

## a panorama of the teaching of additional languages to children in Brazil

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### abstract

despite not being compulsory, mainly in Brazilian public schools, the offering of an additional language/foreign language (AL/FL), especially English to Young and Very Young Learners (EYL) has gained prominence over the years. Inscribed in the Applied Linguistics field, the aim of this study is to provide a tentative research panorama on the teaching of AL/FL to Young and very Young Learners. For that, we present the location of the universities, the context of the research and their research methods carried out by means of master's dissertations and PhD theses presented during the period of 1987 through 2021. Our focus is on the author's motivation for developing the research on the theme. The results indicate that the great majority of the studies were developed by teachers who are teaching AL/FL to children in the early years of schooling and investigated researchers' own practice, being developed for the purpose of undertaking a master's degree. That practice comprises diverse contexts of research and a variety of ages and groups which were either investigated or took part in the master's and PhD studies.

**keywords:** early childhood education; language teaching; practices.

### como citar este artigo

Tonelli, J. R. A., Selbach, H. V., & Seccato, M. G. (2022). A panorama of the teaching of additional languages to children in Brazil. *Revista Letra Magna*, 18 (29), 34-46, doi <https://doi.org/10.47734/lm.v18i29.2051>

## introduction

*So, like many other SLA researchers, my initial interest in L2 acquisition was rooted in my practical concern to make language teaching effective and this is where I still am now (Ellis, 2021, p. 190).*

There has been a rapid global expansion of English teaching in the early grades in public schools (Sayer, 2019). In Brazil, this phenomenon can be seen in the teaching of additional/foreign languages (AL/FL<sup>13</sup>) - mainly English - which has been widely studied and discussed in the Applied Linguistics field (Tonelli & Padua, 2017). Language teacher education deals with a variety of settings, such as early childhood education, assessment, and teaching methodologies, which are just a few examples of the complexities addressed by the field. Sayer (2019) notes that, as complicated and expensive as it may be, the introduction of a large-scale AL/FL in public education, particularly in the so-called developing countries, and its shift from exclusively private to public education is linked to the misleading idea that acquiring English during childhood promotes personal, social, and economic development in the future. One of the results of this movement is the increasing interest in the field with special focus on studies carried out by preschool and elementary school<sup>14</sup> English teachers who end up taking over classes with little or no preparation (Tonelli, 2005).

In this article, we present a panorama of master's theses and PhD dissertations published during the period between 1987 and 2021 on AL/FL teaching to children in order to contribute to the current debate on the theme. In order to answer the question:

what is the research panorama on AL/FL teaching to children in Brazil, we adopted a quali/quantitative approach. The quantitative approach provides a broad view of the panorama in terms of location of postgraduate programs, context of research, research methods and the role of the researcher in the teaching context under analysis.

Taking into account the studies developed by Tonelli and Padua (2017) and Lima and Neto (2021), who provided a broader spectrum on the theme, our main focus in this paper is to discuss the researcher's (author of the thesis or dissertation) motivation for carrying out the investigation. That analysis is supported by the qualitative approach.

This paper is organized in five main sections. After this Introduction, we provide a literature review on AL/FL teaching to young learners worldwide, describing the conceptual framework adopted. In the method section, we present the research procedures. The following section is dedicated to a discussion of the findings and data. In the last section, we offer some conclusions.

## literature review

In this section we present the theoretical framework concerning AL/FL teaching to Young Learners. The section covers representative studies in the field and also provides some exemplars<sup>15</sup> from master's dissertations and PhD theses along with the theory. In the following section, we present an overview of the studies developed worldwide with special focus on Brazilian research.

*additional/foreign language teaching to young learners in Brazil: a panorama*

In Brazil, AL/FL teaching is only compulsory from the Elementary School II on (BRASIL, 2018). This means that in the early

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<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this article, we will not discuss the different assumptions underlying the concepts of additional and foreign language. Although we are aware of the debate around this matter, it was not considered during data generation or the discussion.

<sup>14</sup> We will consider the following terms in English as correspondent to Brazilian school system: Early Childhood Education (Educação Infantil, from 0 to 6 years old), Preschool (Pré-escola), Elementary School I (Ensino Fundamental I, comprising 1st to 5th years of schooling), Elementary School II (Elementary School II, similar to middle school or junior high, comprising 6th to 9th years of schooling), and High School (Ensino Médio comprising 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> years of schooling).

<sup>15</sup> All the excerpts were translated by the authors of this paper.

childhood education and preschool years (students aging zero to six) and at Elementary School I, the offering of any AL/FL depends, exclusively, on local initiatives which are mostly originated in private schools (regular and/or language institutes) although there are also initiatives within municipalities which, in accordance with Sayer (2019), depicts the rapid growth of AL/FL for young learners within public education. Despite not being mandatory in the public school system, it has been increasingly introduced at early stages by private schools or municipalities (Enever, 2012; Tanaca, 2017; Sayer, 2019).

Antonini (2009) and Andrade (2011) indicate that their motivation for undertaking their graduate studies on the subject was related to their concern regarding this trend

This study was motivated by the significant number of regular private and municipal public schools that have included FL (English) classes in the curriculum of the early elementary grades [...] (p. 4). [...]. This study, therefore, intends to address my own personal and professional concern<sup>16</sup> [...]. Having worked in the context of Foreign Language teaching for Children for a few years, I have noticed that, sometimes, there was a mismatch between what I was teaching and how I did it and what and how the student expected to learn (Antonini, 2009, p. 5).

The motivation for this study came from my experience as coordinator of a Language Center (Outreach Project of a Public University of the State of Goiás). [...] I observed the growing demand from the local society for teaching English to children, to the point that we had to implement the course due to the great demand. In addition, my motivation was driven by the complaints of the students of the Portuguese/English Language Program at the same Institution regarding the fact that they had to act as FL teachers in the early elementary grades in the Municipal Education Network, without having academic training for that (these same students were hired via public selection process to teach in the context described above, even without having

finished their degree, such was/is the market's need) (Andrade, 2011, p. 19).

Approved in December of 2017, the "New Basic National Curriculum Framework" (BNCC) (Brasil, 2018) considers English Language teaching compulsory for Elementary II schools from 2019 on, and, despite the great expectation that it would be extended to the Early Childhood Education, there is no mention of the setting of AL/FL to Young Learners<sup>17</sup> (Tonelli & Avila, 2020). Seccato (2016, p. 14) mentions this when she presents her reasons to investigate the theme:

I use my voice as a researcher, linked to my professional experience. As a foreign language teacher at all stages of schooling, I often wondered about the absence of curricular guidelines regarding English teaching in elementary school I.

Not only in the Brazilian context but also in the international scenario (Miller *et al.*, 2019), teacher education and AL/FL teaching to children has gained prominence at important Applied Linguistics events (such as the 'Conference of Brazilian Applied Linguistics (CBLA)', 'Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée or International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA)', 'Encontro de Professoras de Inglês para Crianças' (EPIC) as well as in specialized publications (Kawachi-Furlan; Lima, 2019; Freitas *et al.*, 2020, for example), which has been provoking important discussions and supporting relevant projects and studies developed by researchers in the field. One example can be found in the words of Pinto (2015, p. 12-13), who states that

[...] under the supervision/mentoring of the professor, I immersed myself in studies that would form the basis of the monograph a year later. [...]. It was from this need to go deeper in the subject that I decided to develop a master's thesis in this domain, to better understand the process of FL learning by children, as well as to reflect on its implications for teaching, which could, from my point of view, help teachers who are in the same situation as me.

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout the article, the emphasis in the quotes were added by the authors of this work.

<sup>17</sup> "Young Learners" are defined between 7–12 years old, while the "Very Young Learners" are defined as under 7 years of age.

In this context, it is appropriate to discuss the necessary changes and/or resignification of teacher education which demands from universities new ways of educating teachers especially in terms of formative practices developed in Applied Linguistics, as discussed by Archanjo (2011) and Júnior (2019).

One of the theses identified and analyzed was published by Linguevis (2007) who discusses the role of English teaching during preschool. The author invites us to reflect upon the importance of maintaining a constant reflective posture in the classroom with children. When presenting her personal reasons to develop the study she explains that

[...] my interest in the subject is justified, because when thinking about my teaching practice, as well as the practice of the teachers I worked with during my professional life, I realized how fundamental it is to rethink what happens in the classroom in a reflective process regarding factors that may be involved in language teaching and learning - especially if carried out in the momentous and decisive stage of Early Childhood Education: the gateway to the school universe (Linguevis, 2007, p. 4).

Similarly to Tonelli and Padua (2017), Lima and Neto (2021) concluded in their cartography that the great majority of the studies developed between 1987 and 2019 in Brazil indicate the attempt to understand the formative path of early childhood English teachers as well as their professional experiences in the field. Badiozaman (2016, p. 58) maintains that "[...] an English language teacher's trajectory includes a combination of personal, professional and contextual matters".

Paltridge (2014) discusses the notion that what motivates applied linguistics research usually lies within the authors' own difficulties on a certain subject matter. Based on this assumption, the author affirms that "insider stories, then, can provide us with valuable insights into why applied linguistics researchers undertake the work that they do" (p. 99). This was also identified in some Brazilian studies concerning professional

practice in teaching to Young Learners, as exemplified in the following examples:

The reasons for this theme are mixed with my own professional trajectory, because it is the sum of my concerns throughout my journey as a teacher that my journey as a researcher begins. [...] I shared a classroom with children for the first time early in my life as an educator. [...] The fact that I had never taught children was irrelevant to the school's principal (Linguevis, 2007, p. 5).

[...] the problems that have most strongly impelled me to research come mainly from my professional context, whose basis, for more than twenty years, has been language teaching and learning in various fields and teacher education (Rocha, 2010, p. 2).

The concerns that led to the elaboration of this study came from my professional experiences both in bilingual teaching, in regular schools and in private teaching situations for second language learning in which I adopt the modality of workshops with games (Lopes, 2012, p. 12).

Taking all these elements into account, in order to provide and discuss a snapshot of the research developed in Brazil on AL/FL teaching to children, in the next two sections we provide an analysis of the subject matter of master's theses and PhD dissertations presented during a period of 21 years, from 1987<sup>18</sup> through 2021. The period investigated in this article corresponds to an important part of the studies identified in Brazil.

The reports provide visibility to a certain field of knowledge through the sharing of the scientific outcome and also to the researchers and their groups who are part of the research team. These practices comprise the grounds of legitimate fields, bringing together forces that represent scientific knowledge in its socio and political dimensions.

## methodology

In this section, we describe the methodological process, which involved three main phases. The first comprised the search for master's theses and PhD dissertations in

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to highlight that the first study identified through the mapping was published in 1987.

the database provided by the research group FELICE<sup>19</sup>. The second phase included the mapping of those genres under the theme "AL/FL Teaching to Young Learners".

The third phase entailed the data analysis in terms of 1) location of the postgraduate programs, 2) context of the research, 3) research methods, 4) the role of the researcher in the teaching context under analysis and 5) the researcher's motivation for the investigation. In order to do that, the introduction and methodology sections of the master's theses and PhD dissertations were read in full.

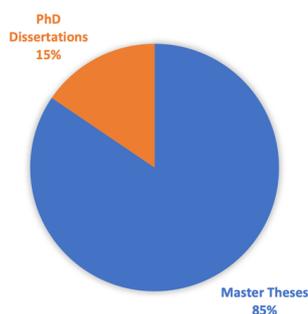
## results and discussion

In order to present the panorama of studies carried out in the field, we present 1) the number of publications identified in the Research Group mapping 2) the location of the postgraduate programs where the studies were developed and 3) the detailed contexts of the studies, including research settings, ages and groups investigated, methods of research, and authors' motivations for undertaking their work on teaching AL/FL to Young Learners.

### *publications*

The theme of AL/FL teaching to Young Learners resulted in 71 works<sup>20</sup> published during the period from 1987 to 2021. Chart 1 presents the quantitative results.

**Chart 1:** Number of publications



**Source:** The authors

The chart shows that the great majority of the studies were developed for the purpose of undertaking a master's degree. There were a total of 60 master's theses (corresponding to 85% of the works) and only 11 PhD dissertations (representing 15% of the research). The theme AL/FL Teaching to Young Learners does not seem to be pursued in more advanced research programs, as shown by the amount of PhD dissertations.

We estimate that this scenario may be due to the fact that in the early stage of their career, English teachers feel the urge to understand their own practice because the necessary education/training is not provided in the majority of Brazilian undergraduate courses. This panorama can be found, for example, in the research carried out by Galvão (2022), which presents the number of Federal Brazilian Universities that offer such courses in their undergraduate programs. The author maintains that few programs offering pre-service education seems to negatively impact the English teaching practices since the undergraduate students give signs that they are not prepared to teach the language to very young learners. As a result, English teachers join graduate programs to research and theorize on AL/FL Teaching to Young Learners and their master's research focus is their own practice setting. The same does not happen when these researchers move on to pursue their doctoral degree. We speculate that the small proportion of PhD research on teaching AL/FL to Young Learners may be associated with funding, graduate programs' and advisors' research interests, which may be related to higher education, their practice setting. These practices are associated with academic literacies, a field that has been expanding and is valued for enabling internationalization and participation in scientific knowledge production (Cristovão *et al*, 2021, p. 380).

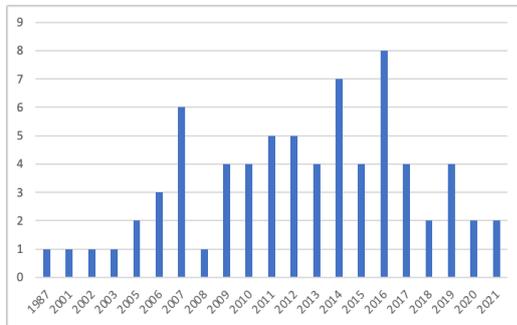
In the next section, the 71 identified studies are presented according to their date of publication.

<sup>19</sup> Available at <https://feliceuel.wordpress.com/>. The group maps master's and PhD theses published in Brazil regarding four main themes: 1) Additional/Foreign Language Teaching to Young Learners, 2) Teacher Education for Teaching Foreign/Additional Language for Young Learners, 3) Assessment of Additional/Foreign Language Teaching to Young Learners and 4) Bilingualism.

<sup>20</sup> Four works were not available online and one was a monograph. Those five works were discarded from the corpus.

*publications over the years*

Over the years, there has been an increase in the number of publications, especially in the years 2014 and 2016 as shown in Chart 2.



**Chart 2:** Publications over the years

**Source:** The authors

There were a total of 71 publications during the researched period, with a greater concentration of publications in the years 2007, 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2016. In 2007, there were six works; in 2011 and 2012, five each year; in 2014 there were six publications and in 2016, seven. This significant growth seems to indicate that the interest on the theme has gained prominence over the years. As we discuss further in the paper, the reason and motivation for the research seems to be closely related to the professional practice of the authors in the field. Due to the lack of specific teacher education for teaching AL/FL to Young Learners, it is possible to infer, based on the theoretical framework, that research has been a way for FL/AL teachers to develop professionally.

In the next section we present the main locations where the studies were developed.

*location*

In this section we present the main Brazilian locations of the graduate programs where master's and PhD studies were developed on the subject.

| North | Northeast (06)   | Midwest (08)   | South (27)  | Southeast (30)  |
|-------|--|--|---|---|
|       | <p><b>Alagoas UFAL</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>Bahia UESB</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>UFBA</b> (1 PhD dissertation)</p> <p><b>UFOB</b> (1 PhD dissertation)</p> <p><b>Pernambuco UFRPE</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>Sergipe UFS</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> | <p><b>Mato Grosso UFMT</b> (2 master's theses)</p> <p><b>UNEMAT</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>Goiás UFG</b> (2 master's theses)</p> <p><b>Distrito Federal UnB</b> (3 master's theses)</p> | <p><b>Paraná UFPR</b> (3 master's theses)</p> <p><b>UEL</b> (1 PhD dissertation; 10 master's theses)</p> <p><b>UNIOESTE</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>UTFPR</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>UNICENTRO</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>Rio Grande do Sul UFRGS</b> (1 PhD dissertation; 5 master's theses)</p> <p><b>Santa Catarina UFSC</b> (4 master's theses)</p> | <p><b>São Paulo UNICAMP</b> (3 PhD dissertations; 4 master's theses)</p> <p><b>PUC-SP</b> (1 PhD dissertation; 6 master's theses)</p> <p><b>UFSCAR</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>USP</b> (3 PhD dissertations; 5 master's theses)</p> <p><b>UNESP</b> (2 master's theses)</p> <p><b>Minas Gerais UFMG</b> (3 master's theses)</p> <p><b>Rio de Janeiro UERJ</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> <p><b>UFF</b> (1 master's thesis)</p> |

**Chart 3:** Publications by location

**Source:** The authors

In chart 3, we present the number of studies carried out in each Brazilian region (North, Northeast, Midwest, South and Southeast) as a way of contextualizing the AL/FL for young learner research scenario in the country. By mapping the location and works published in Brazilian graduate programs, we aim to provide an overview of the knowledge production by region.

As shown in chart 3, the great majority of the studies are in the Southeast and South regions: 57 out of 71. The Midwest and

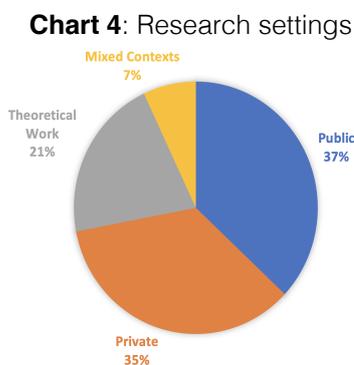
Northeast account for 20% of the research in the field. We did not identify publications on AL/FL for young learners in the North region through the mapping carried out by the Research Group FELICE during the analyzed period. Although it would be necessary to identify the numbers of graduate programs in each region in order to deepen the discussion, we consider that this snapshot allows us to postulate that the Southeast and South regions have a larger number of schools offering AL/FL to Young Learners. Hence, the chances to have a greater number of people willing to study the theme is higher. This claim is also supported by the data on the reasons that master's and doctoral students develop their investigations in the field, as we will discuss below. The next section presents the contexts of those investigations.

*context of research*

In order to provide a more nuanced picture of the research panorama of AL/FL teaching to Young Learners, we provide an analysis of the contexts of the investigations. The analysis consisted of surveying the research settings, students' age and groups, methodological approaches as well as authors' motivation for undertaking the research.

Research settings

The master's theses and PhD dissertations comprise diverse contexts of research as indicated in chart 4.



**Source:** The authors

The chart shows a balance between the public and private research settings as the

number of studies carried out in each context is similar, being 37% and 35% respectively.

Of the 71 works on AL/FL teaching to children, 26 were developed in public institutions. Twenty-three were carried out in public elementary schools, one in a public nursery, one in a social project and one in a public preschool.

Private contexts (a total of 10) represented 35% of the total number of studies. Six were carried out in international elementary schools; four in preschools; one in a nursery and one in a private English class context.

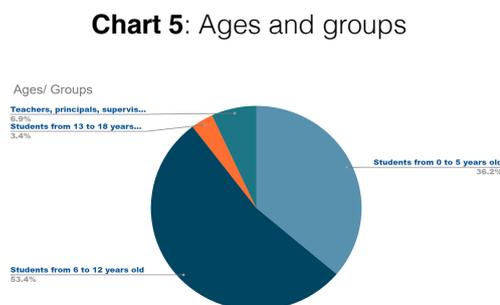
Mixed contexts represent 7% of the studies. Five works collected and analyzed data from both private and public institutions. In all these cases, the data from the different contexts were thoroughly compared and analyzed.

Fifteen of the studies (21%) were theoretical investigations. These covered different topics: two of them dealt with analysis of English Teaching Materials; five with English Teaching Guidelines and two with legislation on English teaching for children. There was also one work on each of the following topics: analysis of private language schools' advertisements; analysis of poems in English teaching textbooks; English learning website analysis, development of guidelines.

Another relevant aspect is the students' ages and the professional groups involved in the studies. These data are presented in the following section.

Age and groups

Similar to the contexts of research in Chart 4, Chart 5 also shows that a variety of ages and groups were investigated or took part in master's theses and PhD dissertations.



**Source:** the authors

The research participants in the master's theses and PhD dissertations were classified according to their age groups. It is important to mention that some research was theoretical and therefore did not have participants.

Most participants<sup>21</sup> (31) were children from 6 to 12 years old, showing that the majority of the research on teaching AL/FL to young learners (53.45%) considered children in Elementary School I in Brazil. Another substantial group (21 studies, corresponding to 36.2%) investigated preschool children.

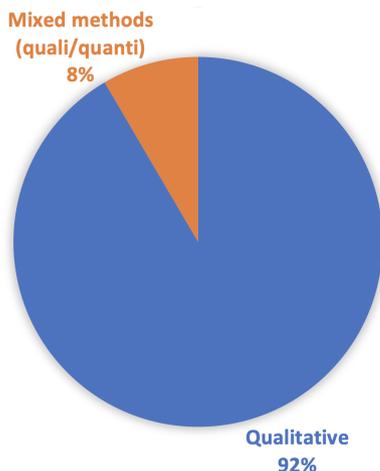
Four works (6.9% of the total) had adult participants, including teachers, principals or supervisors. These studies demonstrated the professionals' positions and point of view about teaching AL/FL to young learners. Finally, two works (3.4%) focused on students from 13 to 18 years old, in Elementary School II in Brazil.

The methodological procedures are presented in the next topic.

### Methods

The methodological approaches of master's theses and PhD dissertations are presented in Chart 6.

**Chart 6:** Methods of research



**Source:** The authors

The qualitative approach is the main option used by researchers who investigate AL/FL teaching to children. It comprises 65 investigations, representing 91.5% of the

studies. In the works analyzed, solely quantitative research was not identified. On the other hand, there were six studies using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In order to categorize the data of those mixed method studies, it was necessary to quantify the data in a first step and then, the data were organized and analyzed using qualitative approaches. For instance, data composed of activities were organized and translated. They were then reviewed and analyzed according to their contexts and participants.

The high proportion of qualitative research might be explained by the fact that the studies are focused on teachers' motivations, configuring descriptions of participants' feelings, opinions, experiences and interpretation of the meanings of their actions.

Denzin and Lincoln (2002), for example, mentioned that qualitative research is an interdisciplinary field which encompasses a wider range of epistemological viewpoints, research methods, and interpretive techniques for understanding human experiences. Qualitative research allows the researchers to discover the participants' inner experience and to figure out how meanings are shaped through and in culture (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Qualitative research methods such as participant-observation, unstructured interviews, direct observation, and describing records are most commonly used for generating data. During data generation, researchers interact directly with the participants. Consequently, data generation is subjective and detailed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). As a result, complex issues may be understood and contextualized.

Taking into account that the great majority of the research developed in Brazil on AL/FL Teaching to Young Learners is qualitative, we aimed to understand the motivation behind the studies. Therefore, the next section is dedicated to the discussion of the reasons the authors pursued the topic.

### Motivation

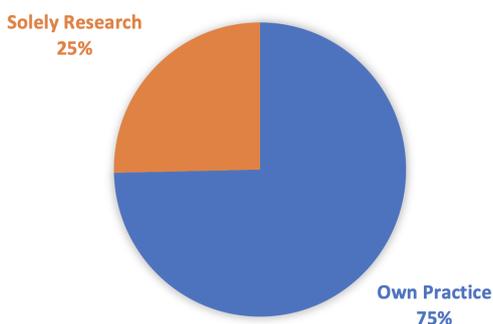
In this section we discuss the researchers' motivation for developing their

<sup>21</sup> It is important to mention that some research was theoretical and therefore did not have participants.

master's theses and PhD dissertations on teaching AL/FL to Young Learners.

In order to map their motivations, we read the Introduction section, looking for the author's motivation. In research of this nature, we would expect the author to justify the research motivation in that section of the thesis. We then classified those excerpts as 1) "Own Practice", when researchers expressed that they were motivated by their own professional practice or 2) "Solely Research", when researchers mentioned that their motivation was related to developing research and/or didn't mention their professional practice. After that, for each of the 16 years, we excluded the years in which there was only one study. For the other years, we selected one study per year, basing our selection on the study that most clearly demonstrated the researcher's motivation in order to compose the panorama of researchers' motivation. Chart 7 presents the motivation in terms of those two classifications.

**Chart 7:** Motivation for research



**Source:** the authors

The vast majority of the studies (53) investigated the researchers' own practice, which represents 75% of the research in the field. Eighteen researchers opted to investigate the practice of another teacher and/or develop theoretical work, corresponding to 25% of the investigations.

When it comes to understanding the motives pointed out by the researchers in AL/FL teaching to young learners, it is possible to affirm that the great majority of them, especially when writing their master's theses, were investigating their own practices. Going

back to Paltridge's considerations (2014) about the value of knowing the reasons that lead to study certain topics, this finding suggests that the motivation for developing these studies arose due to the lack of teacher education in the field in the area.

In order to illustrate the researchers' motivations<sup>22</sup>, we provide five exemplars from the corpus. The selected excerpts are the most representative from the corpus as they concern the roles of professors, project coordinators, teachers, teacher assistants and research group participants and their motivations for undertaking research on teaching AL/FL to Young Learners.

One researcher, who is also a professor of the internship course at a university, points out that the theme of AL/FL teaching to children is not contemplated in the Language Studies program curriculum, despite the fact that it is an important professional scenario and a career opportunity for students outside the university. Her motivation for developing the research on the theme is related to the experience of witnessing student anxiety arising from not having a subject dedicated to the discussion on how to teach FL to children:

[...] I work as an English teacher and I teach the subject Supervised Curricular Internship [...]. Although undergrads should only carry out an internship in the 5th to 8th grades of Elementary School and High School, after training, they may also teach young learners and early grades, as the municipality offers English for these grades. This fact has caused anxiety in Language students and reflection on the part of pre-service teachers, since the theme "how to teach FL to children" is not part of the curriculum in the language studies program (Santos, 2005, p. 68-69).

From a project coordinator's point of view, the motivation for the research came from the desire to contribute to the field - especially to public education - by taking up the challenge of implementing meaningful language teaching for children:

<sup>22</sup> We present these examples from the corpus due to the fact that the focus of the present work is to create a research panorama of teaching AL/FL to Young and very Young Learners in Brazil and not to develop a linguistic analysis of the theses.

This research originated from my inquiries, as co-coordinator of FLP [Foreign Languages Project]. [...] The myth that “you cannot learn English in public schools” (Moita Lopes, 1996), which I also extend to the vast majority of private elementary and high schools, seemed to me to be very present in the scenario of FLP. [...] As a professional working in this context, the challenging task of finding ways to implement the teaching of FL for young learners became essential for me, aiming to show that the opposite is possible and true. [...] this research highlights my personal and professional needs and desires, with regard to the search for a more meaningful language teaching for children from 1st to 4th grades (Rocha, 2006, p. 22-23).

The perspective of an in-service teacher in 2013 shows anxiety, a feeling identified in pre-service teachers by Santos (2005), as one of the reasons for researching the theme of AL/FL teaching to children. The researcher poses her practice - English teaching to children - as a challenge which is situated and guided by praxis:

I developed this research [...] as a way of dealing with my anxieties in the face of a new professional challenge - teaching English to children, using theory to improve my teaching practice, that is, at the same time that I observed, analyzed, intervened and reflected in/about my classroom, I was looking for explanations and answers to the questions that were emerging in the research field. [...] I also realized that theory supported me to go a little further and find my own explanations based on the singularities of my context (Silva, 2013, p. 12-13).

The teacher, who has worked as a teacher assistant, emphasizes that the internship in the field of AL/FL teaching to children was fundamental to her research on the theme. Coutinho (2017) mentions the motivation reported by Santos (2005), which is the absence of opportunities for training and discussion on the theme during the undergraduate language studies program:

The teacher and author of this study [...] has been working [...] for 2 years as an intern (teacher assistant) and 2 years as a teacher. The internship period [...] was crucial to learn how to teach FL to Children, as the teacher-researcher was able to work together (as an assistant) with more experienced teachers. The internship in this segment was important, since the language studies program does not offer it.

Our study investigated the children's learning process, FL teaching to children and the criteria that should be followed in planning for this context, enabling improvements in the practice as FL teachers (Coutinho, 2017, p. 32-34).

The research group participant mentions the importance of researching the theme of AL/FL teaching to children with a group as well as working as an AL/FL teacher to children. The combination of these two activities led to new professional and academic directions:

[...] when I joined the specialization in EFL at UESB and had the opportunity to get to know the research up close through Professor Joceli's proposal, I felt honored to receive her invitation to be part of the official group of the Nursery Project [Projeto Creche], implemented after the end of specialization. In the same year, I received a job offer to start working with children in a language course. By accepting both proposals, the opening and beginning of a new path in my teaching and academic life was inaugurated (Cruz, 2019, p. 69).

In order to complement the discussion on authors' motivations, we examined the C.V. of the 54 master's theses<sup>23</sup> authors to verify whether they continued to pursue their research on AL/FL teaching to young learners in their PhD dissertations. Based on the information available on the authors' C.V. webpages (CNPq Lattes Platform), only five of them (corresponding to 9% of the authors) continued investigating the theme in their PhD dissertations. Thirteen authors (24%) changed

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<sup>23</sup> The corpus of master's theses is composed of 60 theses, but only 54 were considered because we couldn't locate the C.V. of four researchers.

their research theme during their PhD program<sup>24</sup>. Thirty-six researchers (67% of the total) did not pursue a PhD. We speculate that this is due to the fact that the authors examined their own practice during their master's and, after finishing their studies, returned to their workplaces. Once the master's period, motivated by the challenges and puzzles the authors encountered in their classrooms, were completed and provided the answers the authors were looking for, it was time to fully dedicate themselves to their classroom.

Another aspect that we consider relevant is that when pursuing a doctoral study, the researchers are possibly no longer directly involved in the theme since their professional reality may take new directions, leading them to investigate different contexts or take different roles within the professional setting. Such assumptions lead us to reflect upon the lack of teacher educators dedicated to investigating this field of knowledge at higher education institutions. Although, based on the findings, we cannot come to a certain conclusion, we consider it possible to problematize the fact that in financial terms, in Brazil, the great majority of pre-primary or primary teachers are not compensated if they hold a PhD degree<sup>25</sup>. Hence, it seems that few of them choose to continue their studies unless they aim for a position as professors at a university.

### **final remarks**

In this work, we provide a research panorama on AL/FL teaching to children in Brazil through the analysis of master's theses and PhD dissertations published during the period from 1987 to 2021. We adopted a quali/quantitative approach. The quantitative approach provided a broad view of the panorama in terms of location of postgraduate programs, context of research, research

methods and the role of the researcher in the teaching context under analysis. Our main goal was to discuss and investigate the researcher's (author of the thesis or dissertation) motivation for carrying out the study on the theme, an analysis supported by the qualitative approach.

The findings expose a Brazilian context of AL/FL teaching to children. The substantial number of master's theses compared to PhD dissertations elucidate teachers' need to improve their knowledge and rethink their practice to work with very young learners after their undergraduate program. This demonstrates the importance of adding a branch related to this perspective in these programs.

With regard to the publications on the theme over the years, the increasing number of research studies from 1987 to 2021 is evident, which shows a remarkable expansion and attention to the topic in Brazil. The Southeast and South regions had the greatest number of graduate programs offering the possibility of research on AL/FL to young learners, thus possibly a greater number of people studying the theme.

Concerning the context of the research, there was a variety of settings, such as private, public and mixed contexts and theoretical studies, as well as a balanced concern between public and private contexts. In relation to the participants, more than 50% were students from 6 to 12 years old, showing a focus on elementary school I education in Brazil. The majority of the investigations were supported by the qualitative approaches, which can be observed and analyzed according to the different contexts and respecting the different subjects involved.

The researchers' motivation was the focus and the most relevant data in this study. We were able to identify some issues related to teachers' needs, their practice and their perceptions about their educational process

<sup>24</sup> It was not possible to confirm whether two researchers continued researching AL/FL teaching to young learners in their PhD studies. Data from these two C.V.s were not included in this result.

<sup>25</sup> The salary table for salary progressions of teachers in the state of São Paulo is an interesting reference, since the state offers among the highest wages paid. The career plan of the São Paulo government is composed of levels (in Roman numerals, in the columns of the table) and bands (in Arabic numerals, in the lines). To receive a 10.5% increase at each level, teachers must be among the 20% approved by the Merit Test, among other goals. To earn 5% between tracks, academic titles (such as a specialization course) are required. In both levels and tracks, it is necessary to wait for a period to be promoted. Leaving the first level and tier, the salary can increase by 183%, but 45% of teachers are focused on this initial salary value. The last stage is 4-IV, with only 0.009% of the total of 130 thousand professors. Available at <https://infogram.com/piso-salarial-dos-docentes-de-sao-paulo-1gk8pdl9r8ygmq0>

and professional practice. Firstly, the great majority of researchers analyzed their own practice. It is clear that teachers' motivations for undertaking the research were driven by the need to rethink their practice through theories, but at the same time to understand theories through their practice. The perspective or commitment to acting by praxis is elucidated in the excerpts which showed teachers', coordinators' and supervisors' motivations for teaching AL/FL to children. In the reports, topics such as anxiety, needs, desires, challenges, relations between work and academic life came out. There was an apparent concern with the combination of research and practice. Despite this fact, there was a pattern for most of the researchers who went on to pursue doctoral degrees to not continue in the same area of study.

This panorama is also a reflection of the financial reality of teachers in Brazil. Preschool or elementary school I teachers who hold PhD degrees are not compensated. Hence, educators who obtain a PhD may be more likely to seek work as university professors.

It is pertinent to reflect on the possibilities to rethink undergraduate curricula in order to include AL/FL teaching to children subject material. This would allow teachers to make connections between their practice and theories which allow them to understand their contexts.

Finally, it is important to develop critical practices for language education in the field of Applied Linguistics, including beneficial interventions in society or in the ways in which teachers who act in this field are recognized and compensated.

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**recebido em 02/01/2022**

**aceito em 31/01/2022**