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Article

Critical Literacy in English Language Teaching for Youth and Adult Education (EJA) in Brazil: (Re)Thinking Practices and Pedagogical Materials

Letramento crítico no ensino de Língua Inglesa para a Educação de Jovens e Adultos (EJA) no Brasil: (re)pensando práticas e materiais pedagógicos

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Abstract: This study presents an analytical overview of Youth and Adult Education (EJA in Portuguese) in the state of Minas Gerais, in Brazil, aiming to reflect on the need for specific teaching materials for English language teaching and learning in this educational modality, either Elementary Education or Secondary Education. To this end, we discuss current challenges in English instruction within EJA, particularly the lack of appropriate English teaching materials. The theoretical foundation draws on research related to EJA (Brasil, 2006, 2018; Filho, 2020; Filho; Cassol; Amorim, 2021), the role of textbooks as pedagogical tools in English language education (Duboc, 2012; Jorge, 2012; Soares, 2014), and on critical literacy perspectives for English teaching based on pedagogical possibilities found in existing teaching materials (Brasil, 2006; Caetano, 2017, 2020; Soares, 2014). We suggest that this study contributes to advancing critical English language teaching not only within Youth and Adult Education, but also in regular schools. Our aim is to support access to contextualized language instruction for learners from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, through the use of appropriate resources and pedagogical materials that respond to their learning needs.

Keywords: English language teaching; youth and adult education (EJA); teaching materials; critical literacy.

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Resumo: Este trabalho apresenta um panorama analítico da Educação de Jovens e Adultos (EJA) no estado de Minas Gerais, no Brasil, com o objetivo de refletir sobre a necessidade de materiais didáticos específicos para o ensino e a aprendizagem de língua inglesa nessa modalidade educacional, tanto no Ensino Fundamental quanto no Ensino Médio. Para tanto, consideramos as condições atuais do ensino da língua-alvo na EJA, mais especificamente a carência de materiais didáticos adequados ao ensino de inglês. Como pressupostos teóricos para a presente reflexão, encontram-se estudos que versam sobre a EJA (Brasil, 2006, 2018; Filho, 2020; Filho; Cassol; Amorim, 2021), sobre o papel do livro didático enquanto recurso facilitador no processo de ensino de língua inglesa (Duboc, 2012; Jorge, 2012; Soares, 2014) e sobre perspectivas críticas para o ensino de inglês a partir de possibilidades pedagógicas das brechas encontradas no material didático (Brasil, 2006; Caetano, 2017, 2020; Soares, 2014) na EJA. Este trabalho busca contribuir com reflexões sobre o ensino crítico de língua inglesa não só na educação de jovens e adultos, mas também na escola regular, ao buscar proporcionar aos estudantes de diferentes realidades o acesso ao ensino contextualizado da língua-alvo, a partir do uso de recursos e suportes didáticos apropriados às suas demandas pedagógicas.

Palavras-chave: ensino de língua inglesa; Educação de Jovens e Adultos (EJA); materiais didáticos; letramento crítico.

1 Introduction

In Brazil, public Basic Education comprises Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education (divided into stages I and II), and Secondary Education. In addition to these, there are other educational modalities with specific organizational structures, such as Technical and Vocational Education at the secondary level and Youth and Adult Education (EJA in Portuguese), as established by the Law of Guidelines and Bases (LDB), also known as Darcy Ribeiro Law (Brasil, 1996).

Youth and Adult Education (EJA) educational modality, which is the focus of this study, is defined in Article 37 of the LDB as a modality aimed at "those who did not have access to or continuity in their studies at the appropriate age in elementary and secondary education,

and it shall serve as a means for lifelong education and learning" (Brasil, 1996). Moreover, the law emphasizes that the educational opportunities offered by schools must consider "the characteristics of the student body, their interests, and their living and working conditions," including in the context of Youth and Adult Education (Brasil, 1996).

In this context, considering that EJA is designed for students aged over fifteen (15) for the completion of Elementary Education and over eighteen (18) for Secondary Education, it is essential to ensure access to a range of pedagogical resources and supports that are both contextualized and appropriate for this audience. Those tools must facilitate the learning process within a short academic timeframe, typically one semester, which intensifies the urge for contextualized teaching materials.

Nevertheless, there is a significant lack of materials specifically designed for this segment, especially those aimed at English teaching. At the present moment, the National Textbook and Teaching Material Program (PNLD) includes EJA only at the Elementary level, with no provision for Secondary-level EJA. This scenario reinforces the need to critically examine the current conditions of this educational modality and to advocate for public policies that are both pedagogically and socially aligned with the realities of EJA students.

Among the reasons why this topic has not received enough attention so far is the so-called *excluding practice*, pointed out by Scheyerl and Siqueira (2008). According to this notion, learning English still remains a privilege of upper social classes, since in many public educational settings, the subject is still seen and treated as secondary, with very few classes per week and no incentive of any sort. Although it has been widely proven that English is the universal language and one of the main means for social and economic upgrade and even though English teaching is at the center of talks on education and education is a central instrument in the struggle for social equity (Moita Lopes, 2005 *apud* Scheyerl; Siqueira, 2008), public policies aimed at guaranteeing such equity and providing lower-class students with better opportunities remain insufficient.

When it comes to EJA, the scenario is even more challenging. Within an already socially vulnerable public-school student group, those learners face an additional inequality layer, once they often carry the stigma of "school failure". It is important to highlight, however, that many of those students leave school due to survival needs, such as work demands, abuse situations, or financial resources lacking for basic needs. Barcelos (2022) explains that love must be the uplifting force in education, promoting responsibility, commitment, interpersonal connection and humanization. In this sense, one can conclude that education must be a harmonic balance between empathy, respect for students' realities and needs, and the pursuit of change. Therefore, as Brazilian citizens, we must strive to ensure that EJA students, as well as all Brazilian learners, have access to quality education and consequent better work opportunities, because this is, after all, their right according to our Federal Constitution.

Given the above mentioned, we propose the following reflection: *what challenges do EJA English teachers face and how can critical literacies support their pedagogical practices, considering scarce resources and teaching materials suited to EJA students?* In order to address this question, the present study offers an analytical overview on EJA through a critical examination of its present situation regarding English teaching materials. This investigation aims to highlight the importance of further research and pedagogical initiatives focused on additional language teaching in EJA, grounded in critical literacy frameworks, with the goal of contributing to the ethical, humanistic and civic development of educators and learners alike.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 On Youth and Adult Education (EJA) Educational Modality

The educational system in Brazil has historically faced numerous challenges, which become even more complex within the context of Youth and Adult Education (EJA). Within this modality, transformations can be identified ranging from changes in terminology to the educational gaps it seeks to address. By drawing on historical data and a chronological analysis of EJA's emergence in Brazil, this section aims to present the context in which education for students older than the usual school age was developed, while also highlighting the challenges that remain.

The roots of Youth and Adult Education (EJA) in Brazil go back to colonial times, when the Portuguese Crown launched efforts to reduce adult illiteracy through the training of the local workforce, mainly for economic purposes (Xavier, 2019). This approach remained predominant until the 1940s, when educational movements began focusing more on including people who had not learned to read and write at the appropriate age, shifting the emphasis toward the learner and not just the state's economic goals.

As Paiva (1973) explains, the schooling of Indigenous communities, mainly aimed at controlling their language and culture, led to the creation of evening schools, first established in 1854 by Jesuit missions. These schools were designed to teach literacy to Indigenous peoples so they could be familiar with labor demands of the royal court. The network grew quickly, reaching 117 schools in just two decades, each one shaped by local priorities. After political changes at the end of the 19th century and the expulsion of the Jesuits, literacy became linked to voting rights, which were granted exclusively to those who could read and write (Xavier, 2019), illustrating how ideas about citizenship were changing.

High illiteracy rates at the time left a large part of the population without access to basic rights, which led to organized initiatives to reduce illiteracy across the country. Those initiatives opened up broader discussions about the responsibility for adult education in Brazil. At the beginning of the Republic, education started to be viewed as a possible response to national challenges. From 1910, campaigns known as "anti-illiteracy leagues" (or *ligas contra o analfabetismo* in Portuguese) began to grow in different regions, aiming to reduce illiteracy and secure voting rights for people who had been excluded for a long time (Paiva, 1973). This movement intensified the debate on the role that the state should play in ensuring education for adults – debates that continue to shape current public policies.

In the 1920s and 1930s, EJA gained greater visibility, especially following the 1930 Revolution, which led to major political and economic transformations (Friedrich *et al.*, 2010). During the Estado Novo period, discussions on EJA were still not clearly distinct from those of regular education. However, it was within this context that the National Education Plan (PNE in Portuguese) was developed, formally recognizing the right to adult education as a state responsibility.

From the 1940s onward, key milestones for the consolidation of EJA began to emerge, including the creation of the National Foundation for Primary Education, spearheaded by

Anísio Teixeira, whose aim was to standardize educational investment and reduce municipal disparities (Friedrich *et al*., 2010). Another key development during this period was the creation of the Campaign for the Adolescents and Adults Education (CEAA in Portuguese), which initiated the production of teaching materials specifically designed for this audience.

CEAA was active from the 1930s to 1963 and played an important role in reducing adult illiteracy. It was mostly focused on rural areas and aligned with liberal-democratic ideas, aiming to integrate socially and culturally those who had long been excluded. The campaign recognized that adult illiteracy helped sustain inequality and kept many people on the margins of national development (Paiva, 1973; Xavier, 2019). In 1958, as EJA gained more attention, the Second Adult Education Congress took place under the presidency of President Juscelino Kubitschek, with the objective of sharing teaching experiences in the field. Within this context, Paulo Freire, a leading Brazilian educator, and his team stood out by highlighting the limitations of traditional adult education and proposing a new learner-centered approach to teaching (Friedrich *et al*., 2010).

From the late 1950s to 1964, Paulo Freire's ideas – first presented at the Second Adult Education Congress – spread quickly, fostering an understanding of education as a space for valuing and expressing popular culture (Xavier, 2019). This perspective influenced educators in search of more critical and transformative pedagogical practices. During this period, some social movements emerged, including the Popular Culture Movement (MCP in Portuguese), the Basic Education Movement (MEB in Portuguese), and the Popular Culture Center (CPC in Portuguese), all of them oriented toward popular education. Although many of these initiatives were repressed following the start of the military dictatorship, the MEB persisted, partly due to its connections with religious institutions (Friedrich et al., 2010), thus demonstrating resilience and community support.

Following the 1964 military intervention, adult education in Brazil experienced a period of stagnation, characterized by intensified government control and repression (Xavier, 2019). In 1967, the Brazilian Literacy Movement (MOBRAL in Portuguese) was established with the aim of eradicating illiteracy. Although it functioned as a government-led program, MOBRAL sought to limit the dictatorship's direct interference in adult education, maintaining a certain degree of autonomy until it ended in 1985 (Friedrich *et al*., 2010; Xavier, 2019), highlighting the complexities of that era. Considering this historical background, adult education in Brazil is currently regulated by the Darcy Ribeiro Law (Brasil, 1996), the National Education Council Resolution No. 1 of 2021, and the Decree No. 12.048/2024, which established the National Pact for Overcoming Illiteracy and Strengthening Youth and Adult Education.

Initially, as mentioned, EJA was designed to provide literacy for young people, working adults, and older individuals who had not accessed formal education at the appropriate age. However, what we observe today is a process known as "youthfulness" (or *juvenilização* in Portuguese), a social and educational shift resulting from what Filho, Cassol, and Amorim (2021, p. 719) describe as "school failure processes", which significantly influence students' educational trajectories. The growing presence of younger learners has transformed the typical student profile within EJA. School failure, often manifested through dropout combined with grade repetition, along with social pressures – particularly the need to work and make money – frequently leads those students to turn to EJA as a shorter route to complete both Elementary and Secondary Education (Filho; Cassol; Amorim, 2021, p. 719).

In response to the evolving profile of students enrolled in Youth and Adult Education (EJA), there is a corresponding demand emerging for pedagogical strategies capable of integrating varied levels of learning and a wide range of life experiences among learners of different ages. The educational environment, once primarily attended by working adults and older individuals, is now progressively shared with significantly younger students, some of whom have only recently left regular school. Consequently, principles such as plurality and diversity must be central to curriculum development and instructional planning in EJA. This includes, among other considerations, the implementation of inclusive practices for students with disabilities, a group that has grown substantially within this educational context (Cruz; Moraes; Ferreira, 2022), thus demanding urgent attention.

In this regard, "the development and implementation of methodologies and pedagogical practices that ensure the retention of young people and adolescents in regular schooling is necessary to guarantee their continued enrollment, pedagogical development, and civic education" (Filho; Cassol; Amorim, 2021, p. 724). This perspective also extends the teaching and learning process of the English language, which is the focus of this article.

Although it has been shaped by significant transformations, Youth and Adult Education (EJA) remains one of the most important public policies aimed at promoting educational inclusion in Brazil. Even in the face of persistent challenges, such as school dropout rates and the limited availability of resources, this modality has achieved notable progress, particularly through greater visibility and the expansion of pedagogical practices. The debate concerning the quality and accessibility of education for young people and adults continues to play a key role in Brazilian educational public policies. Furthermore, when the inclusion of an additional language is considered within this context, specific challenges arise. One of the most critical issues is the lack of appropriate instructional materials for language education, especially for English, as it will be discussed in the following section.

2.2 The Teaching of English in EJA Educational Modality: Problematizing the (Lack of) Access to Teaching Materials

As outlined in the previous section, beyond the challenges associated with the increasingly younger student population in EJA, an English language teaching and learning process analysis reveals additional issues that directly affect the educational experiences of students who pursue new beginnings through this modality.

Firstly, students enrolled in the Youth and Adult Education (EJA) modality have a reduced number of instructional hours, with all subjects having limited weekly class time. English, for example, has only one class per week lasting fifty minutes (Minas Gerais, 2024). Moreover, heterogeneity is a defining EJA characteristic, a feature that becomes even more evident in language teaching for groups of students with diverse ages, life experiences, motivations, and learning conditions (Filho; Cassol; Amorim, 2021). These diverse factors lead to multiple learning styles within a single English classroom. Finally, there is a notable scarcity of teaching materials, specifically designed for EJA students, particularly for the high school level within this modality. As Filho (2020, p. 310) emphasizes, "it is essential that the language learning development materials take into account issues relevant to the learner in order to provide an appropriate education" – especially for this specific audience in EJA.

Considering these challenges, the discussion now turns to English language teaching within the Youth and Adult Education (EJA) modality, based on the perspectives of public political policies such as the National Textbook and Teaching Material Program (in Portuguese, PNLD).

2.2.1 EJA Modality in the National Textbook and Teaching Materials Program (PNLD)

To understand the English language instruction context within Youth and Adult Education (EJA), it is important to consider the official educational programs in which it takes part such as the National Textbook and Teaching Materials Program (PNLD). According to data found on the website of the Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação (FNDE), the Youth and Adult Education (EJA) modality began to be included in the National Textbook and Teaching Materials Program (PNLD) in 2009 through the Resolution CD FNDE nº 51, dated September 16, 2009, in what became known as PNLD EJA. Initially, the distribution of foreign language textbooks (English or Spanish) was carried out only for EJA classes in the final years of Elementary Education (6th to 9th grade), and it was only in 2011 that the full distribution of foreign language textbooks reached the Secondary Education segment.

In 2025, after 10 years without participating in the PNLD, and according to a report by Educação... (2025), the Ministry of Education announced a call for textbooks for the EJA modality in two segments: Early Years of Elementary Education and Final Years of Elementary Education. The list of textbooks included in this PNLD 2026–2029 call comprises different subjects, including two modern foreign languages (Spanish and/or English) for the Final Years of Elementary Education, with schools responsible for choosing the target-language textbook they wish to offer. For this segment, the call presents textbooks organized into "up to six collections: Practices in Natural Sciences, Practices in Human Sciences and Art, Reading and Writing Practices, Foreign Language Practices (Spanish), Foreign Language Practices (English), and Mathematics Practices" (Educação..., 2025).

The Digital Guide PNLD 2026 EJA (Brasil, 2025), an instrument that helps school systems select their teaching materials and become familiar with them, states that:

> [t]he National Textbook and Teaching Materials Program (PNLD) for Youth and Adult Education (EJA) is fundamental for promoting inclusive and high-quality education, especially for those who, for different reasons, did not have the opportunity to complete their studies at the appropriate age. Its importance and scope can be highlighted in several aspects. EJA is a modality of Basic Education that encompasses educational processes in the stages of Elementary Education (1st and 2nd segments) and Secondary Education. This modality must be offered considering the specific characteristics of young people, adults, and elderly individuals who have not completed the stages of Basic Education, whether because they did not have access to school during childhood or adolescence, or because they were unable to remain in school until completion (Brasil, 2025, p. 22).

This Guide represents an important initiative in addressing the needs of the target audience of the EJA modality, as it acknowledges their specific characteristics, such as "the heterogeneous profile of students, the need for contextualized learning, and respect

for learners' life trajectories" (Brasil, 2025, p. 23), and promotes more meaningful and inclusive education. In this regard, in the words of the Guide itself, the "PNLD EJA reaffirms its commitment to inclusive and high-quality education, recognizing the transformative potential of this modality in building a fairer country with greater opportunities for all" (Brasil, 2025, p. 23). Furthermore, the Guide represents a key milestone in understanding EJA within the Brazilian educational context by emphasizing the role of the PNLD in this modality in providing "quality materials for the teaching and learning of students in this category, as well as innovative proposals that expand access to knowledge and promote social inclusion" (Brasil, 2025, p. 25). Thus, the Guide proves to be a relevant resource for understanding the conception of language and the process of teaching and learning English in the context of EJA in the Final Years of Elementary Education.

On the other hand, English textbooks aimed at EJA Secondary Education have not yet returned to the PNLD call, which reinforces the urgency of addressing this stage within the PNLD EJA to specifically include English language teaching. As was done in this call for EJA in the Final Years of Elementary Education, it is necessary to provide teachers in this modality with support for their classroom practice, enabling them to contribute to the comprehensive education of EJA students who seek to overcome difficulties in accessing or completing Basic Education, including the study of English. In any case, as stated in the Digital Guide for PNLD EJA Final Years of Elementary Education, recognizing that "knowledge produced in EJA must engage with the experiences, interests, and needs of the life cycles of these young people, adults, and elderly individuals so that they can attribute meaning to teaching and learning processes at school" (Brasil, 2025, p. 25) should likewise be taken into account when addressing the Secondary Education stage and when considering all curricular components, especially the teaching of English when understood as a social practice.

Considering the points discussed above, we argue that understanding the EJA modality through the analysis of its official documents such as the National Textbook and Teaching Materials Program (PNLD) Guidelines reinforces the relevance of a critical literacy proposal grounded in students' social realities. To support this perspective, the following section provides the history of instructional materials overview, highlighting the importance of developing resources specifically designed for EJA learners, particularly within the English language teaching context.

2.2.2 The Importance of the Textbook in the Process of Teaching and Learning English – a Brief Contextualization

As is widely known, the textbook is the most frequently used teaching resource – and, in many contexts, the only one available – in the classroom, which makes it a central pedagogical tool for both teachers and language learners. Within the context of Youth and Adult Education (EJA), this relevance becomes even more evident, given the limited instructional time and the lack of alternative teaching materials. As Filho (2020) points out,

> [d]espite the technical-methodological advances and research in the field of foreign language teaching, textbook publications for this curricular component in EJA are still scarce, and the available ones need to be adapted to meet the needs of EJA students, as they do not take into account the specificities of this educational

> modality in their research and production. When textbooks are provided for this modality, they are merely adaptations or reproductions of textbooks designed for regular education. The methodologies used, the texts selected, and the themes chosen for the didactic units are neither suitable nor engaging for EJA students (Filho, 2020, p. 310).

The author's analysis precisely describes the current situation of English teaching and learning in EJA. Despite these challenges, we recognize the importance of placing English language teaching in EJA at the center of the discussion, with a focus on the value of English textbooks in this context. This proposal reinforces the role of the textbook as a potentially facilitating pedagogical resource in the teaching-learning process, as long as the teachers are provided with the afforded necessary conditions to contextualize it in accordance with their students' sociocultural realities. In this regard, we present an overview of textbook use in order to highlight the importance of contextualized materials that are appropriated to the target audience within the teaching and learning process.

The use of textbooks as instructional support has a long history and has accompanied formal education over time. The first known textbook was published in 1578 and consisted of a Hebrew grammar book. Soon after, in 1658, *Orbis Pictus*, an illustrated book aimed at children, was released and became widely popular (Paiva, 2009). One year later, *Orbis Pictus*, initially published in Latin and German, was translated into English and served as a model for other textbooks throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the Brazilian context of English language teaching, the textbook has been a central mediator in the teaching-learning process since the 19th century. The earliest materials used in that period and throughout the first half of the 20th century were heavily influenced by the traditional grammar-translation method, reflecting European traditions. Paiva (2009), for example, highlights a book originally published in 1880 in Porto Alegre that reached 34 editions and, even decades after the abolition of slavery in Brazil, still carried a pro-slavery narrative – thus demonstrating how textbooks not only convey content but also reproduce the values and ideologies of their time.

This leads to two important reflections: (i) the use of grammar and translation as strategies to facilitate language learning, especially in contexts that require a high degree of learner autonomy; and (ii) the colonizing and imperialist character of many of these materials, which have historically reproduced power discourses of the dominant minority. Considering that language reflects social interactions, textbooks naturally reproduce the historical, political, and social contexts in which they are produced. What becomes particularly evident, however, is that even after nearly a century – and despite structural changes in textbooks and the supposed transformations of a self-proclaimed postmodern society – these two aspects (the overemphasis on grammar and translation and the reproduction of dominant discourses) continue to persist in English language classrooms in Brazilian Basic Education.

Given that English has been a compulsory subject in the Brazilian school curriculum since 1809 (Souza, 2015), while textbooks had existed in Europe since the mid-sixteenth century, it becomes clear that methods, approaches, and material models were initially imported from countries already engaged in producing and researching applied linguistics. Moreover, even the underlying conception of language in these materials originates from English-speaking countries, mainly the United States and the United Kingdom, as

demonstrated by Paiva (2009) in a detailed chronological analysis of the history of English textbooks in Brazil.

Until the 1960s, English language teaching approaches were based on structuralism, characterized by a focus on grammar and linguistic forms (Soares, 2014). In response to the need to align language teaching with its social function, the communicative approach emerged and became widespread in Brazil from the 1990s onwards (Soares, 2014). With the rise of this new approach focused on communication in the target language, new textbooks began to emphasize not only interaction but also student agency and participation. These new materials were visually appealing and gave rise to what Paiva (2009) calls the "integrated system of didactic materials", which included print, audio, and video resources for use in language labs, produced by major American and British publishers as well as Brazilian authors.

Thus, textbooks have historically played a central role in mediating English language teaching, serving as vehicles for disseminating the dominant methods and approaches of each historical period. Since the 1980s, various collections tailored to specific purposes – such as English for Specific Purposes, pronunciation, and academic writing – as well as integrated materials for different contexts (e.g., language institutes and public schools) have guided curricula, teaching plans, and English teaching practices across the country. Additionally, *graded readers* (adapted reading books) have contributed significantly to democratizing access to English literature, making classic works more accessible and expanding students' exposure to renowned literary texts (Paiva, 2009). This highlights the historical and pedagogical importance of textbooks in English language teaching, both in Brazil and internationally.

In the Brazilian context, the textbook plays an important role in English language classes. Besides enabling student autonomy – one of the primary objectives of early textbooks (Paiva, 2009) – it also offers practicality to teachers. Sarmento and Lamberts (2016) emphasize that textbooks organize content clearly, facilitating teachers' work, especially considering their often-large class sizes and multiple responsibilities, which is frequently cited as one of the main arguments for using such materials. Since textbooks usually follow a yearly syllabus aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and contemporary linguistic perspectives, it is the teacher's role to manage how the material is used and to what ends. Souza (2015, p. 176) argues that textbooks provide a sense of structure and continuity in classes, offering students "a sense of system, cohesion, and progress". Moreover, Sarmento and Lamberts (2016) point out that the lack of technological resources in many public schools often makes the textbook the only – or at least the main – teaching resource available in these educational contexts.

Another point that underscores the importance of textbooks in basic education is the Brazilian government's substantial investment in the National Textbook and Teaching Material Program (PNLD in Portuguese), which involves a rigorous process conducted by qualified professionals to select up-to-date and context-appropriate materials. According to Lamberts and Sarmento (2023), although the PNLD has existed since 1985, English was only included in 2011. Nevertheless, given the investment and the stringent criteria for selecting materials aligned with the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) and broader national education standards, the textbook is widely regarded as a key tool for promoting students' comprehensive development.

Despite the benefits of using textbooks in English classes, several challenges persist. One of the main issues is the gap between textbook content and students' actual real-life use

of the language. Often, the material is disconnected from learners' realities, making it difficult for them to identify with the content and remain engaged. This disconnection is exacerbated by exclusionary discourses, such as the one highlighted by Leffa (2011), who critiques the notion that poor students do not need to learn an additional language because they will never have real opportunities to use it. When a textbook fails to foster a sense of belonging or provide a contextualized learning approach that considers students' lived experiences, it tends to become a barrier rather than a support tool. In such cases, teachers often set the textbook aside rather than attempt to adapt it to their classroom's actual needs.

Another issue with English language textbooks is the market-oriented nature of the communicative approach, which is widely adopted in Brazilian textbooks. While this approach is important for emphasizing the sociofunctional nature of language and learner agency, it also carries a commercial bias, as English is tied to the global economy. English is now considered a *lingua franca* i.e., the preferred language for international communication (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). From a postcolonial perspective, English language learning is often linked to employment opportunities and wealth generation, a dynamic that may reinforce the economies of English-speaking countries through the global English Language Teaching (ELT) industry (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). This market demand leads to the need to negotiate meaning in the target language within predefined contexts, favoring some contexts over others – a tendency clearly reflected in textbooks adopting this approach.

An additional challenge in the communicative approach, as seen in English textbooks, lies in the way knowledge is often transmitted to learners instead of being constructed collaboratively. Like other traditional methods, the communicative approach relies on delivering pre-determined linguistic structures and crafting real-life scenarios without fostering critical reflection or integrating learners' worldviews into the process. Kumaravadivelu (2012) asserts that a major issue in language teaching approaches is the limited role assigned to teachers, who are often reduced to simple transmitters, passing on "easily digestible portions of personal and professional knowledge" (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 8). This scenario establishes a hierarchy between teacher and student, hindering the collaborative construction of knowledge, as the teacher holds the knowledge and transmits it passively and unquestioningly, expecting the student to adopt the same passive and uncritical stance. Without the teacher's active, critical and intentional intervention, relying on a textbook from this perspective ends up reproducing the "banking education" criticized by Freire (2023), resulting in a progressive disconnection between the student and the subject.

Although the limitations of textbooks for English language teaching in public education are well known, their importance as a facilitating tool for teachers' work is evident, given that they provide a structured and sequenced organization of content aligned, as said before, with widely recognized standards for leveling and teaching English. Furthermore, the inclusion of English language textbooks in national public policies, according to Souza (2015), has contributed to improving the quality of foreign language books by limiting and restricting the purchase of materials that fall outside the guidelines of the national curriculum frameworks (Souza, 2015). Likewise, Batista (2003, as cited in Souza, 2015, p. 36) emphasizes that the textbook is more than a mere reproduction or synthesis of content; it is "a cultural artifact that incorporates the development of such content, in addition to functioning as a tool for assessing learning". Understanding the textbook as a cultural artifact, therefore, implies recognizing its active role in the critical formation of learners and in mediating

between school knowledge and diverse social realities. In light of this perspective, the following discussion offers some food for thought on how critical literacy can walk alongside the process of teaching and learning English in EJA.

2.3 Provocations for English Language Teaching in EJA: Critical Literacy in Teaching Materials

The concept of critical literacy falls within the broader field of literacies, defined by Soares (2009, p. 18) as "the outcome of teaching or learning to read and write; the state or condition acquired by an individual or social group as a consequence of having appropriated writing". This definition highlights the importance of literate practices – engagements with reading and writing in specific social settings (Soares, 2014). From this perspective, literacies are understood not as neutral skills, but as social practices that are rooted in relations of power, ideology, and culture.

Literacies thus involve actions in which reading and writing function as socially situated practices, allowing individuals not only to navigate the demands of their contexts but also to question, reinterpret, and transform them. From this perspective, literacy practices are inseparable from processes of meaning-making, power negotiation, and social positioning. This understanding aligns directly with Freire's (1999) conception of education as a practice of freedom, in which learning is grounded in dialogue, critical reflection, and the possibility of social transformation. Within the context of EJA, critical literacy therefore offers a meaningful framework for rethinking English teaching materials as tools that promote dialogue, learner agency, and critical engagement with social realities, rather than merely reproducing linguistic forms detached from learners' lived experiences.

The Brazilian Curriculum Guidelines for High School (OCEM) (Brasil, 2006) acknowledged the formative role of foreign language instruction by proposing the incorporation of diverse literacy practices – including critical literacy – as an essential element of education. The National Common Curricular Base (BNCC in Portuguese) (Brazil, 2018) echoes and reinforces this perspective, strengthening the commitment to a critical approach in additional language teaching, in OCEM directives and emphasizing the development of linguistic competencies linked to reflection, citizenship, and social engagement.

When combined with critical literacy, teaching materials can become powerful tools for fostering civic competence among language learners, as highlighted by Duboc (2012). According to her, educational materials should be designed not only to develop language skills but also to foster critical awareness of diverse social realities. Jorge (2012) strengthens this view by emphasizing the social role of textbooks in schools, particularly regarding their portrayal – or lack thereof – of social markers such as race, gender, and class. Soares (2014, p. 26) asserts that, through a teacher's deliberate action, students should be given opportunities to question existing power structures and to position themselves critically on issues such as sexuality, oppression, class struggle, and the spread of hegemonic values. In this way, a textbook integrated with critical and reflective pedagogy can become a potent instrument for raising awareness and forming subjects who act ethically and transformatively in society.

Various scholarly studies have demonstrated the potential of adopting a critical approach in English language teaching. Examples include studies by Mattos (2015), Caetano

(2017), Toledo (2021), and Schieber (2022), which show that English activities and teaching materials can be effective tools for fostering participatory citizenship, critical awareness, and learner agency. From these studies, it becomes evident that critical literacy is a key resource for teachers and students to engage in meaningful teaching and learning practices grounded in their specific contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). We therefore underscore the need to align teaching materials with the principles of critical literacy.

In this sense, proficiency in English enables learners to participate fully in diverse social practices – operating as a form of cultural capital (Peirce, 1995, drawing on Bourdieu; Passeron, 1977). Peirce (1995, p. 17) describes *cultural capital* using an economic metaphor: knowledge and ways of thinking that distinguish certain social classes or groups, with some forms of cultural capital enjoying greater exchange value than others in a given social context. The author also argues that, when language learners invest in a second language, they do so with the expectation of gaining a broader range of symbolic and material resources – thus enhancing their cultural capital. These learners anticipate – or hope for – a good return on that *investment* (Peirce, 1995, p. 17). This investment, as opposed to mere instrumental motivation, reflects an evolving relationship between the learner and a changing social world (Peirce, 1995, p. 17). Therefore, identity, in this view, is not static: when learners engage in language use, they are not simply exchanging information but are actively reshaping their sense of self in relation to the social world (Peirce, 1995, p. 18). Consequently, investing in language learning becomes an investment in social identity, which is continuously reshaped over time and across spaces.

It is inevitable, in this section, to reflect on Peirce's observations about learners' experiences – insights that resonate deeply with our own teaching experiences in EJA, as discussed in Filho (2020) and Filho, Cassol, and Amorim (2021). In what follows, we briefly present general impressions from specific contexts based on our team's reflections during this writing process. In doing so, we establish connections between Peirce's concepts – such as cultural capital, investment, identity, and time – to our observed experiences, thereby building a bridge between theory and contextual practice.

First, we consider the personal commitment required to facilitate learning. For such process to occur, learners must have immediate access to time and energy in order to concentrate on intellectual production both in and out of the classroom. Reports from EJA learners consistently reveal that their study time comes at the cost of other professional, family, or financial pursuits – often requiring them to sacrifice other areas of life to continue their education (Filho, 2020; Filho; Cassol; Amorim, 2021). While attending school, they may be foregoing other social roles: grandparents, declining caregiving duties during class hours; sociable youths, skipping nighttime events to study, or even job opportunities rejected due to schedule conflicts with school. There are daytime workers who come to class fatigued, opting to study despite exhaustion; learners who dress carefully – with perfume, lipstick, or new clothes – to attend class with dignity and purpose, but also desired diplomas that previous generations never had; and decorated notebooks; "now it's English – back then it was French," as they remark.

Other challenges are also perceived. Within the EJA educational modality, it is common to observe learners navigating financial hardship while remaining committed to transforming their life conditions; older learners with health limitations who persist despite physical constraints and young parents returning to education after interruptions caused by family responsibilities. These are not distant stories, but recurring realities that illustrate how time is indeed precious in learners' educational trajectories. Thus, the investment they

make can be understood as a set of daily choices – each choice opening a door through which identity may be redefined via social interaction. Often, EJA students face a much starker struggle against dropouts than younger, traditionally-scheduled students, reinforcing the central role of resource-sensitive, critically informed pedagogical materials that acknowledge and support their identity journeys and investments.

Building on this premise, in a second analytical moment, after recalling some of the resilient students we have taught, we apply the notion of *cultural capital* to the EJA context, as presented by Peirce (1995, p. 17). This concept suggests that "new ways of thinking" and "new ways of living" can emerge from schooling, especially through learning a new language. The dream of better days and new opportunities is shaped by students' life experiences and personal sacrifices, whose cost – although the educational offering may be tuition-free – is often immeasurable. There are also less visible, yet significant, metaphorical "prices" or "losses" involved in this journey, such as time, energy, professional opportunities, and family interactions, which learners give up in pursuit of what they understand as an investment in themselves.

The effort to learn an additional language is, therefore, a significant investment, and students' time is a precious resource. For this reason, English teaching in EJA must be relevant, critical, and directly connected to learners' realities, supported by well-designed teaching materials that promote learning applicable to everyday life, as pointed out by Filho (2020). This is an audience that makes a conscious and voluntary choice to learn, even if that means foregoing other commitments – for many, this education represents a priority grounded in deep motivations and purposes. Thus, EJA demands careful pedagogical attention that recognizes and values the high investment – both material and immaterial – that students make to stay in school and complete their studies. In this sense, we advocate for a critical perspective for the production and development of English teaching materials, taking into account the specificities and needs of this population.

Accordingly, EJA requires differentiated pedagogical approaches, able to engage with students' life paths and the unique goals of this modality. Rather than constituting empirical generalizations, these responses function as illustrative insights that reinforce the need to rethink pedagogical practices in this context, since we understand critical literacy as an educational practice aimed at forming subjects capable not only of understanding but also of intervening in their social reality. As Lankshear and McLaren (1993, p. 18) point out, it seeks to transform "the ways in which possible and real social practices and conceptions of reading and writing enable human subjects to understand and engage in the politics of daily life in the pursuit of a more genuinely democratic social order". Based on this perspective, the role of the teacher in EJA must go beyond the traditional and uncritical use of textbooks.

This understanding aligns with Freire's (2005) critique of the "banking concept of education", or the "the banking approach", which positions learners as passive recipients of knowledge and sustains relations of domination:

> [e]ducation thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (...) But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves

> who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human (Freire, 2005, p.72).

Teachers must consider that students always know something in and about multitudes, once "projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry" (Freire, 2005, p. 72). The educator, then, cannot present himself to his students "as their necessary opposite". By having that perspective, the teacher "justifies his own existence"; the students become alienated and "accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence – but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher". In addition, students are seen as "adaptable, manageable beings", "accepting the passive role imposed on them", and they "tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them". The "banking education" minimizes the learners potential, and "serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed or transformed." (Freire, 2005, p. 72) According to the author, a profitable situation is preserved when the oppressors use their "humanitarianism", rejecting the stimulation of students' "critical faculties" to dominate them.

By contrast, a problem-posing and dialogical approach conceives learners as historical subjects and places their lived experiences at the center of the educational process: the "libertarian education", which stimulates students to be "transformers" of the world, the developers of a "critical consciousness" of their own worlds, as a result from "their intervention in the world". According to Freire (2005),

> [...] [k]nowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (...) Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students (Freire, 2005, p.72).

This "creative power" in such libertarian approach can change the reality of EJA. Such a stance implies rejecting transmissive and decontextualized practices in favor of pedagogical materials that promote dialogue, critical reflection, and agency. It is essential the implementation of an intentional transformative context of teaching and learning, fostering sensitive educational practices that resonate with students' experiences and encourage a critical, meaningful, and engaged worldview.

Therefore, adopting a critical stance regarding the selection and use of teaching materials for EJA is not just a methodological choice, but an ethical and social commitment to the learners. It is essential that English teaching in this modality be anchored in practices that value the sociocultural contexts of the students, transforming the classroom into a space for meaningful social interaction, where each learner can see themselves as an active, critical, and autonomous protagonist in their learning process.

3 Final Thoughts

This study offers a critical reflection on central challenges in teaching English in the EJA modality, drawing on theoretical discussions and illustrative insights from official educational documents and studies of Elementary and Secondary Education levels. Once more, the discussion highlights the absence of specific teaching materials for this audience, which forces teachers to adapt content from other contexts, potentially compromising lesson planning and pedagogical effectiveness. This scenario also reflects broader structural limitations in the EJA context, which has historically faced restricted access to adequate pedagogical resources, especially in the teaching of English. Even the official documents emphasize the importance of materials that consider students' sociocultural backgrounds and offer contextualized, practical activities that encourage active student participation and promote autonomy.

According to the National Common Curricular Base (Brasil, 2018, p. 476), Secondary Education – also Elementary Education, as we believe – must "expand students' linguistic, multisemiotic, and cultural repertoires, enabling greater critical awareness and reflection on the functions and uses of English in contemporary society". In this perspective, English teaching in EJA should move beyond the mere development of linguistic skills and foster critical reflection on the social, cultural, and political realities that permeate students' daily lives, thereby promoting learners' protagonism in the educational process. Additionally, there is a clear need to increase instructional time and invest in specific English teaching material so that EJA modality becomes more meaningful and aligned with learners' real demands.

This scenario underscores the need for further research on the importance of not only English teaching practices and pedagogical materials, but also EJA modality as a whole, especially considering that state policies in Minas Gerais, for instance, tend to reduce students' access to the EJA modality through certification exams for Elementary and Secondary Education completion. For this purpose, we call for research on EJA modality across states and nationwide. Last, but not least, this paper calls for effective public policy interventions. After all, investing in appropriate teaching materials and sustained professional development programs for teachers is essential to ensure education for young people and adults that is grounded in the ethical, human, and civic formation of these learners.

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Authors' Contribution

The authorship criteria adopted for this article include substantial and direct intellectual contribution to its elaboration; participation in the analysis and interpretation of the data; participation in the drafting of the manuscript, in the revision of its versions and in the critical review of its content; approval of the final version; and agreement regarding responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the entire work. Regarding the specific contributions, the conception and design of the study involved the participation of Érika Amâncio Caetano in the research design, and Isabelle Marine Rabelo Schieber and Stefani Moreira Aquino Toledo in the conception of the study. The literature review, data acquisition, and manuscript drafting were carried out by Érika Amâncio Caetano, Isabelle Marine Rabelo Schieber, Jaqueline Silva Miranda, Kerolayne Aparecida Gomes Rizzari, and Stefani Moreira Aquino Toledo. The analysis and interpretation of the data from the anonymous online questionnaire were conducted by Érika Amâncio Caetano and Stefani Moreira Aquino Toledo. The intellectual review of the manuscript involved the participation of Érika Amâncio Caetano, Isabelle Marine Rabelo Schieber, Jaqueline Silva Miranda, and Stefani Moreira Aquino Toledo. Final approval of the version submitted to the journal was given by Érika Amâncio Caetano.

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data Availability Statement

The contents underlying the research can be found in physical and digital editions of the respective books listed in the reference section, as well as in the internet links of the articles also explicitly stated.

Use of AI

We, the authors of the above-identified manuscript, declare that we used the Artificial Intelligence tool ChatGPT during the development of this paper for the purposes of language review (improvement of grammar, spelling, clarity, and style of the text) and translation (translation of the manuscript or parts of it into another language). We also declare that the use of the artificial intelligence tool was solely for the purposes declared above. All supervision, validation, and intellectual authorship of the manuscript are the sole responsibility of the human authors. Besides, the use of the AI tool followed ethical practices and did not include activities such as data fabrication, plagiarism, image manipulation, or any actions that could compromise scientific integrity. Last, but not least, we declare that the information provided above is complete and truthful. Should any inconsistency or inappropriate use be identified, we accept that the manuscript may be subject to investigation and, if necessary, rejected or retracted.

Reviews

As part of the commitment made by the Brazilian Journal of Applied Linguistics to Open Science, the journal publishes the reviews issued regarding its published works, when authorized by all parties involved.

Review 1

The work raises awareness of the need to support English Language Learners (ELLs) and educators with pedagogical resources that engages students with the language and develops their ability to think critically and responsibly as global civic actors. It also provides an

in-depth overview of the Youth and Adult Education (EJA) educational parameters in Brazil and the current state of affairs.

The paper is well organized and engages the reader throughout providing an excellent flow of ideas and arguments. Nonetheless, the data collected is limited, since it was drawn from a small sample of only from ten (10) educators within the state of Minas Gerais, second largest in Brazil, whose public high school education system serves about 1 million students. The results might be insufficient to make broad conclusions.

I suggest expanding on Freire's philosophy on the introduction and throughout the article citing/drawing directly from his work, since his pioneered Pedagogy of the Oppressed has inspired and ignited reframing educational paradigms to be truly inclusive and student-centered. Freirean-inspired pedagogical approaches oppose the "banking system" of education, where students are encouraged to limit themselves by receiving, storing, and filing the information deposited into them by teachers. Freire's framework instead supports the development of thinking critically and treating the learning process as an inquiry that provides opportunities for educators and educatees to engage in mutually respectful learning. The banking approach annuls students' creativity, negates their agency, and standardizes learning outcomes, and this is reflected in the lack of foreign language pedagogical resources that are accessible and engaging to students.

Additional data from teachers beyond the ten participants from the state education system of Minas Gerais will strengthen the findings and will be essential in order to make recommendations that would impact policy changes.

Reviewed on: 07/01/2026.
Recommendation: Accept.
Reviewer: Nuria Alonso-García.