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Early Childhood Educators' Knowledge of Language Development: An Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract

Background: The aim of this paper is to identify the scientific production on the knowledge of early childhood educators regarding language development and their pedagogical practices in Brazil, considering the educators' perceptions. **Objectives:** This review aims to identify relevant literature and synthesize existing research on the topic of early childhood educators' knowledge of language development. **Methods:** For this purpose, the following databases were searched: LILACS, SciElo and ERIC, using the following keywords: language development, language acquisition, oral language, children's language, early childhood education and preschool teachers. The inclusion criteria for the review were scientific articles published in English and/or Portuguese, studies with early childhood education teachers /educators as participants, published between 2012 and February 2022, qualitative and/or quantitative studies, and articles published as full text and open access. **Results:** The low production found may reflect the need for more publications on this topic, especially in the Portuguese context. It was concluded that the knowledge acquired by teachers during their training paths has a reciprocal impact on the beliefs and practices presented by these professionals in the context of early childhood education intervention. **Conclusion:** After identifying the published works, this research proved to be relevant and convergent with current conceptions regarding the importance of the link between the knowledge of language acquisition and development acquired by early childhood educators and their practices in school contexts on a daily basis.

Keywords: Early Childhood, Language Development, Pedagogical Practices, Teacher Training.

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Introduction

Language development and any changes that may occur in this process are of considerable importance for the training of teachers working in early childhood education. It is known that children in the early childhood education age range (zero to six years old) are at an important stage in the development of these skills (Schirmer et al., 2004), and that the development of these skills is significantly influenced by their experience in formal education, especially by the pedagogical practices of the early childhood educators involved in this context (Ferreira & Cruz-Santos, 2021; Roncato & Lacerda, 2005; Sapage, & Cruz-Santos, 2021).

In this sense, it is worth noting that early childhood educators who dedicate part of their training to mastering knowledge in the field of children's language have a better background for planning and carrying out pedagogical actions more contingent to the specific needs of the children (Cruz-Santos et al., 2019; Eloi et al., 2015). The context experienced in the kindergarten environment contributes significantly to the promotion of language skills. Therefore, professionals working there must understand their role as facilitators in the development of these skills, given that children in early childhood education spend most of their time in formal activities (Ferreira et al., 2023; Roncato & Lacerda, 2005; Silva et al., 2014).

Early childhood educators are among the most important professionals who can help to identify signs of risk for language disorders in children in this stage. The early identification of these risk situations can reduce the likelihood of future learning difficulties and prevent the children from failing in school. This underscores the importance of early identification and referral for evaluation by appropriate professionals (Cruz-Santos et

al., 2019; Luzardo & Nemr, 2006; Ferreira et al., 2023; Schirmer et al., 2004).

Language development is influenced by a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic human characteristics. Maturational and genetic peculiarities, "or those acquired through neurodevelopmental changes" constitute the intrinsic elements, while interactional and socio-environmental factors comprise the extrinsic characteristics of the individual (Luzardo & Nemr, 2006).

According to Vygotsky (2001), children's linguistic development is linked to their cultural and social experiences, and therefore requires mediation. Based on the socio-interactionist theory, it can be said that mediation is made possible by the occurrence of interactions according to the socio-cultural characteristics of the experienced context (Martins & Moser, 2012; Vygotsky, 2001).

The teacher's pedagogical actions should be guided by the skills that the children already have the potential to acquire and develop in this context. When learning guidelines are effective, they have a positive impact on different aspects of development. From the child's perspective, learning is a fundamental part of the process of developing characteristics that are not born with him/her. Therefore, learning that takes place in the formal education environment will also contribute to the internal elements of development. This can be affirmed since the process of developing competences depends on learning and experiences, and is also influenced by other external, mutually reinforcing aspects (Vygotsky, 2001).

Recent studies on the subject show that early childhood educators try to base their pedagogical practices on the public policies that guide education (e.g., Flores, 2012). However, the findings suggest that these professionals do not really recognize their role in the development process, because they have a superficial

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understanding of the way in which they should guide their actions in the school environment when they seek to promote the development of language skills. This fact compromises the teacher's practice as the main mediator of the interactions provided in the kindergarten, since it does not provoke in the teacher the desire to reflect critically on his or her actions (Flores, 2012; Oliveira, 2008).

The research also shows that, according to the teachers' perception, their initial and in-service training has not contributed enough, in terms of theoretical and practical foundations, to the improvement of pedagogical actions aimed at collaborating with the child's language development. Among the findings, it can be seen that professionals give greater importance to knowledge gained from their own experience or through the experience of other professionals, compared to formal training (Dornelas, 2017; Flores, 2012).

In spite of studies that indicate the need for institutions involved in teacher training to pay attention to the relevant inseparability between theory and practice that must be present in this process, the recent trend is to prioritize one of the parts and consequently neglect the other segment. Research indicates a deficit in the approach to topics related to early childhood education and, more specifically, to content related to language development, both in initial and continuing education. The inadequate approach to these topics, which have a significant impact on teachers' performance, highlights a gap, identified by the professionals themselves, between the content covered in training courses and the needs observed in the context of each school institution (e.g., Peroza & Martins, 2016; Santos, 2019).

However, it was necessary to conduct a review of national and international literature in order to collect current scientific evidence on the subject, with particular attention to early childhood

education. Such a search and analysis is necessary to delve deeper into the subject, since it is common to observe a greater emphasis on issues related to students attending elementary school (Peroza & Martins, 2016; Santos, 2019).

Therefore, based on the above, with the aim of synthesizing the results of current studies, this article presents the results of an integrative review of national and international literature on the knowledge of early childhood education teachers regarding language development and their pedagogical practices.

Methods

This study was designed as an integrative literature review, which aims to build a synthesis that includes scientific knowledge related to the topic in question, so that practices can be based on evidence (Silveira & Galvão, 2005). This type of literature review requires the following steps (Souza et al., 2010): (1) definition of the guiding questions; (2) selection of the articles in the sample; (3) extraction of the data relevant to the objective of this review; (4) analysis of the extracted data according to the previously defined inclusion and exclusion criteria; (5) interpretation of this analysis; (6) presentation of the review.

The research questions for this review were: (1) How does early childhood educators' knowledge of language relate to their pedagogical practices; and (2) How does the training of these professionals affect the development of their students' language skills in early childhood education?

Selection Criteria

The inclusion criteria for the review were: scientific articles published in English and/or Portuguese; studies with early childhood education teachers as participants; published between 2012 and February 2022; qualitative and/or quantitative studies; articles available in full text and online. We chose to include

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articles published in Portuguese, because it is the language of the country where this research was carried out, and in English, because it is the language used in most important publications in the field. The following exclusion criteria were applied: articles that used the pre-post comparison method; studies that did not directly relate the results to the language development process; and research that primarily emphasized language changes without providing proportional evidence of language development.

Search Strategy

The search for articles that met the criteria for this research was conducted in the LILACS (health), SciELO (interdisciplinary), and ERIC (education) databases. The choice of these databases

was based on their relevant impact on the subject in question, as they are recognized in the fields of health and education, and are widely used by professionals and researchers in the areas covered by the research.

The terms used in the search strategies had to be present in the title, abstract, or keywords: "language development", "language acquisition", "oral language", "child language", "early childhood education", "language development", "language acquisition", "child language", "oral language", "preschool", and "preschool teacher". The terms were combined according to the characteristics of each database and using the Boolean operator AND, as described in Table 1.

Table 1

Database Search

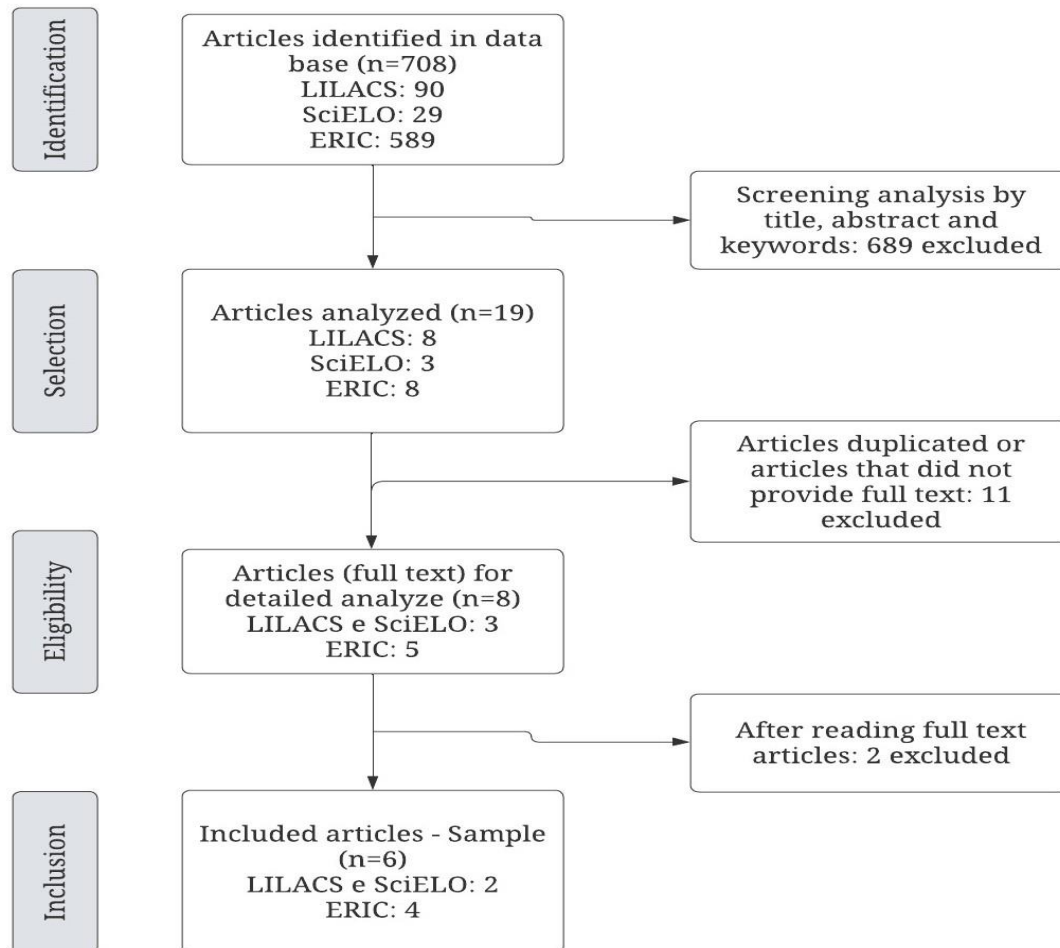
Database	Search strategy
LILACS	"language development" AND "early childhood education"; "language acquisition" AND "early childhood education"; "oral language" AND "early childhood education"; "child language" AND "early childhood education"
SciELO	"language development" AND "early childhood education"; "language acquisition" AND "early childhood education"; "oral language" AND "early childhood education"; "child language" AND "early childhood education"
ERIC	"language development" AND "preschool teacher"; "language acquisition" AND "preschool"; "child language" AND "preschool"; "oral language" AND "preschool"

Data Extraction

A total of 708 articles were initially identified, including 90 studies in the LILACS database, 29 studies in the SciELO database, and 589 in the ERIC database. After screening by analyzing the title, abstract, and keywords, 19 articles were selected, including eight studies from LILACS, three studies from SciELO, and eight studies from ERIC. After this stage, duplicate articles or those that did not provide the full text were excluded, leaving

eight studies in the review (LILACS and SciELO - three articles; ERIC - five articles). Finally, after reading the full texts and selecting according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, of the 19 studies considered eligible, only 6 were considered to meet the requirements for inclusion in this review: two articles from LILACS and SciELO simultaneously and four articles from ERIC, with the majority (5) being cross-sectional (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1*Flowchart for the Integrative Review*

To extract the data, we used a spreadsheet developed with Excel software, consisting of the following fields: database, authors, year of publication, origin of the article, title of the article, objectives, type of study, characterization of participants, sample size, instruments used and main results.

Results

Upon completion of the process already presented in the method section, the articles that met all the criteria outlined for this paper were analyzed based on the results presented, and the corresponding

discussion is presented in the following section.

Study selection

Table 2 summarizes the most relevant data for the characterization of the studies to contribute to the descriptive analysis of this review, based on the questions that guided the study.

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Table 2. Summary of Articles Selected for the Review

	AUTHORS AND YEAR/ COUNTRY	OBJECTIVES	SAMPLE	TYPE OF STUDY / INSTRUMENTS USED	MAIN RESULTS
1	Teixeira; Dickel (2013)/ Brazil	Analyse the interactions provided by the context of early childhood education, from the perspective of language	Two teachers working in a nursery class with 8 children aged between 4 months and 1 year and 2 months.	A cross-sectional study was carried out by observing routine school activities, focusing on aspects of language, using a field diary.	In the episodes described, the teachers were not aware of their active role as mediators of interactions during the child's basic care activities. In addition, they didn't use the activities to stimulate aspects related to language, such as expanding vocabulary.
2	Silva <i>et al.</i> (2014)/Brazil	Investigating whether teachers have the ability to recognize language disorders in children	14 nursery school teachers and 91 pupils aged between two and four years and 11 months.	Cross-sectional study using questionnaires on language development for teachers and a behavioural observation <i>checklist</i> for students	When the analyses of the teachers and the researcher in charge were compared, a deficit was observed in terms of knowledge about aspects of language and their possible alterations. The authors therefore considered the likelihood of teachers identifying a deviation in the language development process to be low.
3	Strohmer; Mischo (2015)/Germany	To find out how content relating to the language development of early childhood students is approached during initial teacher training.	371 early childhood education teachers	A longitudinal study carried out using a standardized test that addresses various elements involved in language development.	The study was still in progress at the time of publication and presented partial results, but the findings suggest that there is a significant gain in terms of knowledge about language development during initial training.
4	Lynch; Owston (2015) / Canada	Investigating the beliefs of nursery school teachers regarding language stimulation	79 early childhood education teachers	A cross-sectional study carried out by means of a questionnaire on topics involving language development and the literacy process.	The results suggest that teachers' beliefs do not fully converge with theoretical conceptions based on scientific evidence, with regard to language and literacy development.
5	Piasta <i>et al.</i> (2019) / United States of America	To analyze the knowledge of early childhood education teachers regarding language and literacy, relating it to their pedagogical practices.	485 nursery school teachers and 2,004 children.	A cross-sectional study was carried out using two forms covering knowledge related to oral and written language structures, as well as questions about teaching practices that contribute to the development of language and literacy skills. Observation was also carried out using scales to measure the quality and quantity of practices aimed at language and literacy development.	The researchers found that there is a significant relationship between the knowledge presented by early childhood educators and their classroom practices, as well as having a direct impact on the initial evolution of the literacy process. According to the authors, teachers with greater knowledge of language and literacy have been shown to develop more effective practices in the classroom, as well as helping their pupils make progress in learning aspects related to reading and writing.
6	Bulut (2021) / Turkey	Analyze the perceptions of early childhood education teachers, through metaphors, regarding their conceptions of language development	110 early childhood education teachers	A cross-sectional study was carried out using a form containing the following statement: "Language development is like _____, because _____."	Among the most frequently cited metaphors, teachers have shown that language development is like "a long journey, which requires work, effort, love and care and support"; "an expression of eternity and depth"; and "an expression of freedom and wealth" (Bulut, 2021, p. 361-362).

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With regard to the characterization of the studies selected for this review, it can be seen that the years in which the articles were published varied greatly.

Characteristics of Studies

This integrative review consists of articles published in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2019 and 2021, two of which have the same reference year - 2015. The four most recently published articles are international - Germany, Canada, USA and Turkey - and were found in the ERIC database. The two national studies that make up this study were published in 2013 and 2014 and were found in both the SciELO and LILACS databases. This demonstrates the relevance of the topic in question and of the national articles selected, since they are included in two leading databases in the scientific field in Brazil and Latin America.

Regarding the design of the studies included in the sample, five of them were cross-sectional studies, in which the variables were measured only at a single point in time (Bulut, 2021; Silva et al., 2014; Teixeira & Dickel, 2013). Only one article was longitudinal (Strohmer & Mischo, 2015) since the first measurement was made when the teacher started his or her training and the second measurement was made after three years, when this training process was completed.

Discussion

Regarding this review, we can analyze that in the study by Teixeira and Dickel (2013) the participants (early childhood educators) showed no pedagogical intention when they did not take the opportunity to give meaning to aspects of the actions carried out in the school environment to meet the child's basic needs. Therefore, the observations made during the data collection suggest that the professionals do not recognize their active role in the development of children's language. The authors emphasize that

naming actions and parts of the circumstances involved in caring for the child are key aspects in this process. This is partly because these practices have a direct impact on the development of imitation skills and thus on language development (Teixeira & Dickel, 2013).

However, the teachers in Lynch and Owston's study (2015), given their high score on the scale used as an instrument to investigate aspects of oral language with a focus on vocabulary, indicated that they understood the importance of valuing opportunities to talk with children. Similarly, an analysis of the results of Bulut (2021) research suggests that early childhood educators understand the importance of language development for children. In this way, the data allow us to conclude that these beliefs can have a positive impact on the pedagogical actions of these professionals in the context of early childhood education (Bulut, 2021).

The results of Teixeira and Dickel's study (2013) suggest that the participating teachers, in addition to not understanding how they play an active role in the process of children's language development, do not yet recognize the child as an active subject in the process of language development. This can be confirmed as the authors pointed out that the professionals did not provide opportunities for the children to explore space and become aware of aspects related to their bodies and their interaction with the environment. The play activities and games made possible in early childhood education should be proportionate to the diversity of circumstances conducive to the exploration of the concepts and meanings identified in this context. Teixeira and Dickel (2013) point out that when teachers are aware of these particularities and assume their role as mediators in the development of the child, the interaction between child and adult is valued and contributes to the effective exploration of the school environment.

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Therefore, an essential requirement in working with early childhood education is the importance of teachers understanding that language does not develop naturally, as it requires mediation, and this process is influenced by the child's socio-cultural context (Vygotsky, 2001). In this sense, teachers working in early childhood education should pay attention to the right moments to promote language development. Experiences in the context of each formal education stage offer multiple opportunities for interaction. Therefore, the planning of pedagogical practices must be aligned with the needs of the children attending daycare and preschool, namely actions in this area must oppose the adult-centered view and seek to be guided by dialogical interactions between the individuals involved (Melo, 2018).

The educators who participated in Silva et al. (2014) study scored poorly in the data collection, indicating a gap in the assimilation of knowledge related to language development. In view of this, the authors emphasized the importance of further training on the subject, as they felt that the teachers in the sample were unlikely to identify characteristics that might indicate language disorders in the children involved. Nevertheless, among the findings of Strohmer and Mischo's study (2015), the gain that teachers showed during their initial training in terms of acquiring knowledge related to language development stood out.

However, according to Lynch and Owston (2015), studies in this area suggest that there is disagreement among early childhood educators about how to promote language and its relationship to literacy. The results of the authors' research indicate that the views of the participating early childhood educators often differ from those based on scientific evidence. Lynch and Owston (2015) linked the low score given by the participants in their sample when discussing the relationship between aspects of language and the literacy process to the

perspective that early childhood education is not culturally associated with the need for its practices to be based on widespread evidence and, consequently, less improvised. The study by Piasta et al. (2019) concluded that practices in the school environment and children's performance in initiating the literacy process were significantly related to early childhood educators' knowledge of language development.

Lynch and Owston (2015) analyzed the relationship between teachers' length of service and their beliefs on the subject. According to the findings, the participants who reported that their practices were based on evidence were those with less experience in the field. The authors state that this finding is consistent with the literature, which shows that professionals with longer experience in the field are more likely to hold more traditional beliefs in the context of early childhood education.

As suggested by Strohmer and Mischo (2015), the theoretical knowledge acquired by teachers during their training has a reciprocal effect on their beliefs. In other words, the beliefs acquired through their personal experiences will be reflected in their search for deeper theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, the knowledge presented through professional training will have an impact on the beliefs based on the experiences of the early childhood teacher. This refers to the fact, also mentioned by the authors, that teachers working in early childhood education who acquire knowledge related to child development provide more targeted and effective learning conditions (Strohmer & Mischo, 2015). Pedagogical actions must be based on a permanent connection between theory and practice, this being the basis of the teacher's training.

As has already been explained, the teacher screen important markers or aspects of typical language development, because even if no difficulty or delay is detected in

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a child, it is essential that this professional endeavor to promote practices and interventions that promote the development of competencies related to crucial language development in early ages (Luzardo & Nemr, 2006).

Conclusion

The results found converge with the tendency that current conceptions present in relation to the relevance of detecting and identifying children at risk of developing language difficulties, delay or disorders. In this sense, teachers must understand and have knowledge of language development acquired by typical children and found their pedagogical practices in this knowledge. It is worth emphasizing the importance of all aspects related to language development knowledge and how to involve them in the teacher training process, highlighting the need to cover contents related to language development in both initial and in-service training.

The results of this research indicate that there is a lack of content related to language development in the training of teachers who work in early childhood education, according to the conception of these professionals; however, the participating teachers recognized the importance of having knowledge related to the subject, in order to work in early childhood education. If early childhood educators understand the essential role they play in the development of their students, especially in aspects related to language, the planning and implementation of their pedagogical practices may result in more appropriate and efficient teaching.

It can be concluded that the results of this review are in line with a trend that has been highlighted in the literature regarding the importance of the relationship between teachers' knowledge of language development and their practices in the school environment, so that these, in turn, are promoted with the necessary qualification. Furthermore, the results

suggest that a relationship can be established with both content knowledge, considering the whole training process, and knowledge related to classroom practices. It is therefore necessary to address these issues during teacher training, on an ongoing basis.

In this article, certain aspects related to the method used in the integrative literature review can be considered as limitations of the study, as they allow the use of broader criteria for the selection of research. In this way, the lack of stricter parameters may affect the quality of evidence in the studies. Among these quality-leveling factors that may be compromised, it is possible to mention the clarification of the process for defining the sample calculation, as well as the alignment between the data collection methods, since a diversification in the instruments used was observed. This study will help health and education professionals to understand the relationship between teachers' knowledge of language development and their teaching practices in the context of early childhood education. Finally, there is a need to develop research that will allow a better understanding of this issue and its implications for pedagogical work in early childhood education.

Study Limitations

This integrative review has limitations in terms of the quality of evidence of the studies found. It is suggested that future review studies be conducted with the aim of providing evidence with a lower risk of bias and methodological quality to contribute to educational professionals.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data search and analysis were performed by Jessica Blanca Santos, Andrea Perosa Saigh Jurdi and Anabela Cruz-Santos. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Jessica Blanca Santos and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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