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Introduction: critical multimodal literacy. Advancing educational linguistics in teacher education

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1 Introduction

This special issue was initiated at the International Conference on Language Learning and Teaching in Digital Transformation held at the University of Teacher Education Lucerne, Switzerland, in September 2023. The aim of that event and this publication is to celebrate the establishment of the first Swiss research institute for Educational Linguistics (EL) – the Institute for Language Learning and Teaching and Educational Linguistics. The institute seeks to advance EL in teacher education by combining different theoretical perspectives and methodologies from educational sciences, applied linguistics and sociolinguistics (Krompák 2024b). In response to current educational discourse on digitalisation and the pressing need to rethink contemporary language education, this special issue focuses on EL in language education, in particular on multimodality and critical literacy in the digital era. It addresses the question: *“To what extent can contemporary language education enable learners to interpret and use socially and culturally shaped multimodal and digital resources, and to reflect critically on them?”* At the same time, it serves as a position paper, laying the basis for applied EL in teacher education.

This special issue brings together scholars from diverse disciplines and geographical contexts, shedding light on various aspects of critical multimodal literacy by challenging contemporary language education. The six articles in this issue present new avenues for (digital) learning and teaching practices by exploring the complex relationship between language and the (digital) learning space from the perspective of EL.

On the one hand, the articles provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation, integrating perspectives from social semiotics (Kress 2010), sign language studies (Kusters 2021) and critical pedagogy (Freire 1970). On the other, they offer empirically

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grounded insights derived from research conducted across a range of educational settings, including teacher education and primary school.

This introduction comprises three parts: First, it outlines the concept of EL and its connection to teacher and language education. Second, it contextualises critical multimodal literacy in the digital age as the thematic focus of the special issue. Third, it presents an overview of the articles, highlighting three key issues: (1) the materiality and embodiment of language, (2) critical language education and trans-languaging, and (3) the digital learning space. The introduction concludes with a synthesis of the contributions in the issue.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue draw attention to highly relevant yet underexplored areas of language education. They open new avenues for theoretical debates, methodological innovations and empirical enquiry into critical multimodal literacy, thereby contributing to the establishment of EL in language education.

2 Why does teacher education need educational linguistics?

Despite its long-standing tradition in the English-speaking world, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, EL remains largely invisible in the German-language research. With a few notable exceptions, the field is not widely known in education in general or, more specifically, in teacher education. Nevertheless, the theoretical underpinnings and methodological approaches of EL offer new ways for investigating language and reflecting critically on language policy and its use in educational contexts.

EL emerged in the early 1970s when Spolsky (1975) proposed a new, problem- and practice-oriented transdisciplinary field situated at the intersection of linguistics and education. According to Spolsky (1975: 347), “[i]t should be a problem-oriented discipline, focusing on the needs of practice and drawing from available theories and principles of many relevant fields including many of the subfields of linguistics”. He further emphasised that EL should provide new insights for language policy in education and promote its implementation.

The development of the field (see also Hult 2008) can be described in three interconnected and partly overlapping phases: emergence; the move towards a multidisciplinary and global perspective; and the advocacy and critical turn.

EL emerged in the latter half of the 1970s with the establishment of PhD programmes at the University of New Mexico, under the leadership of Spolsky, and the University of Pennsylvania, led by Dell Hymes and Nessa Wolfson (Hornberger 2001). Spolsky’s (1978) seminal monograph also played a role in establishing the field of EL.

During this period, Nancy H. Hornberger emerged as another pioneering figure. She argued for the recognition of EL as an independent discipline, identifying its three main characteristics: the interdependent and dynamic relationship between linguistics and educational science; the problem-orientated approach; and the focus on language learning and teaching.

The second phase in the development of EL highlights the multidisciplinary and complexity of the field, as represented in the edited handbook by Spolsky and Hult (2008). Accordingly, EL is no longer confined to linguistics and education but integrates approaches from disciplines such as Anthropology, Neurobiology, Psychology and Sociology (Hult 2008: 16). Hult's subsequent edited volume (2010) extends the methodologies to include tools such as eye-tracking technology, digital games and linguistic ethnography. Notably, it also highlights the importance of EL in bilingual Deaf education. Following this trend, Hult and King (2011) draw attention to both local and global aspects of EL. While the global perspective is reflected in the consideration of different languages and contexts (e.g. codeswitching between Urdu, Hindi and English in film art, Indigenous languages in Peru, teaching in Chinese in the USA), the ethnographic and anthropological approaches further reinforce the multidisciplinary nature of the field.

The third stage in the development of EL is characterised by an advocacy and critical turn. Creese (2010: 36) advocates for its integration into teacher education: "Educational linguistics in a school of education must be one of the disciplines contributing to theme-based problem-oriented research." In a similar vein, Bigelow and Enns-Kananen (2015) argue in favour of EL advocacy by the scientific community, calling for the inclusion of international voices and those of emerging scholars. Closely linked to this advocacy turn is what Pennycook (2022) calls the "critical turn" in EL, pointing to an understanding of different modes of inequality and ways to change them. Furthermore, he underlines the pedagogical orientation of the critical approaches, including critical language awareness, critical language policy and critical literacy.

Following the question "*Why does teacher education need educational linguistics (EL)?*" It is important to acknowledge that many of the issues and approaches associated with EL have a prehistory in education sciences and language education. However, their interconnectedness and theoretical underpinnings as a discipline remain largely absent, particularly in teacher education in general and in language education in particular. Against this backdrop, this special issue advocates for the integration of EL into language education by applying its problem and practice orientation as well as its critical approach beyond the Anglophone world (Pennycook 2022). In doing so, the issue illuminates critical multimodal literacy in the digital age and focuses on emerging key issues in its conceptual and empirical exploration.

3 Critical multimodal literacy in a digital age

In line with van Leeuwen (2005: 281), multimodality can be described as “a combination of different semiotic modes”. These modes – such as images, gestures, facial expressions, sounds and languages – are combined in both social and digital spaces to create new meanings (Kress 2010). Consequently, multimodal literacy embraces the combination of these modes in visual (written) and auditory (oral) practices. The critical dimension of multimodal literacy allows for reflexivity on literacy as a “sociocultural phenomenon” (Gee 2015: 35), emphasising the way speakers and readers engage with their social and cultural practices, how they deconstruct texts and situate them within specific social and historical contexts (Mills 2016).

From the perspective of the child in educational contexts, “critical multimodal literacy includes different ways of learning, emphasizes the importance of social interactions and power dynamics, and provides a framework for understanding how children are designers who create texts, images, and artifacts to communicate” (Capello et al. 2019: 206). Drawing on the framework of critical multimodal literacy, Capello and her colleagues investigated the multimodal production of a fourth-grade student in the US by applying the following dimensions: communicating and learning with multimodal tools; restorying, representing and redesigning; acknowledging and shifting power relationships; and leveraging multimodal resources to critique and transform sociopolitical realities. Their findings underscore the significance of critical multimodal literacy in fostering equitable classrooms.

In the context of this special issue, we are particularly interested in the relationship between critical multimodal literacy and digitalisation in education. Adopting the problem- and practice-oriented approach of EL, the special issue explores the following question: “*To what extent can contemporary language education enable learners to interpret and use socially and culturally shaped multimodal and digital resources, and to reflect critically on them?*” This question is examined through the key issues identified in the sixth paper of the special issue: materiality and the embodiment of language; critical language education and translanguaging; and the digital learning space.

4 Key issues in the conceptual and empirical exploration

4.1 Materiality and the embodiment of language

The papers by Crispin Thurlow and Liona Paulus provide theoretical foundations for exploring the intersection of language, materiality and the body, with a focus on the

“stuff of words” (Thurlow) and sign languages (Paulus) examined through the lens of EL.

In the first paper, **Crispin Thurlow** introduces readers to the stuff of words and discusses language materiality from the perspective of cultural studies, dispositif analysis, mediated discourse and social semiotics by applying a practice- and teaching-oriented approach. At the same time, he offers a coherent theoretical framework for analysing textual, linguistic and communicative practices. The first part of this framework – *little “m” materialities* – focuses on transmodalisation between words and things, while the second part – *big “M” materialities* – draws attention to the symbolic violence inherent in language.

Using everyday examples, Thurlow illustrates the multimodality of language and the function of words as material artefacts, as well as the materialisation of societal structures in and through words. He exemplifies *little “m” materialities* – as transmodal actions in elitist discourse – through his analysis of the tactile, textural and material properties of a business-class menu. The *big “M” materialities*, on the other hand, are reflected in texts and communicative practices; even a single word such as “premium” can enact symbolic violence. Labelling products as “premium” suggests superior quality and higher prices, reinforcing the symbolic violence which is represented in and through language. Similarly, his account of “object interviews” combines sociolinguistic methods with sustainability discourse, enabling students to analyse the materiality of language in depth, guided by the framework.

Thurlow’s little “m” and big “M” materialities framework offers a solid theoretical background for critically analysing the multimodal nature of everyday text and language. It also shows great potential for use in the language classroom. By engaging with words and applying Thurlow’s framework, students can develop a political and critical approach that goes beyond (socio)linguistic analytical skills.

In the second paper, **Liona Paulus** explores the way digitalisation contributes to the emergence of academic registers in non-written languages, particularly sign languages. Focusing on German Sign Language/Deutsche Gebärdensprache (DGS), American Sign Language (ASL) and Brazilian Sign Language (Libras), Paulus highlights the distinctive characteristics of academic register in sign languages, an area that remains largely underexplored. By introducing the contexts of Germany, the United States of America (USA) and Brazil, she describes the use of the specific sign language within Deaf academic communities.

Paulus further points out that the use of sign languages in academic language is currently limited to a few countries, including Brazil, China, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom, the USA and South Africa. Even in these countries, opportunities for Deaf scholars to conduct and present their research in the respective national sign language are limited. Thus, the ongoing development of

multimodal academic registers, particularly in video form, has considerable significance for an inclusive Deaf academic community.

The characteristics of formal academic register in sign language include visual elements such as clothing colour and background, as well as adherence to standard academic structures. Videos often include subtitles naming cited authors to enhance clarity, especially when names are fingerspelled by the signer. As Paulus notes: “Deaf education and related academic fields [are] gaining strength in [their] own right and leading to greater empowerment and political capital for these communities.”

By shedding light on the current development of academic register in sign languages, Liona Paulus makes a valuable contribution to social justice and fosters innovation in multimodal representations of research, not only within Deaf communities but also across the broader scientific community.

4.2 Critical language education and translanguaging

In the third paper, **Cláudia Hilsdorf Rocha** explores the following question: *How can a critical and politically engaged Southern perspective nurture a liberating language education?* Against the backdrop of global environmental and societal crises, with a particular focus on Brazil, she outlines the prerequisites for a critical and liberatory language education. She advocates for the transformative power of language education by recognising Indigenous epistemologies, decolonial perspectives and the philosophical principles of Paulo Freire.

Drawing inspiration from Indigenous thinkers such as Krenak (2021), Hilsdorf Rocha emphasises collectivity as a core philosophy and unity with nature as a means of challenging Western ways of thinking. She conceptualises a decolonial and radically transformative language education by highlighting pluriversity, alternative cosmologies, translingual and transcultural spaces, and a critical stance toward rational and oppressive individualism.

Guided by Freirean principles of life, equality, love, wondering and childhood, Hilsdorf Rocha articulates the decolonial and transformative power of language education. She illustrates this through a Brazilian project related to Deaf education. In her conclusion, she defines teaching and learning as a “collective *thinking-knowing-feeling* experience and as an opportunity for resistance and re-existence”. Through this contribution to the special issue, Hilsdorf Rocha gives a voice to Southern perspectives and raises awareness of Indigenous epistemologies, decolonial perspectives and critical pedagogy (Freire 1970) that represents a blind spot in language education.

Following the discourse of critical language education and translanguaging, the fourth paper in this special issue shifts the focus to the classroom, examining

pedagogical translanguaging in a digital environment. **Dag Freddy Røed** and **Kristin Vold Lexander** investigate the potential of tablets in a linguistically diverse school in Norway. They point out a gap: while digital tools in education are growing rapidly, their use in linguistically diverse classrooms, particularly in a way that incorporates students' heritage languages, remains limited.

Drawing on the concept of translanguaging in educational contexts (Cenoz and Gorter 2021; García and Li 2014; Krompák et al. 2025) and the notion of funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992), the authors explore how teachers combine and include these concepts in their teaching practices. They also analyse students' engagement in digital translanguaging activities.

Using qualitative data from classroom observations, interviews and screen recordings of students' tablets, the authors identify two key incidents in teachers' instructional practices. The first illustrates how teachers model the creation of multimodal, multilingual text using tablets, as well as students' responses to this approach. The second key incident highlights instances of metalinguistic discussion of students' texts, positioning students as language experts.

In their findings, Røed and Vold Lexander underline the potential of tablets as tools for pedagogical translanguaging, showing how they can foster multimodal and multilingual education by integrating students' home languages into the classroom.

4.3 Digital learning space

Similar to the previous study, the fifth paper is situated within an educational context. In his action research study, **Michael C. Prusse** examines how Swiss and international student teachers develop multiliteracies through the use of social media. Drawing on the narrative turn and multiliteracies as a new paradigm in language teaching, Prusse investigates student teachers' blog entries and the development of their multiliteracy competences during an English course on children's literature.

The data set includes interviews ($n = 5$), questionnaires ($n = 74$) and blog entries ($n = 113$) from students attending the course between 2022 and 2024. Prusse highlights the global reach of the publicly accessible student blog, written in collaboration with the author, that received the highest number of visitors from Switzerland and the US.

Content analysis of the blog entries indicates that student teachers are equipped to apply multiliteracies in their classrooms. However, many tend to focus on one specific form of multiliteracy. Nevertheless, the blog was widely regarded by participants as a source of inspiration for their own teaching practices. Findings from

the interviews and questionnaires further illuminate student teachers' beliefs and experiences regarding the use of media in the classroom.

In conclusion, Prusse emphasises the importance of integrating multiliteracies into teacher education to enable student teachers to apply multiliterate practices and multimodal resources in their future classrooms. Participation in an international digital community through social media platforms such as blogs opens up new learning opportunities in language education in general and in the development of multiliteracies in particular. Through this action research, Prusse contributes to the narrative turn by embedding digital multiliterate practices in teacher education.

In the closing sixth paper of the special issue, **Liisa Peura and Maarit Mutta** investigate child–robot interaction (CRI) in a French class in Finland, offering new insights into robot-assisted language learning. By combining theoretical approaches to guided play with research on social robots in language learning and teaching, as well as robot literacy, the authors highlight the gap in research on how social robots influence the production of playful and creative contexts.

The authors describe the robot as “the other”, serving as a metaphorical friend that shapes intercultural dynamics for young learners” in a third space. In their study, 27 ten-year-old primary school pupils interacted over four months with a gender-neutral robot called “Domi”, using a friendship booklet (*carte d'amitié*) to facilitate their free interaction. This booklet also served as a data source, including participants' transcribed texts and illustrations.

To shed light on the meaning-making processes between the young participants and the robot, the authors applied qualitative methods, coding the linguistic and semiotic elements in the friendship booklet (images and drawings). One of the key findings highlights the unique relationship that developed between the participants and the robot, which allowed participants to express emotions and experiment with language in a dynamic “imaginary space”.

In conclusion, Peura and Mutta argue that CRI has considerable potential for fostering both cognitive and emotional development in young language learners.

5 Conclusions

To return to the guiding question of this special issue – “*To what extent can contemporary language education enable learners to interpret and use socially and culturally shaped multimodal and digital resources, and to reflect critically on them?*” – this section outlines the key issues that emerge across the six papers.

5.1 Materiality and embodiment of language

Building on the theory of language materiality, Shankar and Cavanaugh (2017) describe the “language of everyday life as material practice: embedded within structures of history and power, including class relations and markets, but also having physical presence” (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2017: 1). The interplay between materiality and language (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2017), as well as between the body and language (Blackledge and Creese 2017; Kusters 2021; Kusters et al. 2017), forms a crucial theoretical foundation in sociolinguistics, as well as in cultural and linguistic anthropology. Accordingly, Irvine (2017: 290) argues for reframing the relationship between language and materiality to avoid reproducing the dichotomies of immaterial and material language and linguistic and semiotic practices. Consequently, she describes speaking and writing as material practices, highlighting embodied language such as gestures and facial expressions in speech and the physical movement of the hand in writing.

By drawing attention to the multimodal aspects of language, such as materiality, tactility (Thurlow 2020), and sensory experiences such as taste (Mondada 2019, 2024) and embodiment (Blackledge and Creese 2017; Kusters et al. 2017), this special issue aims to bridge the gap between the existing theoretical discourses and their lack of implementation in language education. Focusing on the materiality and embodiment of language enables learners to explore language as a genuinely multimodal, socially constructed phenomenon (Heller 2007: 2) and as a local practice situated in time and space (Pennycook 2010: 128).

- “Language is a set of resources which circulate in unequal ways in social networks and discursive spaces, and whose meaning and value are socially constructed within the constraints of social organizational processes, under specific historical conditions” (Heller 2007: 2).
- “At one level, the local is just here and now, acknowledging that language always happens in relation to space and time. [...] Looking at language as a local practice implies that language is part of social and local activity, that both locality and language emerge from the activities engaged in” (Pennycook 2010: 128).

This, in turn, fosters politically critical thinking by engaging with the material aspects of words and their symbolic violence (see Thurlow in this special issue). Current developments in the academic register in sign language (see Paulus in this special issue) advance the discourses of the non-Deaf scientific community and accentuate the multimodal representation of research findings. In addition, the consideration of research on sign language enhances critical multimodal literacy and indirectly contributes to social justice in language education.

5.2 Critical language education and translanguaging

The post-multilingualism era (Li 2018b: 22) challenges individual and societal multilingualism by extending the boundaries of multilingualism and considering the dynamic and complex relationships among different languages. As Blommaert (2010: 102) states,

[m]ultilingualism ... should not be seen as a collection of 'languages' that a speaker controls, but rather as a complex of *specific* semiotic resources, some of which belong to a conventionally defined 'language', while others belong to another 'language'. The resources are concrete accents, language varieties, registers, genres, modalities such as writing – ways of using language in particular communicative settings and spheres of life, including the ideas people have about such ways of using their language ideologies.

Consequently, language education should take into the account the coexistence and conviviality of linguistic varieties and their impact on individual and societal multilingualism (see also Krompák 2024a). Translanguaging represents a dynamic and multifaceted notion of language that is constantly evolving. It encompasses meaning-making processes through the use of multiple languages (García 2009; García and Li 2014) and reconceptualises language by considering its multisemiotic, multisensory and multimodal resources (Li 2018a).

At the same time, translanguaging draws attention to the transformative “translanguaging space” (Li 2011, 2018a) which allows speakers to critically and creatively engage with their diverse linguistic resources, thereby generating new linguistic identities and values (Li 2011: 1223). From its inception, translanguaging has had a strong link to education, particularly language education, through the investigation of translanguaging practices in schools (e.g. Creese and Blackledge 2010; Krompák et al. 2025), the focus on heritage language education (Straszler et al. 2020) and the development of a framework for pedagogical translanguaging as an educational practice (Cenoz and Gorter 2021).

Moreover, translanguaging represents a decolonising approach that calls for the inclusion of pluriversal perspectives (Canagarajah 2022), Indigenous epistemologies such as Māori (Wang 2024) and the African value system of ubuntu (Makalela 2022: 2), which emphasises collectiveness in the perception of languages: “I am because you are” and “you are because I am”.

The Indigenous epistemologies offer a translanguaging space in which learners critically reflect on the impact of colonisation on language policy and use. Integrating Indigenous epistemologies in critical language education encourages both learners and teachers to rethink the Western mindset and to engage with different value systems by reflecting on multilingualism and the interrelationship between humans and nature as an inseparable entity (Krenak 2021). This approach requires co-learning on the part of both learners and teachers, fostering respect for the

knowledge and values of all interlocutors involved (Li 2023). According to Li (2023: 6), both translanguaging and co-learning “advocate creating opportunities of different ways of learning and different ways of talking about learning, and both point to the need to unlearn cultural conditioning and to dismantle asymmetrical power relationships”.

To conclude, the papers included in this special issue address significant aspects of critical language education and translanguaging, such as the multimodal use of family languages and co-learning in the classroom (Dag Freddy Røed and Kristin Vold Lexander, in this special issue), as well as the potential and transformative power of decolonising approaches in language education (Cláudia Hilsdorf Rocha, in this special issue). These approaches advocate for rethinking and redesigning language education in ways that challenge power relationships at different levels. In doing so, both contributions describe the essence of experience as a “collective *thinking-knowing-feeling* experience” (Cláudia Hilsdorf Rocha in this special issue), along with teachers’ “hands-on experience with multilingual students” and students’ “enjoyment” (Dag Freddy Røed and Kristin Vold Lexander, in this special issue). These reflections highlight the embodiment of language learning and teaching, the development of critical multimodal literacy and emphasise the importance of exploring underrepresented emotions through translanguaging entanglement in language education (Dochvin et al. 2025).

5.3 Digital learning space

The digital learning space has become indispensable in modern language education. It encompasses the use of technology such as robots (Liisa Peura and Maarit Mutta in this special issue), digital applications such as Duolingo (Solmaz 2024) and various tools powered by artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance learning outcomes and support students in their learning processes. To provide access to diverse linguistic and cultural experiences and to foster global connections, students participate in digital tandem or COIL (collaborative online international learning) courses offered in the digital space (Krompák and Hartmann 2023).

Language learning can therefore take place in various online spaces (Androustopoulos 2024), such as social media (see, for example, Chowchong 2022; Prusse in this special issue), or via augmented reality, place-based mobile games used “in the wild” (Thorne et al. 2021), which enable learners to explore physical spaces, such as cities, neighbourhoods or historical sites, while engaging in related activities. Through the pedagogical approach of “rewilding”, Thorne et al. (2021) describe a supportive learning environment that fosters goal-oriented interaction in digital spaces outside the classroom.

Language learning in the digital era requires critical digital literacy, as well as skills for critical reading, writing and thinking when engaging with multimodal and digital material (Hilfsdorf Rocha et al. 2022). How can language education equip learners to become critical and competent users of technology? This remains an open question that will continue to challenge language educators and researchers, particularly in light of the current rapid development of AI. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to draw on research conducted in the field of EL to rethink and liberate (Lytra et al. 2022) current language education practices in the digital era.

To sum up, the core topics of this special issue represent significant discourses in the development of critical multimodal literacy and EL. They raise both theory- and practice-oriented issues and address their implications for the language classroom. In doing so, the contributions advance the field of EL in teacher education in general and in language learning and teaching in particular, and present new avenues for rethinking language education and repositioning learners and educators.

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