Unveiling the invisible Gem: Identifying the Obstacles on the Path of Critical Literacy Practices in EFL Digital Classes in Iran

Esmaeel Ali Salimi[1*] and Omid Ostad[2]

[1]Corresponding Author: Associate Professor of Applied linguistics, English Department, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, University of Allameh Tabataba'i, Tehran, Iran, ORCID: 0000-0001-5432-9547 Email: easalimi@atu.ac.ir

[2] PhD Candidate in TEFL, Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran ORCID: 0000-0003-2811-5726; Email: Omidostad007@gmail.com

Abstract

In the present climate, Critical Literacy has become an area gathering momentum more than ever before, tantamount to an 'invisible gem' as almost many education systems have attempted, but failed, to incorporate it into their curricula. To address this elusive notion, this study aimed to investigate the obstacles in the way of possible dilemmas, challenges, constraints, and limitations Iranian EFL teachers face in the process of implementing critical literacy in their online classes. This qualitative research study was conducted in two phases. First, an open-ended set of questions was developed after reviewing the literature, scrutinizing the existing questionnaires, and collecting data from experts in the field. To do so, after reviewing the literature, a list of questions was composed. Subsequently, qualitative data were collected (and analyzed) from 29 EFL teachers through an open-ended questionnaire and interview. The framework and elicited data led to the development of 23 items for the interview part. Accordingly, the online classes of all the teachers were observed by the researchers for an entire term. From what has been discussed, the following conclusion may be drawn that critical literacy needs to be part of the language teaching curricula in Iran. The finding can potentially aid the key educational stakeholders, including second/foreign language (L2) policymakers, teacher educators, authorities in charge of recruiting teachers, and materials developers, to take appropriate measures to increase pre- and in-service L2 teachers' critical literacy and, as a result, encourage the implementation of this key concept in the instructional contexts.

Keywords: critical literacy, obstacles, online EFL classes, Iranian students

Introduction

The responsibility for the growth and development of individuals is on the shoulder of the educational system and pedagogies that practice, promote, and preach criticality, critical thought and critical literacies (Shor, 1999). It is only in this context that students will be able to "develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2004, p. 13), that is precisely what critical literacy intends to do. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, many educators turned to online classes as an alternative to face-to-face classes. This even makes it more urgent to investigate different practicalities of such settings, one of which is the Critical Literacy practices, especially in societies where English has the function of a foreign language.

For decades, the teaching practice of foreign languages, especially English, in Iran was influenced by traditional methods limited to the memorization of linguistic structures, isolated vocabularies and materials which are largely inauthentic (Rahimi & Askari, 2015). In such a system, teachers rarely operationalized the well-known communicative language teaching practices (although recently CLT has started to gain popularity) and tend to present the information to the learners who are its passive receivers. This is in line with what Freire (1970) termed as the 'banking' view of education that construes learners as hollow vessels that are to be filled by the knowledge the instructor provides. Concentrating merely on linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge goes against Freebody and Luke's (1990) definition of literacy. To them, literacy is more than decoding written texts and being passive receivers of knowledge.

Prior to delving into the issue of critical literacy (CL), the very concept of literacy needs to be looked at more closely. Although "[t]here is no single, uniform literacy, no linear path," it is believed that literacy encompasses the main four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing across texts providing a rich diversity of "print, visual, digital, audio, and oral," experiences (Faulkner, 2011, p. 108). The interpretation and application of such texts, however, vary from time to time and across different locations (Schultz, 2002). Weng (2023) highlights the significance of research in English as a foreign language setting as it has been neglected by researchers. The never-ending conflict between accepting the status quo and the endeavor to consciously ~~to~~ ask learners to question the extant assumptions can pose numerous problems for classroom teachers. Researchers have increasingly been showing dispositions towards the fact that educators are growing more and more sensitive when it comes to exercising control within the restrictions offered by the classroom (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2014), The driving force of the present study, therefore, was to examine the existence of this tension in an attempt to provide practitioners with the awareness that they are, in fact, agents of operationalizing CL in their classrooms, and not to suppress or ignore it (Kubota, 2014). This study explored the extent to which such roles are assumed by teachers.

Theoretical Framework

The quote 'Education as The Practice of Freedom' can best represent the practices which stem from the social justice pedagogy stipulated by the founding father of Critical Literacy, the Brazilian theorist and educator, Paulo Freire, as first described in his most famous book Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968). He added socio-political dimensions to the bare notion of literacy. Then, in one stance, using a problem-posing method of pedagogy, he managed to instruct Chilean and Brazilian farmers to read by showing them lexical items that were germane to their daily routines. Having employed 'words' as incentives, Freire successfully had them reflect critically upon the oppressive realities surrounding them, enabling the peasants to transform their worlds by freeing themselves from such oppressions. Later, Freire figured out that people were still capable of retaining the words as these had assisted them to gain a critical consciousness of their circumstances.

Writing and reading for Freire are tools which are accompanied by exploring the underlying causes and effect of the students' lived experiences, for social transformation. This socio-political standpoint ultimately gave rise to the movement of which evolved to become an influential ideological, theoretical, and pedagogical construct (Cadeiro-Kaplan & Smith, 2002). Although implicit in critical pedagogy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), liberation and emancipation are not the focus of the present contribution as they are beyond the scope of the present study.

Literature Review

Different contexts and perspectives concerning CL have been the result of discrepancies in practicing it due to postulated theories and approaches (Knobel, 1998). The three main orientations of critical literacy have been discussed by Lankshear's (1997) three viewpoints of CL, providing an insightful framework used for investigating different takes by examining each one via its *object(s) of critique*:

1. Having a critical perspective on literacy or literacies per se, where literacy itself is the object of critique;

2. Having a critical perspective on particular texts, where the critique of texts and their world views is the object;

3. Having a critical perspective on, i.e., being able to analyze and critique– wider social practices... etc. which are mediated by, made possible, and partially sustained through reading, writing, viewing, transmitting, etc. texts. Here, social practices, their histories, their normative work, and their associated literacy practices and artefacts, etc. are the target of analysis and critique. (p. 44)

Concerning critical literacy, many studies have focused on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers who share the same concerns as those of their students when it comes to CL. Teachers liked the exposure and experience of critical literacy, critically reflecting in the company of their workmates (e.g. through action research) on power relations in the organizations or institutions they work for, resulting in gaining an understanding of the complicated social challenges, feeling what minority groups that have been marginalized feel (DeMulder, Stribling, & Day,

2013). Acquainting themselves with the notion of critical pedagogy stimulated in-service teachers to be able to pool their newly discovered educational philosophy among their coworkers in conferences and workplaces (Sangster, Stone, & Anderson, 2013). Particularly worth mentioning was the cases of changes in the attitudes of Asian language teachers who, after being familiar with critical literacy, welcomed the shift in their teaching methods towards grasping the meaning rather than being obsessed with language forms (Ko, 2013).

The Literature concerning the practice and theory of CL in both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts happens to be relatively limited. Among the few existing ones, Wallace (2003) investigated the ideological and social underpinnings of critical literacy practices in her EFL students analysing texts to see the ways in which the author's presentation of a given topic can affect the readers. When her students focused on the textual practice decisions of the authors, they were able to realize how texts and ideological constructions could imbue with intention, bias, and design of human taste.

Targeting higher education, Kuo (2009) explored CL by employing dialogue activities. Most students showed a positive attitude towards the activity. Kou, however, fearing the detrimental effects that lack focus on traditional pedagogical literacy instruction may have on the capability to underperform on language proficiency exams warned of the possibility of exercising CL "at the cost of reading delight and spelling/grammar correctness" (p. 493) in EFL classrooms. Yilmaz (2009) studied school teachers in Turkey regarding Critical Literacy practices, too; this study's outcome was a valid questionnaire that investigated the use of critical literacy and critical thinking by instructors within a classroom setting.

Cho and Johnson (2020) observed Korean high-schoolers' presentation regarding gender equality, discussing how pupils managed to be equipped with chances to re- and deconstruct the unequal power relations by means of problems posing format (Freire, 1970). Pack (2023) attempted to put forth an alternative to critical literacy education when it came to preservice teachers. The author defended the merits of introducing critical literacy to preservice teachers by observing their relationship with power relations.

Zaini (2022) introduced a new approach to reading ~~the~~ texts i.e. ambivalence which was connected to the understanding of the truth. Participants in the study managed to critique and modify their interpretations of the text. Bender-Slack (2010) pointed out the fact that many teachers refrain from talking about issues, other than the restricted topics that are offered, as a result of fear of chaos in the class which might result in things growing beyond control.

Ghaffar Samar and Davari (2011) investigated English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals' and university tutors regarding their use of critical thinking and critical ELT. The analyses of the collected data revealed that Iranian ELT educators and practitioners had a disposition towards a newly growing critical-oriented shift as the one which has been mostly dominated by the mainstream linguistic imperialism front.

Abednia and Izadinia (2013) conducted a study in the context of Iran, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran. They targeted learners in a Reading Comprehension course, analyzed the students' learning process improvement and critical thinking development during an entire term. The researchers asserted that students enjoyed the course because "they appreciated the significance of the opportunity that encouraged critical and creative treatment of different issues rather than passive adoption of a single interpretation of the world" (p. 348). According to Abednia and Izadinia (2013), the reason behind the students' 'heightened awareness' was specifically observable in their writing skill as "they tried to capture the complexity of issues through contextualizing them, identifying their problem areas, offering appropriate solutions, and reconsidering their own previous conceptualizations of them" (p. 348). The study concluded with an emphasis on the role of the teachers stating that "teachers must remain open to students' feedback, as openness is a prerequisite for dialogical education" (p. 349). It is, thus, crucial for teachers to assist explicit help regarding critical literacy and critical pedagogy as students may struggle with the notion due to a lack of familiarity with it.

Regarding the implementation of critical literacy in online EFL classes in Iran, our study revolves around exploring the possible implementation of critical literacy practices in online Iranian EFL classes through the lens of the teacher's lived experiences. Despite the fact that previous research has provided invaluable insight into the incorporation of Critical Literacy into education in general and language learning programs in particular, very little attention has been given to the 'if' and 'how' of integrating Critical Literacy Practices in online settings. With the global pandemic COVID-19 and the world-wide lockdowns, face-to-face classes were almost shifted to online ones. It is, thus, justifiable that more light needs to be shed on numerous aspects of the ways using which teachers develop or practice critical pedagogy. This is to be carried out in conjunction with how scholars picture the future of CL in online EFL classes in Iran as a result of scant attention given to the mentioned notion.

The vitality of Critical Literacy and the urgency of its incorporation into online EFL classrooms was the driving force in conducting this study. As a result, the prime purpose of the present contribution is delving into the implementation of critical literacy in online EFL classrooms in the context of Iran, along with coming up with a model appropriate for the context based on the shared experiences of teachers. To this end, their perspectives were surveyed, making sure such a practice exists, though minimally.

In order to come up with responses to address the needs recognized in the literature so as to provide insight into Critical Literacy Practices, the following question has been posed which guide the present study, addressing the requirements of the current research:

- What are the possible challenges and limitations that Iranian EFL teachers face in the process of implementing critical literacy in their online classes?

Method

Research Design

In order to keep the original context of the experiences intact, a transcendental phenomenological design was adopted to provide access to teachers' perspectives. To follow Patton's (2015) proposal that transcendental phenomenology has the capability to equip the researcher with the necessary tools to see, sense and excavate the participants' lived experiences first-hand and to the fullest, such design guided the study. This design, therefore, was adopted as it favors the exploration of context-specific, interpretive and descriptive analyses of conscious experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenology targets only ~~the~~ observable behaviors. It was selected as it was suitable for the present study. It gives researchers the liberty and dynamism in conducting research as the research question posed in such studies can be dynamic, subject to ongoing revision, and refined as the research has the mission to uncover new knowledge (Mackay & Gass, 2005). The various methods in phenomenology include interviews, diaries, audio/video recordings, observations, and documentation as when doing so the researcher can gain access to an in-depth perspective into the concept under investigation.

MAXQDA 2020, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis package, was employed to analyzed the gleaned data. The program ascertained that interview texts were categorized in a specified order. The MAXQDA 20 simplifies the analysis of multiple texts and organizes content analysis. Coding on the interviews conducted by the researchers led to the emergence of some themes, using coding of the data (MAXQDA, 2020).

Searching out for themes in participants' responses, researchers established some themes that signified critical literacy practices. In this study, the main extracted themes were separately coded, tabulated and classified. Coding is of utmost importance as Bazeley and Jackson (2013) define it under the terminology of an abstract avatar of an object, notion, or phenomenon. Coding was adopted as it was recommended by Creswell (2014) in critical ethnographic studies. To functionally analyze the data gleaned from interviews extracting the themes comprising Critical Literacy, exploratory thematic analysis was employed along with content analysis. Mertens (2009) has talked about the four stages of qualitative data analysis: preparation, exploration, reduction and interpretation. This approach, according to Weber (1985), comprises of a series of procedures helping researchers to drag out underlying themes hidden in the files.

Classroom Observation

The nature of online classrooms requires direct observation as it is dynamically shifting and evolving (and also in case a problem happens). In order to gain a better perspective, moving in line with common modes of data collection, researchers decided to turn to observation as a means to gain insight into how the intended practices take place inside the virtual classroom. This method of data

collection is employed to glean first-hand data from both teachers' activities and learners' level of engagement in classes, as it was previously decided not to directly engage with the learners. The classes were recorded for transcription serving further analysis and research purposes.

Not only this, but field notes were also taken as a common practice in class observation because "[N]otes may supplement information from other sources, including documents and interviews, or they may comprise the main research data" (Ary et al., 2010, p. 435). As the classes are being observed, the notes along with recorded audio (or video) can provide great insight into what actually goes on in classrooms. In order to ascertain what went on in the classes, and to further make sure nothing was missed, all the sessions of all the classes were observed by the researchers. Finally, the transcribed data were coded to extract the constructs under investigation for the sake of the study. Of all the data, 20 percent of the data were coded by a second assessor in order to ascertain interrater reliability (Cohen's Kappa = 0.9).

Teachers' Interview

For the sake of more in-depth knowledge, interviews were arranged with the teachers. King and Horrocks (2010) point out that the most commonly used means of qualitative data collection are interviews. Researchers strongly recommend interviews accompanied by diaries (Williamson et al., 2015). Although direct observation has always been considered to offer first-hand data, the incorporation of interviews was deemed necessary by the researchers so as to serve as a method for further triangulation of data, despite being construed to provide a secondary set of data. Another benefit of the interview is that they can broaden the scope of the study as they are the most commonly employed method of data collection in qualitative research (Talmy, 2010).

Based on the objectives of the study, researchers developed questions fitting the purpose of the present research. Through the comments of a panel of Applied Linguists, the relevance, consistency, and content of the questions were checked. Content validity, was applied as an estimate of the validity of the findings of the study. Inter-coder reliability was another factor to be taken into consideration in measuring the relevance, appropriateness, and consistency of the extracted themes.

Each interview session lasted a maximum of 20 minutes and was recorded. To give the searchers more liberty in asking questions, the interview was semi-structured in which "the researcher uses a written list of questions as a guide, while still having the freedom to digress and probe for more information" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p.173). The researchers developed the questions themselves, validated by experts in applied linguistics.

The content validity of the interview was evaluated by 7 faculty members specializing in the field of Applied Linguistics who evaluated each question for its

language clarity and relevance to the issue under investigation. On a Likert scale (1) was deemed irrelevant, (2) needed a major modification, (3) needed a minor modification and (4) was completely relevant. Likewise, the clarity of the questions was rated on a 4-point scale where (1) was unclear, while (4) was completely clear. The ratio of relevance and clarity to the total number of items was, ultimately, computed. According to Rodrigues et al. (2017), the item is clear or relevant if the ratio is above .79. Based on the raters' evaluation, the content validity of the interview was above .81.

Participants

In the present study, based on convenience sampling, only those groups of English teachers working full-time or part-time at English language institutes in Iran were targeted to participate. To cater for the needs of the study, the participants were selected from among Iranian EFL teachers working in two private language schools (which for issues of confidentiality shall not be named directly). Due to issues of practicality, the participants were mainly selected from the cities of Rasht and Tehran and although the main concern of the study was online EFL classes, the possibility of face-to-face interviews was considered, hence the need for selecting the participants from the cities where researchers were based. The total number of participants included about 29 non-native EFL instructors with at least 5 years of experience, teaching at private English language schools in Iran.

The exclusion criteria included unwillingness to cooperate, novice and in-training teachers, teachers of languages other than English and those who held only private classes with only one student. The reason for selecting 29 participants was provisioning the possibility of participants dropping out or withdrawing from the study and the fact that data saturation would be the ultimate goal of interviews and data collection. The participants are selected from teachers whose educational backgrounds ranged from Bachelor's, and masters. They had teaching experiences ranging from five to 18 years. Such institutes usually hold classes with a maximum of a dozen students partaking in online classes (to maintain social distancing considering the Covid-19 pandemic in case classes are formed in a face-to-face manner).

As the classes are mainly conducted in English, the majority of teachers are TEFL graduates having passed TTC courses prior to starting their teaching practice. As the concept of critical literacy may be far-fetched for elementary and beginner students, the researchers decided (employing purposive sampling) to select the instructors teaching at the intermediate level and above, who met the requirements, to participate in the study. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants of the study.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

Demographic information	Participants (f)
Gender	
Female	21
Male	8
Age	
20-29	11
30-39	17
40-49	1
Educational level	
BA	12
MA	14
PhD	3
Geographical Locations (i.e., Provinces of Iran)	
Guilan	16
Tehran	9
Mazandaran	2
Isfahan	1
Shiraz	1
Years of Teaching Experience	
5-9	10
10-14	15
15-20	4
Majors	
Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)	5
English Language and Literature	15
Linguistics	9

This qualitative study aimed to interview teachers, out of whose words the main tenets of CL taking place in Iranian online classrooms were extracted. In the interviews, thick descriptions were provided regarding critical literacy application along with actual classroom practices. Last, but not least, the study sought to examine the extent to which such practices, if any, proved to be fruitful from the point of view of the teachers.

Results

Interview Results

To answer the research question of the study, i.e. what possible dilemmas, challenges, constraints, and limitations Iranian EFL teachers face in the process of implementing critical literacy in their online classes, teachers mostly concurred on the issues of technicalities, rigid curricula, and the restrictive nature of online classes. As quoting every single comment the participants made was beyond the scope of the present study, the researchers decided to insert relevant hypertexts along with their own comments in the following section. The details are tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2

Structure of the Themes

Themes	
Activities/ conditions claimed to cause constraints on critical practices	Activities that were actually observed
Boring nature of online classes	Not considering CL practices as lesson-related
Internet connection problems	Viewing CL practices as taboos and forbidden
Lack of opportunity to provide feedback	Fear of losing jobs by questioning authority
Low chances of group / pair work	Sensitive nature of cultural, religious, political subjects
Rigid education system	Censorship of L2 course books
Syllabi restrictions	No time dedicated to out-of-the-book questions
Not knowing exactly what CL is	total absence of CL practices

Dull Nature of Online Classes

One participant pointed to the lackluster nature of online classes as many nonverbal cues are omitted, cues which could have been subject to interpretation leading to circumstances under which critical literacy could have been facilitated.

[1] *Most of our body language is missing in online classes and in busy classes, the learners do not even see each other so that they can convey some parts of the message through non-verbal communication. This can be*

problematic and cause some misunderstanding. For example, humor is not very well-received if it is written in a chat box. (Participant 4)

As clear as it may be, this participant mentioned their preference for face-to-face classes over online ones, due to the same reasons mentioned above:

[2] *First of all, getting students to focus is very hard in online classes, and explaining some terms takes long eons because of the fact that they cannot express their problems as easily as face-to-face classes. (Participant 12)*

One participant said that they could only encourage learners to state their opinions when they are incentivized by, for example, the teacher playing the devil's advocate:

[3] *I ask them questions in the form of follow-ups. They might express their own lived experiences. As a teacher I have no choice but to play the devil's advocate to keep the discussion going. (Participant 7)*

Internet Connection Problems

Another highly cited problem had to do with internet connection. The overwhelming majority of teachers attributed their lack of opportunity to practice critical literacy to poor quality of internet connectivity:

[4] *Having a low chance to engage the learners in the activities due to limitations in interactions and to use proper materials owing to low speed and breakdowns in connections. (Participant 29)*

Again, the problems of online classes resurfaced here. Another issue that came up along with the internet connection in online classes was the time that was also wasted for constant re-logs:

[5] *Right now the biggest challenge is the lack of time. I have 90 minutes and a lot of content to cover. Another issue would be a breakdown in communication due to internet speed problems or technicalities. The same problems could continue to persist in the future. (Participant 26)*

Providing feedback was among the areas discussed by the teachers. Participant 13 went on further to the issue of feedback, saying that: *"I assume giving feedback on their way of thinking in this online platform would be challenging"*. This participant described feedback as both in-action comments given to students during the classes and feedback on assignments, highlighting the difficulty of providing the first one in the class.

Low Chances of Group / Pair Work

Participant Two was critical of the fact that it is virtually impossible for online classes to have the commodities of face-to-face classes such as group/ pair work which are necessary for CL:

[6] *...activities such as group discussion, a decent presentation from the part of the learner, presenting and analyzing texts in the form of questions*

without worrying if the person on the other side of the line could hear you; all of these are very hard to implement... (Participant 2)

As the classroom restrictions did not create a relaxed atmosphere, as the teachers claimed, one participant told the researchers that they had created a group in social media so that the students could freely discuss and challenge what went on outside the class:

[10] I have some groups in social media where learners get to tell me what they think of the procedure of the class. Since I encourage them to talk about the things they find helpful and those they do not, they often feel free to share their opinion. I believe they usually know what works for them best. However, this process needs to be done discreetly in a way that it won't backfire ... (Participant 2)

Rigid Education System

A very thought-provoking idea that emerged regarding the obstacles on the pathway of implementing critical literacy practices would be the rigid nature of the hierarchical education system:

[7] I think we need to create a safe environment so that people wouldn't be afraid of expressing their political sidings and more importantly, we need to maintain an unbiased mediator's role. People should feel like they might end up at a disadvantage for having had a different view than that of their teacher. (Participant 9)

No room for creativity was brought up by another candidate, highlighting the fact that the syllabi leave no space for anything beyond the lesson to be covered:

[8] The reality is that our syllabus does not consider cultural elements at all. The teacher him or herself needs to have a critical mindset. Both inside and outside the class. (Participant 8)

There were many more cases where the participants claimed that it was not possible for teachers to practice criticality as the restrictions of syllabi did not permit it:

[9] By entailing actual subjects and dedicating space in the syllabus to this part; by emancipating teachers and not forcing them to cover an inflexible syllabus. They can easily change the way everything works by changing the evaluation process; because of the fact that everything within this country is based on evaluation; therefore, if you change the evaluation medium in a way that it entails critical thinking the syllabus and educational system will follow. (Participant 12)

During the study, it was noticed that the teachers were critical of their own practices, with many commenting that since there do exist rigid limitations regarding the educations system, syllabi, and socio-political climate, the blame rests on their own shoulders to firstly know what critical literacy is and secondly to do implement it by taking the lead themselves:

[11] *The teacher must be able to think critically himself to begin with; s/he must be able to explain the matter if s/he is forced to and the instructor must possess an avidity about knowledge so that he can always make progress and go forward, that is exactly how s/he can obtain more information and can operationalize anything within his classroom but in the real universe, teachers get lazy after a while and they do not follow up anything seriously once they have job security. (Participant 11)*

Again, the idea of the fact that teachers have to bear the responsibility of first knowing what critical literacy is and then implementing it resurfaced. This participant saw criticality as a tool to bring about change not just a way of asking complicated questions:

[12] *Well as I said that earlier a teacher should not be a "preacher who is not a believer". Plus, a good knowledge of the concept of critical literacy is also important. I meet some teachers that they thought critical literacy is just about asking complicated questions. It's good to know that the ultimate purpose for critical literacy, in my opinion, is to bring about a change." (Participant 19)*

Another participant blamed the teachers for their indolence claiming that they do need to take charge, seeing this inactivity as their main fault:

[13] Most of the teachers have claims and statements of their own and sometimes they write books and articles about it. But when it comes to practice, they themselves don't follow what they have said. So I believe a teacher should make claims in a way that they really believe in what they are saying not just to address the problem I think everyone is aware of the most of political problems in society but solving those problems needs "a man of action". I hope it is clear enough! (Participant 21)

Observation Results

What was observed during the sessions was that many teachers taught in a way as if they felt activities related to critical literacy were not part of the classroom procedure and were, in fact, something to evade; an area that the teacher is not supposed to talk about or that the authorities forbid, or what must be done clandestinely: a taboo!

Evading Criticality

As some instructors knew they were being observed, whenever a question came up that challenged the "status quo" the teachers would blush and then directly remind the students not to distract their attention from the main focus of that specific lesson. A case in point was that of Participant 9 who forbade the students from asking the question of why they were not supposed to talk about the boy-girl relationship since it was part of the lesson. The researchers would like to comment here that this is but an example from among a mounting number of cases of teachers of any subject matter in Iran, who would barely digress from whatever is dictated by the curriculum from the authorities. This rigid education system is what keeps both

the instructors and the learners form thinking about any creative 'move' towards asking the question why.

During observations of the classes taught by Participant 16, once the teacher said that this tendency to avoid encouraging students to be critical stemmed from the fact that they might have been criticized for not following what they were supposed to, i.e. the lesson:

> [14] *I ask you questions when it is related to the lesson because if I ask out-of-the-book questions you might feel it is not related to the lesson and get distracted.* (*Participant 16*)

Another participant, for example, was observed telling the learners the reason behind not following up on some ideas such as those that are:

> [15] *Mostly social and political issues and sometimes cultural phenomena are the things we tend to avoid going about religious matters is the red line in this class. Please do not comment on these issues during the class (Participant 10)*

This teacher had told the researchers that many colleagues had the same challenge to various extents with the main reason being the fear of losing their jobs. Although most language institutes are privately-run, they are constantly monitored by the 'Ministry of Education'.

Another teacher was observed telling the students that he did not have a clue what the topic mainly revolved around. The students were mostly silent after that and they did not ask anything else:

> [16] *Guys I can't answer your questions because I don't know much about this issue myself. The aim of this exercise was to teach you present perfect. So, let's stick to the plan. (Participant 19)*

The Barrier of Logistics

There were a countless number of times when the connection would break down and ruin the atmosphere. In one class the teacher managed to fire the imagination of the students in the freer practice section of the speaking, but poor connection along with the reverb of the voices did not let the class to go as planned with the teacher commenting:

> [17] *I can't hear you properly and I think your friends got kicked out of the room. Everyone please log out and log back in so we can try again. Of course, this the peak hour and there is a lot of load on the servers. (Participant 21)*

It was also observed that the teachers complained during the class about not having the possibility of putting the students in group pods as was the case in many face-to-face classes. In applications like 'Sky room' this option is absent and many other ones mostly glitch when more than two students are grouped in one pod. It was very interesting to see one teacher calling digital class as an unreal one:

[18] *If this was a real class I would group you so that you could practice asking and answering questions but unfortunately it is not possible. Hopefully, the institute would open soon and we can see each other again. (Participant 8)*

Fear of being observed was another factor that pushed the teachers to refrain from either challenging the situation or letting the students do so. One teacher was very obsessed with the fact that the class was being recorded and was afraid that whatever was said in the class could be used against them later:

[19] *Pay attention that it is being recorded so it is better to just talk about the lesson and nothing else. Thank you. (Participant 28)*

Add time constraints to all these and we come to an amalgamation of problems that are so convoluted it is not clear which knot needs to be untied first. Classes were already no longer than 90 minutes and as a couple of minutes were always killed by technicalities, teacher felt under pressure to be able to teach all the aspects of the lesson:

[20] *As we have very few minutes left, I think we need to cover the next page to finish the unit quickly. (Participant 3)*

Overall, it is palpably clear that many participants expressed concerns over technicalities such as Internet connectivity, time constraints, rigid syllabi and lack of awareness regarding critical literacy practices in their digital classes, blaming these factors along with the nature of online classes for the low regard of such practices.

Discussion

The findings indicated that a majority of teachers had little or no prior knowledge of what exactly critical literacy was, let alone being able to implement such critical practices in their own online classes. Having said that, they believed that English teachers should look critically at what they do more in the future. It is palpably clear that, in spite of appreciating the opportunity of being exposed to critical literacy in the present study, many of the participants felt ambivalence towards the very notion of the concept.

Teachers Appreciating Critical Literacy

As a result of being engaged with critical reflection, the researchers noticed a gentle slope in most teachers' interest in inequalities and power relations in socio-political issues as was the case for the study carried out by DeMulder et al., (2013) whose participants gained an understanding of such matters and began to feel toward marginalized minorities and those underprivileged. This could be partially rooted in the fact that those who hold TEFL degrees usually pass courses germane to critical applied linguistics; a finding that is totally in line with what Aliakbari and Faraji (2011), Yilmaz (2009), and Abelrahim (2007) were unanimous on.

Researchers of the present study hope that, as teachers became more aware of their responsibility towards a more inclusive education, they might re-evaluate the indirect influence of their own pedagogical practices. This is in line with current research accentuating the fact that educators are growing more and more sensitive when it comes to exercising control inside the classroom (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2014), the gravity of the restriction and control they impose to inhibit the learners' views (Kubota, 2014), or opting for safe topics for classroom discussion as a result of fear of the outbreak of '"mutiny" (Bender-Slack, 2010).

Several other studies have found that exposure to CL motivated teachers to share this newly discovered philosophy with their own colleagues (Sangster, Stone, & Anderson, 2013). Some studies have been successful in changing the mindset of teachers, especially Asian ones, who, after being introduced to CL, started advocating a shift in their own teaching; moving away from mere instruction to comprehension (Ko, 2013; Ko & Wang, 2009), form strategy-based teaching to the test to discussing socio-cultural issues (Ko & Wang, 2009), from teacher-dominated monologues to learner-cantered interactions (Ko, 2013), from mere text decoding to seeing the text as a tool in making meaning (Tan et al., 2010).

The point is not to be missed that, despite acknowledging the significance of CL, those partaking in this study raised numerous concerns so as to the applicability and appropriacy of implementing CL in their classes due to a number of existing assumptions which give rise to several factors which prevent them from applying it in their classrooms.

Targeting the System

What else that came under the spotlight was teachers' penchant for prerequisites of agendas favouring the incorporation of CL in curricula and syllabi. They felt the lack of such practices and complained regarding the restrictions imposed as a result of rigid education systems. Some teachers have raised concerns about the direct implementation of critical literacy or critical thought about institutional practices, policies, or even materials that would invite questioning of the education system that such institutions are attempting to give credit to and work hard to establish. As White (2009, p. 56) puts it, "paradoxically, when charged with teaching students critical literacy, teachers should be wary of actually succeeding in the endeavour!" Perhaps this was the root cause of many of these teachers showing conservatism to initiate change in their classes (Sangster et al., 2013).

Another important finding was that teachers identified many technical, practical, and educational restrictions when it came to practicing critical literacy in their classes. More specifically, they knew that the ultimate goal of education was not only teaching what was provided in the book. These teachers seemed to sense that something was missing in their teaching affairs. The first barrier was the rigid curricula that both implicitly and explicitly devalued CL, which was also the case for some studies (Curdt-Christiansen, 2010; Masuda, 2012; Tan et al., 2010). This was the underlying cause of teachers' penchant for focusing on the learners'

proficiency (Ko & Wang, 2009; Masuda, 2012; Tan & Guo, 2009) rather than extracting the literal meaning of the text; so that instead of interpreting it they could go for its implications (Curdt-Christiansen, 2010).

Critical Literacy is one of those approaches armed with an egalitarian view towards education and society as English language teaching has been strongly influenced by power relations in the world. Just as Pack (2023) proposed and proved, critical literacy education needs to be incorporated into the whole teacher education program as a sure measure to boost self-exploration instead of studying the theoretical concept. Little has been done to compensate for this shortage of critical literacy practices in language classes, despite the international status of the English language. One reason might stem from the prevalent educational misconceptions many practitioners and professionals hold and enforce leading to suppression and marginalization (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). As Kumaravadivelu has put, "by their uncritical acceptance of the native speaker dominance, non-native professionals legitimize their own marginalization" (p. 22).

In contexts where English is the first language, culture was not seen as a barrier to the implementation of critical literacy, while in EFL contexts it was (Ko, 2010; Kuo, 2009; Park, 2011). For example, Hao (2011) found that in non-Western countries, teachers construed the silence of students as an inhibitor to CL (as critical literacy centres around the importance of empowering students by giving voice to them. Although the teachers made positive comments about the implementation of CP, the findings showed an absence of CP in online classes in Iran as they felt unable to get a hold of the concept. This finding was in line with that of Mehranirad and Behzadpoor (2022) who came upon the idea that teachers felt they needed to be equipped with specific skill sets that they themselves may not be capable of handling. There is no denying the fact that a critical standpoint in English language education rooted deeply in critical practices is the missing ingredient in Iranian context of ELT.

Conclusion

To be unique, our study embarked to investigate critical literacy in Iranian's language education context. The results can also pave the way for new grounds of research to test and theorize the notion of critical literacy in online language classes. What is more, the present study managed to present the obstacles and the requisites of a classroom setting in which critical literacy could easily be practiced. The themes in this study can function as road maps to guide other interested researchers' development of instruments to explore critical literacy more.

These findings, therefore, call for educational policymakers to revise their educational policies along with teacher training programs for courses that incorporate the CP principles, which can steer TTCs toward this destination. Familiarity with critical literacy can assist policymakers to reconsider the urge for implementing CP in language education. Providing and promoting criticality in lessons in educational curricula enables teachers to help students develop those

essential skills that prepare them to critically question the power structure that persists in society resulting in the genesis of equitable and fair education in the world in the long run.

Educators need to hold the highest regard for critical literacy by acknowledging what learners bring with them to the learning environments. Teachers and educators need to encourage criticality by removing the fear of being oppressed by both inside factors (peers and the teacher) and outside factors (curriculum-developers and policy-makers). In order to build confidence, learners can start the process of critical learning in small groups (We tend to call them mini-groups).

More specifically, we propose that, firstly, teachers and teacher-educators be informed of the notion of critical literacy so that they would be able to appreciate and engage in such activities in their classes. Language learners should be informed of, and more importantly expect, some form of recognition of power relations, gender issues, cultural differences and religious concerns in their class interactions with their peers. This demands Iranian language institutes to majorly redesign their curriculum, teaching, and materials to better suit the reality of language learning, i.e., asking questions. English culture in particular should be included, compared, and contrasted in teaching materials in juxtaposition with the Persian one.

From what has been discussed, and in order to come to a conclusion, it was found that some participants seemed to display no interest in critical literacy. It would be fascinating if future research could follow up with such participants to understand how they would change. It would also be interesting to conduct a more detailed study to identify the factors that make such participants apathetic in the first place. Weng (2023), for example, desperately calls for more research on critical literacy in EFL contexts. Also, the carrying out of this study coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result, the main source of data collection was online classes. It is highly recommended for further research to focus on critical literacy practices in face-to-face classes as it might provide insights that would have, otherwise, been deemed not attainable in digital ones.

As a final word, the very notion of critical literacy ~~is~~ stands equal to a precious gem that is invisible to the unaided eye. It is of utmost importance to unveil it so that the entire world can enjoy seeing it.

Results of the present study are, inevitably subject to some limitations. The first limitation of the present contribution is concerned with its scope and generalizability as it solely deals with EFL learners and teachers in the domestic milieu of Iran. Another challenge was convenience sampling, which was adopted as the sampling approach as the researchers had no choice but to choose only those in the EFL context of Iran who displayed propensity to cooperate. What is more, regarding interpreting interview reports, care is of utmost importance as these are very, very personalized opinions.

Another threat might be the participants' tendency to provide responses suitable for interview setting rather than what actually goes on inside their classrooms (self-flattery syndrome). No control, whatsoever, was exercised over the gender, age, educational, cognitive, or ethnic roots, and socio-cultural background and conditions of the participants.

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Appendix

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

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 <u>cannot</u> 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 _____?

Authors' Biographies

Esmaeel Ali Salimi is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at Allameh Tabataba'i University. He has concentrated his teaching and research mostly on Second Language Acquisition, Critical Literacy, Critical Pedagogy and Teacher Education. He has published papers in TESOL Quarterly, Language Assessment Quarterly, Written Language & Literacy, Learning and Motivation, International Review of Applied Linguistics, ELT and Education & Information Technology and a few other national scholarly Journals. He has also been accepted as a keynote speaker and a presenter in different national and international conferences.

Omid Ostad is a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at Allameh Tabataba'i University, (ATU), Tehran, Iran. He has been a university instructor at Guilan University, the Educational Director at Sepano Language Academy, supervisor at Afarinesh IELTS House, and a teacher for over 15 years. He is interested in conducting research mainly in the areas of Teacher Education, SLA, Linguistics, and Teaching Strategies. Having published articles in this filed, he has been a presenter in more than ten national and international conferences.