

# Teachers' awareness of critical pedagogy: A case study of Iranian EFL teachers

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## Abstract

The concept of critical pedagogy (CP) has been around for some time in education. However, not much research has been conducted on implementing the basic tenets of CP into the ELT classrooms. Acknowledging the significant role of teachers as the cornerstone of education system in every context, the main reason behind this study was to examine the extent to which Iranian EFL instructors in English institutes in Iran apply approaches and principles of critical pedagogy. This study investigated 200 Iranian EFL instructors' points of view in English Institutes. The questionnaire developed by Azimi (2007) which examined teacher's attitude in critical pedagogy with reference to their age, gender, educational level and work experience. Results revealed that there is a significant difference between age, gender, educational level and work experience. Compared to males, females had better mean in responding to critical pedagogy items in this study. Also, responses to critical pedagogy items represent a positive relationship with respondents' age. Additionally, the higher the educational level, the bigger the mean for the responses toward critical pedagogy items was reported. Finally, the teachers with less experience had a lower level of agreement with the principles of critical pedagogy. The results of this study can also be regarded as an implication for policy makers in the field of TEFL to revise their policies related to the ELT issues.

**Keywords:** Critical Pedagogy, Teachers' awareness, EFL instructors, teacher's role, TTC

## Introduction

Critical pedagogy, an alternative approach to traditional pedagogic practices, has been put forward to promote literacy and to help people educate and organize themselves around issues such as health care, elections, and working conditions (Freire, 1972). The approach offers a way of combining a critique of previously unquestioned practices with concrete ways of introducing change through the individual teacher (Johnston, 1999). It attempts to challenge subordinate status by providing a means for students to think about their position in their communities and society and about ways of increasing their access to economic, social and personal power (Goldstein, 1994).

Throughout this study, the distinction between critical pedagogy as understood by Freire (1972) and critical pedagogy as applied in TESL programs will be referred to as Critical Pedagogy focused on Power (CPP) and Critical Pedagogy focused on Language Learning (CPLL), respectively. CPP corresponds to situations where the main objective is to challenge power relations within society, while language instruction is secondary. CPLL uses themes from critical pedagogy such as workers' rights and access to health care, but the main goal is to help students learn language through talking, listening, reading and writing about these issues. CPP builds on CPLL as it includes a language focus as well as a focus on challenging power relations within society.

According to Azimi (2007), in the present time education is an indispensable part of mankind's life. It is also an influential part which affects social, financial and political dimensions of societies.

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It is hoped that the whole community will benefit if it is implemented by an effective curriculum. In this regard, critical ideologies, which add to the effectiveness of individuals can fit best into and aid educational systems to develop critical citizens who are knowledgeable and at the same time ingenious in both contents and contexts. Among these critical beliefs, critical pedagogy is considered to hold more profound potentials in terms of the aforesaid hopes. Relying on firm humanistic roots, CP addresses everyday aspects of our lives with a questionnaire look. In this way, pedagogy is at the service of individuals and helps them feel, and if feasible, modify the conventional take-for-granted realities around them.

In what we are calling CPLL, these same three critical principles are applied in order to facilitate language learning. That is, there is no specific intention to raise the learners' awareness or challenge social relations or power structures. The teacher would organize, and perhaps lead, short discussions about culture or personal experiences in order to contextualize the topic and introduce a language point. Here the discussion activity is used to introduce the language item, vocabulary and/or grammar, and not as a departure point to challenge power relations related to a specific topic as is the case with CPP. Additionally, the third critical principle, which problematizes the topic, can be applied from a CPLL approach when an activity that encourages students to think about problems and solutions from diverse angles is designed in such a way that specific language items must be used.

Although many definitions of critical pedagogy have been proposed, scholars have come to the realization that there does not exist one all-encompassing definition. Instead, critical pedagogy is concerned with developing a contextualized, culturally specific, reflective approach. In other words, critical pedagogy does not in itself constitute a method; the micro level pedagogical implications of a critical stance often have to be worked through by the individual teacher (Pennycook, 1989). However, the way in which teachers are supposed to incorporate critical pedagogy into the classroom remains largely theoretical. There is a tendency for critical pedagogues to engage in research and theorizing that is not grounded in a particular context.

Among the study done in this area, Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2011) surveyed 200 Iranian school teachers' views concerning critical pedagogy

at elementary, secondary, and high school levels. The results indicated no significant difference between teachers' views concerning the given variables except for gender. Moreover, in spite of teachers' agreement and approval of critical pedagogy and its principles, the results indicate the absence of critical pedagogy in the Iranian educational system, which can be attributed to the centralized top-down educational management.

Azimi (2007) has taken into account students' and teachers' attitudes according to their gender and teaching experience, as two probably effective variables. To collect need data, a 36-item questionnaire was developed and validated a priori, and then administered to a pool of 318 respondents. Drawing on statistical procedures namely t-test, cross tabulation, Chi-square, and MANOVA, it was revealed that there is no significant difference between the variables under the study.

## Statement of Problem

Unfortunately, the policy makers and syllabus designers disregard the role of classroom teachers and their opinions for designing any book or syllabus and try to persuade them to follow what they have written or planned in the institutional courses. Regarding Iranian context, we can also observe such problems. Although, nowadays, critical pedagogy plays a significant role around the world, it has not attracted the attention of educationalists yet in Iran. Further, the teachers are not aware of the role of critical pedagogy for improving education in all areas.

In Iran, textbooks are designed by Ministry of Education for all levels without taking the teachers' opinions teaching at those levels into account and teachers are forced to write their lesson plans according to what others have designed in spite of their wills. Consequently, in the Iranian educational system, according to Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2011), education does not lead necessarily to self-development, critical thought, and social progress. Accordingly, learning about the role of teachers in classroom settings and the role of critical pedagogy in creating a balance between the teachers, students, and policy makers supported conducting the present study. In other words, the present study investigated the extent to which Iranian teachers are familiar with and support a critical approach to pedagogy.

## Research questions

The present study was carried out to find answers for the following questions:

1. Do Iranian English Institute instructors support the principles of critical pedagogy?
2. Is there any difference between teachers' view on the principles of critical pedagogy according to age, gender, and educational level or degree, and work experience?

## Methodology

### Participants

A total number of 200 (106 males and 94 females) respondents were invited to take part in this study. The participants were all instructors in English institutes holding B.A, M.A, or PhD in different English majors, i.e., English Literature, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Translation, and General Linguistics including 105 Bachelor of Arts, 92 Master of Arts and 3 PhD holders. They were teaching at elementary, intermediate and advanced levels in English institutes in Amol and Tehran. Respondents' age were categorized into 22-30, 31-40, 41-50 and over 50 including 101, 77, 15 and 7 participants respectively. Respondents in this study were from almost all English institutes (Kish, Gouyesh, Arses, Shokoh, Yasin, Iran Language Institute, Melli, Soroush, Simin institutes) in Amol and Iranmehr English Institute in different branches (Hafhouz, Seyyed Khandan, Pasdaran, Doulat) in Tehran. As some B.A instructors had not any understanding of the concept of critical pedagogy, they were given some explanations. Their experience years were grouped into 1-3, 4-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25 years include 48, 54, 61, 28, 4 and 5 participants respectively. Gender was also taken care of; therefore both male and female participated in this study. The type of sampling was convenient sampling.

### Instrumentation

The structured questionnaire developed by Azimi (2007) was adopted for this study and attempted to determine the degree of teachers' awareness of critical pedagogy. It consisted of 35 items in Likert-type measure. The statements in 200 valid samples were scored on a five-point Likert scale as follow: 1. Agree, 2. Not agree nor disagree, 3. Disagree.

One of the most reliable methods in descriptive research is administering proper questionnaire

among participants. Therefore, to see teachers' awareness toward critical pedagogy, questionnaire administration was thought to be the best method for this study. There have been some steps before administering the questionnaire. First, we translated it to Persian, modified it and in order to investigate its validity, we distributed the questionnaire among 10 instructors. We piloted it twice during 1 week which 5 of them were my classmates in PhD level and the others holding M.A. Then, it was modified by two professors. Finally, 2 professors in TEFL commented on the validity of the questionnaire. After scrutinizing the previous studies, we realized that teachers' awareness about critical pedagogy was another gap in the field

### Procedure

As stated earlier, the data was collected through direct administration of the questionnaire and they were gathered in February 2013. The questionnaire was administered in Tehran and Amol English institutes. The researchers distributed the Persian translation version of the questionnaire among instructors. Distribution of the questionnaire took 1 month (one week in Amol and 3 weeks in Tehran). Some of the participants received the questionnaire via e-mail. Some email addresses were obtained through Asian TEFL journal and others were gained by Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran (TELLSI) whose members filled the questionnaire. Almost half of these electronically sent questionnaires were completed and turned back.

## Results

The main objective of this study was to examine the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers teaching in English institutes in Iran believe in approaches and principles of critical pedagogy. In addition, the researchers wanted to know whether some variables such as age, gender, and educational level or degree, and work experience would play any role in forming teachers' opinions about critical pedagogy. For this purpose, the related data were collected and analyzed as it is shown in Table 1.

The results of data analysis (ANOVA) in table 2 below indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between four age groups including 22-30 ( $SD = .748$ ;  $M = 3.03$ ), 31-40 ( $.359$ ;  $M = 4.49$ ), 41-50 ( $SD = .007$ ;  $M = 4.48$ ), and 50 or above ( $SD = .01$ ;  $M = 4.97$ ) because obtained F value

of 125.53, was found to be significant at  $p < .05$  level. Therefore, there is a significant difference between the responses of the participants to critical pedagogy questionnaires with different age groups. In other words, we can conclude that in all cases, there is a relationship between the responses of the samples and their age. In fact, the age of learners can play a significant role on their way of responding to the items related to critical awareness.

**Table 1. Mean scores of samples among four age groups**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
22-30	101	3.03	.748	.074
31-40	77	4.49	.359	.040
41-50	15	4.96	.007	.001
50 and above	7	4.97	.010	.004
Total	200	3.80	.983	.069

**Table 2. Results of ANOVA for mean scores of samples among four age groups**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	126.670	3	42.223	125.536	.000
Within Groups	65.923	196	.336		
Total	192.593	199			

In addition, by considering the result of the means in the Table 1, the samples having younger age had less mean in comparison to those samples having older age. Therefore, the more the age of participants, the better the mean of responses to critical pedagogy items.

**Table 3. Mean scores of samples according to gender**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Male	106	3.07	.755	.073
Female	94	4.63	.350	.036
Total	200	3.80	.983	.069

According to Table 4, the one-way analysis of

variance (ANOVA) which was conducted on the results of the male and female participants revealed that there was a statistically significant difference among male and female mean scores at the  $p < .05$  level,  $P = .000$ . As a result, there is a significant difference between male and female in responding to critical pedagogy questionnaires. Further, by looking at Table 3 since the mean of the female group ( $SD = .35$ ;  $M = 4.63$ ) is greater than that of the male group ( $SD = .75$ ;  $M = 3.07$ ), we conclude that females had better mean scores in responding to critical pedagogy items in comparison to males in this study.

**Table 4. Results of ANOVA for mean scores of samples according to gender**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	121.146	1	121.146	335.724	.000
Within Groups	71.448	198	.361		
Total	192.593	199			

**Table 5. Mean scores of samples among four educational levels**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
BA	105	3.06	.754	.073
MA	92	4.61	.355	.037
PhD	3	4.98	.016	.009
TOTAL	200	3.80	.983	.069

The results of data analysis (ANOVA) in Table 6 below indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the response mean of participants having different educational levels with regard to their responses to critical pedagogy items because obtained F value of 169.88, was found to be significant at .001 level.

Furthermore, as it is clear from Table 5, those participants having PhD degree were found to have higher mean ( $M = 4.9810$ ), in comparison to those having MA and BA degree (Mean = 4.60, 3.06, respectively). In other words, the higher the educational level, the more the reported mean for the responses toward critical pedagogy items.

As it is evident in Table 8, there is a significant difference between the mean of six groups of partic-

ipants with different work experience ( $p < .000$ ). As a result, there is a significant difference between the responses of the participants having different work experience with regard to critical pedagogy questionnaire. In other words, there is a significant difference between the responses of the participants having different work experience to critical pedagogy questionnaire. Further, by looking at the results of Table 7, we can find out that those participants having less work experience were reported to have lower mean toward their responses to critical pedagogy items in comparison to those having more work experience. In other words, work experience can be regarded as a factor playing a role in enhancing the participants' knowledge about the items related to critical pedagogy.

**Table 6. Results of ANOVA for mean scores of samples in four educational levels**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	121.911	2	60.955	169.889	.000
Within Groups	70.683	197	.359		
Total	192.593	199			

**Table 7. Mean scores of samples among six groups of work experience**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
1-3	48	2.42	.654	.094
4-5	54	3.58	.221	.030
6-10	61	4.39	.318	.040
11-15	28	4.94	.03	.005
16-20	4	4.97	.000	.000
21-25	5	4.97	.012	.005
Total	200	3.80	.983	.069

**Table 8. Results of ANOVA for mean scores of samples among six groups of work experience**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	163.722	5	32.744	220.028	.000
Within Groups	28.871	194	.149		
Total	192.593	199			

## Discussions and Conclusion

Regarding the significant role of teachers as the main decision-makers in performing any education system in any context, the main reason behind doing this study was to see whether Iranian EFL teachers teaching in English institutes in Iran believe in approaches and principles of critical pedagogy. In addition, some variables which might play a role in expressing teachers' opinions about critical pedagogy such as age, gender, and educational level or degree, and work experience were also taken into account

As the results of this study indicate, on the whole, Iranian teachers' awareness toward critical pedagogy and its principles were positive. As for the variables considered in this paper, there was a significant difference between teachers' awareness about critical pedagogy regarding age, gender, and educational level or degree, and work experience. With regard to age group variable, there was a statistically significant difference between four age groups including 22-30, 31-40, 41-50, and 50 or above. In fact, the more the age of participants, the better the mean of responses to critical pedagogy items.

As far as the role of gender is concerned, again there was a significant difference between male and female's opinions about critical pedagogy and its principles. In fact, females had better mean scores in comparison to the males in this study. Again, the results of this study are against the findings of Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2011) since they found male participants superior. Yet a point worthy of notice is that the samples in the present study was limited to English instructors on private language institutes and in the aforementioned research ordinary teachers at regular schools.

Furthermore, Azimi (2007) investigated teachers and students' attitude toward critical pedagogy according to their age and teaching experience. After analyzing the data, it was revealed that there was no significant difference in two variables, age and teaching experience but this survey represented some differences and similarities with our article. Firstly, teachers were the participants of the study. Secondly, teachers' awareness is the topic of our discussion. Thirdly, our population was different. Fourthly, variables such as gender and educational levels were taken into consideration through ANOVA while the two surveys had age and work experience in common. Lastly, there were signifi-

cant differences in teachers' awareness with regard to the mentioned variables.

With regard to the role the teachers' degree may play in expressing their awareness about critical pedagogy and its principle, there was a statistically significant difference between the response mean of participants having different educational levels. In other words, the higher the educational level, the more the reported mean for the responses toward critical pedagogy items. The results of this study are congruent with findings of Yilmaz (2009) in Turkey, which concluded that there is a significant difference between the views of the teachers about the educational system and the critical pedagogy (total score based on the teachers' educational background). Postgraduates agreed more with the principles of critical pedagogy in this study. To account for this trend, it can be argued they might have more profound knowledge about education. Also, in Iran, postgraduate studies have attracted more attention while this is not the case for undergraduates. Over the recent years, postgraduates have focused on reading or writing articles and doing research because they are very important for their graduation from university. In addition, regarding ELT, some related courses to critical pedagogy have been included in postgraduate studies. In these courses, alternative points of view are presented. Therefore, postgraduates might have more information about these topics.

Further, considering the last variable included in this study, i.e. work experience, there was a significant difference between the responses of the participants having different work experience to critical pedagogy questionnaire. In fact, those participants having less work experience were reported to have lower mean toward their responses to critical pedagogy items in comparison to those having more work experience. In other words, work experience can be regarded as a factor playing a role in enhancing the participants' knowledge about the critical pedagogy and its principle. The teachers with less experience had a lower level of agreement with the principles of critical pedagogy because they had not encountered with the principles of critical pedagogy or they were not well-acquainted with them. However, a higher level of agreement with the principles of critical pedagogy was expected from experienced teachers since they had experienced inequality in the current education system as Yilmaz (2009) has emphasized. Failure of social transformation will give way to sustainable legiti-

macy of inequalities and a hierarchical, autocratic system (Giroux, 1988; Turan, 2000, as cited in Yilmaz, 2009).

As Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (2011) believed, one of the reasons for the absence of critical pedagogy in Iranian classroom settings, in spite of its overall support by teachers, may be related to the characteristics of the implemented education system and to the ignorance of critical thinking in teacher training in Iran. Another important issue which is worth mentioning is the observable stress on the quantity of education than its quality. In other words, students and managers are only thinking about the product of learning at the end of the semester or school year not the learning process. In fact, students may pass a lot of semesters without remembering the materials taught during their courses. Therefore, there is no space to talk and modified about the challenging issues at schools and English language centers.

Put it in few words, the findings of this study can pave the way for introducing critical pedagogy as professional development to Iranian teachers, especially in teaching training centers. In addition, as Aliakbari and Allahmoradi (ibid) stated in their article, due to the absence of standard textbooks on critical pedagogy and the absence of critical pedagogy education in teacher training, teachers have no time and instructional resources to integrate critical pedagogy into their daily instruction.

## Implications of the Study

Findings of the current research provide insightful implication for the current education in Iran and elsewhere. One suggestion is to include the critical pedagogy principles in an Iranian English schools or institutes so that students-teachers have more teaching experience to draw from as they learn the principles. In our view, even more experienced teachers will require time and many practice opportunities in order to understand how to incorporate critical pedagogy principles within their teaching unless an entire course is dedicated to exploring the critical pedagogy literature and the associated school-based practice include a critical pedagogy focus. Indeed, it can be argued that the only way to incorporate the principles from a truly critical perspective would be to create a new critical pedagogy course where students-teachers would be instructed as well as teach from a critical pedagogy perspective. In other words, the student-teachers

would work in collaboration with their students to decide on topics and themes to be covered, as well as the grading system.

In our opinion, the most straightforward way to incorporate the principles is to integrate them into a general practicum course and to follow up in subsequent pedagogy and practicum courses. If these principles become a focus of pedagogic instruction they can help student-teachers personalize their activities to raise their students' awareness of critical pedagogy opportunities in published materials and help their students become more responsible for their own learning. Ultimately, student-teachers can be empowered to analyze and act on their students' knowledge and experience to challenge hierarchical social relations and power structures, and to become more effective teachers.

### Suggestion for further research

Regarding the findings of the current study, some further studies can be suggested. First, this study can be replicated by comparing different teachers teaching at high school, language institutes, and university at different levels. Second, the participants should be selected at different regions of Iran to be able to generalize the findings to all contexts. Third, the researcher believes that some socioeconomic factors may play a role in expressing teachers' views on the principles of critical pedagogy. Finally, only relying on the results obtained from the questionnaire cannot be justifiable. Therefore, some qualitative instruments such as interviewing teachers and students, class observation, and course materials analysis may result in better and clearer results.

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