

illuminating the Pedagogical Odyssey: Perspectives of Iranian EFL Educators Grounded in the Principles of Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

Critical Pedagogy (CP) is a prerequisite for a democratic society where pedagogy empowers teachers and learners to be both socially reasonable and knowledgeable. It is a novel and rather minimally investigated motif, being rarely noticed in the Iranian educational system. Recognizing the importance of fostering critical thinking and active engagement within educational settings, the current study intended to investigate perspectives on critical pedagogy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers with different academic degrees and language backgrounds. Following a qualitative research design, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 18 EFL teachers to provide information on their perspective of CP to identify the challenges against CP awareness and solutions towards a balanced CP. Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as a thematic analysis approach was followed for the purpose of qualitative data analysis. The results showed that although teachers were aware of the importance of critical pedagogy, they did not have the freedom to put it into practice. The findings yield implications for teachers, students, and educational systems, highlighting the need for greater emphasis on CP in the Iranian context.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, English as a second language, EFL teachers' perspectives, critical attitudes

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1. Introduction

Critical Pedagogy (CP) recognizes the importance of understanding the connections between ideology, power relations, culture, and language within the educational system. By acknowledging these underlying interrelations, educators can work towards creating more democratic schools that improve social justice (Baltodano & Torres, 2003; Giroux, 1983; Kincheloe, 2007, 2008). This framework underscores the imperative for educators to recognize these connections to foster more democratic and socially just educational environments. Giroux (2011) expands on CP, examining its potential to cultivate democratic engagement, particularly through the critical examination of how experience, knowledge, and power manifest in various, often unequal, contexts.

Education holds a central role in democracy, requiring pedagogical practices that cultivate critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and responsible citizenship among students (Giroux, 2011). This perspective resonates with Freire's (1970) critique of the traditional 'banking' concept of education, advocating for an approach that nurtures critical thinking, self-reflection, meaningful learning experiences, and responsible citizenship among learners. Darder (2022) revisits Freire's contributions to education, noting that "Freire's legacy is not just in the theory of CP but in its praxis and how it transforms education. CP also seeks to uncover hidden power relations and transform oppressive power and ideologies that impose their knowledge and structures on society, encouraging creativity and the courage to generate knowledge (Freire, 1970; Shizhou, 2020). This will result in criticizing the status quo and empowering students to participate in creating a more equitable social and educational context. It should be noted that oppressive power can also influence teachers' instructional methods, leading to the use of prescribed teaching and learning materials that may limit creativity and autonomy (Diaz, 2018). Freire advocates for an active role for students in the learning process, with teachers adopting an open-minded approach, sharing and learning with their students, thereby fostering an environment that encourages curiosity, creativity, and confidence (Diaz, 2018). Biesta (2021) reflects on the centrality of teaching in achieving educational aims, suggesting that the rediscovery of teaching is not just about teaching techniques or methodologies but about the political and ethical dimensions of education. This aligns with the goals of CP, emphasizing the importance of teachers in fostering critical thinking and responsible citizenship. Fromm (1967) describes two approaches to helping others, with the banking method representing a need for control and dominance, while CP respects individual freedom and creativity, fostering a democratic relationship between teachers and students where both learn from each other.

Furthermore, CP has the potential to challenge traditional teacher authority, granting learners freedom to engage intellectually and develop real-life skills beyond the confines of the classroom (Brown, 2000). Hirsch (1996) believes that oppressed classes must learn essential skills such as reading, writing, and communication to navigate different cultures. CP also encourages

learners to address important societal issues, challenging ideological hegemony that legitimizes the dominant societal interests and arrangements (Giroux, 2011). Balancing authority in the classroom is important for teachers, who can employ either coercive power or collaborative power, with the latter encouraging student participation in the learning process (Cummins et al., 2011). Additionally, cooperative learning, as a key aspect of CP, improves students' academic achievement and social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2020).

In the evolving landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT), the call for decolonizing educational practices has gained momentum. Canagarajah (2023) advances this discourse by proposing 'decolonization as pedagogy', a framework that not only challenges the Eurocentric biases in English teaching but also provides a transformative approach to teaching and learning. This seems to be a crucial perspective as it invites educators and policymakers to rethink the ways in which ELT perpetuates colonial legacies and to actively work towards more inclusive and equitable practices. Kubota and Lin (2020) also addressing the challenges of social justice in EFL teaching, assert that "language education must be a space where inequalities are not just acknowledged but actively challenged" (p. 97).

Notwithstanding, while CP has garnered significant attention as a theoretical framework in educational discourse, there remains a dearth of empirical research detailing the specific instructional strategies and challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who seek to integrate CP into their practice. The majority of existing studies have concentrated on general educational settings, predominantly in Western contexts, and have not sufficiently addressed the unique considerations and obstacles that arise in language learning environments, particularly in non-Western countries such as Iran. It is crucial to comprehend the practical ramifications of CP for Iranian EFL instructors, given the country's distinct sociocultural and educational context and the prevalence of EFL instruction there.

This research thus aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences, strategies, and challenges faced by Iranian EFL teachers as they endeavor to incorporate CP principles into their teaching. Specifically, it seeks to uncover how these educators navigate the sociocultural and educational nuances of their context to implement CP effectively. By doing so, this study not only contributes to the growing body of knowledge on CP in diverse educational settings but also provides valuable insights into the practical application of CP in language education, particularly within the Iranian EFL landscape. Additionally, it addresses the need for a more nuanced understanding of how CP can be adapted and utilized in non-Western educational contexts, thereby enriching both theoretical and practical discussions in the field.

2. Literature Review

Critical pedagogy has emerged as a significant theoretical framework within the field of education, advocating for examining and transforming power relations and eradicating social

inequities within educational contexts. Giroux (2011) defines critical pedagogy as a pedagogical approach that uncovers the formation of experience, knowledge, and power within the classroom, particularly in unequal contexts. It encourages teachers to balance their authority and rigor against dominant pedagogical practices without hindering critical questioning and attitudes. Teachers are also encouraged to use their authority to foster critical thinking and disseminate knowledge from critical perspectives, rather than suppressing students' critical attitudes, allowing students to critically analyze the knowledge they acquire.

Brown (2000) posits that critical pedagogy enables learners to think and act intellectually without being coerced by authority figures, empowering them to apply their learning to real-life situations that may challenge traditionally-minded teachers' authority. Hirsch (1996) emphasizes the importance of the oppressed classes acquiring skills, such as reading, writing, communication, and cultural competence within the classroom setting. Giroux (2011) contends that critical pedagogy motivates students to engage with the significant problems of our time, while also addressing issues related to ideological hegemony, which legitimize institutional interests of the dominant society.

Canagarajah's (2023) notion of 'decolonization as pedagogy' introduces a praxis-oriented approach to ELT, emphasizing the importance of reflective practice and action in dismantling colonial structures. This perspective builds on previous works in the field of critical pedagogy and decolonial theory, such as those by Freire (1970) by addressing the needs and challenges of teaching English. By focusing on the process of 'becoming', Canagarajah suggests that educators and learners, engaging in a journey of transformation and critical reflection, can contribute to the decolonization of the curriculum and the classroom. However, within the context of foreign language teaching, language teachers have traditionally been viewed as authoritative figures (Craig, 1995). Regrettably, this authority dynamic has led some foreign language teachers to overshadow guidance counselors, limiting students and protecting their own linguistic authority, resulting in the language teacher becoming the sole authority in the classroom. Nevertheless, contemporary studies suggest that the language classroom should not be isolated from the real world, urging instructors to adopt a critical perspective and view language as a crucial social and ideological tool, rather than a mere set of grammatical rules (Savio, 2021; Phipps, 2019).

Derince (2011) demonstrated that combining critical pedagogy with students' linguistic resources in English medium universities in Turkey resulted in more meaningful learning experiences, whereas preparatory courses did not enhance students' critical thinking awareness. Conversely, a study conducted by Yilmaz (2009), examining the elementary school teachers' attitudes toward CP principles, indicated a lack of teachers' readiness to implement critical pedagogy principles in their classrooms. When applied to the EFL teaching context in Iran, critical pedagogy takes on particular significance because of the unique social, cultural, and political dynamics influencing the educational landscape. Several studies have explored the awareness and attitudes of Iranian teachers towards critical pedagogy. Aliakbari and Allahmoradi

(2012) found that teachers tended to support critical pedagogy and its principles, although it was scarce within the Iranian educational system. However, the practical use of these principles remained limited, indicating a gap theory and practice. Atai and Moradi (2016) examined the impact of CP on the Iranian teachers' attitudes toward language teaching. They reported that Iranian EFL teachers were influenced by the CP principles. Besides, irrespective of their level of education and field of expertise, the teachers were generally supportive of critical pedagogy. However, the intersection between CP and existing educational system requires deeper investigation.

Nonetheless, Soodmand Afshar and Donyaie (2018) investigated the challenges and awareness of Iranian EFL teachers of CP principles. They found that university EFL teachers in Iran were not extensively familiar with critical pedagogy, potentially due to concerns about the challenge to their authority and power. Concerns about disrupting power structures within the EFL classroom and the broader educational context were among the significant barriers to the use of critical pedagogy among Iranian teachers. Soodmand Afshar and Zare (2022) also investigated the prospects and challenges of CP in EFL teacher education in Iran and found that while there is a growing awareness of CP among EFL teachers, there is still a significant gap between theory and practice. This highlights the need to address institutional and structural factors inhibiting the integration of critical pedagogy into EFL teaching classes. Dialogue is considered vital for effective communication and learning, and educators can facilitate environments conducive to open dialogue (Jill et al., 2009).

Glenda (2009) asserts that dialogue should be a core element of education. Kumaravadivelue (2001) highlights the importance of recognizing the unique attitudes of teachers and students in different contexts. In the post-method era, individuals and educational contexts are seen as unique entities, emphasizing the significance of post-method pedagogy. Given the hegemonic structures prevalent in various aspects of Iranian society, it may be necessary to reconsider educational system policies. Edmondson and D'Urso (2014) note that policymakers often overlook the role of teachers in shaping curriculum and educational practices, which arguably applies to the Iranian educational system.

In conclusion, past research underscores the necessity of identifying the EFL teachers' perspectives within educational contexts, with a focus on critical pedagogy in Iranian EFL education. Addressing the challenges and opportunities of implementing critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms can yield valuable insights for syllabus and curriculum development, teacher training programs, and educational policy reforms. While there is limited research on the intersection of critical pedagogy and EFL education in Iran, this study aims to investigate teachers' awareness of critical pedagogy and its core tenets. The research question formulated for this study is as follows: What are the perceptions of critical pedagogy among EFL teachers?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study utilized a qualitative research method with a focus on achieving data saturation. The participants included a sample of 18 EFL teachers (9 females and 9 males) from Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Qom, selected non-randomly for interviews. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 49 years ($M=29.38$, $SD=7.53$) and their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 15 years. Moreover, from the total, 10 of them were MAs, 2 were PhDs and 6 were BAs in English or English related majors such as English Literature and Translation Studies. These participants were required to answer a set of interview questions about critical pedagogy. From the items of the questionnaire and the review of the literature, a set of interview questions was extracted.

The corpus of this study consists of interviews conducted with EFL teachers from ILI, which is known for its communicative approach to teaching and the use of course books based on communicative language teaching principles. The course-books thus provided a higher level of CP and freedom in expressing views compared to other contexts like high schools. The books included activities and tasks to improve communicative language ability in all four language skills. The activities included role-play, group works, free discussion, reading comprehension, free writing, and a variety of listening activities like listen to music, film shows, and listening to CDs prepared for the non-native students. Also, the robust supervision policy taken up by the authority and regular classroom observation to ensure that instructors adhere to the principles of being communicative, which seems to result in critical pedagogy, is the other ideal reason for choosing the institute for the data accumulation.

3.2. Instrumentation

The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview protocol conducted in Farsi. The semi-structured interview was conducted with 18 EFL teachers in an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of critical pedagogy in English classrooms. The interviewees were ensured that their information will be remained secure to make sure for the ethical issues. Each interview lasted between 20-30 minutes and all the participants' audios were recorded and transcribed to be coded and analyzed through thematic analysis.

To estimate the credibility of the data, the interview transcripts were shared with the participants for verification. After the participants confirmed the accuracy of the data, the credibility of the interview was established. For the aim of dependability, 30% of the results of the interview were re-checked by two of the researchers' colleagues familiar with the data analysis procedure, and the results of the inter-rater reliability were reported to be 90% in agreement.

3.3. Procedures

Data were collected during the 2022-2023 academic year. The sample was selected from private language institutes in Qom, Iran. A semi-structured interview guide, modified from Sario Siqueira (2021), was used to ask participants about their attitudes toward critical pedagogy, their experiences, and their perceptions of authority in their EFL classes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and the researchers obtained and analyzed the key constructs through the thematic analysis. The procedure for data codification was to find the components and factors associated with construction of critical pedagogy and then to assign it to each of the themes pertinent to this concept. More specifically, the process of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was followed for the purpose of qualitative data analysis.

Grounded theory analysis has three stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding involves describing and naming initial features of the data and phenomena being studied. Axial coding involves trying to 'fit' the data together and identify causal relationships. Selective coding is the selection of the core category and systematically relating them to other categories (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). The core category is the central phenomenon. The theories and categories generated are verified through theoretical saturation. The inductive process of data analysis was unstructured and inductive. After transcribing the recorded files of interviews, the three stages of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were followed. In the first step of open coding, all the data were broken up into smaller parts, and the main ideas of each part were noted as the codes. Afterwards, during axial coding, the interconnected codes were regarded as being under the same subcategory. Finally, in the third phase of selective coding, core categories were identified based on the interlinked subcategories which guided us to write the grounded theory. In this line, all the key and micro pieces of themes within the texts related to the role of CP in classes were identified. Then the basic themes were categorized into the main frameworks of the study as organizing themes. Finally, the recurrent themes were categorized according to the definition of CP and its various aspects. However, to avoid subjectivity, all the obtained codes, subcategories and core categories were written verbatim, and a collaborative session was held to effectively examine and judge the credibility and objectivity of decisions. Due to the iterative and inductive nature of thematic coding, this process was completed in a period of almost two months. Texts were analyzed by a second coder to satisfy the consistency or stability of the coding by providing him with enough information on coding technique.

Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and their consent was obtained before the interviews. The inter-rater reliability index was calculated to be .79, indicating that the codification process is trustworthy (Dehghan, 2022). The whole ongoing process of code identification and categorization led to the synthesis of several key concepts and categories to be explained in the following section.

4. Results

The present research aimed to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of CP. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through a process of Grounded Theory. As a result, 25 subcategories and five core categories were obtained out of the combination of 145 codes. The emerged subcategories included *teachers' conceptualization of CP*, *the role of institute/curriculum in CP awareness*, *teachers' solutions towards restrictions on CP*, and *the challenges of teachers in CP*, and *Teachers' solutions to students' high CP*. As follows, the extracted core categories are presented in light of main themes and concepts taken from the interview transcripts. Quotes from interviews have been also randomly recruited to give support for the findings.

Core category 1: Teachers' conceptualization of CP

The first question of the interview aimed to gauge EFL teachers' point of views of the concept of critical pedagogy and its definitions (teachers' conceptualizations of CP). With reference to this core category, four subcategories and 34 codes were obtained. Almost all the teachers were aware of the concept of CP and presented some related definitions for it. One of the teachers considered CP as a trigger for students to question and challenge societal norms, power structures, and inequalities. She stated that:

Critical pedagogy is an educational approach that ***encourages students to question and challenge societal norms***, power structures, and inequalities (Roya, MA, female, 7 years of experience).

The other teacher viewed CP as:

...an attempt to ***empower students by fostering their critical thinking*** skills, promoting ***social justice***, and encouraging ***active participation*** in their own learning process (Mohammad, PhD, male, 11 years of experience).

Moreover, one of the instructors' definition of CP was worth mentioning as he believed that CP:

...create an atmosphere that ***encourages open dialogue, independent thinking, and the exploration of diverse perspectives*** (Ahmad, BA, male, 14 years of experience).

Considering the characteristics such as questioning and challenging, traditional power structures, and fostering a deeper understanding of language, both teachers and students can be agents of change as the following extract was pointed out:

Critical pedagogy involves ***questioning and challenging traditional power structures***, social inequalities, and dominant ideologies through the exploration of various texts and contexts (Mohsen, MA, male, 10 years of experience).

Or another respondent said that:

Critical pedagogy in English learning classes promotes ***active student participation***, dialogue, and reflection, ***fostering a deeper understanding of language*** and its social implications.

It also encourages students to become *agents of change* by engaging in social justice issues and advocating for equality within their communities (Elham, BA, female, 12 years of experience).

In general, EFL teachers' definitions of CP were coded under the category of questioning and challenging traditional power structures, fostering critical thinking, and fostering a deeper understanding of social inequalities. Table 1 illustrates the subcategories together with the frequency of codes related to teachers' conceptualization of CP.

Table 1
Teachers' Conceptualization of CP

Core category	Subcategories	Frequency of codes	Percentage
Teachers' conceptualization of CP	As a means of questioning and challenging traditional power structures	8	44.4%
	As a means to foster critical thinking	11	61.1%
	As a means to undermine the traditional responsibilities of teachers	6	33.3%
	As a means to foster a deeper understanding of social inequalities	9	50%
	Total	34	100%

As it is axiomatic, the subcategory of *fostering critical thinking* has been repeated by more than 60% of the teachers. However, the subcategory of *undermining the teachers' traditional responsibilities* has the lowest percentage.

Core category 2: The role of institute/curriculum in CP awareness

The second interview question addressed the attitudes of the interviewees towards the role of curriculum in CP awareness level. Three subcategories emerged out of 30 codes all related to this concept. From the total of 18 teachers, 17 of them reported on the highlighted role of curriculum in increasing or decreasing CP level, however, one of the instructors considered the teacher's role more important than the institute's role when it comes to paying attention to CP. An English teacher stated that highly disciplined institutes damage the development of a standard education system with manipulating CP levels as she said:

As an English teacher in a highly restricted and disciplined language center in Iran, I believe that teachers and students' critical pedagogy's level can be minimized that it can be *damaged the development of a well-rounded education system* (Sara, BA, female, 9 years of teaching experience).

Similarly, another interviewee justified her reason (being obedience) for the CP low level in restricted language centers:

In a highly restricted and disciplined environment, where *conformity and obedience are often emphasized*, critical pedagogy cannot play a transformative role (Zahra, MA, female, eight years of teaching experience).

The other instructor referred to the highlighted role of the institute due to the challenges posed by the cultural and political limitations:

However, implementing critical pedagogy in a highly restricted environment may *pose challenges due to cultural and political limitations*. Therefore, it is essential to approach this topic

sensitively and adapt the principles of critical pedagogy to the specific context (Sohrab, PhD, male, 9 years of teaching experience).

Table 2 indicates the subcategories associated with the core category of *language institute and its role in CP awareness level*.

Table 2

Language Institute's Role in CP

Core category	Subcategories	Frequency of codes	Percentage
Language Institute's Role on CP	Highly restricted institutes damage the development of well-organized educational systems	7	38.8%
	Highly restricted institutes oblige teachers to be obedient	16	88.8%
	Highly restricted institutes pose political limitations	7	38.8%
	Total	30	100%

Based on the interview results, most of the teachers (88%) believed that highly disciplined institutes view teachers as slaves, and around 38% of teachers reported two sub-categories of barrier to well-organized educational systems and political limitations in direct association between high restricted institutes and CP. In sum, the institutes were considered to be important in manipulating CP levels and damaging the development of well-organized educational systems since they oblige teachers to be obedient and challenge them due to the political limitations.

Core category 3: Teachers' solutions towards restrictions on CP

Teachers' solutions towards the institutes' strict rules were the focus of the next question. This concept was emerged out of the thematic combination of four subcategories and 21 codes. In other words, to identify how teachers keep their classes consistent with CP, another question addressed whether the teachers follow the curriculum which is imposed by the institute director under any circumstances, or they try to change it, especially when it is not according to attitudes of students or teachers.

More than half of the teachers (10 out of 18) reported on their lack of ability to change the curriculum and they stated that they will teach according to the present curricula, and it is not always possible to change all the methods. However, a total of eight teachers mentioned solutions, such as using the eclectic method, being expert, consulting with the supervisor, and adopting some extra materials are used to create a balance between CP and the language institutes' curricula. For example, one participant said that:

Most teachers believed they do not have that much freedom to change the books, and materials, or intervene in the curriculum, and they may follow a fixed pattern that the institute proposes. However, one must *treat eclectically to achieve both institute-specific goals* and the students' needs (Mona, MA, female, 5 years of teaching experience).

Or another teacher stated that:

I will *discuss the issue with the supervisor* in detail and try to persuade him or her to change the curriculum. It is always interesting to see people trying to change policies and I think that is how you can improve as a group, but it seems that it has lost its meaning. Private institutes have the potential to change more than schools. Personally, I think it depends on the efficiency of your work and *in the case of being expert, you can manipulate the curriculum*, I do not talk when there is no one to listen to it. So, I guess, I just go away with it. If I see it as a problem, I would change my ways but when it affects students, I would try to change the curriculum. As a teacher, my hands are tied to a book or a specific method (Sima, MA, female, 7 years of experience).

Moreover, another participant said that:

In an institute, a teacher does not have any right to change the curriculum. Unfortunately, Teachers should obey the director. But I *adopt some materials according to my students' needs* (Hasan, MA, male, 14 years of experience).

Table 3 represents the core category of solutions towards institutes' restrictions on CP together with the associated subcategories and the frequency and percentage of underlying codes.

Table 3

Solutions towards Institutes' Restrictions on CP

Core categories	Subcategories	Frequency of codes	Percentage
Solutions towards Institutes' Restrictions on CP	Using eclectic method	6	33.3%
	Being expert	7	38.8%
	Consulting with the supervisor	3	16.6%
	Adopting some extra materials	5	27.7%
	Total	21	100%

Core category 4: The challenges of teachers in CP

This theme encompasses four subcategories derived from thirty 31 codes. The *teachers' challenges in increasing or lowering CP level* was the other category that has been touched in the interview section. All the teachers pointed out to the critical role of teachers in CP level. One of the instructors believed that for teachers, challenging traditional teaching methods can be problematic in the process of CP adjustment.

... recognizing the importance of creating inclusive classrooms where every student's voice is valued. Its big barrier involves *challenging traditional teaching methods* that rely solely on rote memorization or passive learning (Mona, MA, female, 5 years of teaching experience).

Or another teacher stated that:

The following extract represents teachers' views on the barrier of resistance from both students and parents, as one of the significant challenges, in language centers.

CP by teachers means striving to engage students in meaningful discussions, encourage them to question assumptions, and provide opportunities for collaborative learning. However, a big challenge for teachers in relationship with CP is *resistance from both students or parents* and

they do not experience change as the gist of CP is change (Mohammad, MA, male, 6 years of teaching).

Furthermore, the sub-categories of *outdated evaluation procedures and curriculum* and *the institutes' regularities* were the other two problems for teachers while treating CP in English courses. A participant mentioned that,

By adopting a critical pedagogical approach, teachers can become facilitators who guide students towards discovering knowledge rather than simply transmitting information; however, *outdated evaluation procedures* impede teachers to take into account the concept of CP (Sama, MA, female, 10 years of teaching).

Similarly, another teacher claimed that:

Teachers should also be aware of their own biases and prejudices to ensure they do not perpetuate inequalities or reinforce existing power structures. But, a big challenge for English teachers is the *curriculum and the institutes' regularities*, which avoid them to consider CP in language courses (Alireza, BA, male, 8 years of teaching).

Table 4 indicates the four subcategories and frequency and percentage of the codes for each subcategory in terms of teachers' challenges of CP, which were repeatedly obtained in order to reach data saturation.

Table 4

EFL Teachers' Challenges of CP

Core categories	Subcategories	Frequency of codes	Percentage
Teachers' challenges related to CP	Challenging traditional teaching methods	5	27.7%
	Resistance from students or parents	6	33.3%
	Curriculum and the institutes' regularities	13	72.2%
	Outdated evaluation procedures	7	38.8%
	Total	31	100%

As the above table shows, curriculum and the institutes' regularities were reported as a highly challenged item related to CP (72%) and the ability to challenge against traditional teaching methods was considered as the less frequent barrier (27%) to teachers in terms of critical pedagogy.

Core category 5: Teachers' solutions to students' high CP

The last question of the interview was an attempt to emphasize the role of students in relationship with CP and teachers' reactions towards this barrier. Related to this question, 29 codes and four subcategories were identified to be associated with the core category of teachers' solutions to students' high CP awareness.

Although most of the EFL teachers (17 out of 18) believed that students' awareness of critical pedagogy empowers them to become active participants in their education, some teachers (13 out of 18) considered it as a damage to the education. By encouraging them to critically analyze information presented to them and question societal norms or injustices they observe

around them, teachers can foster their ability to think independently and develop empathy towards others. These teachers mentioned that there are teachers' utterances by teachers about the condition in which EFL students' critical pedagogy awareness can be a threat to EFL teachers' authority in the classroom. One of the teachers expressed his idea of the students and their CP perception as follows:

In my idea, promoting critical pedagogy skills among students helps them become more engaged citizens who are capable of contributing positively to society. They learn how to challenge injustice constructively while respecting different viewpoints, but *when the students are very free to contribute to the teaching process it may be harmful to the teaching outcome* (Sahand, BA, male, 11 years of experience).

The other educator had a mild point of view and considered two contrasting poles while meeting the students' needs in terms of CP:

The *vibe should be friendly* and you should let it go. Of course, it should be *stopped when students try to use it as a tool to not study or to mess with the teacher*. But sometimes, it is helpful, it creates an environment and helps to find new talents (Sima, MA, female, 7 years of experience). Another teacher also expressed that ignoring the rude students as a solution to overcome their high CP awareness.

When they get *too rude and their critical attitudes are out of control, it will be the time to disregard the students* and not let them to be aware of the benefits of CP. But, as far as the students are *following the instructors' courses and syllabi* there would be no problems with the teachers' authority (Milad, PhD, male, 9 years of teaching experience).

Moreover, an instructor believed that students should be in harmony with teachers' disciplines, however, some times their behaviors seem to be annoying.

It is a *threat when students get the control of class*, when a teacher allows students to intervene in making decisions, to the disciplines, it should be the teacher's duty to control the class. *Students should be in line with the discipline the teacher makes* (Hasan, MA, male, 14 years of teaching experience).

Finally, being expert was the last sub-category that was considered by the participated teachers as a solution against students' high CP awareness. For instance, a respondent said that:

If they (students) find you with low knowledge and illiterate, but *not expert and professional*, they won't accept you as an instructor who has come to teach them. Hence, it is up to the teachers to increase their level of knowledge both generally and specifically (Reza, BA, male, 13 years of teaching experience)

Table 5 indicates the subcategories' rate and distribution in terms of students' high awareness of CP as a challenge to the instructors and teachers' solutions towards students' high CP.

Table 5*EFL Teachers' Solutions to Students' High CP*

Core categories	Subcategories	Frequency of codes	Percentage
EFL Teachers' Solutions to Students' High CP	Not letting students be very free to contribute to the teaching process	7	38.8%
	Not letting students use CP as a tool to not study or to mess with the teacher	5	27.7%
	Not letting students get the control of class	9	50%
	Teachers are getting experts and professionals	8	44.4%
	Total	29	100%

As it is indicated above, while half of the teachers believed that teachers should not give students the permission to get the class's control, less than half of the teachers (44%) referred to the role of being expert as a solution to students with high CP awareness. In conclusion, teachers and students' awareness of critical pedagogy is vital in a highly restricted and disciplined language center in Iran. By embracing this approach, teachers can create inclusive classrooms that foster critical thinking, empower students, and promote social justice. Students, in turn, develop the skills necessary to question societal norms and actively participate in their own education, ultimately contributing positively to the society.

5. Discussion

The research aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of critical pedagogy. Analysis of teachers' statements revealed that the majority of them were familiar with the term CP and understood their own rights and the rights of their students. The study findings emphasize the importance of teachers being aware of the ideological structures that influence classroom dynamics. As the interview findings revealed, EFL teachers conceptualize CP as a means of challenging traditional power structures, a means to foster critical thinking and a deeper understanding of social inequalities, and a way to undermine the traditional responsibilities of teachers. As Bartolomé (2004) suggests, it is crucial to train teachers to recognize political and ideological attitudes that could negatively impact language education. By promoting critical thinking and understanding, students can liberate themselves from ideologies and prevailing beliefs. Gounari (2020) argues that our objective should be to transform personal problems into public issues in order to bring about change in our classrooms, schools, communities, and society. Educators must engage in discussions on various topics in their classrooms and emphasize pedagogical points. The results also highlight that most teachers tend to exert control on students' behavior and thinking in the classroom, despite the fact that they should refrain from imposing their views in order to foster critical thinking among students. The educational level of a teacher

may not be as significant as their susceptibility to dominant ideologies or religious doctrines. However, as the results revealed, they face difficulties and challenges in implementing democratic learning strategies in their classrooms, including challenging traditional teaching methods, curriculum and the institutes' regularities, resistance from students or parents, and outdated evaluation procedures. As Sahragard et al. (2014) suggest, teachers often feel constrained by preplanned curricula and decisions imposed by institutional authorities, limiting their autonomy in selecting course materials, designing assessments, and determining course duration. Iran's centralized educational system restricts the implementation of postmodernism and critical ideas in education, with decision-making power centralized among authorities, leaving teachers with limited agency in their classrooms (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008).

These findings contradict previous studies conducted by Abdelrahim (2007), Azimi (2008), and Soodmand Afshar and Donyaie (2018), which suggested that Iranian EFL teachers lacked awareness of CP principles. However, the findings align with the findings of Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2012), who found a lack of CP in the Iranian education system despite teachers recognizing its importance. This might be attributed to certain characteristics of the education system and a lack of emphasis on critical thinking in teacher training in Iran. Such characteristics include constraints such as limited class time, heavy workloads, minimal opportunities for open discussions, and a reluctance to engage with controversial topics. Additionally, the avoidance of problem-posing education, a fundamental principle of CP, further contributes to the absence of CP in the educational system. The centralized top-down approach to instruction is often cited as the reason behind this lack of CP. Besides, according to the findings, language institutes play several important roles in CP awareness as they may damage the development of well-organized educational systems, oblige teachers to be obedient, and pose political limitations. Consequently, the findings of this study, along with other research, indicate that while Iranian language teachers may possess an awareness of CP and its principles, they seldom have the opportunity to implement this methodology in their teaching due to various obstacles within the Iranian educational system. However, they suggest using an eclectic method, being an expert in the field, consulting with the supervisor, and adopting some extra materials to tackle with problems related to the restrictions on CP imposed by institutions.

According to Hatch and Groenke (2009), cultivating trusting relationships between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves, is crucial for promoting critical thinking. This can only be achieved through a democratic learning model that allows students to freely express their perspectives and encourages independent thinking. Soodmand Afshar and Donyaie (2018) assert that teachers possess an interest in CP principles and are aware of its significance. However, some teachers may perceive the incorporation of CP principles and the inclusion of controversial topics as a threat to their authority, as noted by Brown (2000). It is important to note that students should have the freedom to think and express themselves intellectually without coercion from authorities, and their education should prepare them for real-

life experiences beyond the classroom. This may pose a challenge for teachers who adhere to traditional teaching methods and value their position of authority. However, teachers employ various approaches to manage students' engagement with CP. As indicated in the study findings, these approaches included not letting students be very free to contribute to the teaching process, not letting students use CP as a tool to not study or to mess with the teacher, not letting students get the control of class, and teachers being experts and professionals.

6. Conclusion

The current research, aiming to explore EFL teachers' perspectives on critical pedagogy, revealed that while teachers recognized the significance of critical pedagogy, they often lacked the autonomy to implement it effectively in their classrooms. The study findings highlight the need for increased awareness of CP principles among teachers. In the Iranian educational system, the focus is primarily on meeting examination requirements rather than fostering critical thinking skills. The curriculum is designed in a way that encourages rote memorization and regurgitation of information for final exams, rather than promoting deep understanding and problem-solving abilities. This lack of emphasis on CP in the syllabi hinders the development of critical thinking and problem-posing skills among learners. Conservative elements within the educational system also maintain a distance from critical ideas, and preplanned course books and prescribed teaching methods leave little room for teachers to deviate from the established curriculum and explore critical perspectives (Akbari, 2008). Therefore, teachers require a comprehensive understanding of critical thinking concepts to effectively encourage students to engage in genuine reflection. They should be equipped with the necessary resources and knowledge to incorporate critical thinking into their daily instruction.

Furthermore, the findings of this study underscore the need for a shift in the Iranian educational system towards a more inclusive and student-centered approach that promotes critical thinking and problem-posing education. This would require revising the curriculum to incorporate CP principles, providing comprehensive training for teachers on critical thinking, and empowering teachers to have more autonomy in their classrooms. The findings also suggest that even in private institutes in Iran, there is limited flexibility in implementing CP principles. These institutes still adhere to fixed patterns, textbooks, and materials, often following traditional teaching methods. Teachers, regardless of their academic qualifications and knowledge, face constraints in challenging and changing these traditional teaching approaches due to the lack of support from society and families in promoting critical thinking skills. Although instructors may find themselves in a challenging position when they are unable to change the teaching methods imposed by the institute, they are still recommended to make modifications to the curriculum to incorporate elements of critical thinking. As Scrivener (1994) suggests, there should be a balance between following institutional requirements and implementing teaching methods that the teacher believes

are more suitable for the students' learning. According to Soleimani (2020), individuals are not passive recipients of information, and knowledge cannot be simply injected into them through reading or listening. Critical thinking skills are vital for individuals to actively engage with the world and make it a better place. This indicates the crucial importance of students acquiring critical thinking skills, as they have not been taught to think critically. It is also essential for pedagogy to be rooted in dialogical patterns, promoting mutual respect among students and teachers, regardless of their attitudes, thoughts, or religious beliefs. Implementing critical pedagogy and fostering students' critical thinking skills necessitates not only attitudes but also sufficient time, financial resources, and research in this field. Future research could explore how EFL students perceive critical pedagogy and compare the perspectives of EFL teachers in different contexts regarding critical pedagogy. Besides, further studies can evaluate the effectiveness of professional development programs designed to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement critical pedagogy. Also, future researchers are recommended to examine current teacher training programs to identify gaps in the preparation of teachers for implementing critical pedagogy and better equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge. It is critical to recognize some limitations of this study despite the insightful knowledge it provided.

First, because direct causation cannot be established and confounding variables may exist, low internal validity may limit the findings. Furthermore, the low external validity of the study, which concentrated on Iranian EFL instructors based on critical pedagogy principles may limit the results' generalizability. Future studies should incorporate a wider range of participants and contexts in an effort to overcome these limitations.

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