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Critical Pedagogy in Practice: Classroom Practices and the Barriers to Its Implementation in EFL Context

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of Critical Pedagogy (CP) and their classroom practices. For this purpose, a total of 22 EFL teachers were selected through convenience sampling and participated in an online semi-structured written interview. A sub-group of them also took part in a phone interview. Textual data were analyzed using grounded theory coding types, including open, axial, and selective coding, with MAXQDA software (Version 2020). The findings revealed two broad themes: raising students' critical consciousness and learner-centered pedagogy for CP definition, and communicative tasks and learner-centered activities for CP classroom practices. Additionally, the dominant barriers to the implementation of CP in the Iranian EFL context were identified as the top-down educational system, teachers' variables, and practical barriers.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, critical pedagogical classroom practices, EFL context, grounded theory, language teacher education

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1. Introduction

Many proponents of liberal pedagogy hold the belief that our inclination to create genuine and flawless educational settings resides in the realm of CP theory. There are various definitions of CP in the literature. For instance, it has been defined as a connection between social change and one's ethical responsibility through training and education (Beck, 2005). It is a kind of pedagogy that emphasizes the situated, mutually constructed essence of meaning. It accentuates establishing critical awareness about language usage and texts and breaking away from the current structures of predominant power and social relationships (Fang, 2012). In simple terms, CP is a theoretical approach to teaching that aims to address the hierarchical and oppressive impacts of our educational system (Ellsworth, 1989). This challenges the traditional notion that teachers are the sole providers of knowledge while students are passive recipients. Instead, teachers and students should engage in a dialogic system in the classroom, where critical, sociopolitical issues, and social justice are reinforced by developing diverse perspectives (Ellsworth, 1989; Sharma & Phyak, 2017). Canagarajah (2005) argues that defining CP based on a static set of ideas or philosophical principles is challenging. Instead, it should be viewed as a distinct approach to learning and teaching. Students and teachers with a critical stance should be trained to localize learning in their relevant sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts. They should also strive to change the means of learning by creating an ethical and educational setting (Canagarajah, 2005). Larson (2014) defines CP as a learner-oriented approach that focuses on controversial issues and problem-posing activities, leading to students' involvement in critical dialogue. McLaren (2003) believes that CP is a way of thinking and talking about the creation of a nexus between teaching and social exchanges in the wider social context.

CP was proposed as a response to traditional language teaching methods, which Freire (1993) referred to as "banking education". Pagowsky and McElroy (2016) explain that this approach establishes standards and criteria, designs textbooks and curricula, and then assumes a one-way, hierarchical relationship between the teacher and student for grading purposes. To resolve this matter, educational amendments have introduced a more student-centered learning approach, recognizing students' authority more than in the past. In this era, CP is considered a radical and change-oriented theory that challenges all forms of domination, oppression, and subordination to emancipate oppressed or marginalized people.

In literature, various scholars have proposed different perspectives on CP. It is

often referred to as a technique to foster cooperative learning principles in the classroom, raise consciousness among learners, and encourage critical thinking about injustice or inequalities in society (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992; Luke,1997; McLaren, 1989). Critical pedagogy is also considered a link between educational settings and the wider community. However, according to Breunig (2009), there is a lack of research on the methods used by teachers to implement CP theory in their classrooms, despite the significant amount of literature on this subject. Furthermore, due to its innovative contributions to teaching, as well as the abundance of books and articles discussing the importance of CP in educational systems, it has become integrated into the ELT community and curriculum planning of Iran. To date, numerous quantitative studies have been conducted to assess the prevalence of CP and its popularity among Iranian EFL teachers. However, there is a lack of qualitative studies that delve into the perceptions of Iranian EFL teachers regarding CP, including how they define CP and its objectives, what classroom practices they consider to be indicative of CP, and their own self-evaluation as critical pedagogues.

To address this gap, the present qualitative study seeks to offer a comprehensive depiction of how CP and its objectives are delineated by 22 Iranian EFL teachers, as well as determine whether they apply its principles in their instructional settings. Additionally, this inquiry explores the potential obstacles to the integration of CP from the participants' viewpoints. Given that this inquiry aims to furnish a descriptive portrayal of actual CP practices in Iranian EFL contexts, it is anticipated that the findings will yield valuable insights into the degree of familiarity that Iranian EFL teachers possess regarding CP and its underlying principles, drawing upon their personal and academic studies, their tangible CP classroom practices, and the perceived hindrances to its implementation in authentic classroom settings. Ultimately, the findings will have implications for EFL teacher education programs. This will prompt them to invest in CP training programs, conferences, and workshops for prospective EFL teachers. The ultimate goal is to eliminate barriers and foster a conducive atmosphere for its' future implementation.

2. Literature review

Critical pedagogy has been a topic of investigation in both Iranian and non-Iranian ELT contexts. For instance, Breunig (2009) studied 17 self-identified critical pedagogues to determine if their classroom implementations and activities aligned with

their claims. The researcher identified several themes that were frequently used by 13 participants to refer to CP, including social consciousness, social change, student-centeredness, critical thinking, and deep learning experiences. Three participants identified themselves as Freirean pedagogues, while one identified as a social reconstructionist. Participants reported their CP classroom practices as classroom discussions, dialogue, group work activities, teacher's and students' mutual construction of syllabus as indicative of their critical pedagogical classroom practices.

Milner (2003) investigated the effect of CP on racial awareness and concluded that prospective teachers can potentially benefit from CP by encouraging them to change their ideas toward students. Yilmaz (2009) investigated the general impressions of a group of elementary school teachers in Turkey toward CP classroom implementations. The study revealed that due to having various personal backgrounds, participants had different viewpoints on the concept of CP. Zhang's (2009) study on training CP to a group of Singaporean teachers found that critical reading of learning materials, including texts, had a positive impact on both teachers and students. Many reported an improvement in their critical thinking abilities following the instruction on critical thinking. Additionally, Hollstein (2006) administered a questionnaire on CP to prospective teachers at Ohio University. The results suggested that the participants were not familiar with CP, had misconceptions about its principles, and were unable to effectively implement it in their classrooms.

Several studies have also been conducted on CP in the Iranian ELT context. For instance, Afshar and Donyaie (2019) investigated English teachers' perceptions of CP to identify any discrepancies between their perceptions and actual classroom performances. To this end, three groups of English instructors, teaching at different levels in language institutes, schools, and universities, participated in this study. The results revealed that English teachers need to be enriched with CP knowledge and learn how to implement it in real-language classroom contexts. In another study, Zare-Behtash et al. (2017) examined the extent of CP applications among 100 Iranian EFL teachers in the Iran Language Institute. The findings showed that the participants were familiar with CP, but many reported refraining from implementing it in their classes due to barriers such as top-down and focused educational systems. In a similar vein, Atai and Moradi (2016) examined Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions towards CP and it was revealed that their participants were adequately familiar with the fundamental principles of CP and supported its implementation in the classroom contexts.

In their mixed-method study, Sahragard et al. (2014) investigated Iranian EFL teachers' familiarity with CP and their ability to implement it in the classroom. The results confirmed previous findings regarding EFL instructors' familiarity with CP, but also revealed that they seldom put it into practice. Mehrpour and Baharloo (2015) identified several obstacles to implementing CP in the classroom in Iran. These include the top-down educational system, prescriptive approaches to supervision, large class sizes, learners' expectations, conventional teacher-student relationships, and traditionally-defined roles. Alibakhshi and Zarei (2011) investigated the status of CP and language teaching in schools. They concluded that Iranian EFL teachers avoided implementing CP due to three main obstacles, namely, organizational, personal, and learners' barriers. Finally, Alibakhshi (2011) examined intermediate school teachers' viewpoints on CP and confirmed the familiarity of the participants with CP principles in general, but it was revealed that they could not employ its principles in their language classes freely due to some practical and political obstacles.

Altogether, based on the analysis of the literature on CP in the micro-ELT settings of Iran, it can be concluded that the majority of EFL teachers in Iran possess knowledge and understanding of CP and its fundamental principles. However, up until now, there has been a lack of in-depth qualitative investigation into how EFL teachers define CP and its objectives, as well as the classroom activities that serve as evidence for their claims. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to scrutinize the definitions of CP and its objectives provided by Iranian EFL teachers, their utilization of critical pedagogical activities in the classroom, their self-assessment as critical pedagogues, and the obstacles they face in implementing CP in the EFL context of Iran. Finally, by employing grounded theory to analyze the data, two models were proposed to illustrate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of CP and the obstacles hindering its implementation. In this particular case, the study aims to explore three research questions:

1- What is the level of familiarity of Iranian EFL teachers with critical pedagogy and how do they define it?

2- If Iranian EFL teachers are familiar with critical pedagogy, what classroom practices reflect their conceptions of critical pedagogy?

3- What are the barriers to the implementation of critical pedagogy according to Iranian EFL teachers?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Context

This qualitative study was conducted in the ELT micro-context of Iran to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of CP and its purposes. The study also aimed to identify the types of critical pedagogical classroom activities that teachers employ to practice this theory and the barriers that prevent them from freely practicing its principles in the classroom. It is of utmost significance to acknowledge that although generalizability is not a principal apprehension in qualitative research, it is of critical importance to explicate all measures implemented for the purpose of data collection, analysis, and interpretation of outcomes to guarantee dependability and transferability, which are the two fundamental principles of qualitative research. The former pertains to the clarity of the measures undertaken by investigators for others to emulate and attain analogous outcomes. The latter pertains to the applicability of findings to alternative contexts (Nassaji, 2020).

3.2. Participants

Convenience sampling was used to select a cohort of 22 Iranian EFL teachers from schools, institutes, and universities to participate in this investigation (Ary et al., 2018). The justification for employing convenience sampling was predicated upon the inherent advantage of participant accessibility and expediting the data collection procedure. Furthermore, the use of variation highlights differences among individuals and identifies significant trends that arise from diversity (Palinkas et al., 2013). It also facilitates the collection of data from samples that can be generalized to populations in qualitative studies (Patton, 2015). Therefore, to adhere to this principle, participants in this study were selected from diverse academic disciplines, years of teaching experience, and genders.

The participants were selected from both genders, with 83.3% female ($N = 15$) and 16.7% male ($N = 7$). In terms of their highest academic degree, 12 participants were PhD students (44.4%), two were PhD holders (11.1%), three were MA students (16.7%), four were MA holders (22.2%), and one was a BA student (5.6%). Regarding their teaching experience, 14 participants (55.6%) had more than five years of teaching experience, three participants (16.7%) had 3-5 years, three participants (16.7%) had 1-3 years, and two participants (11.1%) had no teaching

experience. In addition, they have been teaching various age groups, kids ($N = 2$, 9%), youngsters ($N = 3$, 14%), and adults ($N = 17$, 77%).

3.3. Instruments

Three instruments were utilized to collect data in this study: a demographic information scale, an online semi-structured written interview, and a phone interview. The demographic scale collected data on the participants' years of teaching experience, gender, and university degrees. The semi-structured written interview consisted of five items (see Appendix A) that aimed to assess EFL teachers' familiarity with CP, including its definitions and purposes, their self-identification as critical pedagogues, the classroom practices they believed reflected this approach, and the barriers to its implementation. The phone interview encompassed certain open-ended questions following the semi-structured written interview, to acquire further elucidations on the participants' interview answers. The design of these items was informed by the existing body of literature on CP. Additionally, two distinguished university professors specializing in the domains of CP were solicited to evaluate the language of the items. Their expertise in both language and content allowed them to assess the accuracy and coherence of the items. The items were subsequently revised based on their insightful feedback.

Furthermore, to ensure the content validity of the interview items, two research mentors evaluated their relevance and clarity using a four-point scale for each. The relevance scale ranged from "poorly relevant" to "completely relevant," while the clarity scale ranged from "poorly clear" to "completely clear." The index values were set from 0 to 1. An item with a value larger than 0.79 is considered clear, while an item with a value between 0.70-0.79 requires revision. An item with a value smaller than 0.79 should be excluded (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Following this evaluation, the content validity indices of each item reached 100%, supporting the transparency and relevance of the items.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

To adhere to the ethical criteria prescribed by research committees, participants were required to provide written consent by signing a consent letter (BERA, 2011). This letter indicated their willingness to participate in the study and assured them

that their identity would remain anonymous. Additionally, throughout the research process, participant labels (e.g. participant 1, 2, etc.) were used when referring to their responses. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and asked to complete a demographic scale and an online semi-structured written interview. The two instruments took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete, and participants were free to provide brief or detailed responses. The items of the interview were written in English and the participants were required to provide their responses in English, since all of them were English teachers and had enough English proficiency.

In the subsequent phase, the researcher sought the participation of 11 participants who willingly volunteered to partake in a phone interview. They were asked to provide their perceptions of CP and elaborate on their written responses. The purpose of the phone interview was to enhance the credibility of the findings and obtain a thorough understanding of the subject through data triangulation (Denzin, 1989; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews conducted over the phone had a duration of 10 to 15 minutes and were transcribed for later analysis. For the most part, data was collected online to comply with COVID-19 protocols and to facilitate collection from various locations. Therefore, the items of the written interview were constructed and disseminated via Google Docs and the phone interviews were made through WhatsApp platforms. Afterward, the data obtained from the two interviews was merged and analyzed using MAXQDA software.

3.5. Data Analysis

To address the research questions, the researchers employed grounded theory analysis throughout various stages of open, axial, and selective coding in which they engaged in reading and constant comparison of the participants' accounts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During the coding procedures, the researchers endeavored to remain faithful to the precise meaning and intention conveyed in the participants' accounts. Additionally, to code the statements, the researchers created a codebook wherein they established codes and defined their content and scope. Modifications were also made to the codes during the data analysis if deemed necessary (Morgan, 1997). Ultimately, a total of 150 codes were identified within the dataset.

The coding procedures were performed using MAXQDA software (Version

2020). The data were analyzed to identify the broad themes and sub-themes of the participants' definitions of CP, its purposes, the participants' self-evaluation as critical pedagogues, CP classroom activities, and the barriers to its implementation. To identify each broad theme and its sub-themes, the researchers conducted an inductive analysis of the participants' responses. They then created five code lists to classify the results of open and axial coding for each domain. For instance, in the open coding for the CP definition, statements with the same intentions, such as *"Students become critical thinkers"* (Participant 11), *" It makes students think and reflect, and criticize on the weaknesses"* (Participant 16), *"It helps students achieve critical consciousness"* (Participant 13), *"It enables the students to have critical lenses to see what surrounds us"* (Participant 11), *"It empowers students to think critically at various issues at the classroom and society"* (Participant 14), were grouped together as "*Developing Critical Thinking*". These were then coded as *"Raising Students' Critical Consciousness"* in the axial coding stage. The same procedures were used to code the remaining data to identify broad themes and their corresponding sub-themes. It is worth mentioning that the findings section presents the results of the open and axial coding procedures. The conclusion section analyzes the two models developed from these broad themes identified through selective coding.

Furthermore, to ensure the credibility of the codes, 20% of them were reviewed by a second coder, and the inter-rater agreement coefficient was estimated for the emerged codes. As a result, the CP definition had a total of 42 codes and an inter-rater agreement coefficient of 91%. For CP purposes, there were 21 codes and an inter-rater agreement coefficient of 90%. The analysis yielded 20 codes and an inter-rater agreement coefficient of 82% for participants' self-evaluation as a critical pedagogue. For CP classroom activities, 23 codes and an inter-rater agreement coefficient of 92% were obtained. Finally, 44 codes and the relevant inter-rater agreement coefficient of 88% were obtained for the barriers to the implementation of CP. The findings are reported by estimating the percentage of the coded segments and using MAXQDA Concept Maps.

4. Results

In the present study, a total of 19 broad themes were extracted for CP definition, CP purposes, teachers' self-evaluation of themselves as critical pedagogues, critical pedagogical classroom practices, and the barriers to its implementation. These

broad themes and their associated details are discussed in this section.

The first research question examined the participants' familiarity with CP and their definition of it. A total of 42 codes were then detected in the open coding stage pertaining to CP definition. Through axial coding, five broad themes emerged for CP definition: *Raising Students' Critical Consciousness* (37%, $N = 21$ codes), *Leaner-Centered Pedagogy* (24%, $N = 8$ codes), *A Strategy of Raising Teachers' Critical Consciousness* (15%, $N = 5$ codes), *A Means of Achieving Equality of Education* (12%, $N = 4$ codes), and other concepts (12 %, $N = 4$ codes) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
The Concept Map for Critical Pedagogy Definition by Iranian EFL Teachers as Depicted by MAXQDA
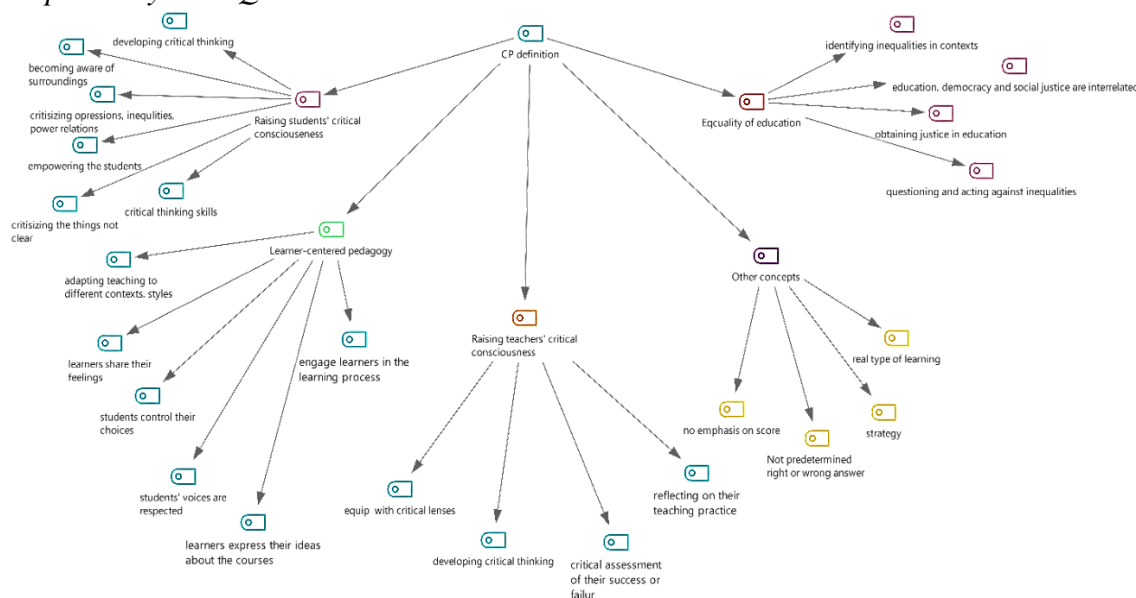
As illustrated, five broad themes were identified for the definitions of CP as a method to develop critical skills, criticize oppression, inequalities, and power relations, empower students, adapt teaching to different contexts, and enable students to share feelings. Additionally, it was found that CP equips teachers with critical lenses, encourages reflection on teaching practices, promotes justice in education, and challenges inequalities. Some participants defined CP as follow:

The attainment of equality in every aspect of education. (Participant 6)

Questioning these inequalities, and taking actions against them. (Participant 11)

The person could be the best critic for her/himself; and can learn from the weak points and try to work on them in order to get better. (Participant 5)

Having critical lenses to see what surrounds us. (Participant 11)

With regard to the frequency of the coded segments, it was revealed that *Raising Students' Critical Consciousness* ($N = 21$) and *Learner-Centered Pedagogy* ($N = 8$ codes) dominated the coded segments pertaining to CP definition. Within *Raising Students' Critical Consciousness*, the most frequently emerged codes were *developing critical thinking* ($N = 5$ codes), "…to be critical thinkers" (Participant 11), "…makes students think and reflect, and criticize on the weaknesses" (Participant 16), "…helping students achieve critical consciousness" (Participant 13), "…having critical lenses to see what surrounds them" (Participant 11), "…empowering students to think critically at various issues at the classroom and society" (Participant 14), *criticizing the injustice* and *power relations in education* ($N = 4$) and finally *empowering the students* ($N = 3$). For instance, some participants reported: "To help our students to be able to criticize whatever that are challenging for them" (Participant 12), "Help students question and challenge domination" (Participant 13), "Encourage students to criticize structures of power and oppression" (Participant 3), "Encourage students to challenge and question inequalities that exist in families, schools, and societies" (Participant 3).

As for the second broad theme, *Learner-Centered Pedagogy*, the most frequently emerged codes were *adapting teaching to different learning contexts and styles* ($N = 2$), for example, participant 15 stated that "To think of teaching as a situated enterprise", and participant 4, "A pedagogy in which flexibility is a major point", and *letting the students share their feelings freely* ($N = 2$), for example, "Share their viewpoints regarding a specific subject they can obtain the required score" (Participant 1), and "Students can say their ideas freely and there is no ignorance" (Participant 10).

Moreover, through a more scrutinized analysis of the responses regarding the participants' perceptions of CP purposes, the analysis of data yielded 21 codes in the open coding stage and through axial coding, three broad themes were extracted for CP purposes. *Raising Students' Critical Consciousness* (43%, $N = 9$ codes), *Increasing Learner-Autonomy* (33%, $N = 7$ codes), and *Situate Learning and Teaching* (24%, $N = 5$ codes), (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Concept Map for Critical Pedagogy Purposes by Iranian EFL Teachers as Depicted by MAXQDA
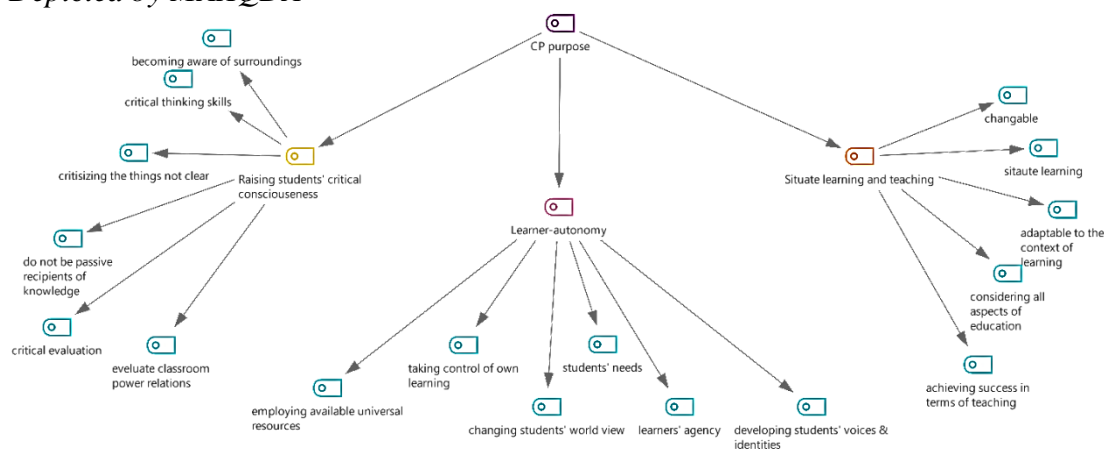
These three broad themes included the development of critical thinking skills in students, encouraging students to be active learners who are aware of their surroundings, and promoting learner autonomy by allowing students to take control of their learning experience and consider their own needs and perspectives. Additionally, the importance of situating learning and teaching within the broader context of education and adapting to the specific learning environment were emphasized. Below some of the participants' accounts are presented:

Designed for the purpose of enabling the learner to become aware of, conscious of conditions in his life and in society. (Participant13).

To change the students' perspectives toward the classroom power relationship. (Participant 7)

It is subjective and so wants to pay attention to all perspectives of English language teaching and learning. (Participant 17)

Its emphasis is on unravelling inequitable power relations and developing student's voice and identities. (Participant 6)

In terms of the frequency of the coded segments, *Raising Students' Critical Consciousness* (*N* = 9) and *Increasing Learner-Autonomy* (*N* = 7) were the most dominant for CP purposes. Additionally, within the domain of *Raising Students' Critical Consciousness*, the most frequently emerged codes were *developing critical thinking skills of the students* (2 codes), "To empower students to think critically at various issues in the classroom and society" (Participant14), "For

gaining critical thinking skills" (Participant 9), and *making students aware of their surroundings by becoming aware of what they are learning* (2 codes), "To promote students' awareness of what they're learning and why" (Participant 2), "Designed to enable the learner to become aware of, conscious of the conditions in their life and in society" (Participant13).

In the second dominated broad theme, *Increasing Learner-Autonomy*, the most salient code was *enabling the students to employ all available resources* ($N = 2$ codes), for example, "To facilitate their own language learning, to have the necessary skills, knowledge and resources to be able to plan and create change" (Participant 13),"To enable individuals to make their own life through making the best use of the available universal knowledge and adapting them to their own local requirements and potentials i.e. thinking globally, acting locally, and thinking locally" (Participant11).

The study also examined the participants' self-evaluation as critical pedagogues. In this regard, the open coding stage revealed 20 codes, which were then grouped into two broad themes through axial coding. The initial broad theme that emerged was *Not a Self-Identified Critical Pedagogue* (55%, $N = 11$ codes). For example, some of the participants stated that "I am not ready mentally to involve my students in all aspects of teaching" (Participant 6), "You cannot expect traditionally trained and oriented teachers to train critical students" (Participant 4), "Our cultural orientations limits us too much" (Participant 10), "They don't take into account our class activities and just see our final exam" (Participant 11), "When I taught English, I was not conscious about critical pedagogy" (Participant 14), "It is not practical due to the contextual constraints available" (Participant 7). The second broad theme in this group was *A Self-Identified Critical Pedagogue* (45%, $N = 9$ codes). "For example if a task works fine for a class but there's another class which do not find it interesting or benefiting, then I'd change the task" (Participant 7), "With higher level students, I try to use activities such as dialogue and problem-posing" (Participant 8), "I myself do my best to help them change the status quo when I have the chance to engage them by this world view" (Participant 6), " I care about student's own voice. I am well aware of the danger of native speakerism" (Participant 5), "I do use reflection to critically and analyze my teaching after each session" (Participant 5), (see Appendix B).

The analysis of the data for the second research question, which aimed to identify the participants' classroom practices reflecting their conceptions of critical

pedagogy, resulted in 23 codes during the open coding stage and three broad themes after axial coding: C*ommunicative Tasks* (56%, *N* = 13 codes), *Learner-Centered Activities* (35%, *N* = 8 codes), and *Alternative Assessment* (9%, *N* = 2 codes). (See Figure 3).

Figure 3
The Concept Map for Critical Pedagogical Practices by Iranian EFL Teachers as Depicted by MAXQDA
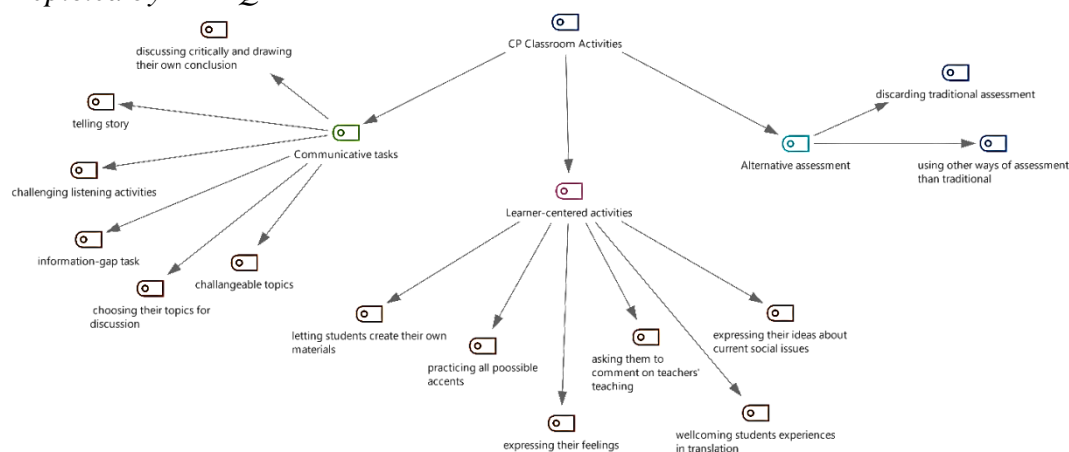
These three broad themes were identified in relation to communicative tasks, such as using debatable topics for listening and speaking, storytelling, information gap activities, discussions, and learner-centered activities, such as asking students to create their own syllabus and materials, expressing themselves in class, and commenting on their teachers' teaching style. Additionally, alternative assessment methods were suggested to replace traditional types. Some of the participants' remarks are referred here:

Listening parts, I can really challenge myself by trying to get the speakers as much as I could ... It's really challenging. (Participant 5)

I allowed learners to choose the topics which were of interest to them, by discussion. (Participant 14)

I will request them to share their translations sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph. If they share their translations, I will get them the required score and ask them for giving the reasons of presenting different translation than other. (Participant1)

I also welcome the background knowledge and experiences about the subject presented and I consider a score for it as an encouragement. (Participant 1)

I ask my students to write on a paper their ideas, feelings and suggestions about the course that we had. (Participant 11)

Sometimes, I even change the traditional and confining assessment structures to include critical thinking skills. (Participant 2)

Within the domain of CP classroom practices, *Communicative Tasks* and *Learner-Centered Activities* were dominant in the coded segments, as they dedicated the most frequency to themselves. In this regard, in the first broad theme of *Communicative Tasks* ($N = 13$ codes) the most salient coded segments were *discussing critically and concluding* ($N = 3$ codes). For example, "Using realia or focus on formative assessment rather than traditional tests" (Participant 16), "I also sometimes move from a lecture-based to a discussion-based class that allows students to think critically and draw their own conclusions" (Participant 2), "Classroom discussion" (Participant 12), *storytelling* ($N = 2$ codes), "Retelling the story and expressing the results"(Participant 9), "Telling the story" (Participant 3), and *information gap activities* ($N = 2$ codes) were reflecting their CP classroom practices, "….jigsaw task" (Participant 3), "…. prediction games" (Participant 3).

Analysis of the coded segments for the second broad theme, *Leaner-Centered Activities* ($N = 8$ codes) generally revealed that students' participation in the class for creating their syllabus and materials, expressing their ideas, and feelings about the class and the book, commenting on the teachers' practices were indicators of their CP classroom practices. For example, some of them stated that " I ask them to share their experiences for us and as a teacher, we should implement them in our classes" (Participant (10), "I ask my students to write on a paper their ideas, feelings, and suggestions about the course that we had" (Participant 11), "I also welcome the background knowledge and experiences about the subject presented and I consider a score for it as an encouragement" (Participant 1), "Develop their opinion about the social event in society" (Participant 9), "…another activity is that learners produce what they want and teachers can understand the errors or mistakes" (Participant 3).

Finally, the results of the open coding for the third research question regarding the participants' beliefs about the barriers to the implementation of CP in the Iranian EFL context yielded 41 codes. These codes were subsequently grouped into six

broad themes after axial coding: *Top-Down Educational System* (27%, *N* = 12 codes)*, Practical Barriers* (21%, *N* = 9 codes), *Teachers' Variables* (18%, *N* = 8 codes), S*tudents' Variables* (12%, *N* = 5 codes), *Traditional Structure of Iranian Community* (11%, *N* = 5 codes), and *Hierarchical Relationship between Teachers and Students* (5%, *N* = 2 codes), (See Figure 4).

Figure 4
The Concept Map for the Barriers to the Implementation of CP in the Iranian EFL Context as Depicted by MAXQDA

These broad themes were indicative of the barriers to implementing CP in Iran, including, the power of authorities, lack of autonomy for teachers and students, prescriptive approaches to the educational system, financial matters of institutes, class size, lack of teachers' freedom to be creative in the classroom, teachers' tendency towards perfectionism, traditional teaching methods, lack of a culture of accepting criticism, score-oriented students, lack of student cooperation with teachers, different learner expectations, and a traditionally-oriented relationship between students and teachers. Some of the participants' accounts are referred to:

…. students and even teachers should deliver what authorities believe to be true, we cannot think critically. (Participant 10)

One of the most important barrier is the lack of support and attention from the side of those who are in charge. (Participant 6)

There are a lot of students in each class. (Participant 1)

Most teachers cannot accept that the way that they teach is not perfect and as a result they can't stand to be criticized by their students. (Participant 11)

Iranian teachers mostly lack enough enthusiasm to involve in recent paradigms in TEFL. (Participant 12)

...we have score-oriented students. (Participant 18)

…lack of cooperation among learners. (Participant 8)

Iranians have always done the things in the same old way that is the norm of the society. (Participant 4)

The most important reason is that critical pedagogy endangers what people in power has attained during their life i.e., controlling other people in the society, so that they can exploit them to boost their power and profit. (Participant 10)

The traditionally defined roles of teachers and students and the conventional nature of their relationships. (Participant 20)

The findings showed that three broad themes of *Top-Down Educational System* (*N* = 12 codes), *Practical Barriers* (*N* = 9 codes), and *Teachers' Variables* (*N* = 8 codes) dominated the coded segments, since they had more frequencies than the other coded units. The analysis of the data illustrated that within the *Top-Down Educational System*, the most frequently emerged codes were the power of *top-down authorities* (*N* = 3 codes), "There are barriers that originated from high-ranking persons in society such as managers" (Participant 8), "Extreme power of authorities and curriculum planners can be another barrier" (Participant 5), "…eventually society members" (Participant 10), and *the lack of alternative assessment* (*N* = 2 codes). "The expectations to prepare learners for the tests and evaluation rather than make them critical thinkers" (Participant 10), "Absence of formative assessment" (Participant 8)

For the second broad theme, *Practical Barriers*, it was indicated that *time limits* (*N* = 5 codes) were the most important practical barrier to implementing CP. For instance, some of the participants stated that "Teachers don't have the time to reflect on their teaching" (Participant 13), "The context of Iran considering the time" (Participant 10), "During the time limit of the class, all students cannot participate in the class activities in terms of critical pedagogy" (Participant 1).

And finally, in the domain of the *Teachers' Variables*, the *lack of teachers'*

required knowledge of CP (*N* = 3 codes) and *the lack of enthusiasm to be creative in Iran* (*N* = 3 codes) were the most prominent coded segments relevant to this domain, for instance, some of the participants stated that: "Teachers are not familiar with the principles of critical pedagogy" (Participant 13), "It needs more information so the teacher must be qualified" (Participant 15), "Also, we do not have critical teachers to train critical students (Participant 19)".

5. Discussion

The primary objectives of this study were to examine EFL teachers' understanding of CP, their classroom practices, their confidence as critical pedagogues, and the obstacles hindering the implementation of CP. In this regard, the literature successfully substantiated the findings for the first research question (Alibakhshi, 2011; Alibakhshi & Zarei, 2011; Atai & Moradi, 2016; Pishghadam & Shakeebaee, 2020; Sahragard et al., 2014; Yamin et al., 2020; Zare-Behtash et al., 2017), indicating that the participants exhibited a commendable level of familiarity with the fundamental principles of CP. The findings unveiled that 37% of the participants referred to CP as a pedagogy that fosters students' critical consciousness. This is in line with Chlapoutaki and Dinas's (2016) claim that the task of transmitters of social change, such as teachers in educational systems, is to develop critical awareness to enable individuals to question and find solutions to existing social injustices. Moreover, 24% of the participants referred to CP as a learner-centered pedagogy, and 12% referred to it as promoting equality in education, which are consistent with the findings of Breunig (2009). So, for Iranian EFL teachers, CP is defined as a learner-centered pedagogy. It emphasizes the importance of hearing and respecting students' voices, encouraging their participation in class and improving their own learning processes, and questioning existing clichés, power relations, and injustice.

It was also demonstrated that 43% of the participants referred to raising students' critical consciousness, and 33% to fostering learner autonomy as the purposes of CP. This shows that the definition and purposes of CP were in agreement for the participants. Additionally, 24% of the participants believed that the goal of CP was to situate learning in the relevant social and cultural contexts of teaching, which is consistent with Canagarajah's (2005) view that critical students and teachers should prepare themselves to transform the means and ends of learning in order to construct an ethical, educational, and social environment. The study found that the participants recognized the significance of a dialogic pedagogy, which involves

acknowledging students' voices and creating a democratic climate for free exchanges on ethical and sociocultural issues (Luke & Dooley, 2011).

The findings for the second research question regarding CP classroom activities revealed three dominant themes: communicative tasks (56%), learner-centered activities (35%), and alternative assessment (9%) that are consistent with Breunig's (2009) central themes for CP classroom practices. These themes include group work activities, classroom community, mutual curriculum construction between students and teachers, assessment, and experiential activities. On the other hand, these findings show that for Iranian EFL teachers, CP is a dialogic process. In this regard, the findings are significantly in consonance with Ellsworth's (1989) claim that CP challenges the idea that teachers are the sole knowledge providers and students are passive recipients in the classroom. Instead, students should get involved in class activities in a dialogic manner. Additionally, according to Larson (2014), CP is a learner-oriented pedagogy that focuses on controversial issues, provoking critical discussions among students in the classroom.

The findings of the third research question showed that around 55% of the participants did not consider themselves as self-identified critical pedagogues, while only 45% identified themselves as such. There were also six broad themes identified as barriers to the implementation of CP. These included the top-down educational system (27%), practical barriers (21%), teachers' variables (18%), students' variables (12%), hierarchal relationship between teachers and students (11%), and traditional structure of the Iranian community (11%). These observations are largely consistent with the existing research on the key challenges to effective implementation of CP (Alibakhshi & Zarei, 2011; Mehrpour & Baharloo, 2015; Zare-Behtash et al., 2017).

The sub-themes of the variables pertaining to teachers revealed that their lack of understanding of CP, their inclination to exercise complete control over the classroom or strive for perfection, their absence of enthusiasm, and their limited freedom to be innovative hindered the implementation of CP. This hindrance was evident as 55% of the participants did not identify themselves as critical pedagogues. These findings align with Ahlquist's (1990) assertion that teachers' lack of support for CP could indicate a lack of comprehension of the concept and its practical application in the classroom. Additionally, the intricate nature of CP contributes to the challenges faced in its implementation (Guilherme, 2002). Furthermore, the sub-themes related to the variables concerning students revealed

that in Iran, students are reluctant to voice their disagreement in the classroom. One possible explanation for these findings is that, unlike in Western communities, many Asian communities discourage students from questioning their teachers and instead encourage passive acceptance of the established norms and practices (Andrade, 2007).

The results also showed that 11% of the barriers were related to the traditional structure of the Iranian community and the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. The sub-themes showed that the participants believed that the lack of courage to question inequalities, the tendency to control society and people, the tendency to do things in an old way, the cultural lack of accepting criticism, and the traditional learning and teaching style in Iran were the main barriers to the acceptance of innovations such as CP. In this context, based on Hofstede et al.'s (2002) first aspect of culture, namely identity, Iran, as a constituent of Asian society, exhibits a collectivist cultural orientation. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), this cultural inclination promotes dependency as a means of fostering unity and cooperation.

In addition, according to the second dimension of culture, which relates to hierarchy (Hofstede et al., 2002), collectivist societies exhibit significant power distance, thereby fostering the growth of power and wealth inequalities within their communities. Individuals living in such social groups are expected to accept an unequal distribution of power, unbalanced role dynamics, a hierarchical chain of command, and the notion that rewards and punishments should depend on factors such as age, social status, job title, position, and length of service. As a result, the presence of a hierarchical relationship between students and teachers in the Iranian educational system is considered inherent, dictating that individuals defer to authority figures who occupy the highest echelons. As a result, individuals in this setting are not afforded significant latitude to exercise their creativity, ask questions, or express dissent against the prevailing power dynamics and inequalities.

Finally, in relation to the dominant theme of top-down educational system, which was primarily reported by the participants, it can be argued that based on Kennedy's (2011) classification of social advancements, Iran can be associated with traditional social advancements. These advancements are characterized by an educational system that is didactic and reflects a mechanistic perspective of social development, and a teacher-controlled (top-down) approach to learning. In such

context, according to Bolitho's (2012) Earthquake Model (version 1), any form of change or innovation, such as CP, within such a system must be initiated at the national level, specifically by the ministry or government. Subsequently, it permeates the lower levels, including the regional, institutional, and finally the classroom levels. Within such an educational system, teachers and students occupy the lower levels with limited autonomy to foster creativity or adopt innovative practices. Hence, it is implied that in the Iranian EFL context, teachers must wait for authorization from the appropriate authorities to adopt CP. Only then can teachers begin to implement its principles in the classroom. Without such authorization, teachers do not have the freedom to exercise CP and its principles in the classroom.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to examine the understanding of CP among EFL teachers, their pedagogical practices related to CP, their confidence in being critical teachers, and the challenges that hinder the application of CP in the classroom. The findings suggest that two models for CP comprehension and the barriers to its implementation among Iranian EFL teachers can be developed based on the emerging themes. The initial model, created using selective coding, is founded on the primary themes of defining CP, CP objectives, and CP classroom practices (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
*A Model of Iranian EFL Teachers' CP Perceptions*
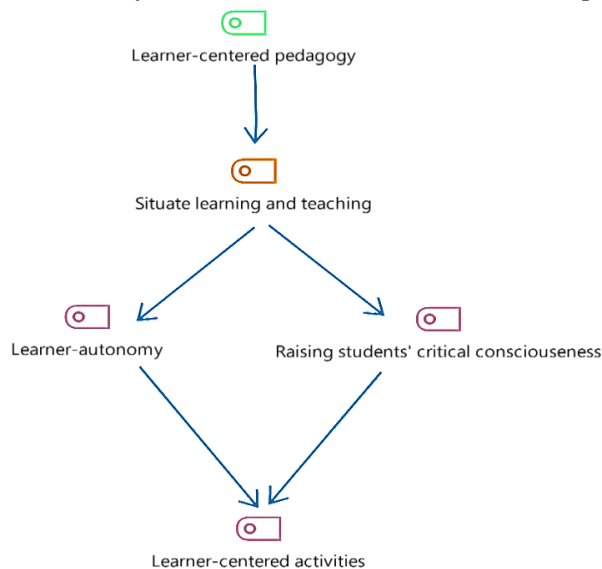
According to the model, Iranian EFL teachers understand CP as a pedagogy that prioritizes the learner and aims to adapt and situate the learning context to accommodate different learning styles, individual differences, and culture. The core objectives of CP, within this learner-centered pedagogy, are the cultivation of learner autonomy and the development of critical consciousness among them. These aims are intended to equip students with the ability to think critically and question the inequalities presented in their immediate environment. To achieve these goals, critical teachers employ learner-centered activities such as open discussions, storytelling, problem-solving, students' creation of their own learning materials, and the encouragement of individual self-expression.

The second model, which was created using selective coding, is based on the primary themes of the barriers to implementing CP (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
A Model of Barriers to the Implementation of CP in the Iranian EFL Context
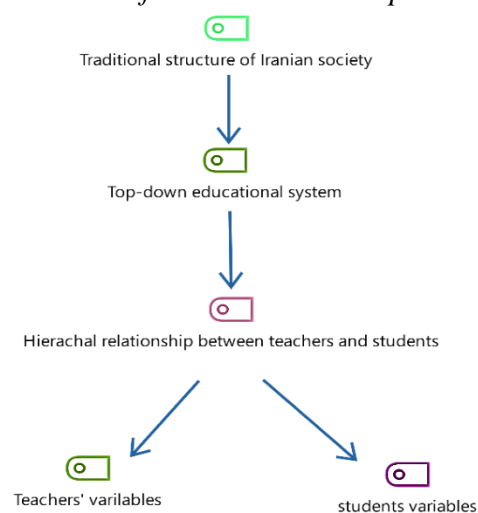
According to the second model, the conventional structure of the Iranian community and its collectivist culture give rise to a didactic and authoritative educational system that prescribes regulations and directives for subordinate levels, such as universities, institutes, and schools. This framework anticipates a hierarchical dynamic among individuals, particularly between teachers and students. Consequently, in this educational system, teachers and students are not inclined to engage in critical thinking or challenge the existing inequalities and

power dynamics. Therefore, CP, as a revolutionary force within global educational systems, is somewhat incongruous with the collectivist culture of Iran.

In summary, the findings of the current qualitative study suggest that the governing bodies in mechanistic educational systems, such as Iran, must familiarize themselves with the tenets of CP by examining the practices of other nations that have already adopted CP in their educational systems. This will enable the provision of resources for teacher training programs, elucidating CP principles, cultivating more proficient English teachers, and establishing a secure framework for its implementation.

Finally, similar to any other investigation, this study is subject to certain limitations. These limitations pertain to unexplored effects related to the variables of the participants, including gender, age, background, and teaching experience. Additionally, the small sample size and the instruments used for data collection are also limiting factors. Consequently, it is recommended that future studies consider all of these limitations to enhance the level of confidence in the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, it is important to note that the primary focus of this study was to provide an interpretive depiction of the actual practices of CP in the Iranian EFL context. As a result, no formal comparisons were made between the practices of EFL teachers in the classrooms and the official principles implemented for CP by authorities, except for a few references. However, it is crucial to conduct thorough theoretical investigations to establish such comparisons.

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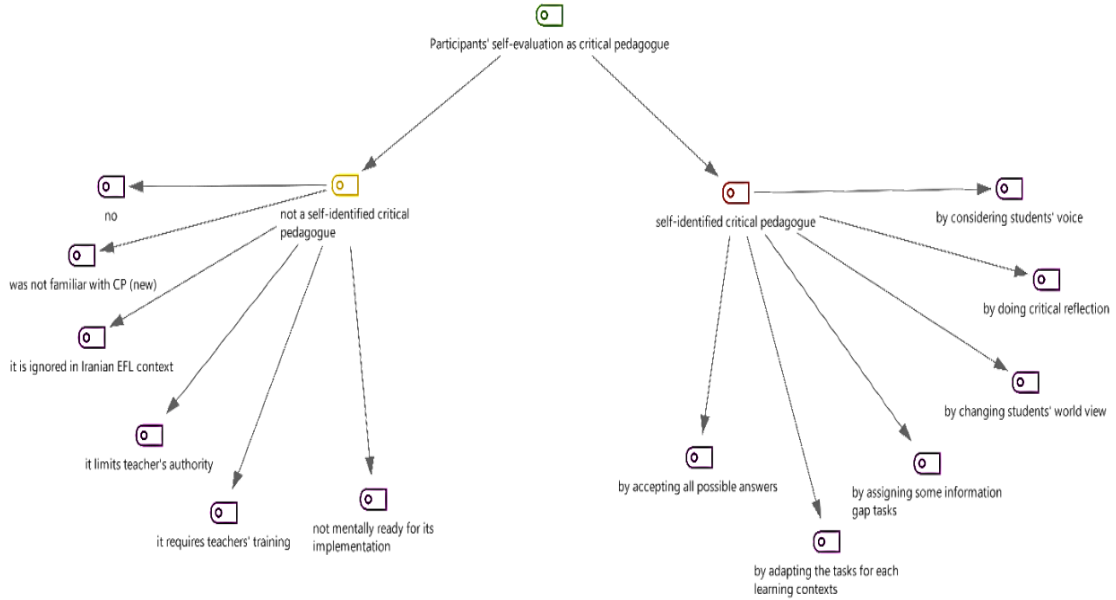
Appendices

Appendix A

The Semi-Structured-Written Interview Items

1- How would you define critical pedagogy as an English teacher?

2- What is the purpose of critical pedagogy? What do you personally think of it? Please provide a detailed discussion.

3- Do you engage in classroom practices that reflect the theories of critical pedagogy? Please support your answer.

4- What classroom practices do you use to employ critical pedagogy? Please name the types of activities and strategies you use in class.

5- What are the barriers to implementing critical pedagogy in Iranian EFL contexts? Please provide a detailed discussion.

Appendix B

Figure 1

The Concept Map for the Iranian EFL Teachers' Self-Evaluation of Themselves as Critical Pedagogues as Depicted by MAXQDA