

## **RE(THINKING) CRITICAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION WITH CHILDREN AND TEACHER EDUCATION DURING (AND AFTER) PANDEMIC TIMES<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to discuss teachers' perspectives on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the teaching of English to young learners (TEYL). We focused on one specific question (from a 10-question online questionnaire) in which participants shared their thoughts, experiences and concerns about TEYL in pandemic times. The answers were analyzed in a qualitative perspective, based on critical literacy research and studies in the field of TEYL. The results indicate the participants' exhaustion due to dealing with unusual situations, and teaching focused exclusively on content in an attempt to show how teachers are reinventing themselves despite uncertainties and lack of training. The present moment requires reflections about goals and expectations in TEYL and in teacher education.

**Keywords:** English language; children; COVID-19 pandemic; teacher education.

### **Introduction**

The current pandemic times (COVID-19) caused by a previously uncharacterized virus have presented devastating psychological, physical, and emotional consequences to all of us. People across the entire world have been dealing with the effects of social isolation, associated with crises in health, economy, and education (YI; JANG, 2020). In this scenario where new social differences have become evident, language educators have been facing challenges related to the naturalization of inequalities, teacher exhaustion, and,

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sadly, death. Thus, it is our commitment to discuss our praxis as possibilities to fight against necropolitics and necropower in education (LIBERALI, 2020).

In the context of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), it is even more complex, as this area struggles to consolidate itself as a possibility of educating through language with children, not only to children (MALTA, 2019; PINTER, 2019). Teaching children was challenging enough before COVID-19. This field has been thriving despite several issues that compromise teachers' practices and students' experiences, such as lack of laws that regulate how additional languages are offered in the early years of education in Brazil (ROCHA, 2006; ÁVILA; TONELLI, 2018) and also in some other regions of the world (MOURÃO, 2019), besides the fact that very few teacher education programs cover this context (MILLER et al., 2019).

In addition, neoliberalism has been explicitly exerting its influence upon TEYL as we witness the rapid increase in the number of bilingual (Portuguese and English) schools and programs, as well as language-specific and regular schools that offer English as a discipline in their curriculum with the promise that it will make a difference in students' lives. Certainly, we cannot deny that knowing an additional language grants many benefits and advantages in personal, academic, and professional domains. However, the question at hand is not the possibility of what language education represents, that is, a process in which people engage to construct meaning, as suggested by Jordão (2018); it is the widespread—and from our point of view, entirely false—idea in these programs that English is a product, functioning as a career booster or something that will be objectively important for the child's future.

In previous studies, researchers have discussed the myths involved in the assumptions of the prevalent discourse of “the sooner, the better” (CARVALHO; TONELLI, 2016; KAWACHI-FURLAN, ROSA, 2020). Educators need to be involved in this discussion in order to problematize these hegemonic discourses that naturalize how children learn additional languages and also to engage in the reflection of what we aim to accomplish and why we defend TEYL. In this sense, we advocate in favor of (critical) language education with children, as this proposal reassesses what teaching and learning an additional language means,

considering sociocultural dimensions, as suggested by Ferraz and Nascimento (2019).

Pandemic times, however, have challenged the appreciation built around language education with children; our data shows a return to traditional practices that focus solely on teaching grammar and vocabulary, relying on a structural perspective of language. In order to cope with the system that we live in, or as Ferraz (2020) calls, “the mechanism”, teachers go back to what is considered safe ground (teaching isolated linguistic items) and to what can be measured (and sometimes controlled) by parents and school administrators. All the while, we see financially privileged children trapped into a screen with remote, online classes that may not be relevant to them; and at the same time, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are left without shelter, food or care, let alone English classes.

The aim of this article is to discuss teachers’ perspectives on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in teaching English to young learners. At the beginning of the pandemic in Brazil, we invited teachers of English to children to respond to an online questionnaire about teaching during pandemic times. The questionnaire, composed of 10 questions, was answered by 62 teachers and, in this study, we will focus on one specific question as detailed ahead. In addition, participants were also invited to attend a virtual meeting to discuss the topic of the questionnaire, sharing their thoughts and concerns, as well as reflecting about researchers’ views on what had been observed in participants’ answers.

To meet what is expected in this genre, the paper is organized in sections; however, all items are related, as they are connected to the authors’ reflections about teachers’ perspectives of TEYL during the pandemic. Thus, following this introduction, an outline of the study and its collaborators are presented in the next section, followed by a discussion on how the pandemic contributed to a focus on traditional practices and the need to re-educate ourselves to consider praxis focused on children’s contexts, expanding our understanding of teacher education.

## **Presenting the study and the collaborators**

As both teachers and teacher educators, we have been deeply concerned as we follow both the young learners having English classes at home (those who have this chance), as well as their teachers who have carried out their duties, putting aside their emotions, needs, mental and physical health and, last but not least, their standard practices. In this section, we provide an overview of the research and present the teachers who participated by sharing their opinions, thoughts, and feelings.

In this qualitative study (LÜDKE; ANDRÉ, 2017), we aim to interpret and discuss the data generated in the light of specialized theory from critical literacies, TEYL and the education of English teachers.

In the following sections, we intertwine the voices of the participants together with the ideas of other authors to establish a dialogue. By not following the traditional linearity in presenting theory followed by data, we seek to bring the dialogues established closer together, discussing the teachers' perspectives of their educational praxis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To better understand the participating teachers, among other actions, we promoted virtual meetings to talk about TEYL and prepared a questionnaire to learn more about those who were/are dealing with such unprecedented situations. This questionnaire was the source of the data analyzed in the present study. The questionnaire itself was composed of 10 questions and was sent by email and shared by social media in groups of teachers, mainly WhatsApp and Facebook communities. The first four items aimed at outlining the participants' profile: an alias, age, gender and educational level. Question number five asked the respondents to indicate their teaching context; question six asked for the city and state where they teach. The seventh question, a close-ended question, sought to know if participants were, at that time, teaching remotely; depending on their answer, they were asked to share, in question 8, their personal thoughts on whether the absence of English classes would be detrimental to the students' education.

The great majority of the participants were between 20 and 40 years old and identified as women (90,3%); only 9,7% identified as men. With reference to participants' educational level, the largest group of respondents held a Master's degree and/or other specialization, representing 40% of participants. Approximately 33% held a bachelor's degree or equivalent in Languages and Literature, and approximately 5% in Pedagogy.

Regarding the teaching context, most respondents said that they work either at private schools teaching kindergarten (38,7%) or with lower, primary grades at public schools (37,1%).

Taking into consideration that the questionnaire was delivered to TEYL exclusively working in the Brazilian territory, the responses to the sixth question showed that the collaborators teach across many different regions of the country, specially the South, Southeast and Midwest.

The ninth item, whose answers are the focus of the analyses in this paper, asked the participants what they would write if they had a chance to publish a brief text on social media sharing their experiences, worries and complaints about TEYL in pandemic times.

The last item on the questionnaire wished to know if the teachers would like to take part in a closed community on Facebook to share their thoughts and feelings with other teachers about the issue. As for this matter, it is important to say that although many of them (71%) presented an interest to be involved in the social media community, we felt the need to have a different space to listen to them. As such, later on, we invited the participants for an online talk, during which they had the opportunity to interact with the authors of this article and with each other and discuss the theme of this study.

Com base no texto “**Re(thinking) critical language education with children and teacher education during (and after) pandemic times**”, responda às questões de 1 a 5.

#### Questão 01

a) De acordo com o texto, qual o objetivo do artigo?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) consiga entender que o objetivo do artigo era discutir as perspectivas de docentes sobre como a pandemia tem impactado o ensino de língua inglesa para crianças (LIC).

b) O que aponta o resultado da pesquisa?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que os resultados revelaram a exaustão dos participantes decorrente de situações inusitadas e apontavam ainda para um ensino focado exclusivamente em conteúdo em um esforço de mostrar como os professores estão se reinventando, apesar de incertezas e ausência de formação.

#### Questão 02

a) Segundo as autoras, qual compromisso social deve ser imputado ao discutir a práxis docente no período da pandemia de Covid-19?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) compreenda que os educadores de línguas enfrentam a naturalização da desigualdade, a exaustão docente, e a morte. Dessa maneira, o compromisso é de lutar contra a necropolítica e o necropoder.

b) Quais os problemas assinalados pelas pesquisadoras, em relação ao ensino de inglês para crianças, no contexto educacional brasileiro, mesmo antes da pandemia de Covid-19?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que os problemas são a falta de leis que regulam como os idiomas adicionais são oferecidos nos primeiros anos de

educação no Brasil e a exiguidade de programas de formação de professores que cubra esse contexto.

#### Questão 03

- a) De acordo com o texto, qual crítica é feita ao pensamento neoliberal com relação ao currículo de escolas regulares que oferecem inglês como língua instrucional?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que as autoras não negam os benefícios no plano pessoal, acadêmico e profissional na aprendizagem de uma língua. Contudo, as autoras advogam que é falsa a ideia que o inglês, por si só, será um produto que garantiria objetivamente o futuro sucesso profissional para as crianças.

- b) Segundo as pesquisadoras, o que seus dados evidenciaram em torno da educação de línguas para crianças no contexto pandêmico?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que os dados das pesquisadoras revelaram um retorno a práticas educacionais mais tradicionais se concentrando no ensino de gramática e vocabulário em uma perspectiva mais estruturalista da linguagem.

#### Questão 04

- a) De acordo com o texto, como se deu o desenvolvimento da pesquisa?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) responda que a pesquisa foi realizada por meio de um questionário online com 62 professores de inglês para crianças. Os educadores foram convidados também para participar de uma reunião virtual com a finalidade de discutir o tema do questionário e compartilhar seus pensamentos e preocupações.

- b) Com base no texto

1. Como o artigo foi organizado?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) consiga entender que o artigo é disposto em seções, mas elas estão interrelacionadas.

2. Qual conteúdo foi apresentado na organização do artigo?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que na introdução há um esboço do estudo, na segunda seção os participantes são mostrados. A seção de discussão fala sobre como a pandemia contribuiu para um foco em práticas tradicionais e a necessidade de reeducar para uma práxis voltada para as crianças, expandindo a compreensão sobre a formação de professores.

Questão 05

De acordo com o artigo, quem eram os participantes da pesquisa, sua formação educacional e atuação profissional?

Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que a idade dos participantes fluía entre 20 a 40 anos. 90,3% eram mulheres e 9,7% se identificaram como homens. Com referência ao nível educacional dos participantes, o maior grupo de entrevistados possuía um grau de mestre ou outra especialidade, representando 40% dos participantes. Aproximadamente 33% possuíam um diploma de bacharel ou equivalente à Línguas e Literaturas e 5% em Pedagogia. Em relação ao contexto de ensino, a maioria dos entrevistados disse que trabalhavam tanto em escolas privadas (38,7%) e escolas públicas (37,1%).