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Iranian EFL Teachers' Familiarity with Critical Literacy Practices in their Online Classes: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

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Abstract: The incentive behind conducting the present study was initially ignited by the curiosity to extent of Iranian EFL teachers' familiarity with the concept of "critical literacy". This qualitative contribution was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, an open questionnaire was developed and compiled after reviewing the literature, analysing existing questionnaires and gathering feedback from academics in the field. Qualitative data was then collected from 29 EFL teachers and analysed using an open questionnaire followed by an interview. The obtained data allowed the development of 23 questions for the interview part, which was accompanied by observing the online courses of all teachers by the researchers throughout the semester. It was concluded that the participants displayed very low levels of knowledge of Critical Literacy along with little, if any, application or incorporation of it. These findings may assist stakeholders in education, including second/foreign language (L2) policy makers, teacher educators, teacher recruitment institutes and material developers. They need to take appropriate action to enhance the critical literacy of L2 teachers before and during employment, thus promoting the implementation of this key concept in the pedagogical context of the process.

Keywords: Critical Literacy; Teachers' Familiarity; Online EFL Classes; Iranian Students.

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1. Introduction

Foreign language instruction in Iran, particularly English, has traditionally been influenced by conventional techniques restricted to the memorization of specialized terminology, grammatical rules, and predominantly inauthentic sources (Rahimi et al. 2015). Within this thread, instructors rarely employ known conversational language teaching approaches and instead strive to provide knowledge to passive students. This is congruent with what Freire (1970) termed a "banking" perspective on learning, which regards learners as empty vessels to be occupied with the teacher's information.

According to Freebody and Luke's (1990) conceptualization of literacy, an exclusive emphasis on language and metalinguistic information is incongruous. For them, literacy is more than reading and passively processing knowledge. The fundamental complexity for teachers and students is to place reading skills at the forefront of other conflicting factors that are frequently undervalued and ignored. Researchers have started displaying propensity towards the fact that language practitioners are growing more and more conscious to of imposing their own agency within the restrictions offered by the classroom limitations (Jeyaraj and Harland, 2014),

After the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers, especially language instructors, moved to online classes as a substitute to traditional classes. This has made it more urgent to investigate different angles of such milieus, one of which is the Critical Literacy practices, especially in societies where English tends to be more of a foreign language. The ongoing tension between supporting the contemporary system and intentionally asking students to examine established preconceptions can present classroom teachers with a variety of challenges. Weng (2023) accentuates the importance of conducting research in English as a foreign language context as it has been overlooked by academics.

In an attempt to ensure that professionals are cognizant of the reality agents of CL in their classrooms, the driving impetus behind this study will be to explore the presence of this tension. This study examined the extent to which instructors fulfil these responsibilities. Notwithstanding the fact that liberation and emancipation are implied in critical pedagogy (Lankshear and McLaren 1993), they are not the focal interface of the present study.

2. Review of the Relevant Literature

In the spirit of cornerstones of critical pedagogy, Wallace (2003) explored the social and ideological foundations of the critical reading and writing habits of EFL learners by examining texts to determine the writer's style of presentation. This issue may be

appealing to readers; when students concentrated on the textual preferences of writers, they recognized how texts and ideological constructions may imbue human preferences with intention, prejudice, and design.

Kuo (2009), who addressed CL through dialogue, analyzed a particularly atypical situation focusing on higher education. The majority of learners held a favorable view of the activity. Kou warned against the probability of pursuing CL at the expense of reading enjoyment and grammar/spelling appropriateness in EFL classroom environment, out of concern for the effect that a dearth of emphasis on conventional pedagogical literacy teaching could have on underachievers on language proficiency examinations. Yilmaz (2009) also scrutinized the CP concepts of Turkish instructors. This study produced a reliable questionnaire that assessed the usage of critical thinking and constructivist pedagogy in the classroom by instructors. In a similar vein, Ghaffar Samar and Davari (2011) studied critical thinking and critical ELT among ELT specialists and university professors.

Cho and Johnson (2020) carried out a study investigating Korean high-schoolers' presentations regarding gender equality. They discussed how pupils managed to be equipped with learning opportunities to deconstruct and reconstruct the unequal power relations through the use of problems posing format (Freire, 1970). Pack (2023) endeavored to propose an alternative to critical literacy education for the case of preservice teachers. The author wrote in favor of the merits of instigating critical literacy to preservice teachers by studying their relevance to power relations. Zaini (2022) put forth a new approach to reading the texts called "ambivalence" which underpinned the understanding of the truth. Participants of that study critiqued and redefined their interpretations of the given discourse. Bender-Slack (2010) highlighted the fact that many language teachers avoid talking about many issues, other than the limited topics that are offered, as a result of anticipating chaos in the class which might lead to classroom management growing beyond control.

In a more recent research, Abednia and Izadinia (2013) at Allameh Tabataba'i University, focused on students enrolled in a reading comprehension course and assessed their performance, critical thinking, learning process, and growth over the entire semester. In concert with the findings of reflective journals and group discussions protocols, the authors were able to identify five themes that could help learners become cognizant of such challenges as posing problems, contextualizing problems, conceptualizing keywords, learning from their own experiences and those of others, being motivated, and proposing solutions.

According to the results, the learners admired the course since they recognized the significance of an opportunity that challenged them to think critically and imaginatively about many issues as opposed to passively embracing an interpretation of the universe. In compliance with Abednia and Izadinia (2013), the heightened awareness of learners was most evident in their writing ability. The conclusion of the study focused on the function of instructors. While learners may face challenges with unfamiliarity with the term, it is crucial that professors give explicit assistance for critical pedagogy and critical literacy.

In consideration of the operationalization of critical literacy in EFL online courses in Iran, the objective of this study is to determine what function it may play in bridging the gaps in this field of study. This study examines the viability of applying critical literacy techniques in online EFL programs in Iran via the perspective of instructors' actual experiences. This study is motivated by the significance of critical literacy and the importance of introducing it into online EFL programs.

Prior research has provided useful insights into the incorporation of critical literacy into instruction in general and language learning courses in particular. Nevertheless, the “if” and “how” of implementing critical literacy approaches into online contexts have not obtained much momentum. Owing to the global COVID-19 epidemic and global lockdown, practically all face-to-face courses have been replaced with online ones. As a result, it is necessary to examine how scholars perceive the future stance of CL in online EFL classes in Iran, as this topic has received minimal prominence.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions were given in an effort to identify responses that fulfill the highlighted requirements in the current literature and offer insight into critical literacy activities. They inspire current research and fulfill the requirements of this study.

How familiar are Iranian EFL teachers (in online classes) with the notion of Critical literacy?

What is deemed ‘critical’ or ‘uncritical’ in online EFL classrooms from the point of view of the Iranian EFL teachers?

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

To preserve the fundamental context of the experience, a transcendental phenomenological design allowing access to the instructor's perspective was adopted. In

accordance with Patton's (2015) argument that transcendental phenomenology enables investigators to observe, sense, and understand directly and to the greatest extent possible the lived experience of their participants, this study was guided by transcendental phenomenology design. This approach was chosen to facilitate the investigation of context-specific interpretative and descriptive analyses of conscious experience (Moustakas 1994).

In the spirit of the benchmarks of ethno-methodological approach, observation was utilized for in-depth investigation of organically recurring phenomena as it would live up to first-hand data and provide conclusive responses to the research questions. It focuses largely on the "body of commonplace sense knowledge and the spectrum of principles and operations by which ordinary people of society make sense of, navigate, and perform on the situations they encounter themselves in (Heritage 1984). The rationale behind the selection of this design partly rests in the interface that it provides researchers with the flexibility and adaptability to conduct study as the research question adopted in these investigations can be dynamic, susceptible to continual amendment, and modified as the investigation proceeds to unearth new information (Mackay and Gass 2005).

4.2. Instruments

4.2.1. Classroom Observation

Before performing the research, it was determined that learners would not be contacted personally. All classes were recorded for transcription, which was then utilized for additional analysis and inspection.

While lessons are observed, notes and audio (or video) recordings can give valuable input into what is actually occurring in the classroom. Researchers monitored every session in every class in order not to miss anything that occurred in class. Lastly, the transcriptions were coded in order to isolate the investigated construct for analysis. To evaluate inter-rater reliability, another researcher who was familiar with content analysis, coded twenty percent of the data.

4.2.2. Teachers' Interview

Each teacher was interviewed to gain a deeper awareness of the dynamics of critical literacy activities in classrooms.

On the basis of the research premises, questions pertinent to the current study's aims were prepared. A group of applied linguists provided feedback on the questions'

appropriateness, content, and coherence. The content validity defined by Gillham (2001) served as a basis for estimating the validity of the study's findings. As such, the inter-coder reliability is a further consideration when it comes to evaluating the relevance, appropriateness, and consistency of the extracted subjects.

Each interview lasted around 30 minutes and was taped. To offer researchers more leeway to pose questions, the interviews were semi-structured, in which the researcher utilized a prepared list of items as a guidance, but were free to detour and explore for further information (Mackey and Gass 2005). The items were created by the authors and evaluated by specialists in applied linguistics.

Furthermore, seven academic experts knowledgeable in the domain of applied linguistics evaluated the content validity of the interview. Using a Likert scale, they scored each question's linguistic relevance and clarity to the research issue with the terminologies such as irrelevant, substantial revision necessary, moderate revision required, and entirely relevant. In a similar approach, the clarity of items was graded on a four-point scale ranging from not clear to completely clear. The ratio of relevance and clarity to the total number of assessors was then determined. As rightly remarked by Rodriguez et al. (2017), an item is distinctive or significant if its ratio exceeds 0.79. The majority of the seven raters selected numbers three and four, indicating that the interview's content validity surpassed 0.81.

4.3. Participants

Based on convenience sampling, and in light of the delimitations of the study which was narrowed down to the scope of Iran's context, only full-time or part-time English instructors teaching in English language institutions in Iran were invited to take part in this research. To satisfy the demands of the research, EFL teachers from two private language schools in Iran were recruited as participants (owing to confidentiality concerns, names cannot be directly stated). Participants were mostly chosen from the cities of Rasht and Tehran for accessibility considerations. Although the primary objective of this research was EFL instruction in digital (e.g., online) classrooms, face-to-face interviews were incorporated since the participants were stationed in various cities. Participants were around 29 non-native EFL instructors with at least five years of experience teaching at a private English school in Iran.

Exclusion criteria encompassed a lack of cooperation, novice and trainee instructors (those with little or no prior experience), non-English language teachers, and teachers with only one student in their class. The selection of 29 participants was motivated by

the potential of individuals dropping out or failing to maintain participation, as well as the concern that data saturation is the primary objective of interviews and data collecting in the vast majority of qualitative investigations. Participants were chosen from a pool of teachers holding bachelor's to master's degrees. They had between 4 and 18 years of classroom experience. Language institutes in Iran generally enroll between eight and twelve students in online lessons (to attain social distancing in concert with the Covid-19 pandemic instead of holding face-to-face classes).

As the majority of classes are taught in English, the majority of teachers were TEFL graduates who had finished TTC courses prior to beginning their teaching careers. Since the notion of critical literacy might seem expansive for primary and beginning learners, the researchers (via purposive sampling) sought to recruit trained teachers of intermediate and advanced levels for the study.

4.4. Trustworthiness of Data

In qualitative research, trustworthiness has been viewed as the researchers' ability to persuade themselves and their audience that their results are trustworthy (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) restructured the conception of trustworthiness by suggesting the four characteristics of credibility (equivalent to the positivist construct of internal validity in quantitative research methodologies), dependability (which corresponds to the principle of reliability), transferability (which, as the title implies, embodies an edition of external validity), and confirmability (which is typically a matter of presentation) as the quantitative counterparts of traditional quantitative research and testing criteria.

All qualitative techniques of data gathering, from epistemology and ontology to narratives and phenomenology, are popularized by the stages for determining the trustworthiness criteria of a qualitative study, as these approaches depend largely on methodological rigor (Green, 2000). This is despite the fact that others have proposed more transparent and adaptable quality indicators for qualitative investigations (Tracy 2010).

4.5. Data Analysis

The researchers based their analysis on the themes emerging from the interviews followed by what was practically observed in classes. By scrutinizing participant answers for themes, a number of topics demonstrating critical literacy practices were discovered. As advocated by Creswell (2014), a significant ethnographic research utilized codification. In parallel with content analysis in pursuit of critical literacy, exploratory

theme analysis was used to extract salient themes from the interviews and functionally evaluate the data. Adopting Patton (1988) protocol, a thematic analysis of the data extracted from the categorized and processed transcript data is presented. This can contribute to the extraction of underpinning patterns, from which themes can be identified and used to analyze the data further.

5. Findings

5.1. Findings of the First Question of the Study

5.1.1. Interview Results

Based on the content analysis of the obtained qualitative results from the interviews, teachers displayed relatively superficial levels of familiarity with the concept under scrutiny, much to the surprise of the researchers as not only were all the teachers experienced but they also had finished their higher education.

“I have not read about this topic but my guess is that it involves encouraging critical thinking in learners. I have no idea about the components. However, my thoughts revolve around an education system that encourages learners to question the present situation and current theories and challenge them rather than requiring them to memorize facts.” (participant 23)

Another participant went even further to include learners' background into critical literacy!

“I think critical literacy is considering the bigger picture in educational context and taking into consideration learners' identity, background and so on so forth; In Iran we do not care about this entity much and I am one among many within this god forsaken country.” (participant 4)

Again no unanimous opinion could be extracted as the participants merely tried to relate the term critical to their teaching.

“I suppose it means understanding texts analytically in order to use them in social life.” (participant 8)

One of the teachers said that he had taken a course in SLA Critique, at PhD. level and remembered the lecturers' explanation of the phenomenon:

“Critical literacy is a central thinking skill that needs to be developed in students. It involves the questioning and examination of ideas, and requires you to synthesize, analyze, interpret, evaluate and respond to the texts you read or listen to.” (participant 16)

Participant 12 was the only one that managed to give a partially more accurate answer:

“I believe it can be defined as being able to analyze any given text or piece of discourse through an analytical lens. Being able to make judgements based on that framework.” (participant 12)

As can be seen from sample excerpts, participants relied mostly on conjectures and literal interpretation of the term based on their prior conceptions, which was surprising as they all had pursued higher education in language education and were regarded experienced teachers.

Regarding how they came across the notion of critical literacy, they commented that:

“Well, to be honest, the first time I heard it was during my master’s program. One my professors mentioned it on one of our courses. I still don’t know if it is the same as critical thinking or not.” (Participant 6)

Although vaguely, 3 participants mentioned that they had heard or seen the term and became familiar with them “*through some articles*” (participants 29, 13, and 19). Still, the place of academic education seems to be very prominent in being familiar with critical literacy, at least on the surface:

“One of my good friends was writing a thesis on it and I got familiar with the whole charade”. (participant 2)

One participant mentioned that she had become familiar with the concept “through this interview” (participant 25) with two others claiming that they had heard of critical literacy “through some courses we passed, these concepts were mentioned there”. (participants 17, 22).

Also when asked about the philosophy of their education, answers varied divergently. One participant talked about the teachers’ philosophy as being a collection of all the methods they had studied:

“In my opinion, a teacher’s philosophy is a combination of methods he studied in college and lessons learned when he was a language learner himself and the experience gained as a teacher.” (participant 14)

Preparing the learners for real life experiences was another idea that was brought up as both participant 9 and 18 similarly describes it:

“Learning is gaining life experience and I think teachers must prepare their students for real life challenges and situations” (participant 9)

“I believe the main purpose of education is to equip a person with the tools required to have a better life.” (participant 18)

All these comments seem plausible, but the reality is that what they claimed to be their philosophy of education was not in line with what they displayed as their actual practices in their classes or how they defined critical literacy.

One participant just copied quotations from the internet sources, with which the researchers were familiar:

“I consider myself to be someone who helps students learn. To me, the philosophy of education is teaching and not learning.” (participant 1)

5.1.2. Observation Results

During the observation phase, much to the researchers' chagrin, none of the teachers participating in the present study tried to give any sort of information to their learners regarding the very concept of critical literacy, let alone encouraging them to be critical in their answers and comments.

Perhaps the only instance in which the teachers and some learners were challenging was to question the class time along with complaining about the decisions made by the institute policy-makers regarding not changing the classes to face-to-face sessions during the peaks and troughs of the COVID-19 pandemic; a behavior typical of most of the people in the Iranian community who, instead of trying to analyze and to question the status quo in order to change it, resort to nagging and niggling with no attempt for any foreseeable action.

5.2. Results of the Second Research Question

5.2.1. Interview Results

Based on the results obtained from the interview, teachers did not display any consistency in their answers which could imply that they were not really familiar with what can be considered critical and what cannot; however, some trends were observed in the classes, namely questioning authority and gender biases. The summary of extracted themes is presented in the Table below.

Table 1

Themes that Emerged from Teachers' Comments on What Counted Critical and What Did not along with What They Were Critical of in Practice

Themes		
What was deemed as critical by participants	What was not deemed critical by participants	Critical literacy activities that were observed by researchers
Background knowledge	Spoon-feeding learners	Questioning the censorship in the textbooks
Receptive skills	Rote learning	Questioning authorities and power relations
Being critical / criticizing/ the concept of critical literacy itself	Context of learning	Questioning gender bias
Multi-literacies	Passive knowledge reception	Questioning the rigid content of the syllabi
Standing on their own feet / taking the floor		Questioning the technicalities/logistics of online classes
Paying attention to students		
Giving them freedom and voice		
Change: teaching critically		

One teacher claimed that as teachers provide the learners with all that is needed, this can kill off their creativity and criticality:

“I believe that whenever we are working on productive skills and learners are required to come up with their ideas and answers about a specific topic, it could trigger some form of critical literacy. In third world countries such as Iran, teachers often take steps that work in the opposite direction. They often spoon-feed the learners with predetermined ideas and try to kill off any kind of creativity and deviation from what the course book is dictating. Any task, however, that asks learners to share their own ideas on a given topic or to think of solutions to current problems can activate critical thinking. For example, the tasks given to IELTS candidate for their writing part of the exam often focus on the causes of some real global issues and the solutions to them.” (participant 10).

Again, more of this belief was witnessed as one teacher posited that learners could activate their background knowledge to be critical when dealing with the four skills of English language.

“When it comes to doing a task of reading, listening, writing, or speaking like activating the background knowledge of the learners, analyzing a text, or brainstorming. I presume they will develop a critical-thinking mind when addressing a task, even in real life ones.” (participant 15)

One even went a step further and narrowed down all the critical activities to the receptive skills only:

“Well judging by the paradigms of critical thinking, I would mostly apply it to my reading and listening tasks, especially when the students are more advanced.” (participant 22)

One participant seems to have mistaken critical literacy with criticism and critical comments:

“I think when it comes to the beginning of the class, mostly it is related to critical literacy. I ask the students to provide a piece of news that is related to the lesson and helps to incentivize them to make critical comments”. (participant 13)

This participant only touched the surface of a few scattered notions related to critical literacy:

“To tell you the truth, I don't have a complete understanding and command of the idea; of course I have read a lot about it but it is related with so many other entities such as agency, multi-literacies and so many other that I am not sure what it really is and I don't think any part of my classes really address the issues of power, inequality and multi-literacies.” (participant 26)

Most of those interviewed placed the burden of critical literacy on the shoulders of their learners, without specifying how exactly they were supposed to do it without prior instruction or knowledge. Germane to the matters that could not be considered critical, from the perspective of the teachers, one issue that was referred to was rote learning. They blamed the system for being too rote-learning based:

“...I don't really know but I think those practices that mainly deal with answering the questions posed in the lesson without considering the learners' perspective. You know, those times when students act like robots.” (Participant 5)

As can be seen from the excerpts, it is not very clear what the teachers are unanimous about. Leaving the learners to fend for themselves was brought up in the hope of developing criticality.

“I believe making everything ready for the students without expecting him to do anything in the class would affect their awareness. So I think it’s a teacher-centered class.” (Participant 17)

Participant 12 commented that rote learning was to be blamed:

“Asking them to memorize any type of information. Also, giving them negative feedback when they have ideas that differ from the rest of the people.”

In line with the previous comments, participant 29 criticized the status quo:

“I think most of the activities done in a normal class within Iranian context are irrelevant to the idea and I think nothing done within Iranian context can be considered as critical literacy.”

Giving the floor to students was also seen as a facilitating factor in fostering critical literacy by participant 6, yet again ignoring the role of the teacher:

“Nowadays within digital classes usually I prefer to give the floor to the students so that they have enough time to express themselves because if I get the turn the class will turn to a monotonous monologue that is very boring for every one so I try to involve all of the class members as much as possible; turns that are taken in the course of conversation are rapid and numerous because of the fact that holding the floor for a long time will lead to soliloquy which in my idea is the death of an online class.” (participant 6)

Basically, when asked this question, teachers placed the learners at the center of attention, trying to give them freedom and voice (not clear how though).

“Students must be seen as human beings who have needs and have a culture and background of their own so paying attention to them is of utmost importance.” (Participant 26)

Regarding the importance of such distinctions, all teachers were unanimous on the fact of critical literacy being important, despite the superficial embodiment it had in their classes with the teachers not having a clear idea of what it actually was. They believed it should be taught more explicitly. Participant 7 commented that critical literacy is to be taught explicitly in classes:

“To know the importance of critical literacy, to begin with, teaching the importance of it explicitly might be effective.” (participant 7)

Participant 15 put the value of critical literacy above everything else, placing the same value on it as the language learning itself:

“Well I hasten to say that they should have a better understanding of this concept themselves. I believe it is important as much as teaching the language itself. Having a deeper understanding of the content of the target language and being able to think critically in that language would be a challenging purpose for a course or a program. But enabling students to get that deep knowledge would help them a lot to become “successful language learners”. (participant 15)

One teacher commented that it is the responsibility of the education system to provide teachers with this knowledge:

“I feel it is very important but in educational systems that provide instructors and students with the basics of educational process.” (participant 26)

Another teacher believed that as instilling critical literacy into the education system meant change and as change required time, the whole process was a fundamental shift:

“Change requires time. To me it seems that if I am totally committed to what I believe is the right approach, the learners will eventually come along. As the ultimate aim of education is betterment of humans' life, this approach can certainly help take a big step towards this goal” (participant 14)

Of course it is true that braking away from the banking view of teaching is necessary and one teacher talked about this:

“If we want our students not to be merely passive receivers of knowledge, but to have voice and be able to make decisions and act based on those decisions a break away from it all is deemed necessary.” (participant 19)

A very interesting comment was made by participant 20. It was claimed that teaching critically is the key to set students free, but when it was asked what critical teaching meant the participant had no clear idea.

“The best way would be the practical one. If students are to be set free, teachers and planners have one choice only: to start teaching critically.” (participant 20)

The same was true for another participant. They highlighted the fact that this change was to be started from the teachers themselves.

“We need to start from ourselves as teachers. If we need critically aware students, we need to have teachers who are critical too.” (participant 3)

From an overall perspective, it is clearly evident that, for the learners to be critical, the teachers felt a sort of change was necessary. They also were able to trace it back all the way to the system and the teachers.

5.2.2. Observation Results

During observations criticizing the status quo took place mostly in the part of the lesson that was conducted mostly in L1. Two main themes emerged from these observations regarding religion and gender.

The first one was related to the censorship of the books that the students were studying. In one session of a class the teacher and the learners were engaged in mocking the censorships that they saw in the books. One instance was the word “red wine” which was altered to “red milk” much to the teacher’s chagrin, as he found this very unnecessary and hard to believe.

Other instances were also observed as in a few classes the students laughed at the censorships that had taken place in the pictures of the book regarding the items of clothing of the characters (mini-skirts and cleavages were covered very amateurishly). The other case was related to the picture of a party where those dancing were completely removed and the teacher had to explain the reason behind the empty dance-floor to the learners. They all laughed and made fun of the decision of the education authorities and believed that even in Iran people dance in parties.

The second one was related to gender biases. In one class the teacher was doing the pre-reading phase of a passage and talking to students regarding a woman who was a pioneering role model in a field. The students commented that in their country women were not allowed to do many things including watching football in stadiums or becoming presidents. These were cases in which the classes were engaged in critical literacy without being aware that they were doing so.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrated that the majority of teachers possessed little or no prior knowledge of the concept of critical literacy, let alone the ability to use such techniques in their online classes. In addition, they believed that English teachers should examine their practices more seriously in the future. In spite of the fact that many participants in this investigation appreciated the chance to learn about critical literacy, it is apparent that many of them still remained ambiguous about the notion.

The authors of this research take into account that as instructors become more cognizant of their responsibilities for more inclusive teaching, they would reevaluate the

indirect effects of their own teaching approaches. In light of the more recent research studies, the fact that teachers are becoming progressively sensitive to practicing control in the class (Jeyaraj and Harland 2014) highlights the severity of the constraints and controls placed by them on their learners' viewpoints (Kubota 2014) or selecting safe themes for fear of 'mutiny' in the class (Bender-Slack 2010).

Similar to the findings of DeMulder et al. (2013), who concentrated on critical reflection, authors detected a minor bias in the majority of teachers' considerations on sociopolitical disparities and power relations. Participants grasped these difficulties and began to consider marginalized minority and disadvantaged people. This may be due to the fact that TEFL graduates typically attend courses in significant applied linguistics. This finding supports those reported by Aliakbari and Faraji (2011), Yilmaz (2009), and Abelrahim (2007).

Numerous additional studies indicated that introduction of CL inspired instructors to communicate this newly acquired mindset with their colleagues (Sangster et al. 2013). Moreover, a growing body of literature have also proved effective in altering instructors' perspectives. Particularly an Asian teacher who, after being exposed to CL, advocated for modifying his teaching approach from instruction to comprehension (Ko 2013; Ko and Wang 2009), from teaching to the test strategy-oriented teaching to discussion of socio-cultural concerns (Ko and Wang 2009), from teacher-initiated monologues to learner-oriented interactions (Ko 2013), and from merely deciphering text to visualizing it as an instrument for creating meaning (Tan et al. 2010).

Despite acknowledging the significance of critical literacy, it cannot be ignored that participants in this research voiced numerous qualms over the practicality and suitability of applying CL in their classrooms due to a number of impediments. It is also worthy to note that the instructor's predilection for agenda preconditions over the incorporation of CL in courses and curriculum. They noticed a lack of such procedures, and their greatest issue was the rigidity of the educational institutions. According to White (2009), when instructors are tasked with teaching learners' critical literacy, they should be truly succeeding in the operation. Perhaps this was the primary rationale why so many of these instructors exhibited conservatism by initiating "change" in their classrooms (Sangster et al. 2013).

Participants highlighted several technological, logistical, and pedagogical barriers to the successful implementation of critical reading instruction in the class. Importantly, they were outspoken in the fact that the purpose of teaching was not only to teach what

was written in the textbooks. These educators appeared to believe that something was lacking from their instruction. A rigorous curriculum that clearly and implicitly marginalizes CL is the first hurdle (Curdt-Christiansen 2010; Masuda 2012; Tan et al. 2010). This has caused teachers to concentrate on the knowledge of the students (Ko and Wang 2009; Masuda 2012; Tan and Guo 2009) and to emphasize the literal meaning of the text instead of analyzing or looking for its meaning. That was a basic argument why they favored meaning extraction above interpretation (Curdt-Christiansen 2010).

Furthermore, educators and teachers must eliminate the fear of oppression and foster critical thinking from both external (e.g., curriculum designers and policy makers) and internal (e.g., peer and teacher) facets. To cater for the concern of confidence, students can initiate crucial learning activities in small groups (e.g., mini-groups). Using riddles, images, and contentious themes, teachers can devise activities that promote the exchange of questions and opinions. Instructors may also assign students pre-class exercises. This will minimize their tension and give them time to consider and debate particular concerns.

As a concluding remark, it can be underscored that the Iranian ELT setting lacks a critical viewpoint of English language instruction that is strongly entrenched in critical behaviors. It is strongly suggested owing to its anti-oppressive, ethical, and socially "just" nature, which is congruent with the Iranian people's anti-imperialist stance. At English language institutions, it is no surprise that the crucial function of instructors must be emphasized. The data of the current study revealed that there is a paucity of CP in online classrooms in Iran, despite positive comments from teachers towards the implementation of CP. This was in line with the finding of the study of Mehranirad and Behzadpoor (2022) who proved that language teachers expressed the need to be equipped with specific skill sets which they may not be capable of handling. An acquaintance with critical literacy will encourage policymakers to reevaluate the incorporation of CP into language instruction. Weng (2023), also, has called for more investigations on critical literacy in EFL contexts. The authors of the present contribution highly recommended further research revolving around critical literacy practices in face-to-face classes as it might provide insights that would have, otherwise, been deemed not attainable in digital ones.

The results of the present study encourage instructional policymakers to change their educational orientations, as well as language teacher training/education initiatives that embrace CP concepts that can direct TTCs towards this objective. Teachers train learners to challenge the persistence of power systems in society by including and supporting instructional criticality in the curriculum. This leads to the global establishment of an equitable and just educational system over time.

7. Conclusion

Our study's primary purpose was to investigate critical literacy within the setting of the non-Western Iranian education system. The findings can give useful practical and theoretical insight and understanding. This may be accomplished by putting light on unexplored essential areas of literacy and applying these principles to the setting of EFL classes in Iran. Due to the fact that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 epidemic, the primary avenue of data gathering was online classrooms. It is strongly suggested that future study concentrate on critical literacy approaches in face-to-face classrooms, since it may yield discoveries that would otherwise be judged inaccessible in digital settings.

Some teachers of the current study lacked interest and willingness in critical literacy. It would be intriguing if future research could monitor these teachers to determine how their perspectives may shift. Furthermore, it would be fascinating to do more in-depth research to uncover the causes of such participant apathy. A suggestion for additional studies is to combine the interview data with a longitudinal investigation to provide a wider outlook on how teachers' opinions of themselves and their students are impacted by online instruction.

As a concluding statement, the basic concept of critical literacy is equivalent to the blood running through the vessels of every educational institution. If the blood were to be taken from the body, how would it regain its vitality?

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Appendices

Appendix A. Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Exploring Critical Literacy

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to investigate the concept of critical literacy and how Iranian EFL teachers can incorporate it into their online classes. Your answers will be confidential. I will use pseudonyms on all notes and reports. Is it ok if I audio record this interview? If you want to stop at any time, or stop recording at any time, just let me know. Do you have any questions before we begin?

First, tell me about yourself and your experience in education.

- a. What is your gender and racial identity?
- b. What is your age?
- c. How long have you taught?
- d. What subject(s) and grade level(s) do you teach/have taught?
- e. What is your highest degree level, and what subject is it in?

Age:	Teaching Experience (in years):	Gender: Male Female	Major: Teaching Translation Linguistics Literature Other	Degree: Undergraduate BA/BSc MA/MSc PhD	Hours you teach English per week:	Type of Institution: University School Institute Other
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1. I would like to discuss your views on the purpose of education. What is your philosophy of education?
2. In your opinion, what do you think critical literacy is? What components does it have? What does it mean to you?
3. How did you become familiar with this idea of critical literacy?
4. Which part of your teaching do you consider to be related to critical literacy in your online classes? What are the effects of your teaching tasks and strategies on students' critical literacy?
5. What practices do you think cannot be considered important in making students critically aware?

6. What skills or knowledge do you think students should learn as part of critical literacy?
7. To what extent does the employment of online class features (e.g. shared slides and materials, using chat box, and break-out room) have an effect on enhancing students' critical literacy in their language learning?
8. How do you think teachers should enter/address the political and ideological issues in online classes with the hope of making students more critical and changing society?
9. How do you motivate your students to think critically about their own culture or previous experiences in life?
10. How do you involve all students in your class to promote equality and Justice? In What ways do your programs tend to make students effective decision makers?
11. What qualities does a teacher need to have to be able to operationalize critical literacy in classes?
12. In planning what to do in the classroom, how do you consider your students' expectations and immediate needs?
13. How are the students' future needs and interests considered for organizing your class agendas?
14. For teaching language skills, how do you try to relate topics in the syllabus to your students' social and cultural experiences?
15. How do you involve your students in expressing their viewpoints about teaching materials and topics?
16. What was the biggest problem you encountered when implementing critical literacy practices in online classes? What about implementing critical literacy practices in online classes in the future?
17. What critical literacy practices would you change in your own teaching? (Please share your coping strategies if any.)
18. How can the decision-makers help ensure success for students in the critical literacy in online classes?
19. When you start an online or digital class, which topics do you engage in the most?
20. What suggestions, if any, would you have for teachers as it pertains to increasing student critical literacy?

21. What practical strategies do you suggest to help teachers emancipate students from the restrictions of traditional teaching practices (such as the banking view)?
22. Do you feel teaching critical literacy is important? Why or why not?
23. Anything else you would like to share?

Probes include:

Can you tell me more about that?

What do you mean by _____?