

Teaching English *with* young learners: possibilities of critical language education

Ensino de inglês *com* crianças: possibilidades da educação linguística crítica

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Resumo: In the last two decades, we have observed an increase in research related to Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), and a consequent strengthening of the literature in this area, as pointed out by Tonelli and Pádua (2017). However, despite the achievements, there are still many challenges, such as the lack of regulation of the TEYL offer, the gap in teacher education and the instrumental view of teaching that language. Thus, based on memories of discussions held in a workshop conducted by the authors, the aim of this article is to defend the teaching English *with* children, reflecting on the possibilities of critical language education, revisiting understandings of what language means, as well as what teaching and learning languages in childhood means. To do so, we were guided by some authors (DUBOC; FERRAZ, 2018; JORDÃO, 2018; MONTE MÓR, 2019; LOPEZ-GOPAR, 2019; among others) to discuss our perspective of critical language education *with* children, presenting some activities that are part of our contexts and praxis. We hope that this work will encourage discussions about language education in foreign languages in childhood, aiming at valuing the context and reality of students and teachers, as well as the need to rethink the teacher education of those who work with TEYL.

Palavras-chave: Critical language education. Young learners. Teacher education. English teaching. Contexts.

Abstract: Nas últimas duas décadas, temos observado o aumento no número de pesquisas sobre ensino-aprendizagem de língua inglesa/ língua estrangeira para crianças (LIC/LEC), e um consequente fortalecimento da literatura dessa área, como apontado por Tonelli e Pádua (2017). Porém, apesar das conquistas, ainda há muito desafios, como a falta de regulamentação da oferta de LIC, a lacuna na formação de professores e a visão instrumental do ensino dessa língua. Assim, a partir de memórias das discussões realizadas em uma oficina conduzida pelas autoras, o objetivo deste artigo é defender o ensino de inglês *com* crianças, refletindo sobre as possibilidades da educação linguística crítica, revisitando entendimentos do que significa língua/linguagem, ensinar e aprender línguas na infância. Para tanto, pautamo-nos em alguns autores (DUBOC; FERRAZ, 2018; JORDÃO, 2018; MONTE MÓR, 2019; LOPEZ-GOPAR, 2019; dentre outros) para discutir nossa perspectiva de educação linguística crítica *com* crianças, apresentando algumas atividades que fazem parte de nossos contextos e práxis. Esperamos que este trabalho fomente discussões sobre educação linguística em línguas estrangeiras na infância, visando a valorização do contexto e da realidade de alunos e professores, bem como a necessidade de repensarmos a formação docente dos que atuam com LEC/LIC.

Keywords: Educação linguística crítica. Crianças. Formação de professores. Ensino de inglês. Contextos.

Introduction

Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) has been in the spotlight in Brazil in the last two decades (ROCHA, 2007; SANTOS, 2010; TONELLI; CORDEIRO, 2014; TONELLI; PÁDUA, 2017; MALTA, 2019a; TONELLI; KAWACHI-FURLAN, 2021; and others). We have been observing an increase in the offer of TEYL mainly in language schools, private regular schools and bilingual (Portuguese and English) schools. Several reasons explain this movement, especially the questionable idea of language as a tool that is essential for one's success and the market issues that involve offering English since the early ages (such as using the offer of English classes as a bait to attract more customers in private institutions, sometimes not really focused on what is being taught; or teaching only vocabulary, so that children just repeat those words). The collective representations of the role of the English language and the assumed need to begin this process as soon as possible have been addressed in the area of TEYL with concern.

In an attempt to expand perspectives that may limit teaching English to children to an exclusive focus on vocabulary, such as colors, shapes, animals, and others, we defend critical language education with children, questioning what language is and what the teaching and learning processes represent. In our view, critical language education with children involves teaching vocabulary and language structures, but it does not necessarily need to be restricted to it. Neither should it limit the children's roles in this process, since their identities and histories, as well as their complete development (physical, cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, among others) should be at the center of attention.

We believe that English teaching with young learners is still a scenario to be explored, and most teachers are still trying to find appropriate ways to do their work. According to Malta (2019a), the lack of teacher education focused on teaching young (aged 7-12) and very young learners (under 7) (NICHOLAS; LIGHTBOWN, 2008) together with the lack of official documents to guide our practices represent challenges in TEYL, but it also makes room for experimentalism, which could be a possible way to start.

The idea for this article emerged from a workshop conducted by us where we could discuss the roles of teachers and children during the teaching-learning process, reflecting not only about our praxis but also about our contexts. The authors were invited to conduct a 2-hour workshop with a group of 15 English as a Foreign Language teachers during an event¹ promoted by APLIEPAR, an Association of English Teachers in the State of Paraná. The

¹ <https://apliepar.wixsite.com/apliepar/eventos>

meeting occurred through an online platform and had an asynchronous follow-up in which participants had to develop a final project, with a total of 15 hours.

Thus, the aim of this article is to discuss teaching English *with* children and the possibilities of critical language education, based on the memories of discussions in a workshop conducted by the authors. In the following sections, we reflect on our understandings of critical language education and why we should talk about this in early childhood education. We also consider proposals that enhance language awareness with the purpose of educating children to appreciate differences. Readers are invited to reflect on the importance of valuing teachers' praxis and contexts.

1 Critical language education and children: do we need to talk about this?

Several authors have reflected on the educational epistemologies and literacy theories, focusing on defining critique, as well as other terms related to education and language education. Scholars have contributed to the discussion of the literacy movements in Brazil, as well as the developments of new literacies and the pedagogy of multiliteracies (DUBOC; FERRAZ, 2011; JORDÃO, 2013; FERREIRA; TAKAKI, 2014; DUBOC; GATTOLIN, 2015; DUBOC; FERRAZ, 2018; MONTE MÓR, 2019; DUBOC; FERRAZ, 2020; to cite some Brazilian researchers who have been committed to this theme).

Bearing in mind the scope of this article and the least intention of exhausting this theme, which is barely impossible, our aim is limited to stating our perspective on this matter. Hence, our comprehension of "critical" is based on Monte Mór's (2019) usage of the word critique, highlighting learners' critical perception of their contexts, the society and the world. The point is to create opportunities for learners to expand their views and to reflect on their role in society and on their abilities to construct meaning. Ferraz (2018) adds that critique is not something superior or encyclopedic. It is related to our daily events and comes from the repertoires we build during our lives. According to the author, based on classes with professor Walkyria Monte Mór, being critical is also related to breaking the way we consider something; to suspect of what is known as true; and to construct meaning from the person's own experiences. We agree with this perspective in the sense that being critical in education and language education represents revising conceptions that were pre-established and have been naturalized as "normal" and correct.

In a similar vein, defending language education implies revisiting the traditional ideas of teaching and learning languages as separate processes that are sometimes marked by hierarchical relations between teachers and students, being able to consider the linguistic,

critical, and social cultural dimensions, as proposed by Ferraz and Nascimento (2019). Thus, in accordance with Jordão (2018), language education entails valuing the concept of language(s) as social practice in a process of constructing meaning. Teaching and learning, then, represent the relationships between people and knowledge, as well as what languages mean and which meanings people make from languages. In this sense, critical language education involves recognizing how people are connected to their actions and what these actions imply. It is a conscious process of making meaning, acknowledging that this process is socially and collectively built with our own identities.

In regard to critical language education *with* children, first it is relevant to explain the focus on “with” instead of “for” children. Malta (2019a) proposes this change in order to recognize children’s participation and leading role throughout the entire process. This means placing children at the center of educating through language rather than planning and developing the process for them. In our view, critical language education with children implies that children will learn a foreign language and through/because of this process, they will be able to question truths imposed by society. It means to teach and learn a language aiming at problematizing naturalized constructs, focusing on possibilities of ruptures and transformations. When it comes to English, this need is even more explicit due to hegemonic perspectives that are associated with teaching and learning this language since the early years of childhood.

At this point, we may wonder if it is really necessary to discuss critical language education with children. We argue that this reflection is urgent since we have been observing (by developing research and participating in courses, lectures and conversation groups with teachers) an exclusive focus on content in English as a foreign language (EFL) class for children. We ponder that the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced lessons that approach language as a structure in an attempt to answer to what is demanded from schools and parents. Thus, as most teachers had to change to online teaching with little time to get prepared for this, and sometimes without resources, training or at least some guidance and support from the school, they worked on what has been considered as safe ground: teaching vocabulary (isolated words).

However, this focus on static conceptions of language that limit English teaching to children to vocabulary and also restrict children’s role in this process is not only during the pandemic. Despite all the achievements in the area of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), such as efforts regarding children’s complete development, not only linguistic, as well as the need to place the child at the center of this process, what can be observed in many contexts of TEYL in Brazil is still this narrowed idea of an only focus on lexicon. The data from Lima’s (2019) doctoral dissertation, for instance, show that before participating in the course the researcher proposed, many teachers thought that teaching English to children meant teaching vocabulary.

In this sense, as argued by Rocha (2009), it is desirable to revisit language teaching focused on functions and lexical items. Santos (2010) also criticizes approaches focused on mechanical repetitions and grammar rules, which can demotivate students to keep learning English. The author states that in the first years of TEYL, lucidity and affection are at the center of attention. However, in the following years, with the premise of teaching what will be important for students' future, there is a focus on the structure of the language, which may not make sense for students.

This idea of teaching EFL to young learners as something that will open doors in the future has been questioned by many researchers (GARCIA, 2011; FORTES, 2017; CARVALHO; TONELLI, 2016; KAWACHI-FURLAN; ROSA, 2020). What seems to be at stake in this belief is an understanding of language as product, as something that people need to purchase in order to have better jobs or opportunities for social and economic rise (FORTES, 2014). Nonetheless, as previously stated, our commitment to critical language education with children seems distant from these assumptions of education as consumer goods. Following Monte Mór's (2009) proposal, we defend education as creation instead of reproduction. When it comes to TEYL, this defense involves being aware of the myths related to this area (KAWACHI-FURLAN; ROSA, 2020), as well as the influences of neoliberalism (MALTA, 2019a), that result in introducing children to the English language as soon as possible, using English classes to draw the attention of possible "clients" to private courses or schools. Opposed to this idea, we believe in promoting language education as a possibility of transformation (ROCHA, 2018), contributing to the construction and reflection of identities and other cultures.

We agree with Tonelli and Cordeiro (2014) on the contributions of sensitizing students to the existence of other languages and cultures, involving them in comparisons among languages in a multilingual perspective, so that learners are "open to languages". According to the authors, this proposal goes beyond the idea of language as code, enhancing reflection and valorization of local and global cultures. Likewise, Menezes de Souza (2019) stresses the focus is not on one language, but developing language awareness:

To me, linguistic sensibility is to be able to teach various languages, in this concept of language as practice. It is to teach the children: "Look! In this place, they say 'casa' like this. In Arabic, in Chinese, in I don't know... And we say 'casa'. It is not to teach only one language, but to teach this linguistic sensibility. This can help a child (MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2019, p. 305, our translation).

In face of neoconservative times (DUBOC; FERRAZ, 2020) and the influence of the media (advertisements) with their discursive constructions that value language as a tool, as

well as the spread of hegemonic perspectives (emphasis on native speakers and homogenous understanding of standard language) throughout the educational field, we find hope (in the Freirean way) in defending critical language education. The described scenario is even more evident in childhood education, since the offer of English in school curriculum (or bilingual program) is seen as a differential asset to attract clients.

In the next section, we discuss possibilities of enhancing language awareness and linguistic sensibility through critical language education with children, giving examples of what we have discussed so far.

2 What are some of the possibilities?

Looking back to what we have done during the aforementioned workshop, we are now going to discuss some possibilities related to context, education to appreciate differences and practices associated with theories while teaching very young learners.

First, it is relevant to mention that we should consider different local contexts when we talk about the teaching-learning process, since teachers and learners in distinct contexts cannot be contemplated with the same “recipe”. This is something significant to be discussed, since nowadays, while teachers are trying to focus on language education with children, they face some workshops, courses or books that promise a formula, something that might work for everyone and be “efficient” in all contexts.

According to López-Gopar (2019, p. 234), referencing Freire (1970), Canagarajah (1999), and Cummins (2001), we should ground our teaching-learning processes “in the local contexts and physical realities of our students”, resisting the effects of the ELT industry which tries to sell a perfect model that fits all classrooms, teachers and children.

In our conceptions, this formula is something impossible to be reached. For us, teachers should learn how to associate different theories with their own contexts and children instead of just trying something that “already works” and that is what we mean when we talk about experimentalism. For this, we reaffirm that teacher education has an important role in language awareness and linguistic sensibility through critical language education with children. It is important to know who is teaching and who is learning, and it is equally important to know what should be learned according to the context, as Merlo (2018) affirms:

In my view, the practice not associated with theoretical reflection supports the uncritical performance of the teacher and the **distance between school knowledge and people's lives**. Much more than apprehending a repertoire of ‘things to do’ in the classroom, the well-

founded teaching action must represent **ways of thinking** about what to do and about knowledge related to **what is teaching** and **what is learning** a language (MERLO, 2018, p. 122, our translation, our emphasis).

Thus, we believe that critical language education is also about being critical and reflecting about our own praxis as teachers, it is looking not only at our students but at our own repertoire, too. And we believe one possible way to do this is associating practice and theories, based on what we, teachers, believe should be done in our scenario.

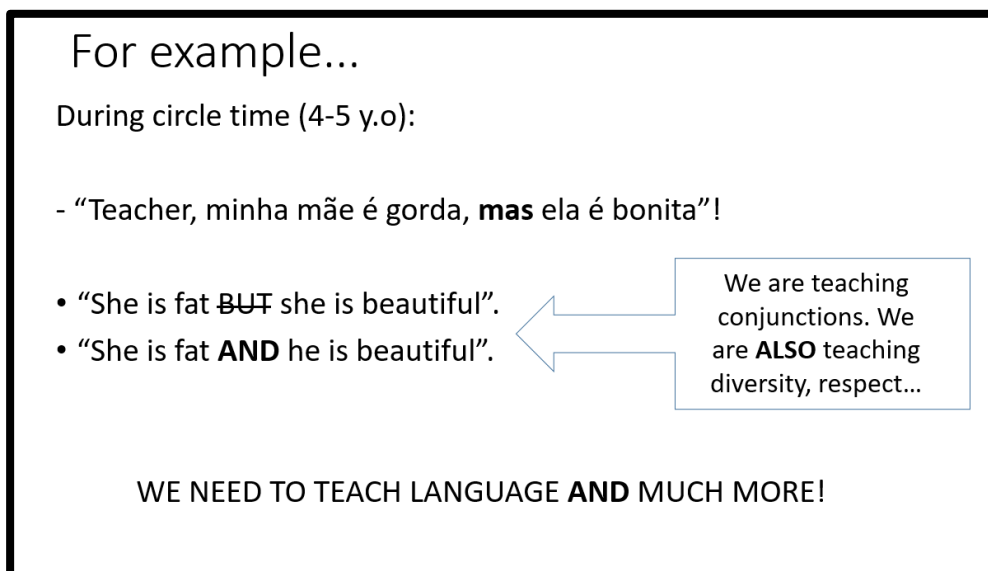
Moreover, when we become able to analyze our praxis as teachers, we also become able to raise awareness related to what we are doing - or what we should do - in classroom. We understand that we are not only teaching the English language, but we are teaching students, as Larsen-Freeman (2003) states, and we add: we are teaching children. In other words, we are presenting some concepts children might never have faced before, such as identity, diversity, relationships, respect, democracy and others, and that is why we should be conscious of our choices.

In our view, critical language education comes together with linguistic concepts, such as grammar and vocabulary. We do not have to choose between being critical or teaching the language, because our vision of critical language education involves both. As an example, we bring an experience we had during circle-time while teaching a group of 4-5 year old children:

The children, then, in an attempt to attenuate fat-phobic arguments previously exposed, used sentences like 'my mom is thin, **but** she's pretty', or 'I have a beautiful friend, **but** she is fat', in Portuguese. So I decided to work on these sentences in English, explaining the use of the conjunctions 'but' and 'and', and how, in this case, one would express prejudice while the other would not. At the end, affirmatives like 'my mom is skinny **and** beautiful' could be heard, as well as 'my mom is fat **and** beautiful'. (MALTA, 2019b, p. 41, our translation, our emphasis)

As we affirmed in the workshop, this is a significant example to demonstrate the possibility of teaching language with a critical view with very young learners. Here, we were able to teach conjunctions, which is something not usually explored with children, and we could also discuss this social problem of fat-phobia, helping them become aware of their own discourses that could reproduce prejudice or not.

Figure 1 – Example of practice involving grammar in critical language education



Source: Developed by the authors

As educators, we believe it is our role to educate children to appreciate differences, as suggested by Menezes de Souza (2019). We have been witnessing neoconservative movements in Brazil not only in governmental projects and bills, but also in people's discourses (especially on social medias), which contribute to this “growth of intolerance towards difference”. (MENEZES DE SOUZA; MONTE MÓR, 2018, p. 446). Duboc and Ferraz (2020) stress that this project of erasing differences continuously affect minority groups, recently adding to this list scholars and critical thinkers. Thus, we cannot resort to the idea of focusing solely on language structures in TEYL. Critical language education with children represents a possibility of helping children to create other repertoires, in which differences are embraced and not erased.

We reaffirm that this is only possible when teachers are educated to look at their own contexts and think of their own possibilities with children they are working with, appreciating their own differences. There is no room for formulas and recipes, and there is no obligation to be 100% efficient as in a very neoliberal way.

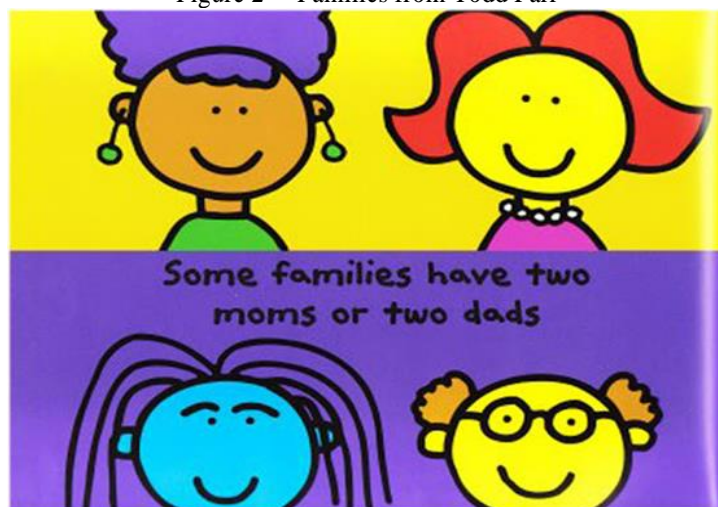
Thus far, we have argued that critical language education is also about breaking social standards while teaching-learning a language. But do we have to use controversial themes all the time? Does it have to be polemic and deal with sexuality, gender, social standards and so on?

Our answer is: yes and/or no. We believe teachers that are comfortable bringing more controversial themes to their classrooms should do it, but we also understand that we are dealing with very young children, with very different backgrounds, families, contexts etc. Also, it is a misunderstanding associating critical language education only with controversial themes. Critical language education has to do with appreciating differences and showing multiple possibilities, despite the subject.

Another example given in the workshop was related to Todd Parr's "The Family Book", well-known among English teachers who work with children. This is a book dedicated to praise different types of families: families with many people, families with only one parent, families with no children, families that live far from each other etc.

One of the pages is about families with two moms or two dads. Some teachers would use this part to talk about sexuality, to explain to their students about homoaffective couples, and that is all right if teachers have the chance to do so. But we also understand that this topic could be possibly censored in some scenarios.

Figure 2 – Families from Todd Parr



Source: "The family book", by Todd Parr

In our view, one way to work with books like this is letting the children express themselves and they are going to give us some answers. Some of them are going to talk about homoaffective couples, which would be great, because they would probably give examples about their own contexts (parents, uncles, aunties...), other children would explain two moms

or two dads using their own mother and a grandmother, or their father and a grandfather, others would explain it using their stepmothers or stepfathers.

This is a good way to present multiple possibilities, since children would explain families using their own experiences and thoughts. As Freire (2005, p. 81) affirms, we need to educate children for freedom and not for domination, considering “people in their relations with the world”, and letting children express their points of view and their relations with the world is education as the practice of freedom.

In addition, in a post-structuralist perspective, we understand children in relation to their subjectivity and histories. Along these lines, Robinson and Díaz (2005, p. 4) assert that “children do not enter early childhood programmes as empty slates but rather bring with them a myriad of perceptions of difference that they have taken up from their families, peers, the media and other social sources and negotiated in the representations of their own identities”. As argued by the authors, children bring to school their backgrounds, identities and perspectives, which cannot be overlooked. These aspects need to be considered mainly by establishing dialogs between children’s families and teachers, so that the local context is valued and different views are addressed.

Furthermore, we agree with Sousa Santos (1997), who affirms we have the right to be different. In a world where we must increasingly conform to the standards, the author declares that being different and having our own peculiarities is a right and we should not give it up. Our discourses should be oriented to preserving and appreciating the differences. In this case, we can affirm that we are not only teaching some vocabulary and grammar about families, but we are notably considering other aspects that might be part of this environment, such as identities, respect, emotions, and the children’s complete development. It would also be desirable to encourage linguistic sensibility (MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2019) so that children could think about words related to family in other languages, and especially, in Portuguese (if this is their first language). This would represent an opportunity to reflect on languages (not only English) as well as on what “family” means to them.

Another helpful example of working in a critical way with young learners came from two participants during the workshop’s final project. During the workshop, we came up with practical activities involving more abstract themes like emotions. In our view, it is relevant to reflect on these topics working with children’s needs, such as helping them to refine their fine motor skills, promoting sensory play and providing the vocabulary. But it is also significant working on their emotions themselves, encouraging them to express their feelings, legitimating and learning how to deal with them.

At the end of the workshop, our final project’s proposal for the participants was to select a unit from a textbook they have worked with, and, based on what we have discussed

regarding critical language education, suggest an adaptation that would be appropriate to their contexts. This project could be done in pairs or individually.

The two participants aforementioned explained that they have already been working with children in a critical way when it comes to feelings and emotions. In their context, they relate colors to feelings to make this subject less abstract, since they are dealing with very young learners. To begin, they present flashcards with images that might represent some feelings, and they ask students how the characters from the images are feeling. After that, they present vocabulary related to those feelings (sad, happy, angry, scared etc.) and they link the feelings to some colors they have learned before. For example, they say “when you are sad, you are feeling blue” in English. Then, they ask children to make those connections between colors and feelings themselves, showing them that this is something abstract, since one can relate happiness to yellow and another can relate happiness to pink, for example. The children’s production is a drawing illustrating their feelings at that moment, using the colors they considered appropriate for those feelings and emotions. Finally, using all the illustrations, they create a story together with the whole group regarding emotions and colors.

Rezende (2020, p. 67) explains that “trying to separate rationality and emotion is an attempt to suffocate our potentialities of acting, building and transgressing”, so we were glad to know that the participants sought to work with feelings/ emotions and colors in a different way, expanding the possibilities this topic presents to us. In order to look for more possibilities, teachers and students discussed their feelings and how people could help them in those situations during the storytelling, also learning how to legitimate and deal with their emotions.

In our point view, we could see a break in patterns established in traditional education in the opportunity to collectively talk about something that is personal and subjective. Also, because this is personal and subjective, it is a good way to appreciate and legitimate differences, as we have mentioned before.

Hence, teaching children not only the names of their feelings but encouraging them to deal with those feelings leads us to notice here that critical language education is not only about teaching language structures, but about developing discourses and identities. That being said, it is relevant to mention that we are not teaching today only envisioning the adults these children will become in the future, but we teach with today’s children in mind, since we understand that:

[...] the perception of children as critical thinking active citizens in their own right, with valuable contributions to make to families, communities, and society more generally, is often overshadowed by **traditional understandings and constructions of childhood as a period of**

innocence, powerlessness and incompetence (ROBINSON; DÍAZ, 2005, p. 9, our emphasis).

In other words, we believe that these children have a voice in society today, at least in their social scenario, and they can make the difference in their micro-environments talking about the appreciation of the differences they have learned at school. It is all about creating opportunities to help children become authors of their own discourses (MALTA, 2019a).

As Lopez-Gopar (2019, p. 241) says “it is also imperative to remember that critical pedagogy requires hope that change, transformation and social justice will occur, especially in current times when groups of peoples and cultures are treated as secondclass citizens”. Because at the same time that they are having their voices heard, children are treated as secondclass citizens, blank slates, people who do not have the right to have their discourses validated as something reasonable.

The same author determines that listening to these students' voices and showing multiple possibilities is encouraging critical pedagogy, and “critical pedagogy is not about changing the world. It is about small things, and the small changes in a classroom that can make a student feel intelligent, creative and truly appreciated at that particular moment” (LOPEZ-GOPAR, 2019, p. 241). In their words - and our beliefs - this child who felt intelligent, creative and appreciated the moment they were being validated could change the world in the future, and that is what we hope when it comes to critical language education with children.

After all, we understand that teacher education can contribute to make those voices acceptable and heard. Not only the children's voices, but the teachers' voices. Finally, we reaffirm that working in language education with children is about respecting their complete development, helping children become authors of their own discourses, educating them to appreciate differences and question common sense (LIMA; KAWACHI, 2015), because when the children are the center of language education, everything is planned to meet their needs and characteristics. For us, together with teaching grammar and vocabulary - or what people would call teaching language itself, these are the main purposes of critical language education with children.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to discuss some concepts related to critical language education *with* children (instead of *for* children, as proposed by MALTA, 2019a), based on

the discussions that emerged in a workshop conducted by the authors. We began by presenting our perspectives on critical language education, arguing that English teachers need to question their views of language(s), teaching, learning, and even their understanding of children's role in this process. We also focused on proposals that enhance language awareness with the purpose of educating children to appreciate differences.

It is relevant to highlight the importance of the workshop aforementioned as an opportunity to share experiences and reflect on issues that are related to TEYL. Through this moment of teacher education, it was possible to focus on teachers' praxis and contexts, as well as on childrens' expectations and needs. These types of meetings represent a chance to revisit concepts that have been traditionally associated with TEYL, such as teaching practices focused solely on isolated words. It is also possible to talk about hegemonic discourses that advertise the idea of native speakers as perfect models regarding pronunciation and language as something homogenous. In this paper, we sought to argue that these naturalized proposals of erasing differences need to be questioned.

We believe that critical language education with children represents possibilities of focusing on teachers' praxis as well as on teachers and children's contexts, respecting their identities, subjectivities and histories. Following López-Gopar's (2019) proposal, critical pedagogies are present in teachers' praxis when they focus on their local settings and resist the industry of English Language Teaching, which insists to set the same model for everyone. Hence, it is fundamental to consider teacher education so that teachers are informed to make their own choices, respecting children's needs and dreams.

By showing some examples of our praxis, we intended to invite readers to know some of our perspectives of what critical education with children means. Writing this paper represents an opportunity to reflect on our thoughts and concerns in regard to TEYL, expecting to somehow dialogue with the authors we read, with the participants of the workshop, with possible readers and with ourselves. We do agree with Rocha (2018) on education as a possibility of transformation. In this sense, educating children to appreciate differences, to become authors of their own discourses and to question what has been commonly known as "normal" or "true" represents a hope to change the world, so that human relations are valued.

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