Exploring Iranian EFL Learners' Perceptions of Critical Pedagogy-Based Teacher Effectiveness

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Abstract

Teacher education in Iran has not been reactive to critical pedagogy and stuck to traditional thinking lines. To address this problem, this study aimed to explore Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness. In so doing, a basic interpretive design was used. The participants included thirty Iranian EFL learners (15 males and 15 females) who were selected through convenience sampling from among different state and Azad universities in Iran. To collect the data, a semi-structured interview was used. To analyze the data, open, axial, and selective coding were used. According to the results, the following themes were extracted: facilitating students' learning, being aware of the last achievements in the field of TEFL, generating equal opportunities for all students in the class, teaching students problem-posing skills, and teaching students critical thinking skills. The findings have some implications for EFL teachers, teacher education instructors, and researchers.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, banking education, effective teachers, teacher effectiveness

1. Introduction

EFL teacher effectiveness is very significant because teachers' involvement in language learning is inevitable (Richards, 2001). Richards

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(2001) believed that teacher effectiveness occurs within a socially mediated environment where learners engage in meaningful communication and collaborative activities. EFL teachers can teach more effectively by providing appropriate guidance and support to their students. EFL teacher effectiveness is particularly important in EFL learning, where collaborative tasks, peer communications, and teacher-student interactions play a crucial role in developing learners' language proficiency. Furthermore, recently, critical pedagogy-based English Language Teaching (ELT) has aroused the interest of scholars (Ahmadian & Erfan Rad, 2014; Wei, 2018). Critical pedagogy has affected teacher education remarkably (Wei, 2018). Critical pedagogy is regarded as an approach to language teaching and learning which aims at associating the classroom context with the broader sociocultural, political, and economic context (Gao et al., 2020; Wei, 2018). Today, critical pedagogy implications and applications have gone beyond their original agenda to deal with issues on ELT

There is agreement that ELT is a complex profession which is faced with obvious problems (Ahmed, 2003; Gao et al., 2020). Addressing these problems can be done more easily if EFL teachers resort to critical pedagogy (Ahmadian & Erfan Rad, 2014) because critical pedagogy is a novel approach to reacting to mainstream banking education (Freire, 1970). However, teacher education in Iran has not been reactive to critical pedagogy and stuck to traditional thinking lines. This is founded based on the premise that teachers are possessors of knowledge and learners do not possess knowledge at all. This stance is not congruent with novel approaches in teacher education.

Moreover, although teacher effectiveness has been touched on in some studies (e.g., Sezer, Hasan, & Fezile, 2019; Shahvand & Rezvani, 2016; Zamani & Ahangari, 2016), it has not been addressed as tied to critical pedagogy. Given that the combination of teacher effectiveness with critical pedagogy can lead to significant outcomes in EFL teaching and learning, this gap is worth bridging. To this end, the following research question was formulated:

1. What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness?

2. Literature Review
2.1. Theoretical Framework
This study is theoretically built upon critical pedagogy. According to Freire (1993), critical pedagogy is a praxis-based educational thinking line

whose aim is supporting students in learning freedom, authoritarian views, and power knowledge (Giroux, 2010). Critical pedagogy is an educational philosophy which seeks to show a reaction to oppression (Brosio, 2000) by putting social inequities aside to strengthen and change others in line with ethics and values (Capper, 1993). In total, critical pedagogy seeks to generate positive social change to make society democratic and fair (White, Cooper, & Mackey, 2014).

Those who support the use of critical pedagogy in EFL teaching focus on the ties between EFL learning and social change to reach a dialectic interplay between language and learners' self-concept (Zohrabi, Razmjoo, & Ahmadi, 2019). According to this view, the relationship between language and learner is dynamic. This is why the belief in critical pedagogy is that teachers should be made aware of the inherent inequalities and injustices in educational settings and become capable of responding to them and in this way, reconstructing their selves (Zohrabi, Razmjoo, & Ahmadi, 2019). According to McLaren (1998), critical pedagogy is after human injustice and unfairness. This is why teachers are recommended to uncover the unity of knowledge and power.

2.2. Related Studies on Critical Pedagogy

Larson (2014) investigated how the use of critical pedagogy can be grounded in Indonesia. Having described critical pedagogy, the researcher justified the application of critical pedagogy by reviewing the literature. Finally, some stages were suggested for unearthing critical pedagogy in EFL teaching.

Rahimi et al. (2015) suggested some recommendations for curriculum designers upon the principles of critical pedagogy. Moreover, it was concluded that choosing and grading materials should also be done based on critical pedagogy. According to Taylor et al.'s (2015) results, while teachers corroborated the necessity of using critical pedagogy, they perceived that currently critical pedagogy is not fully implemented in EFL teaching settings. Roohani et al. (2016) planned a scale, namely Teacher Critical Pedagogy, to assess the volume of critical pedagogy utilized in the English contexts by Iranian teachers. The scale that was developed in the Likert scale was confirmed in terms of validity and reliability. Enyew and Melesse (2018) explored the amount of infusion of critical pedagogy in universities. The qualitative and quantitative results were opposite to each other: According to the quantitative findings, critical pedagogy has been incorporated into EFL curricula. However the qualitative findings showed the opposite of this. In the study by Wei (2018), educational shifts in EFL curricula were addressed based on CP. According to the results,

the recent observations show basic changes in EFL curricula with the arrival of CP. Parker (2019) addressed the values of critical education for ELT and teacher education in post-secondary education and recommended that stakeholders take these elements as starting points for re-conceptualizing their teaching principles and methods.

2.3. Related Studies on Teacher Effectiveness

Rahimi and Nabilou (2011) examined the effectiveness of teachers teaching in Iranian public and private schools. According to the results, in both settings, teachers were effective. This shows that context does not affect teacher effectiveness. Navidinia et al. (2014) examined teacher effectiveness in Iran through a mixed-methods study. The results confirmed that the current system is not valuable and high quality. In the research by Rahimi and Hosseini Karkami (2015), the impact of EFL teachers' teaching strategies on teaching effectiveness was examined. As found by the results, teaching effectiveness was heavily impacted by teachers' methods of teaching. Shahvand and Rezvani (2016) examined whether gender influences teacher effectiveness. The findings showed similar perceptions for male and female teachers. This confirmed that gender was not effective on teacher effectiveness. Therefore, it was concluded that teacher effectiveness is independent of gender characteristics.

3. Method

Consistent with the aims of the study, a basic interpretive design was used. This method is appropriate for extracting the recurrent themes and patterns in the data. Thirty Iranian EFL learners (15 males and 15 females) who were selected through convenience sampling from among different state and Azad universities in Iran participated in the study. That is, the participants were selected based on their availability to the researcher. They were studying at the M.A. and Ph.D. levels in the field of TEFL. Their age range was 23-50. The mother tongue of all of them was Persian. This group participated in an interview to show their perceptions of critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness. The criterion for the sample size was data saturation. That is, data was saturated after interviewing the 30th learners. To clarify the issue, after collecting data from the 30th subject, no new finding was obtained.

They were fully informed of the objectives as a part of fulfilling research ethics. Moreover, they were ensured that no leakage of their personal information would occur. Additionally, no harm threatened the participants, and their consent was taken for participation in the study. A

semi-structured interview was designed based on consultation with previous research and seven TEFL experts. The interview consisted of five open-ended questions that addressed the characteristics of an effective English teacher in line with critical pedagogy. The interview questions started with more general questions and continued with more specific ones. Additionally, the questions were designed in a way that no bias or subjectivity is represented in them.

The language of the interview was English because the participants could convey their meaning in English in a comprehensible way. Besides, there was no time limit for each interview session. Moreover, each interview was taken individually. All the interviews were taken through social networks including WhatsApp and Telegram applications for the convenience of the interviewees. Because the participants had these applications on their phones, no limitation threatened the study in this regard. The participants believed that these two applications are more user-friendly than the others. All the interviews were taken by the researcher and transcribed to create verbatim written data for analysis. Then, the transcribed version was subjected to the manual qualitative thematic analysis.

As we know, when speaking about qualitative data, instead of reliability and validity, dependability and credibility of data are checked. To establish the dependability and credibility of the interview data, low-inference descriptors, and member checks were used. Here, using low-inference descriptors means presenting direct quotations from the interviews which allows readers to experience the participants' world by seeing the actual words of the respondents (Ary et al., 2010). Using member checks involved the researcher's sharing her interpretations of the data with the participants to avoid any miscommunication, identify inaccurate interpretations, and show courtesy to the participants by letting them read what has been written about them. In member checks, the researcher got feedback from the participants about the study's findings (Ary et al., 2010). The procedure was launched by designing the questions for an interview as stated above. Next, the sampling was done and the selected sample was interviewed by the researcher. More details have been provided above. To analyze the data, open, axial, and selective coding steps were followed manually by the researcher without using any software in three stages. In the first step, the researcher tried to become familiar with the data by taking notes or looking through the data. In the second step, the data were coded. It involved making some phrases and sentences of the text bold and coming up with some codes that represented

the content of the bold parts. In the third step, the codes were looked over to identify the recurrent patterns in them.

4. Findings

The following 5 themes were extracted from the content analysis of the data:

Theme 1: Facilitating Students' Learning

The first recurrent theme, "Facilitating Students' Learning", emphasizes the role of teachers as learning facilitators, congruent with critical pedagogy principles.

Participant 18 (P18) recognized the importance of this role of teachers in teaching effectiveness, stating: "*Teachers should be facilitators of students' learning by utilizing various advancements in education. This makes their teaching more effective for students.*"

Participant 2 (P2) noted the relationship between teaching success and the facilitating role of teachers, stating: "*Teachers should be facilitators of learning rather than learning dictators. Students should be helped to learn more easily by teachers. This is a technique for teacher success. They should support students' learning by different strategies.*"

Participant 10 (P10) echoed a similar sentiment, discussing: "*In critical pedagogy school, teachers are not controllers of students anymore. But they are here to facilitate learning for learners. This leads to several positive outcomes including teaching effectiveness.*"

Theme 2: Being Aware of the Last Achievements in the Field of TEFL

The second recurring theme, "Being Aware of the Last Achievements in the Field of TEFL", underscores teachers' awareness of the new advancements in the field as a key contributor to teaching effectiveness.

Participant 14 (P14) expressed teachers' awareness of new educational achievements as a factor influencing their effectiveness of teaching, stating: "*Teachers' teaching effectiveness passes through different factors one of which is awareness of the recent achievements in the language teaching field. My idea is that the role of new innovations in the field of teaching is a cornerstone of critical pedagogy.*"

Participant 7 (P7) shared that using new findings in EFL teaching is effective on teacher effectiveness, stating: "*To me, teachers are required to use new research findings in their profession to increase their own teaching effectiveness. For example, they can use search motors to download new papers published in their field.*"

Participant 3 (P3) referred to the contribution of new advancements to critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness, expressing: "*Critical pedagogy theory emphasizes innovation and newness. I feel teachers should take this into account when teaching EFL. This contributes to higher effectiveness of their work.*"

Theme 3: Generating Equal Opportunities for All Students in the Class

The third recurring theme, "Generating Equal Opportunities for All Students in the Class", highlights that effective teachers, based on critical pedagogy, are those who generate equal opportunities for all students in the class. Participant 10 (P10) expressed equal learning opportunities as a right of students that is well recognized by an effective teacher, stating: "*Every student has the right to be provided with the opportunities which are available to other students. If a teacher recognizes this, he can claim that he is an effective teacher.*"

Participant 9 (P9) also regarded equal class opportunities as a concern of effective teachers, stating: "*An effective teacher is concerned with providing equal opportunities for all the students. This is justified by the emphasis of critical pedagogy on the lack of bias and discrimination.*"

Participant 12 (P12) perceived the equality of learning opportunities as a main issue for effective teachers, expressing: "*An effective teacher pays attention to the equality of learning opportunities. No student should be lagged behind others for personal reasons.*"

Theme 4: Teaching Students Problem-Posing Skills

The fourth recurring theme, "Teaching Students Problem-Posing Skills", highlights how teaching problem-posing skills is a feature of effective teachers, in the light of critical pedagogy.

Participant 20 (P20) noted that teaching effectively involves teaching problem-solving skills, stating: "*Teaching effectively based on critical pedagogy involves teaching problem-posing skills so that students can raise problems independently.*"

Participant 9 (P9) emphasized the importance of incorporating problem-posing skills in teaching effectively, discussing: "*Teaching effectively is not separate from problem-posing skills, at least when critical pedagogy is going to be the basis of teaching. Students are needed to learn how to pose problems.*"

Participant 17 (P17) discussed the need for students to be trained on problem-posing skills as a requirement of effective teaching, stating: "*Effective teaching involves students' learning to express problematic*

issues which preoccupy their minds. As supported by critical pedagogy, learners must be empowered with regard to problem-posing skills."

Theme 5: Teaching Students Critical Thinking Skills

The fifth recurring theme, "Teaching Students Critical Thinking Skills", highlights that effective teachers teach students how to think critically.

Participant 2(P2) noted that criticality and critical pedagogy are tightly intermingled, stating: "*Critical pedagogy is seriously concerned with critical thinking. Teacher effectiveness cannot be positively judged without teaching critical thinking skills.*"

Participant 13 (P13) emphasized the importance of critical thinking in effective teaching, discussing: "*I think effective teaching is achieved if students are taught critical thinking. They should be instructed on the strategies of thinking critically.*"

Participant 5 (P5) discussed the need for teachers' emphasis on critical thinking, stating: "*In critical pedagogy-based teaching, it is a must for teachers to put emphasis on critical thinking. This has a high effect on students' success in learning.*"

5. Discussion

With regard to the findings, the following perceptions were extracted: Facilitating students' learning, being aware of the last achievements in the field of TEFL, generating equal opportunities for all students in the class, teaching students problem-posing skills, and teaching students critical thinking skills. The perceptions resonate with the results of the studies by Abdeli Soltan Ahmadi and Sadeghi (2016), Colombo (2013), Daryai-Hansen et al. (2015), and Sadeghi (2012) wherein students' learning, paying heed to last developments in the field, and putting emphasis on equal opportunities for all students were enumerated as features of teachers who teach in a CP-based system. The findings are also consistent with the results of Sabaghzade et al. (2023) in which it was recommended that teachers should encourage students to pose problems and think critically. Furthermore, the results are supported by the studies of Adams (2004), Aikman and Unterhalter (2007), Mohammadi, et al. (2016), and Mostafazadeh, et al. (2015) wherein equity of education was proposed.

To interpret the findings, the perceptions extracted in the present study are also indirectly emphasized in critical pedagogy under a variety of concepts including social consciousness-raising, learner empowerment, and alignment with globalization (Abdeli Soltan Ahmadi & Sadeghi,

2016). In addition, the perceptions raised are in opposition to the banking system of education and therefore, congruent with critical pedagogy (Sabaghzade et al., 2023).

CP is theoretically built upon all the issues put forth by the participants of this study. In fact, CP emerged as a reaction to a system called banking education wherein teachers were regarded as providers of information and students as receivers of information. Such a system was devoid of any empowerment agenda to help students challenge the status quo, protest inequality, seek transformation, be engaged in class activities, solve their own problems as well as those of others, etc.

EFL teachers who teach based on the above themes are effective in teaching, based on critical pedagogy. When a teacher seeks to attain effectiveness in light of critical pedagogy, he/she must inevitably follow the tenets of critical pedagogy in EFL teaching. Going beyond banking teaching, being involved with students' critical thinking and problem-posing skills, teaching as free from subjectivity and bias, making learning easier for students, and taking advantage of others' views are what make teaching critical pedagogy-laden and transformative (Adams, 2004). In sum, critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness passes through the channel of critical pedagogy principles and tenets. No one can claim that he or she is teaching EFL effectively in line with critical pedagogy without manifesting or representing critical pedagogy in his/her teaching and assessment methods and strategies, classroom behaviors, social interactions, and so on.

6. Conclusions

In line with the findings of the study, it can be concluded that critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness is a multi-faceted phenomenon. It revolves around several factors all of which are equally important and worth noting. In sum, it is concluded that EFL teachers should take different factors into account in seeking to achieve critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness. Given that critical pedagogy as a theory is broad in theory and practice, implementing its principles in EFL teaching requires a bulk of knowledge, research, experience, and training. This implies that critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness does not occur overnight. However EFL teachers are needed to enhance their critical pedagogy knowledge base, make their teaching practices consistent with the principles of critical pedagogy, conduct research on this research area, and benefit from critical pedagogy-based training and educational programs.

7. Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

With a view to the penetration of critical pedagogy in advanced educational systems of the World, this study contributes to the advancement of teacher education in Iran toward critical pedagogy. Moreover, since the researcher found no study in the literature on learners' perceptions of critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness, this study adds to the knowledge base in the field. In addition, this study adds to the validity of the studies proposing the application of critical pedagogy in EFL teaching.

This study enriches the theoretical background of EFL teacher effectiveness by merging teacher effectiveness with critical pedagogy as a prominent theory in education. Given that teacher effectiveness is a relatively neglected research area, this can broaden the insights on this issue and compensate for the insufficiency of knowledge of some groups including teachers and learners about this topic.

The findings may engage different groups of stakeholders. EFL teachers can take useful insights from the findings and follow them in their teaching to achieve critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness. EFL teacher education instructors can emphasize the themes extracted in this study in teaching student teachers so that they become more familiar with and equipped with critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness.

Future research can investigate the effectiveness of a training course based on critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness on the teaching quality of EFL teachers and the learning success of learners. Future research can explore the challenges of critical pedagogy-based teacher effectiveness from the perspective of different groups.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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