed in the previous subsection, but seems to encompass a broader pedagogical scope. For instance, through the teaching of modal verbs and the production of commandments, students are encouraged to "understand their various social roles and their attributions within each role" as well as reflect "about their responsibility in the process of transforming their reality and about their empowerment as a tool for such transformation" (Caetano, 2020, p. 296).

Egido and Campos (2022) describe a pedagogical intervention involving fourth-grade students in exploring professions. Initially, the teacher introduced the professions using visual resources and interlinguistic translation. Next, the students documented the professions in multimodal productions. Then, the students conducted a search for images of these professions using digital tools, sharing the results with the class. The productions were presented and, with the teacher's mediation, the students reflected on their choices, such as gender and ethnicity. Subsequently, they discussed the similarities between their drawings and the images found in the research based on some questions posed by the teacher. Finally, they created self-portraits in which they represented themselves in a profession. Based on the students' responses, Egido and Campos (2022, p. 30) conclude that this activity, focused on the systematic teaching of vocabulary, allowed students to be "able to question the bias in which people are represented

regarding gender and race” at the same time that “they could also reflect on who they are and how they represent to others”.

Based on the experiences built throughout her teaching career, Sabota (2024) proposes a “pedagogical route” — a framework for designing English lessons that aligns with the view of language as social practice and fosters the expansion of repertoires in a dialogical, critical and praxis-emergent way. Sabota’s pedagogical route consists of three “routes”: “talking topics”; “expanding repertoires”; “thinking over”; and “bringing to life”.

“Talking topics” aims to help students get to know themselves better — to understand where they speak from and what voices speak with them, promoting a dialogical and respectful environment that embraces dissent as an opportunity for self and other understanding. “Expanding repertoires” seeks to intertwine social, cultural, and linguistic-structural repertoires. The broadening of semiotic repertoires occurs through the expansion of comfort zones and the tensions provoked by systematic language study, incorporating questioning, critical reflection and analysis. “Thinking over” reflects on the connection between tensions, discoveries and learning with the students’ immediate context. According to Sabota, instead of seeking to resolve conflicts or homogenize ideas, this route invites the recognition of responsibility for verbal or physical actions and the conscious choice to maintain or transform structures, assuming possibilities for agentive protagonism. “Bringing to life” aims to encourage students to share what they have learned about the topic through the creation of multimodal text(s), focusing on student agency, as learners challenge themselves to construct and share meaning.

By prioritizing self-knowledge, sensitive listening, the intertwining of repertoires and critical reflection, Sabota’s praxiological proposition recognizes language as a social practice and a tool for transformation. Language education, in this view, becomes a means to invite students to take responsibility for their actions and to promote meaning-making through the construction of text-experiences (Sabota, 2024).

The title of this subsection, “Understanding (oneself through) language”, reflects the dual process by which students can both understand language as a social and ideological construct and understand themselves in and through language. As the articles discussed above show, this teaching approach values student’s subjectivity, identity positions, sociocultural experiences and willingness to change.

The articles analyzed in this section present various approaches to the systematic teaching of language in English lessons, all aimed at addressing social (in)justice. Although each teacher will develop their own practices, this review may serve as a resource to inspire reflection on (new) possibilities for critical English language education. As Silvestre (2015) argues, there is no single, definitive critical approach to teaching and learning additional languages, but rather multiple critical perspectives operating within the current context of language education. This plural stance, for Silvestre, is the one that most closely

aligns with the premises of postmodernity, which strongly influence these critical approaches.

Conclusion

This systematic review examined critical English language education at two angles: an overview of the field within Brazilian research and a deeper look at the relationship between social justice education and the teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources. Despite the limitation of the search terms, which may have excluded relevant articles using alternative forms such as “additional/foreign language”, this constraint ultimately facilitated a more manageable data set, enabling a deeper analysis of both research questions.

The review highlighted a clear evolution of critical English language education from a marginal topic to a growing and consolidated research topic. This shift is related to broader educational guidelines and the strengthening of critical applied linguistics in Brazil, pointing to an ideological shift toward viewing language education as a political activity, intertwined with the broader goal of social justice. Critical literacy emerged as a dominant theoretical perspective in the reviewed studies, and Paulo Freire as the most cited author.

A key pattern identified is the central role of sociopolitical themes in lessons — often involving discussions on issues related to minority groups — providing relevant examples of how English language education goes beyond the teaching of grammar and other skills. Most studies employed a question-answer format in the classroom to encourage student participation. However, I raise concerns about whether this model fully taps into the potential for critical engagement, particularly if students are mostly responders rather than questioners.

Only a limited number of articles addressing both social justice and the teaching of linguistic and other semiotic resources was identified, strengthening, on the one hand, the notion that teaching English goes beyond the instruction of specific linguistic features. On the other hand, this limited number highlights a significant gap in the literature, indicating a need for further research in this topic. However, most of the articles that do explore both social justice and the systematic instruction of language extend beyond isolated or contextualized approaches to English teaching. Some advocate for methods that emphasize language analysis, examining how linguistic and other semiotic resources can reflect and perpetuate discriminatory or harmful discourses. Others demonstrate that when students gain a deeper understanding of language, they can not only decode the ideological messages embedded in discourses but also critically assess their own positionalities within social structures.

This article contributes to the growing body of research on critical English language education in Brazil by providing a comprehensive synthesis of current trends and research priorities as well as exploring how language teaching systematization has been addressed within critical education perspectives. As the field of critical English language education continues to evolve, this review serves

as a call to action for scholars and educators to further investigate and refine pedagogical approaches that integrate the systematic study of language with the broader goal of fostering social justice in the classroom. Additionally, the results can guide educational policymakers in redesigning language education curricula around sociopolitical themes and a systematic approach to teaching language for social justice, moving beyond the current model focused primarily on skills development.

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