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Alignment of Iranian EAP Programs with Critical Principles: An Exploration of Educator Perspectives

Behruz Lotfi Gaskaree¹^{*}, Nasser Fallah², Mohsen Nili-Ahmadabadi³

¹*(Corresponding author) University of Zabol, Sistan and Balouchestan, Iran.

lotfi@uoz.ac.ir

²University of Zabol, Sistan and Balouchestan, Iran.

nfallah@uoz.ac.ir

³Islamic Azad University, Firouzkoh Branch, Tehran, Iran.

Mohsen.niliahadabadi@gmail.com

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Abstract

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This qualitative study explores the perspectives of Iranian EAP educators regarding the alignment of the country's English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum with principles of critical English for academic purposes (CEAP). It also examines the changes these educators propose for the programs to better prepare the students for their professional goals. Semi-structured interviews and life history narratives were collected from eight university EAP instructors. Thematic analysis identified misalignments between Iranian EAP and the tenets of critical EAP including empowerment and holistic development. Iranian curriculum defined EAP goals around content learning and exams, neglecting broader development of critical thinking and problem-solving, and identity formation essential for professionalization. The EAP curriculum was incoherent, marked by inconsistent stakeholder goals, varied teaching methods, and insufficient involvement of instructors and learners in curriculum design. Additionally, the national EAP curriculum employed a dehumanized pedagogy, focusing on decontextualized grammar rules while neglecting to incorporate learners' backgrounds, knowledge, and strengths. Proposed changes include broadening objectives beyond content, enhancing curriculum coherence through collaboration, and humanizing instruction to nurture well-rounded professionals. The findings provide valuable insights to better align Iran's EAP programs, teaching practices, and educational policies with the goals of critical EAP.

Keywords: critical English for academic purposes, EAP curriculum, Iranian EAP educators, humanized pedagogy, professionalization

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1. Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in empowering learners and cultivating the essential skills required to thrive as successful citizens (Kumaravadivelu 2006; Wenger, 1998). Within the field of English language teaching (ELT), English for academic purposes (EAP) specifically aims to equip learners with language use abilities required for their professionalization within their desired communities (Hyland, 2019).

Iranian education system has evolved significantly since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, with a centralized structure managed by the ministry of education. The system encompasses pre-primary to higher education levels, with compulsory education from ages 6 to 14. Higher education in Iran features a network of public and private universities. Within this landscape, English for academic purposes in higher education is increasingly important due to the internationalization of education and the growing use of English in academic fields (Movahhedi et al., 2024).

However, there have been reports of dissatisfaction with EAP education in the Iranian educational context. For example, many educators lack a clear understanding of what EAP entails and how it differs from English for general purposes (EGP) (Atai & Fatahi-Majd, 2014; Atai et al., 2017). The lack of needs-responsive instruction leads to a mismatch between course content and student requirements (Atai et al., 2017; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). There is no structured program for EAP teacher training (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). Course materials are not developed based on current trends in genre and discourse analysis, and are not aligned with students' actual needs (Atai, et al., 2017; Shahidipour & Tahririan, 2017). The objectives of EAP courses are often unclear (Atai, et al., 2017; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). Additionally, there is a lack of formative assessments, which undermines the evaluation of student progress and understanding (Atai, et al., 2009). Many EAP courses lack learner-centered communicative methods, instead relying on traditional teacher-centered approaches (Afshar & Movassagh, 2016). EAP education often fails to incorporate the specific linguistic and communicative features of various disciplines (Atai et al., 2017). This dissatisfaction can mainly be attributed to factors that hinder the effectiveness of EAP education, such as the lack of involvement of both teachers and learners in the curriculum development process (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Atai & Tahririan, 2003).

In response to these issues, there has been a growing interest in critical English for academic purposes (CEAP) in Iran. CEAP aims to address the sociopolitical context of EAP teaching, promote critical thinking, and empower students as active learners (Benesch, 2001, 2009). Traditional EAP often focused too much on linguistic skills. In response to this limitation, CEAP encourages students to question and challenge academic norms, examining power dynamics in academic discourse and transform academic

language use. This approach aligns with broader educational reform efforts in Iran, seeking to modernize teaching methods and enhance student engagement (Movahhedi et al., 2024; Shahidipour & Tahririan, 2017).

This shift towards CEAP represents a significant evolution in Iran's approach to English language education, yet its implementation and impact remain areas ripe for further investigation. Despite the growing body of literature on EAP in Iran (Afshar & Movassagh, 2016; Afshar & Ranjbar, 2021; Atai, 2002; Atai et al., 2017; Iranmehr et al., 2018; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018), there remains a critical gap in understanding how closely Iranian EAP programs align with critical EAP principles in their approach to student professionalization. Additionally, there is a lack of research exploring educators' perspectives on necessary changes to better prepare students for their professional goals within the unique Iranian context.

This study aims to address this important gap in the existing literature by investigating contextual factors that may influence the design and implementation of EAP programs and student academic development within the Iranian education system. Specifically, it seeks to identify potential influences at the system, institutional, and classroom levels that could facilitate or hinder the effective delivery of EAP instruction and advancement of students' academic skills and knowledge. Guided by critical EAP theory, this study examines facilitators and barriers to effective EAP instruction in Iran, aiming to uncover underlying assumptions and power dynamics for improved practices.

The aforementioned challenges, including the lack of critical approaches and the lack of needs-responsive education, necessitate a twofold investigation. First, it is essential to examine how current EAP programs align with critical EAP principles, addressing the gap in critically evaluative approaches. Second, to tackle the issues of insufficient needs-responsive instruction, it is necessary to explore potential improvements as proposed by EAP educators themselves. To fulfill the stated aims, the present study sought to elucidate the following research questions:

1. How do Iranian EAP programs approach student professionalization based on the major premises of critical EAP?
2. What changes to EAP program approaches do Iranian EAP educators propose in order to better prepare students for their professional goals?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical EAP

CEAP emerged from the critical tradition of applied linguistics, which emphasizes comprehending the relationship between language, power, and social structures (Benesch, 2009; Pennycook, 2017). CEAP acknowledges the dialectical interplay between language and socio-political realities within academic contexts. It views language not just as a neutral medium but as both shaping and reflective of power dynamics (Fairclough, 1992). Everyday linguistic practices play an important role in the construction, negotiation, and transformation of social hierarchies across contexts (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Complex webs of power are embedded in linguistic choices related to vocabulary, rhetoric, and styles that have the effect of privileging certain speakers while silencing others (Fairclough, 1992). Through a critical discourse analysis lens, CEAP examines the nuanced and overt ways language use can encode, perpetuate, and potentially challenge prevailing power relations in academic settings (Pennycook, 2021).

Language reflects and shapes social hierarchies, while also reproducing and challenging these hierarchies through everyday use (Pennycook, 2017). Accordingly, beyond a focus on language skills and accuracy, CEAP has broader pedagogical aims. It seeks to foster critical consciousness and empower student agency through sociopolitical awareness (Benesch, 2009; Pennycook, 2021). CEAP cultivates understanding of diverse cultural perspectives and their interplay with academic language use (Singh & Doherty, 2004). It also nurtures students' sense of social responsibility and comprehension of their roles within society (Norton & Toohey, 2011). For example, standardized English norms can marginalize students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Hyland, 2012). CEAP analyzes these dynamics to reveal and challenge power relations (Canagarajah, 2013), empowering learners to contribute new knowledge from their own perspectives.

CEAP approaches education with the overall goals of promoting identity reconstruction, participatory knowledge construction, emancipation, and social change (Benesch, 2001; Hyland, 2012, 2015). It aims to empower students to critically reflect on their backgrounds and roles in academic contexts to reconstruct inclusive and agentic identities. Education is framed as an interactive and collaborative process where students actively engage in knowledge building by interrogating information through discussion and bringing diverse viewpoints. The end goal is to equip students with the skills and awareness to challenge social inequities through education, advocate for marginalized communities, and work towards positive transformation so that schooling becomes a tool for empowerment, social justice, and societal progress rather than content learning. Thus, CEAP frames English education

as a means towards student-centered participatory learning, empowerment, and enacting change (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

The present study applies the theoretical framework of CEAP to analyze potential problems within Iranian EAP program. Given CEAP's emphasis on empowerment and participatory education, this lens could help optimize curriculum and pedagogy to better support diverse student populations. Before evaluating the Iranian EAP program against CEAP tenets, it is essential to first introduce and contextualize EAP education in Iran.

2.2. EAP Education in Iran

EAP education plays an important role in Iranian tertiary institutions, with courses typically offered to undergraduate and graduate students. EAP is commonly a two-unit course designed to develop skills for comprehending subject-specific content (Atai & Fatahi-Majd, 2014; Atai & Nazari, 2014). Teachers commonly rely on materials from the center for university book development (SAMPT), or teacher-compiled passages, which may not fully integrate principles of discourse analysis, genres, authentic tasks, and texts that are considered ideal for EAP instruction (Atai & Fatahi-majd, 2014). Additionally, EAP instructors are often content experts with less specialized training in language education methodology (Atai & Fatahi-majd, 2014). Evaluation studies suggest that EAP teacher education can contribute to a more needs-responsive EAP instruction, and incorporating more real-world focused learning using authentic resources could enrich outcomes (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Atai & Nazari, 2014; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018).

Global trends such as internationalization and the spread of English as a lingua franca are making EAP increasingly vital in Iran (Canagarajah, 2006; Cogo 2022; Jenkins 2013). EAP should now emphasize effective participation in diverse linguistic-cultural exchanges over native-speaker norms. Another important discussion is the global rise of English-medium instruction (EMI), including its potential adoption in Iran (Sharifian, 2013). While EMI increases access to education, it necessitates EAP programs tailored to specific disciplines to help students learn content in a second language (Dearden, 2014).

At the same time, forces like cultural globalization have seen growing interest in Persian around the world (Sharifian, 2009). This opens avenues for Iranian cultural diplomacy through translanguaging between English and Persian in academic interactions. EAP could explore bilingual and translanguaging pedagogies harnessing both languages. Addressing this issue will help ensure that EAP remains adaptable to Iran's sociolinguistic realities within an increasingly globalized higher education.

Research indicates EAP in Iran has progressed, it yet remains focused on traditional skill-based instruction (Atai & Fatahi-majd, 2014). However,

global EAP trends emphasize disciplinary acculturation, authentic language use, and learner independence (Hyland & Wong, 2013). Curriculum-wise, international programs design tasks that put students in simulated real-world contexts related to their subjects of study. The goal is to make academic learning feel more situated and connected to the real world outside the classroom (Flowerdew, 2016). In contrast, Iran's current EAP approach is heavily materials-driven, meaning it focuses primarily on the use of pre-designed textbooks and resources. While these materials can provide a structured way to teach language skills, they often fall short of preparing students for the real-world demands of their future professional studies and activities. Other challenges Iranian EAP courses face include a lack of systematic EAP teacher education and a learner-centered, dialogic approach in curriculum development and implementation (Atai et al., 2017). As a result, EAP implementation in Iran appears to lag behind global best practices in terms of critical pedagogy, needs analysis, and learner engagement. Regionally, Persian Gulf EAP programs align with disciplinary demands by benchmarking genres and text expectations per field (Hyland & Wong, 2019). Such discourse-oriented approaches are still developing in Iran. Also, while globally interactive student-centered pedagogies are standard, Iranian EAP classes remain mostly lecture-based.

In regard to CEAP-oriented studies in Iran, Movahhedi et al. (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study revealing a significant gap between theory and practice in Iranian EAP education in terms of employing CEAP principles. They reported that teachers maintain an authoritarian classroom dynamic, which silences student voices and stifles innovation. Their findings suggest that Iranian educators are either unwilling or unable to implement the very CEAP principles they are expected to uphold. Similarly, the study by Derakhshan et al. (2023) highlights significant gaps between current EAP practices and CEAP principles, including limited teacher agency, a lack of student-centered approaches, insufficient attention to local sociocultural contexts, and inadequate focus on developing critical literacy skills.

In conclusion, EAP plays a vital role for Iranian students and institutions, serving as a gateway to global academic engagement and professional opportunities. By equipping students with essential language and communication skills for academic contexts, EAP may enhance their ability to access international research, participate in global scholarly discourse, and pursue study abroad opportunities. For institutions, embracing EAP signifies a commitment to internationalization, positioning Iranian universities within the global academic community. Ultimately, EAP contributes to societal progress by fostering a skilled workforce capable of driving innovation, facilitating knowledge transfer, and strengthening Iran's position in the global knowledge construction.

3. Method

We employed a basic qualitative research design (Merriam, 2009) and utilized thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to investigate how the participating educators interpret their experiences within the EAP context. This research design is particularly suitable for exploring Iranian EAP educators' perspectives and experiences in depth as it facilitates a comprehensive summary of the phenomenon in everyday terms. The design balances detailed description with interpretive insights, connecting to critical EAP (Merriam, 2009). This methodological choice is appropriate for the research aims as it allows for rich, contextual exploration of participants' views, yielding straightforward findings that can be readily applied by practitioners and policymakers. The combination of semi-structured interviews and life history narratives as data collection methods complements this design, enabling both focused inquiry and broader contextual understanding.

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted in the EFL context of Iranian universities with participants being selected from Kharazmi University, University of Birjand, University of Zabol, and Islamic Azad University of Tehran North Branch. The eight EAP educators across Iranian universities were selected based on specific criteria, which included teachers who had experience teaching EAP, teacher educators who taught EAP/ESP courses to Iranian ELT teacher learners, EAP researchers, and the teachers willing to participate in the study. Teachers meeting these criteria were purposefully recruited from the pool of EAP teachers at various universities across Iran. Diverse criteria for participant selection, such as years of teaching experience, academic qualifications, geographical location, and types of institutions helped capture a wide range of experiences and viewpoints.

The main concern was to achieve participant adequacy and data saturation. To ensure that collecting further data aligns with our theoretical sampling approach, we decided to stop recruiting additional participants or collecting more data (Charmaz, 2006). Participants provided both oral and written consent before data collection, with a strong emphasis on their rights and the confidentiality of both their data and identities. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms, and the data were safely stored and will be destroyed later.

3.2. Instruments

The data collection methods used in the present research were semi-structured interviews and life history narratives.

3.2.1. *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore perspectives on the alignment of Iranian EAP approaches with critical EAP premises (Pennycook, 2017). These interviews lasted between 90 and 130 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews investigated EAP teachers' perspectives on the goals of EAP and critical approaches in Iran; their participation in curriculum development; accommodating learner diversity and needs; teacher training for participatory, needs-based, critical pedagogy; academic freedom to adapt materials; inclusion of social identities and power analyses; policymaker awareness of critical frameworks; barriers to critical, participatory EAP; proposed reforms; cultivating critical awareness; influences on EAP perspectives; advice for critical reforms; and other contextual factors shaping EAP in Iran (see Appendix A).

3.2.2. *Life-History Narratives*

Narratives were collected to understand how social and educational experiences shaped EAP perspectives over time (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). Participants were provided with general guidelines and prompts to structure their life-history narratives. They were asked to reflect on critical incidents and influential experiences throughout their academic and professional trajectories that impacted the development of their perspectives on EAP. Prompts included reflecting on early educational experiences, teacher training, professional development activities, policy changes, and interactions with colleagues, students, and materials that shaped their understandings of the roles and goals of EAP over time (see Appendix B). However, participants had flexibility in choosing which experiences to focus on and how to structure their personal narratives.

3.3. *Data Collection Procedures*

The eight data-rich EAP educators from five Iranian universities were purposefully selected and interviewed (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Patton, 2015), providing narratives (Goodson, & Sikes, 2001) that offered the detailed insights required for this study. Regarding the participants of the University of Zabol and Kharazmi University, they were both visited in person and contacted on phone while the participants at the University of Birjand and Islamic Azad University Tehran North Branch were accessed through phone calls only. These methods were chosen for the participants' convenience and to manage the considerable distances. By combining in-person visits and phone calls, the researchers ensured a flexible and considerate data collection process.

The interviews and narratives were originally conducted in Persian. To facilitate analysis, they were translated into English following established

translation procedures (Temple & Young, 2004). The research team performed the initial translations from Persian to English. To verify accuracy and consistency, translations were checked through a process of member checking (Saldaña, 2013). Furthermore, when English excerpts were used as evidence in reporting, they were compared against the original Persian versions to enhance accuracy. Any discrepancies found were resolved through extensive discussion and revision.

3.3. Data Analysis

This study employed a codebook approach to thematic analysis, combining elements of reflexive thematic analysis with a more structured approach to coding (Braun & Clark, 2021). The analysis process began with data familiarization, where team members (i.e., the three authors of the paper working on a larger project as of the first author's MA thesis) independently read and re-read the interview transcripts and life history narratives. Following this, the research team collaboratively developed an initial codebook based on the research questions and the theoretical framework of Critical EAP. Next, team members independently conducted open coding on the data to generate initial candidate codes, employing an inductive approach (Saldaña, 2013). The team then met to discuss and compare these preliminary codes, refining definitions and reaching consensus on a coding scheme. This refined codebook was systematically applied to the entire dataset, allowing for both deductive coding using established codes and inductive coding to identify new concepts.

Axial coding was used to group codes with conceptual similarities into potential themes. For example, codes related to "lack of teacher involvement," "limited communication," and "restricted autonomy" were mapped to the candidate theme "Barriers to Participatory Curriculum Development." The emerging themes were continuously refined through mapping relationships between codes and evaluating the fit of coded extracts within themes. For instance, the theme "Incoherent Curriculum Development" emerged from linking several related subthemes including "Barriers to Participatory Curriculum Development," "Teacher Alternative Curriculum," "Policymaker Utopian Curriculum," and "Stakeholder Disagreements on Educational Goals." The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing the refined themes into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions. This process resulted in the identification of three major themes: (1) Goals in Need of Revision: Rethinking Aims in General and EAP Education, (2) Redirecting EAP Curriculum Design: From Incoherence to Coherence Through Participation, and (3) Dehumanized Pedagogy: Transforming Education Via Humanized Praxis.

Throughout the analysis, the research team engaged in constant comparison of data within and between codes and themes to enhance internal

validity. Analytical perspectives were documented through researcher memos, charting the development of ideas, connections, and evaluations of theme saturation over time (Saldaña, 2013). To further strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, member-check procedures were employed, where participants were invited to review and comment on the initial findings (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Additionally, intercoder agreement was established through team discussions and consensus-building on code applications and theme development (Saldaña, 2013).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. *Excessive Content-Focused EAP Goals: Revising Goals Beyond Content*

The first key misalignment between Iranian EAP and CEAP principles is a reductionist approach to defining educational goals within EAP, which appears narrowly focused on content learning (see Table 1). According to the participating educators, EAP's primary goal is often "reduced to the acquisition of specific terms or concepts related to the subject matter, rather than the development of students' identities as expert members in their respective fields." (Teacher E, Interviews). This approach is concerning, as it may "limit students' ability to critically engage and develop skills for academic success," (Teacher H, Narratives). However, participants felt education "should aim for more holistic development in areas like identity formation, knowledge building, and preparing empowered, successful contributors to society." (Teacher C, Interviews).

While content knowledge is important, as a participant stated, this narrow focus "may produce false success, as students may perform well on exams but lack the skills necessary to succeed in the real world." (Teacher D, Interviews). The findings suggest this reduced emphasis may "inhibit learners from fully engaging with their education through critical thinking" (Teacher H, Interviews). It could also limit their acquisition of skills highly relevant to future academics and careers such as "agency, problem-solving, and independent thinking" (Teacher C, Narratives). By more comprehensively capturing this theme from the data, a broadened perspective acknowledging "identity, knowledge construction and professionalization" could help optimize EAP and the system for empowering Iran's next generation (Teacher A, Interviews).

Moreover, this approach limits students' ability to "develop their identities and socialize with their peers" (Teacher A, Interviews). While exam scores matter, the mission education should be crafting well-rounded, empowered citizens. Its current emphasis risks students excelling on tests yet

struggling to apply learning or fully mature as autonomous, community-minded professionals.

The educators believed that in EAP, “professionalizing learners in their desired professional communities is increasingly important” (Teacher C, Interviews). Accordingly, EAP’s purpose should not only be to improve language skills but also to “equip learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to participate effectively in their chosen fields of study or profession” (Teacher F, Interviews). The current Iranian EAP focus “on subject-specific concepts and terms” (Teacher H, Interviews) fails to recognize the importance of language use abilities and communication skills for membership in desired communities. This means EAP should help learners “think and act like expert members of their professional communities” (Teacher C, Interviews). To achieve this goal EAP, courses should provide learners with opportunities to “engage in professional activities within their fields of study such as attending conferences or seminars, or collaborating with peers in their chosen fields” (Teacher G, Interviews). Engaging in such activities can help learners develop the “skills, knowledge, and networks necessary to pursue their needs and contribute to their field” (Teacher C, Interviews).

In a nutshell, based on educator perspectives, our current EAP program does not align with the objective of socializing learners in their professional fields. While improving language skills is essential, focusing solely on this approach can be limiting and deprive learners of the expertise required for professionalization. A more holistic focus is needed.

Table 1

Educators' Perspectives on Aligning Iranian EAP Programs With Critical EAP Principles

Major Themes	Sub-themes/Categories	Suggestions for refinement
1.Excessive content-focused EAP goals: Revising goals beyond content	Reductionist approach to education goals	Broaden objectives to include critical thinking and problem-solving skills
	Narrow focus on content learning	Integrate content with language learning, emphasizing real-world application
	Need for holistic development	Implement curriculum addressing cognitive, social, and emotional aspects
	Importance of identity formation and professionalization	Incorporate field-specific engagement activities (e.g., conferences, projects)

2. Incoherent EAP curriculum: redesigning Through participation	Lack of coherence in curriculum	Develop a standardized yet adaptable EAP curriculum framework
	Inconsistencies in pedagogical approaches	Provide comprehensive teacher training for consistent, research-backed methods
	Insufficient stakeholder involvement	Establish collaborative curriculum development process with diverse stakeholders
	Need for collaboration in curriculum development	Create regular forums for ongoing curriculum refinement with stakeholder input
3. Dehumanized pedagogy: transforming education via humanized praxis	Overemphasis on grammar and rules	Shift focus to communicative competence in academic contexts
	Deficit-based view of students	Adopt an asset-based approach recognizing existing student knowledge/skills
	Decontextualized teaching methods	Develop discipline-specific EAP materials reflecting real academic tasks
	Insufficient attention to sociocultural dimensions	Incorporate socio-cultural aspects of academic discourse into curriculum
	Over-reliance on summative assessments	Incorporate assessment for learning practices

4.1.2. Incoherent EAP Curriculum: Redesigning Through Participation

The second way that Iranian EAP misaligns with the principles of CEAP is the lack of coherence in the EAP curriculum (see Table 1). The responses revealed an absence of coordination between various stakeholder groups involved in the program, including policy makers, materials developers, teacher educators, instructors, and students. One issue is the divergent understandings among stakeholders regarding the goals of the curriculum. As one participant explained, different parties “seem to have different ideas about what skills and knowledge students should be focusing on” (Teacher F, Narratives). This disconnect was reported to create potential confusion for EAP learners, such as receiving “conflicting messages about intended learning” (Teacher B, Interviews) or “inconsistent and unclear guidance on what they need to learn ...” (Teacher B, Narratives). An example illustrating “conflicting messages” (Teacher B, Interviews) is “labeling a course simply as *reading comprehension* in the syllabus, without detailing the sociocultural and genre-based teaching methods, can mislead instructors. They

might think that students will be able to read and understand academic texts effectively by the end of the course, which isn't always the case ..." (Teacher G, Interviews). However, comprehending academic texts also requires an understanding of text genres, which reading comprehension alone may not provide.

Another form of miscoordination, as revealed by the interviews, is the inconsistencies in the pedagogical approaches used by EAP teachers both within and across their teaching. A participant noted that "teachers have different ideas about how to teach EAP, which can lead to a lack of consistency across classes and institutions" (Teacher F, Interviews). For example, some EAP instructors focus on developing reading skills but teach in a way like general English classes, differing mainly using subject-specific texts. One of the teachers stated "some classes take a more general English approach rather than teaching the academic skills needed for university programs" (Teacher C, Interviews). EAP models need to utilize research-backed techniques and emphasize disciplinary discourse and genre awareness to effectively "prepare English language students for higher academic demands across subjects" (Teacher D, Interviews)

The third way of curriculum incoherence, as revealed by the interviews, is the insufficient involvement of key stakeholders in development. Participants reported that instructors and learners themselves were excluded from this process. One participant expressed frustration, noting "the curriculum seems to be designed without proper consideration of the learning context and the realities of the learners' academic and professional goals" (Teacher B, Interviews). Another highlighted potential consequence, stating that "policy makers may not be well-informed of the actual needs and experiences of EAP learners. Other groups such as EAP teachers and learners may struggle to understand and implement decisions made without their input" (Teacher C, Interviews).

The interviews with participants surface some potential negative impacts of an incoherent curriculum on teachers. Specifically, "without a shared understanding of goals, objectives and content, teachers may independently develop their own curricula, limiting opportunities for collaboration and consistency across classes" (Teacher D, Interviews). Further "an incoherent curriculum hinders systematic development of teachers' skills and knowledge, restricting professional growth opportunities" (Teacher B, Interviews). This can undermine teacher confidence and satisfaction through a lack of progression.

Participants emphasized actively engaging EAP teachers can improve curriculum coherence. Incorporating "the expertise of experienced and well-trained practitioners into the process of shaping curriculum goals and objectives can significantly improve the alignment between top-down

directives and the realities faced by teachers and learners on the ground” (Teacher G, Interviews). Their practical insights and deep understanding of learner needs can offer invaluable input for shaping policy decisions.

Furthermore, maintaining teachers’ engagement throughout the curriculum design process is ensuring consistency in delivering a shared educational vision. By promoting early “collaboration between policymakers and seasoned EAP instructors, we have the potential to create curriculum outcomes that are not only more coherent but also more relevant” (Teacher H, Interviews). This collaborative approach, which harnesses the perspectives of both sides, has the power to bridge the gap between curriculum design and execution.

4.1.3. Dehumanized Pedagogy: Transforming Education via Humanized Praxis

Interviews with Iranian EAP educators show that EAP education in the country still lacks a fully humanized approach despite efforts (see Table 1). Participants expressed that traditional EAP approaches “focus disproportionately on grammar and rules while assuming students enter with deficits rather than existing knowledge and skills” (Teacher F, Interviews). By viewing EAP primarily as remediating deficiencies, learners’ potential to contribute unique backgrounds is limited. “The conventional skill-based focus on linguistic structures fails to recognize the value students bring from their experiences” (Teacher E, Narratives).

The findings underscore the limitations of current “skill-based, decontextualized teaching methods” in fostering students’ holistic development (Teacher C, Interviews). This calls for a more personalized approach to EAP education, transforming it into a means of empowering students to realize their full intellectual, creative, and social potential, beyond just linguistic instruction (Teacher H, Interviews).

The emphasis on “linguistic aspects within EAP is inherently restrictive obstructing students from engaging meaningfully with the broader academic disciplines they are pursuing” (Teacher E, Interviews). Therefore, a shift towards a more holistic EAP education is essential for nurturing well-rounded learners, utilizing their human resources, and fully engaging them with the professionalism of their disciplines.

One insightful participant astutely observed that when “EAP is divorced from the social and cultural contexts that give academic discourse meaning and purpose” (Teacher B, Interviews) the tools at students' disposal become severely limited. Without considering these contexts, humanized pedagogy is unlikely to be operationalized, limiting learning to linguistic aspects rather than disciplinary professional discourse. Thus, the findings indicate a need for a humanized approach to Iranian EAP education that

harnesses students' diverse abilities, engages them in authentic disciplinary discourse, and promotes professional agency, rather than focusing on perceived deficiencies.

Based on the interview data, it is evident that Iranian EAP education places excessive emphasis on summative assessment methods, often at the expense of formative evaluation. This oversight deprives the educational system of the benefits of ongoing assessment, which actively involves students in their learning journey. Moreover, such an approach fails to honor the unique ways individuals construct knowledge, each at their own pace and through their distinct strengths (Teacher H, Interviews). Furthermore, it deprives learners of the opportunity to co-construct knowledge with their teachers through a dialogic instructional process.

4.2. Discussion

Critical EAP theorists provide compelling arguments for reforming goal-setting practices in EAP education (see Table 1.). They emphasize adopting a learner-centered approach that promotes identity development, learner agency, and application of skills to real-world contexts. Norton and Toohey (2004) and Canagarajah (2006) stress that EAP learners engage in identity construction through social participation. An empowering model positions learners as negotiators navigating linguistic and cultural borders.

Excessive focus on exams and content mastery in Iranian EAP fails to foster these important skills. It risks losing opportunities to cultivate autonomous expertise applicable to diverse professional fields. A narrow focus also impacts identity formation integral to socialization (Wenger, 1998). To better align with learner empowerment and long-term growth, Iranian EAP should encourage critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving and engagement with social issues (Benesch, 2001). Participatory goal-setting including all stakeholders builds understanding and commitment (Toohey, 2000). Drawing on these critical perspectives, Iranian EAP can reshape objectives through a holistic, learner-centered transformation. This empowers learners via identity development, community engagement and meaningful learning rather than traditional content-oriented instruction.

The findings reveal a concerning lack of coherence and consensus in Iran's EAP curriculum, with unclear program objectives and student experiences varying by instructor. This undermines the effectiveness of the curriculum in optimizing academic English acquisition (Alexander et al., 2008). From a critical EAP perspective, such technicist, apolitical curricula perpetuate traditional control over knowledge-making by separating language from content and failing to develop critical language awareness (Benesch, 2009; Pennycook 1997). By excluding instructors and learners, curriculum developers overlook contextual needs and realities (Pennycook, 1997). This

reflects an instrumentalist view of EAP as simply transmitting decontextualized skills, rather than engaging learners as thinking beings involved in constructing knowledge (Benesch, 2001). Critical EAP scholars advocate reconceptualizing lessons as spaces for epistemological reflection and having students question assumptions as social agents (Benesch, 2009). However, such transformative, emancipatory education requires understanding diverse standpoints through greater participation in curriculum development (Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 1997). Incorporating instructor and learner perspectives through enhanced communication, collaboration, and coordination will help address specific needs and develop critical language awareness (Richards, 2013).

The findings on the lack of coherence in Iran's EAP curriculum reinforce earlier critiques by Atai and colleagues (2013) and Movahhedi et al. (2024). All these studies found curricular incoherence stems from insufficient input from key stakeholders during development. This standardized, one-size-fits-all approach fails to address diverse learner needs and contexts. Additionally, the studies highlighted how excluding teacher and learner perspectives creates misalignment between policy intentions and classroom realities, undermining program outcomes. Movahhedi et al. (2024) warn that Iranian EAP programs risk becoming increasingly irrelevant in a world that demands learner empowerment. They call for educational institutions to embrace truly transformative approaches to language education, emphasizing the need for increased dialogue between teachers and students in curriculum development. Our findings in the current study provide further evidence that this top-down, decontextualized curriculum model disempowers stakeholders and jeopardizes EAP goals.

Furthermore, Atai and Tahririan (2003) advocated more integrated, interactive curricula supported by well-trained instructors. Our findings reinforce this by demonstrating the problems arising from lack of coordination and shared understanding among stakeholders. There is clear agreement between both studies on the need for greater participation and coherence in EAP curriculum design and delivery to empower stakeholders and achieve intended learning outcomes. Ultimately, our research lends additional weight to Atai and colleagues' call for reforming the standardized curriculum by incorporating local expertise through participatory models.

Incoherent EAP curricula undermine learning through reduced motivation and disjointed skill development. Overlooking learner needs and teacher expertise in design disconnects implementers from goals and disempowers students (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Intended learning fails as instruction proceeds independently of policies (Richards, 2013).

Reconstructing the curriculum is imperative. Renewal requires an inclusive, collaborative process among stakeholders to cultivate consensus on

goals and practices tailored to local realities. Valuing diverse inputs, especially from practitioners, informs better accounting for pedagogical challenges and empowering students in design (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Realigning curriculum, instruction and assessment through consultation optimize coherence and outcomes.

The findings regarding the lack of humanization in Iranian EAP education align with long-standing critiques of traditional EAP approaches as disempowering (Benesch, 2001). Evidence suggests it falls short through detached, skill-based instruction disconnected from meaningful academic contexts or disciplines. By narrowly focusing on subject-specific content, Iranian EAP distances itself from learners' unique sociocultural backgrounds and communicative strengths (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Building on students' prior knowledge and linguistic repertoires, as these scholars advocated, could better empower learning instead of viewing deficiencies.

Exclusive focus on linguistic skills without consideration for other dimensions risks ill preparing students to navigate complex real-world challenges requiring compassion. A curriculum reform guided by humanizing visions of these EAP pioneers could help address shortcomings revealed (Benesch, 2001).

Investing in EAP-responsive teacher education is essential to support coherence, appropriate goal-setting, and humanization. Derakhshan et al. (2023) propose that empowering practitioners through increased autonomy, encouraging both teachers' and students' voice, contextualizing instruction, and promoting collaborative teaching methods can drive curriculum reform aligned with CEAP tenets. By implementing these changes, EAP programs can enhance practitioners' professional identity and well-being while improving the relevance and effectiveness of EAP instruction for Iranian students.

While the predominant EAP approach in Iran emphasizes generic language skills, it does not utilize empowering trends like discourse-oriented, genre-based, and task-based teaching methods (Hyland, 2006; Lillis, 2013). This hinders linking students' academic study to their future professions and hinders their socialization into desired discourse communities (Lillis, 2013). By not supporting disciplinary socialization or identity development, students miss opportunities to meaningfully engage within their fields (Belcher, 2009; Swales, 2004). Scholars advocate reforming EAP to prioritize learners' experiences, goals, and roles through authentic disciplinary enculturation (Flowerdew & Costley, 2014). A renewed curriculum incorporating these recommendations could better prepare students for full participation by building upon their existing strengths and knowledge within genuine practices (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

Disciplinary socialization through learning discourse conventions and communicative norms cultivates academic identity and competencies for

success (Leki, 2011). Adopting critical genre analysis initiates students into research article structure/language to socialize them into communities (Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Shaw, 2016; Swales, 2004). Immersive conferences and expert interviews introduce authentic practices while fostering critical thinking (Belcher & Hirvela, 2020). This combined approach equips students with tools for navigating academia and careers (Belcher & Hirvela, 2020; Hyland, 2006; Swales, 2004). Centering this reform within CEAP ensures contextual sensitivity and learner empowerment (Belcher & Hirvela, 2020).

5. Conclusion and Implications

Our findings illuminate areas where Iranian EAP programs might benefit from revision and improvement. Firstly, critical EAP emphasizes empowerment and holistic development. However, our findings show Iranian EAP mainly focuses on content mastery for exams. This disconnect suggests a significant need to realign the goals of Iranian EAP with a more comprehensive vision of student professionalization. Moreover, our study reveals incoherence in Iranian EAP curriculum design. The lack of stakeholder collaboration, especially with educators, causes fragmentation. This impedes developing a unified curriculum and undermines student understanding of vital academic skills. Furthermore, the predominant pedagogical approach in Iranian EAP appears dehumanized, emphasizing rule-based learning and viewing students through a deficit lens. A shift towards humanized praxis, valuing learners' potentials can nurture well-rounded, capable students.

However, certain limitations should be noted. The study was confined to EAP educator perspectives without input from other stakeholders like students, administrators, or policymakers. Incorporating a wider range of views could give a more comprehensive picture of alignment with critical EAP. Also, the single context of Iran limits generalizability. Comparative studies across diverse EAP programs would help validate whether the issues uncovered apply more broadly. Furthermore, our investigation does not include an extensive policy analysis, which could provide deeper insights into systemic influences.

To address these limitations and advance the critical EAP agenda, studies could examine policy dynamics and their interaction with program design and delivery. Additionally, comparative studies across international contexts could facilitate cross-cultural insights on EAP program effectiveness. Moreover, comprehensive exploration of Iranian students' perspectives and experiences would enrich the literature and inform more student-centered practices. Investigating the impacts of specific interventions aligning Iranian EAP with critical principles could provide practical guidance for improvements. Larger, multi-institutional samples could offer generalizable insight on critical EAP issues worldwide. Longitudinal designs tracing

learning and identity over time would help evaluate impacts of applying critical principles. Overall, more research is still required to formulate evidence-based guidelines for implementing curricula, materials, assessments, and teacher training aligned with an empowering, socially-just vision of EAP.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview to Explore EAP Educators' Perspectives on the Alignment of Iranian EAP Education With Critical EAP Tenets and Potential Areas for Improvement.

1. How do you perceive the current goals of EAP education in Iran? To what extent do these goals align with CEAP principles such as empowerment, critical thinking, and social awareness?
2. How does the Iranian EAP curriculum approach student professionalization? How could it be improved to better align with CEAP's focus on identity formation and participation in professional communities?
3. Can you describe teacher involvement in EAP curriculum development? How does this level of participation align with CEAP's emphasis on inclusive, collaborative curriculum design?
4. How do teachers address learner diversity and needs in their EAP teaching? How does this approach compare to CEAP's focus on learner-centered, context-sensitive instruction?
5. What training have EAP teachers received as EAP teachers? How well does this preparation align with CEAP's expectations for transformative teaching practices?
6. To what extent can teachers adapt EAP materials and methods to incorporate CEAP principles? What constraints or opportunities do you encounter?
7. How do you incorporate analysis of power dynamics and social identities in your EAP instruction, as advocated by CEAP? What challenges do you face in this regard?
8. What are the main barriers to implementing CEAP principles in the Iranian EAP context? How might these be addressed?
9. How do current assessment practices in Iranian EAP align or diverge from the emphasis of CEAP on formative, learner-centered evaluation?

Appendix B

Prompts for Life-History Narratives

1. Reflect on your journey as an EAP educator in Iran. How has your understanding of the goals and purposes of EAP evolved over time, particularly in relation to critical approaches and student empowerment?
2. Describe a significant moment in your career when you became aware of the principles of critical EAP. How did this awareness impact your teaching philosophy and practices within the Iranian EAP context?
3. Think about the changes you've observed in Iranian EAP curricula throughout your career. How do these changes align or misalign with CEAP principles, such as learner empowerment and critical thinking?
4. Recall instances where you've attempted to incorporate CEAP tenets (e.g., addressing power dynamics, promoting student agency) into your teaching. What challenges did you face, and how did you navigate them within the Iranian educational system?
5. Consider your experiences with EAP curriculum development and implementation in Iran. How have these experiences shaped your views on the need for participatory approaches and stakeholder involvement in line with CEAP principles?
6. Reflect on your interactions with students, colleagues, and administrators regarding EAP goals and practices. How have these interactions influenced your perspective on the alignment (or misalignment) of Iranian EAP programs with CEAP principles?