Iranian EFL Teachers' Understanding and Beliefs of Critical Pedagogy: A Multiple Case Study

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Critical Pedagogy (CP) in Iran, among other countries, is still in its early stages, and there are various challenges facing the implementation of problem-posing education. To pinpoint the probable factors impeding transformation in the educational setting, the present research, using convenience sampling, investigated 64 Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs and understanding of CP and its fundamental tenets. Furthermore, attempts were made to examine the way these teachers' understanding of CP informed their beliefs of it. As such, a set of interviews as well as observations were conducted to capture the participants' statements, intentions, and behavior. As a result of a thorough thematic analysis, it was discovered that approximately 89 percent of the 64 EFL teachers participating in this study did not have a profound understanding of this approach. This finding can bear witness to inefficient or insufficient pre-service teacher education. Regarding their beliefs about CP, these EFL teachers either resisted or disagreed with the fundamental tenets of CP. The findings of the present study hold much to contribute to the related literature, insofar as new doors will be opened for those whose area of interest falls within the purview of CP and student voice. ***Keywords:*** Critical Pedagogy, Problem-Posing Education, Teachers' Beliefs, Teachers' Understanding

1. Introduction

We are living in a world replete with social injustice, inequitable privileges, and distorted facts (Awayed-Bishara, 2021). At a time when virtually everything is biased in favor of one political party or the other, it seems more probable to see, on the one hand, hopes fading for a better future and, on the other hand, pains building up due to oppressive conditions surrounding people (Sun, 2021). Hopefully, however, education can change the status quo for the better. Through raising individuals' awareness of the asocial distribution of opportunities in society and consequently asking them to relate such knowledge to the current injustices and problems, it is possible, in turn, to improve society (Giroux, 2004; Malazonia et al., 2023). Helping individuals think critically about such issues and act appropriately with the aim of improving society is best achieved in Freire's notion of *Critical Pedagogy*. The Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, was among the first to advocate for a liberating education by his seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* published in 1970 (originally published in Portuguese in 1968). Drawing on the principles of the critical theory of society (commonly known as critical theory) used by the Frankfurt School, Critical Pedagogy (CP) was proposed in an attempt to transform the oppressed from passive receiving objects into active subjects of their own emancipation (Freire, 1970).

As a fundamental tenet, CP should encourage learners to be able to read the word *and* the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Since there is no curriculum which is ideologically neutral (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 1995; Ryan, 2011), it makes sense to argue that reading the word necessarily requires one to read the world too. The world, on close inspection, turns out to be the unacceptable face of unequal power relations among humans. Such uneven distribution of reality results in the division of humans as oppressors and oppressed (Freire, 1970). While the former initiate violence and perpetrate violating others' rights by oppressive acts of dehumanizing, the latter are subordinated and bereft of a meaningful life. In order to change this situation, it is mandatory for the oppressed first to recognize the nature of the oppressive reality they are submerged in and second to act upon it (Giroux, 1997). This is only possible by virtue of the *praxis* (Freire, 1970). As Freire (1970) would have it, praxis means "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). Transformation in an educational sense means the production of educated individuals who are both critical and reflective of their own actions and are on their way to actively engage in the world (Mulcahy, 2011). Therefore, transformation, without which there would be no useful education, is of prime importance in CP (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2016). According to Degener (2001) "social transformation is the ultimate goal of critical education" (p. 35).

CP can be influential in formulating an education based on a great many fundamental underpinnings. Such an education is not centered on the superiority of teachers' authority, deepening the teacher-student dichotomy (Pennycook, 1990). Instead, the focus of the learning process is concentrated on students' freedom and granting power to those left deprived of their voice (Giroux, 1997). This is because the aims of teachers, as the principles of CP dictate, converge with students' needs. An education in which the teacher is not the only initiator of the learning process and students are encouraged to actively participate, create, reflect, and become critical thinkers serves as a pedagogy of liberation by which the oppressed once again dare to claim their voice (Mulcahy, 2011). The resolution of the teacher-student dichotomy in education is an undeniable prerequisite for the emergence of what Freire calls *problem-posing education* (Freire, 1970). Problem-posing model of education in juxtaposition against the banking model of education creates a conflict (Freire, 1970). The banking model of education is a means of oppression. Problem-posing model of education is a means for liberation. Leaning toward the views held by the problem-posing model of education, this study is an endeavor to explore Iranian EFL teachers' understanding of CP and their respective beliefs about it.

Pennycook (1990) criticized the educational policy for its failure to empower students and teachers alike. He maintained that teachers "have become increasingly positioned as classroom technicians employed to transmit a fixed body of knowledge" (p. 310). Now, more than three decades later, despite advances made in online education, little, if any, has changed (Gao et al., 2020). Most educational programs, including programs in English Language Teaching (ELT), encourage the culture of passivity in classrooms with teachers lecturing on preplanned subjects without any meaningful discussion; the pedagogue decides what is worth learning, and none of the students' sociopolitical concerns is appreciated, nor are their cultural backgrounds valued; examples of students disapproving of uninteresting reading passages, prescribed tasks irrelevant to their immediate needs, and lack of communication between teachers and students are not few in number (Sahragard et al., 2014). Thus, it seems safe to proclaim that the current context of teaching in ELT does not give primacy to the major concerns of the Freirean model of pedagogy, the one that makes the liberation of human beings its principal aim. As a result of the domination of such an atmosphere, students are bereft of their voice, their ingenuity on the line, and their identities as humans imperiled (Giroux, 1997).

To cultivate a more inclusive and liberating education, as long as we are worried about the status of the marginalized and their retention in education as well as in society as active citizens, teachers, along with anyone who has a part to play in the current educational system, are to heed critical pedagogy's calls

for a problem-posing education, praxis, and dialogue (Freire, 1970). However, implementing such a post-method pedagogy in classrooms where traditional approaches have long been in operation is not without its challenges (Akbari, 2008).

Looking into teachers' understanding and beliefs is vital (Pajares, 1992) for many reasons. First, through such investigations, it is possible to identify teachers' misunderstanding or ignorance. This is of crucial importance since their misinterpretation or lack of understanding of a particular area of knowledge is indicative of inefficient or insufficient pre-service teacher education. In such a case, teachers' decision-making is likely to be misleading, if not downright detrimental. Additionally, a lack of a deep understanding of a particular methodology, for example, causes teachers to form false beliefs. This way not only their beliefs but also their practices are influenced. While there is a growing body of literature concerning different aspects of CP, few studies have qualitatively investigated Iranian EFL teachers' understanding and beliefs of CP, and above all, the way their understanding of CP influences their respective beliefs of it.

A neglected area in the field of CP has to do with its practical considerations, or simply put, the fact how the conceptual aspects are actually put into practice together with the potential impediments. As Akbari (2008) pointed out "the practical implications of CP have not been well appreciated and most of the references to the term have been limited to its conceptual dimensions" (p. 276). From personal teaching experience, the researchers concluded that introducing unorthodox teaching methods and any innovative approach to ELT classrooms, considering the Islamic context of Iran, necessarily involves certain impediments. Safari and Pourhashemi (2012), in this regard, explored the potential constraints of critical pedagogy's applicability in Iran's educational system. Illuminating teachers' beliefs and attitudes, their qualitative study unveiled some key themes concerning CP and the difficulties related to its applicability, including lack of familiarity with the approach and resistance of school principals against any innovative approach. In a similar vein, this study tries to explore Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs about the applicability of CP and its associated barriers in Iran's EFL classrooms to corroborate and/or expand the existing themes. The results would, in turn, serve as a practical set of guidelines for teachers to consider the optimal incorporation of CP into their classrooms.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have been carried out to explore teachers' beliefs as well as the application of CP in ELT. Such an exploration is on the increase in

different parts of the world such as the US (Wink, 2000), Canada (Goldstein, 2004), Korea (Shin & Crookes, 2005), Australia (Starfield, 2004), and Iran (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Ahmadi & Hasani, 2018; Akbari, 2008; Aliakbari & Allahmoradi, 2012; Atai & Moradi, 2016; Khatib & Miri, 2016; Sahragard et al., 2014; Sarani et al., 2019).

EFL teachers' views concerning the premises of CP were previously explored in an Iranian context. Using a mixed-method approach, Atai and Moradi (2016) used semi-structured interviews and researcher-developed questionnaires in order to delve deeply into Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs. Overall, the questions were mostly related to the importance of context and interaction, teachers' practice as well as textbooks. According to a content analysis of the obtained qualitative data and the independent samples t-tests used for the quantitative phase of the study, it was revealed that these EFL teachers, despite their little academic familiarity, were mostly supportive of the fundamental principles of CP. In fact, what teachers mostly advocated for was raising learners' awareness as the essence of any educational program.

The perceptions of Iranian school teachers regarding the basic tenets of CP were also examined in a non-EFL context. In a purely quantitative study conducted by Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2012), the views of 200 Iranian school teachers were surveyed with regard to the applicability of CP at different educational levels. The results of descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and t-test showed no significant difference between the participants' perceptions considering their age and the level they taught with the exception of gender. It was further discovered that despite teachers' approval of CP and its basic tenets, this post-modern approach to teaching and learning was virtually nonexistent in Iran's educational system.

Similarly, Sahragard et al. (2014) set out to explore the practicality of CP from Iranian EFL teachers' viewpoints. As such, they used a mixed-method design for the study. What is more, in order to collect and analyze the qualitative data, they employed a grounded theory approach as well as factor analysis for the quantitative data. Using a CP questionnaire and through conducting in-depth interviews with 20 Iranian EFL teachers, they noticed that the vast majority of teachers had a decent awareness of CP and its basic principles. Interestingly enough, in spite of their (i.e., Iranian EFL teachers') approval of its application and helpfulness in the Iranian context, CP was seldom employed in their actual practice. Upon further investigation, it was revealed that certain barriers such as the top-down educational system, teachers' burnout as well as limited class time impeded the incorporation of CP into their teaching.

By the same token, the applicability of CP in EFL contexts was examined in other countries. In a case study, Ko (2013) investigated a university

lecturer's experience in teaching critical literacy to students majoring in English in the context of Taiwan. Through posing critical questions and establishing critical dialogue, the teacher helped raise students' awareness of the hidden agendas embedded in texts, further substantiating the possibility of raising individuals' critical literacy skills through CP-led reading instruction. The findings of this study suggest some impediments on the way toward a critical literacy approach to reading instruction, one of which is students' language learning beliefs.

The acceptability of CP and its major principles has also been the subject of a few theses and dissertations. In a study by Jeyaraj (2014) as a thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the researcher investigated the experiences of thirteen English language teachers from a variety of tertiary educational institutions in diverse parts of the world, ranging from Canada to the UK. These were teachers who had theoretical and practical knowledge of critical pedagogy, eleven of whom self-identified as critical pedagogues, whereas two other teachers had knowingly rejected critical pedagogy in their practice altogether. The result of her interviews with these teachers revealed themes concerning why they became critical pedagogues, how they were affected in this process, and how they actually implemented critical pedagogy in their ELT classrooms.

Even fewer studies have analyzed the distinction between a banking model of education and a problem-posing education (Freire, 1970) as realized in EFL contexts. Drawing a contrast between transmission-based and CP-centered language classrooms, Khatib and Miri (2016) set out to investigate the particular qualities associated with teacher talk that could cultivate a culture of multivocality both within and outside of classroom borders. Using a conversation analysis methodology to analyze the qualitative data collected through audio- and video-recording of two typical sessions of an ELT teacher, the researchers discovered that the growth of multivocality in the participant's classroom was restricted by certain teacher moves, such as frequent interruptions, the overextended teacher turns and prohibiting L1 use. In the next phase of the study, the participant (i.e., the ELT teacher) took part in a CP-informed teacher education program that included sessions on multivocality. Following these sessions, a great shift was observed in the way the teacher handled his classroom. To be more specific, the researchers found out that the teacher made deliberate attempts to enhance multivocality through strategies such as delaying error correction, welcoming student initiation, and using L1.

While the related literature extensively describes the helpfulness of incorporating CP into ELT classrooms, very few studies, if any, have qualitatively examined Iranian EFL teachers' understanding of CP and their

respective beliefs of it, nor has any attention been given to the way their beliefs of CP were informed by the extent of their respective understanding of it. Hence, the present research intends to address these points among Iranian EFL teachers. Meanwhile, it attempts to identify the potential sources of resistance, disapproval, and barriers with regard to the application of CP in Iranian EFL contexts.

In this study, the following qualitative research questions are investigated:
1. To what extent do Iranian EFL teachers have a deep understanding of critical pedagogy?
2. What are Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs of critical pedagogy and its basic principles?
3. What are Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs about the applicability of critical pedagogy and its associated barriers in Iran's EFL classrooms?
4. How does Iranian EFL teachers' understanding of critical pedagogy influence their respective beliefs of it?

3. Method

Considering the qualitative nature of the present research, this study benefited from a multiple or collective case study, in which several cases were jointly examined so as to explore the phenomenon of interest (Dörnyei, 2007).

Accordingly, as the necessity of fostering student voice in EFL classrooms had been previously established by a number of studies (see for example Ahmadi & Hasani, 2018; Khatib & Miri, 2016; Murphey et al., 2009), in order to deeply delve into the concept of CP in the Iranian context, 64 Iranian EFL teachers (i.e., cases) were selected and interviewed regarding their understanding and beliefs of CP and its underlying principles (i.e., the phenomenon of interest). These cases had clearly defined boundaries in terms of major, degree, and years of teaching experience (see section 3.1 for further explanation). The attempt to gather comparative cases among the available English language institutes added to the face validity of this multiple case study (Dörnyei, 2007).

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were comprised of 34 male and 30 female Iranian EFL teachers in the 27-48 age range, with a master's degree or Ph.D. in TEFL. Due to accessibility and feasibility reasons, this study used a convenience sampling (Dörnyei, 2007) to obtain the sample of four renowned English language institutes in Tehran, Mazandaran, and Gilan, in Iran. For the purpose of the present study, 12 branches (three of each institute) were selected from their branches nationwide. In an attempt to follow the recommendations for identifying expert teachers, the major bases of which are related to

experience and reputation (Tsui, 2003), all of the EFL teachers in this study were selected from among the experienced community, currently employed with at least five years of experience in teaching English to adults and teenagers. In total, 64 EFL teachers (27 from Tehran; 21 from Mazandaran; 16 from Gilan) were selected.

3.2. Materials and Instruments

The primary instruments for data collection were interviews and observations. The questions for the semi-structured interviews were all developed by the researchers, mainly based on the literature on CP. As for the first part, the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson et al., 2001) was utilized as a guide to develop 11 open-ended questions in an attempt to evaluate the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers have a deep understanding of CP. The Cognitive Process dimension of this Taxonomy includes the following six levels (in ascending order): (1) *Remember*; (2) *Understand*; (3) *Apply*; (4) *Analyze*; (5) *Evaluate*, and (6) *Create*. In the second part, in order to explore the interviewees' beliefs toward CP and its basic principles, the researchers developed 10 open-ended questions in four interrelated areas, namely the role of teacher, the role of student, world, and transformations. Finally, in the third part, four open-ended questions were designed to elicit the interviewees' beliefs about the practical implications of CP and its associated barriers, thus leaving the researchers with 25 questions in total (see Appendix).

Then, the content validity of these 25 open-ended questions was established by virtue of their consistency with the related literature and through expert judgment (i.e., consulting with a panel of nine experts in the field, all of whom held a PhD in TEFL). In addition, a pilot study was carried out on 10 participants (five males and five females) on a one-on-one basis to unravel any potential problem, to assess the usefulness of the data collection method, to check the feasibility of the study, and, if necessary, to revise the questions. Based on the feedback provided by the participants, some minor yet helpful revisions were made to the way the interviews were conducted. For instance, all of the participants asked for a short pause after several questions for further reflection (even one of the participants, having hesitated for a while in response to a rather wordy question, demanded that the researcher pause voice recording). Despite the many questions raised, at the end of the interview, two participants indicated that they wanted to make some final comments about their beliefs. Hence, deliberate attempts were made to provide the main participants of the study with more time for reflection. This was facilitated by the use of questions such as "Is there anything else you wish to add before we move on to the next question?" Once it was determined that each question can

elicit an adequate range of responses in the allocated time, the researcher proceeded to the main data collection.

3.3. Procedure

To provide the interviewees with the chance to self-reflect on their own beliefs and practice as EFL teachers, the interviews were conducted in two sessions. The interview conducted in the first session was of the semi-structured type. This was then followed by a stimulated recall interview in the second session. Some guiding questions were formulated in advance to direct the stream of the interview in the desired manner. However, the format, for the most part, was open-ended, thus, allowing for further elaboration on certain aspects of the inquiry by both the interviewer and interviewees. The average length of the interviews was 68 minutes long with a range from 47 minutes to 81 minutes.

In addition to conducting interviews, in order to enhance the richness of the data, all of the participants were observed while teaching (audio-recorded, and thereafter, roughly transcribed), each followed by a stimulated-recall interview (within 2 days of observations). Hence, aside from the participants' statements, the researchers made an attempt to capture these EFL teachers' intentionality as well as their behavior in the classroom. Such combination of data collection methods (i.e., triangulation) by case study researchers is not uncommon (Dörnyei, 2007), and improves the credibility of the data (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). The observations were of a non-participant, unstructured type (Cohen et al., 2011) which involved completing field notes and a detailed description of the classroom context as being observed.

3.4. Data Analysis

To begin with, all interviews were transcribed in a rough fashion to get familiar with the depth and breadth of the data set. To better organize the enormous obtained body of data, the responses of all interviewees were arranged according to the specific topics brought up in the interviews (McKay, 2006). Doing so would facilitate cross-case analysis (Patton, 2015). They were then put in juxtaposition to the field notes and descriptions obtained from the observations to facilitate comparison. After the initial rough transcription and organization of the field notes, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and annotated using QSR Nvivo software. Using a qualitative multiple case study research design, qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. In addition, in order to ensure consistency and accuracy, the Nvivo Intercoder Agreement function was employed by the researchers. Thematic analysis is one of the most appropriate and common methods of analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), through which it is possible to examine and record recurrent patterns (themes) across data sets. To this end, the researchers went

through the six phases of thematic analysis provided by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely getting acquainted with the data, developing preliminary codes, exploring themes, analyzing identified themes, defining and labeling themes, and generating the final report. Subsequently, descriptive statistics were calculated to provide a more accurate interpretation of the results.

4. Results and Discussion

The results and discussion pertaining to the four research questions are collectively presented in three interrelated subsections. Initially the first and second research questions are addressed in 4.1. and 4.2. Later, in the same subsections, the fourth research question is examined. Finally, subsection 4.3. provides the results and discussion associated with the third research question.

4.1. Teachers with a Limited/No Understanding of CP and their Respective Beliefs of it

As a result of analyzing the findings with regard to EFL teachers' understanding of CP and its basic principles, and in response to the first research question, it was revealed that approximately 89% of the 64 EFL teachers participating in this study (i.e., 57 EFL teachers) lacked a deep understanding of the concept. This particular finding stands in contrast to what was earlier found by Sahragard et al. (2014) through conducting a study in a similar EFL context in Iran. In fact, for the first few questions in the interview (Remember and Understand), these EFL teachers either provided no response or, at best, some ill-defined descriptions of the terms. As far as the more demanding questions, including the ones focusing on their implementation skills (Apply), were concerned, these EFL teachers' answers proved unelaborated and sketchy. Most of them resorted to inaccurate examples to support their claims. Finally, all of the questions put forward in the Analyze, Evaluate, and Create sections were left unanswered by these interviewees. Relying on a number of undemocratic and oppressive teaching techniques, these EFL teachers claimed to be practicing CP in their classrooms, and hence they described themselves as critical pedagogues. These teachers were mostly concerned with the amount of knowledge they shared in the class, and made repeated references to the fact that to be a critical pedagogue they need to be knowledgeable to the extent that their students would accept them as the only "source of knowledge" in the class. They also contended that the ultimate goal of CP is to produce "well-read learners" by exposing the learners to a variety of materials. One interviewee, for instance, asserted that:

Teacher #17:

Students today know less about everything as they read less.
In order to produce critical students, teachers themselves should

> *be critical. I mean, teachers can become critical through extensive reading, and uh, become knowledgeable. This way students will admire you more when you have answers to all of their questions – it's a sign of strength [laughter]. In other words, critical pedagogy requires knowledgeable teachers who are capable of educating well-read learners. After all, that's the main goal of critical pedagogy, isn't it?*

Such an approach toward teaching and learning is what Freire (1970) describes as banking model of education: the teacher is the one who knows everything, and the students are the ones who know nothing. Apparently, the existing atmosphere in Iran's EFL classrooms has evolved to give rise to such an oppressive attitude.

In addition, these EFL teachers asserted that making the learners speak in English the entire time in the classroom is what they need the most. For instance, one of the interviewees remarked:

Teacher #2:

> *There are a lot of things that I do in order to make sure that my teaching is successful. So, for example, I ask a lot of comprehension questions before I go on to the next part. I teach every single detail in the books, and every session we have a quiz. I also encourage them to speak just in English to make the class more, you know, native-like. If they speak in Persian, they are penalized. They have to buy an ice cream for everyone.*

Two interpretations are in order. First, there is this oppressive illusion permeating most of the EFL classrooms that EFL teachers (without any systematic needs analysis) know their students and are aware of their needs better than anybody else. Second, speaking in English the entire time in the classroom, albeit useful, may lead to the marginalization of some introverted students in the classroom. Therefore, in an EFL classroom where speaking in English is a must, speaking in the mother tongue is oppressed, and the unfortunate learners turn into non-participating individuals, who are to be "penalized" and "admonished."

Unlike the more traditional approaches to ELT, CP sets out to transform the unfair distribution of power in the classroom (McLaren, 2003); in other words, whereas traditional approaches to ELT cultivate a culture of one-sidedness, CP attempts to transform such a biased situation in the hope that the marginalized (i.e., students) once again find their voice. Going through the interviewees' responses to the interview questions, the researchers realized that these EFL teachers were neither aware of such a distinction between CP and its traditional counterparts nor willing to concede that there might be some

truth to this matter. All of them shared the general misconception that the EFL teacher in a CP-based classroom is to know everything and thereby help the learners improve their understanding of the world. Convincing as it may seem, one should always remember that teachers are only one side of the story. The collaborative nature of CP necessitates involving the learners in the co-creation of knowledge in the classroom (Bovill et al., 2011). In other words, both teachers and learners are to cooperate with each other to unravel the hidden agendas underlying the atmosphere surrounding them. If one believes that the reality to be discovered is split one-way (i.e., held by one party and not the other), the participants in need of that reality (in this case learners) may not feel the urge to question, reflect, and transform. This reality could be interpreted as any piece of fact that is not distorted and misrepresented (e.g., what happens in a particular culture, ranging from the way people live to the way they interact with the world). As long as teachers are believed to exclusively hold this reality, learners would inevitably serve as the consumers of whatever is provided for them. Such an undemocratic context, unknowingly approved by this group of interviewees, has resulted in the existing hierarchies of power within the current EFL classrooms in Iran.

As far as their beliefs about CP were concerned, and in response to the second research question, these EFL teachers either resisted or disapproved of the basic principles of CP. In fact, despite the stated approval of some of the principles, they were neither intended nor practiced in the interviewees' classrooms. For instance, one of these EFL teachers (Teacher #41) believed that students cannot contribute much to classroom procedures, and hence should not be engaged in any major decision-making for the classroom. He was of the opinion that, in order to be successful in their studies, students need to take heed of what they are told in terms of punctuality and diligence and act accordingly- just like a "soldier," to use this interviewee's descriptive term. He further added:

Teacher #41:

> *It's the teachers' responsibility to supply the most useful materials and topics for the students. Because teachers are more experienced, they know best what to teach and how to teach. I mean, they can change the order of the lessons or bring extra activities to the class to make the class more fruitful. Sometimes some students may talk more than the others and the class may get, uh, chaotic. So, again, the teacher must start and stop the conversations.*

Moreover, he would give his students a number of closed tasks (e.g., multiple-choice tests, mechanical drills, and reading aloud activities) as a means of consolidating the lessons taught in the class. In an attempt to expose

the learners to a variety of authentic materials, he argued that students should "change everything to English": their everyday conversations, the language on their cell phones, the subtitles they use for watching movies, etc. What is more, students should never speak with their teacher in Persian (their mother tongue). Going through the belief evidence provided by this EFL teacher in his statements, one can clearly notice the subjugated role of learners in such a teacher-dominated classroom. First of all, in this classroom, it is the teacher who disciplines, and the students are to comply; otherwise, they are doomed to failure. This is exactly what happens in a classroom led by a banking method of education (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, the closed-ended nature of classroom activities (e.g., tests and drills) may save a lot of time but at the expense of restricting the students' creativity and freedom to think out of the box (i.e., think differently and critically). In addition, the fact that speaking in the mother tongue is banned in such classrooms seems to be one of the realizations of hegemony. EFL teachers, who are usually more competent and self-confident in what they instruct, compared to their learners, can easily dominate any sort of interaction. What is more, as EFL teachers are usually more communicatively competent in English, in comparison to their students, they tend to win the consent of everyone to speak solely in English with them, the result of which would be the maintenance of domination (McLaren, 2003). Taking all of the above-mentioned points into account, these EFL teachers, who either resist or disapprove of the basic principles of CP (e.g., by being reluctant to do away with hierarchies of power in their classrooms), should definitely consider the hegemonic consequences of their beliefs.

4.2. Teachers with a Deep Understanding of CP and their Respective Beliefs of it

On the other hand, as far as the first research question was concerned, only seven EFL teachers (11%) had a deep understanding of CP and its basic principles. They were all able to provide a satisfactory definition of CP as well as appropriate examples of its application in EFL classrooms. This means that they were able to provide a satisfactory definition of CP (Remember), associate the proposed concepts with CP (Understand), show their prowess in applying the basic principles (Apply), compare and contrast CP and traditional approaches to ELT (Analyze), and make a sound evaluation of CP (Evaluate). In fact, their understanding of CP far outweighed that of their peers in this study. The wide range of technical terms, together with accurate interpretations, and the variety of tangible examples with regard to the application of CP were clear proof of their theoretical and practical knowledge. For instance, one of the interviewees made several references to the notion of postmethod pedagogy and its major macrostrategies in his definition of CP:

Teacher #5:

Well, critical pedagogy reminds me of the postmethod pedagogy as proposed by Kumaravadivelu. It covers many sociopolitical and cultural aspects of teaching. It, really, pays attention to the immediate needs of the learners and the problems surrounding their lives. Critical pedagogy takes a critical view of everything and provides ample room for negotiation.

Likewise, one of these EFL teachers emphasized the "close relationship" between social change and critical pedagogy. For instance, it was stated by one of these interviewees that:

Teacher #58:

I believe social change is one of the most significant products of critical pedagogy, or let's say, it should be like this. Let's think about it. We are dealing with people in the classrooms, who are real, who have real problems, who have real purposes, and most importantly, who have the capability to take action. So, I believe there is a close relationship and critical pedagogy can pave the way toward changing the society for the better.

Although these EFL teachers lacked the ability to propose any new principles for CP in line with the existing ones (in response to questions raised at the level of Create), they all reasoned that being able to propose new principles would require careful thought and that even though they could come up with some new ideas, they would prefer not to make any wild guesses.

Significantly enough, in relation to the second research question, these interviewees approved of the mentioned role of teachers: to improve learners' critical thinking skills. All of them believed that "it is of prime significance for learners to be able to read between the lines," which is in line with what Nasution et al. (2020) emphasized regarding the analysis of a given text. However, they contended that to instill such skills into their leaners they need more time than a two-month-long course. What is more, in their actual classrooms, it was observed that there is a general tendency among all of the teachers to follow the points provided in the syllabus from cover to cover, focusing merely on what is already presented in the books and other instructional materials. None of the students was invited to express their views about the content being covered. For example, one of the EFL teachers (Teacher #19), teaching a reading passage about *Cybercrimes in India* to her upper-intermediate students, would not raise any questions concerning the reasons behind such a topic selection: Why cybercrimes? Why India? Nor would she attempt to examine the necessity of analyzing the realizations of

such crimes in other cultures. When asked about her intentions with respect to such observations, she provided the following reasons in the stimulated recall interview to justify her intentions and behavior:

Teacher #19:

> *Well, I understand that the ideas and the values hidden in the text are important. They [the learners] may even have more tangible examples of crimes. But to be honest, that's what they, most of the time, expect from me – to prepare, read, and interpret everything for them. There is also the risk of raising uninteresting questions. They may simply not appreciate the value of such questions. So, I'd rather ask more about the vocabulary and the grammar points.*

Similarly, the same EFL teachers agreed that a great deal of the class time should be devoted to meaningful discussions about not only social problems but also cultural and political issues. Nonetheless, having observed these EFL teachers' classrooms, the researchers were astonished to figure out that there was neither any trace of dialogue nor any attempt to initiate socially/culturally/politically-driven negotiations. Later, when conducting the stimulated recall interviews, it was revealed that, for these EFL teachers, "time restriction" and "the difficulty of the topics" were the major reasons for such a mismatch between what they claimed and what was observed in practice.

4.3. Practical Implications and Barriers

By and large, those EFL teachers who had a deep understanding of CP approved of its underlying principles. However, upon close inspection and subsequent observations, it was revealed that there were some mismatches between what they had claimed to believe and what was actually observed in their classrooms. These mismatches are more accurately referred to as tensions (Phipps & Borg, 2009). For instance, an EFL teacher may believe in the value of collaborative discussions and meaningful dialogues, but they may exclude its possibility in the lessons due to time limitation or even fear of contrasting viewpoints. As a result, a tension occurs between the professed beliefs and the observed practices. This finding (i.e., the observed tensions) coincides with a number of similar studies in other contexts (see for example Farrell & Kun, 2008; Richards et al., 2001). When asked about the reason behind such tensions, these participants provided different explanations, which were basically related to either time limitation and classroom management (feasibility concerns) or supervisors and students' expectations and preferences (accountability concerns).

More specifically, as for the potential barriers on the way toward implementing CP, and in response to the third research question, a number of challenges emerged from the interviewees remarks. They mainly underscored:

- the impermeable agendas of institutes,
- different expectations held by the society,
- supervisors' resistance to change,
- teachers' lack of theoretical and practical knowledge,
- the risky nature of CP, and
- the probable inconsistencies between their own classes and other classes.

Similar studies in the past revealed a variety of barriers preventing the application of CP in EFL contexts such as the top-down educational system, teachers' burn-out, lack of information about students' background and their learning styles, class size, and limited class time (Sahragard et al., 2014). This particular finding both corroborates and expands the existing themes.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The present study was aimed at examining Iranian EFL teachers' understanding and beliefs of CP and its basic tenets. As a result of a thorough thematic analysis, it was discovered that as many as 89% of the EFL teachers participating in this study were not able to show a deep understanding of CP. This is obviously indicative of inefficient or insufficient pre-service teacher education. If not taken care of by teacher education programs, such a shallow understanding of CP may cause these EFL teachers to form false beliefs with regard to the applicability of CP and its consequences. As a matter of fact, this was the case with these teachers, some of whom had misinterpreted the underlying tenets of CP. Consequently, not only their beliefs but also their practices were influenced. To put it differently, a shallow understanding in this regard, for the most part, had led these EFL teachers to either resist or disapprove of CP. Hence, as long as teacher trainers and policy makers are concerned about the incorporation of an empowering education into EFL contexts, teacher education programs are to make more room for the development of EFL teachers' CP-literacy.

It was also revealed that among the 64 interviewees, only seven EFL teachers (11%) had a deep understanding of CP and its basic principles. These were the same participants who generally approved of CP. Nevertheless, there were some tensions between their professed beliefs and their actual practice in the classroom. These EFL teachers had certain challenges in their practice, which could be classified as issues related to either feasibility concerns or accountability concerns. Among the feasibility concerns, they referred to time limitation and classroom management, and among the accountability concerns, they made repeated references to supervisors and students' expectations and

preferences. Apparently, even though a high level of understanding of CP has paved the way toward the acceptability of CP by these teachers, there are some external barriers on the way toward its application within the classrooms. Hence, it can be inferred that when incorporating CP into the current educational framework of a particular setting, it is essential to assess both the viability and practicality of its fundamental tenets. What is more, teachers feeling obliged to account for their activities, may tend to tailor their teaching to supervisors and students' expectations and preferences rather than what they truly believe in. Therefore, teachers, alone on this journey, may simply be regarded as unconventional rather than innovative.

The findings provide a number of implications for research methodology and teacher education. First of all, being one of the few qualitative studies to have explored the link between teachers' understanding and beliefs within the framework of CP, this research could be construed as a significant step in shedding some light on the way EFL teachers' beliefs of CP and their corresponding practices are informed by the extent of their respective understanding of it. Methodologically speaking, the researchers would argue that it is doubtless not sufficient to rely on EFL teachers' statements as the only evidence of their beliefs. Rather, attempts should be made to capture their intention and behavior as well. In addition, as far as the tensions between EFL teachers' professed beliefs and practices are concerned, researchers need to delve into the reasons behind such differences to illuminate EFL teachers concerns and challenges. It is further implied that a qualitative approach toward collecting and analyzing EFL teachers' understanding and beliefs would be more fruitful (than, for instance, questionnaires made up of a number of closed-ended questions) in providing a comprehensive and accurate picture of these constructs. Overall, the findings hold much to contribute to the related literature, insofar as new doors will be opened for those whose area of interest falls within the purview of CP and student voice.

Furthermore, as the majority of the EFL teachers participating in this study lacked a deep understanding of CP, it is suggested that teacher education programs should include materials and courses relevant to CP and student voice. Such incorporation of materials into the ELT curriculum has been underscored by other Iranian researchers as well (e.g., Ghadiri & Tavakoli, 2017). What is more, teacher trainers could invest more time in holding practical workshops for would-be EFL teachers in an attempt to provide more opportunities for them to practice how CP can be incorporated into the classroom in practice. The researchers would also argue that teacher education programs could be of great help to the implementation of problem-posing education through encouraging EFL teachers to expand their understanding, self-reflect on their own beliefs, and transform their practices accordingly (see for example Alarcón et al. (2022) for a case in point). Besides, the prevalence

of such critically-oriented programs would, in turn, lead to more acceptability on the side of the stakeholders, resulting in less tension between EFL teachers' beliefs and their practice.

Despite its contributions, the present study faced some limitations with regard to sample size, instrumentation, and data collection procedure. First, this collective case study was conducted on a relatively small sample of 64 EFL teachers. Due to feasibility considerations, they were selected from 12 institutes through convenient sampling. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings need to be done with great caution. Future studies could perform similar research on a larger scale, using other methods of data collection such as focus group interviews or reflective journals, to build more trust into the findings.

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Appendix
Interview Questions
Part 1

Remember

1. How do you define critical pedagogy in ELT? What are its basic principles?

2. What is praxis in critical pedagogy?

Understand

3. Can you describe the relationship of each of the following to critical pedagogy?

- Social Change
- Student Voice
- Marginalization
- Critical Thinking

Apply

4. In what respects could the principles of critical pedagogy be used to foster student voice in Iran's EFL classrooms? Explain your answer.

5. Would you call yourself a critical pedagogue? Why (not)?

Analyze

6. How do you compare and contrast the main characteristics of critical pedagogy and traditional approaches to ELT?

7. Do you see any drawbacks to the notion of critical pedagogy as you understand it? If so, what are they?

Evaluate

8. How do you evaluate the way your students may benefit from implementing critical pedagogy in the classroom?

9. What changes to critical pedagogy would you recommend?

Create

10. Can you propose some new principles for critical pedagogy in line with the existing ones?

11. How do you foresee the future of critical pedagogy over the next decade in Iran?

Part 2

The Role of Teacher

1. Can you describe your role as an EFL teacher in the classroom? What are your responsibilities?

2. Paulo Freire advocates for problem-posing education and dialogue through which meaning and reality is negotiated between the teacher and students. Do you believe teachers and students should engage in dialogue about their social problems?

3. According to the principles of critical pedagogy, a crucial role of teachers is to improve learners' critical thinking skills. Do you approve of such a role in EFL classrooms? If so, how can it be accomplished?

The Role of Student

4. Can you describe your students' role as EFL learners in the classroom? What are their responsibilities?

5. Do your students have the authority to freely share their ideas, wishes, and interests in the classroom?

6. In your opinion, should students be involved in curriculum planning and development? Does their voice matter in determining the topics to be covered? How about classroom activities and assessments?

World

7. In your opinion, does critical pedagogy make a difference in the world?

8. Do you believe every citizen deserves an education?

Transformations

9. What do you think about the power relations in Iran's EFL classrooms?

10. In Henry Giroux's terms, teachers are transformative intellectuals who possess the required knowledge and skills to question and transform the existing inequities in society. What does it mean to you and do you approve of that?

Part 3

Practical Implications and Barriers

1. How can educators, students, parents, policymakers, curriculum designers, and test developers contribute to the application of critical pedagogy in Iran's EFL classrooms?

2. Can you apply critical pedagogy in your current classrooms? If so, how?

3. How do you think your students would react if critical pedagogy were to be incorporated into the classroom?

4. Would you explain the potential challenges and constraints that you may face? Do you have any personal experience in this regard?