


Research Article

A Mixed Methods Investigation of Critical Cultural Awareness of Iranian Female and Male Senior High School EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Critical cultural awareness is a crucial component of intercultural competence that has become an essential subject in foreign language curricula. It has captivated many academics' interests in the language teaching field. Following an ex post facto, correlational mixed-methods design, the study aimed to investigate the critical cultural awareness of 108 Iranian female and male EFL teachers from different high schools. To achieve data triangulation, the study employed the Critical Cultural Awareness Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with 15 volunteer teachers, and observation of 15 naturally occurring classes. The obtained quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Results indicated that teachers demonstrated a relatively good level of critical cultural awareness across their dimensions. The independent samples t-test reported no statistically significant difference in the critical cultural awareness of male and female EFL teachers. The qualitative interview data further elaborated these findings, revealing that teachers possessed a solid theoretical understanding of critical cultural awareness and expressed willingness to integrate it into their teaching. However, the classroom observation checklist, as a second quantitative source, revealed limited implementation of critical cultural awareness in actual practice, with low mean scores highlighting a gap between teachers' reported awareness and their pedagogical application. The findings of this study may offer multiple valuable insights into critical cultural awareness and direct stakeholders in teacher education programs at the university level to pay more attention to promoting critical cultural awareness among foreign language teachers and to incorporate practical strategies for enhancing it in classroom contexts, as evidenced by teachers' positive perceptions in interviews but limited implementation observed in actual practices.

Keywords: critical cultural awareness, EFL teachers, gender, intercultural competence, senior high school

Cite as: Pournia, S., Chalak, A., & Heidari Tabrizi, H. (2025). A mixed methods investigation of critical cultural awareness of Iranian female and male senior high school EFL teachers. *Mixed-Methods Studies in English Language Teaching*, 2(1), 133-158. <https://doi.org/10.71873/mslt.2025.1210845>

Received: 22/05/2025; **Revised:** 30/07/2025; **Accepted:** 01/09/2025; **Published:** 01/09/2025

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1. Introduction

People from diverse cultural contexts communicate while keeping their own culture and respecting others through the interculturality process. All that matters in intercultural communication is possessing the competencies required for making a comparative assessment that helps individuals interact thoroughly and effectively. Thus, we must consider that a large part of the meaning is made as the conversation develops. This building of meaning will be considerably expanded if individuals are knowledgeable about their cultural characteristics and can successfully adapt to the cultural features of others. In other words, both cultural knowledge of the first language and valuing the target culture through having positive attitudes toward the culture of the foreign language are essential.

Bara (2025) defined an individual's intercultural competence as their strength in using some skills, knowledge, and particular qualifications to experience success with people from different national cultural backgrounds. When people who possess different degrees of affective, cognitive, and social attitudes can appropriately handle communication with each other, they can be considered to have high intercultural competence. Efficient and acceptable behavior and communication in intercultural environments are the main results of intercultural competence. The individuals' intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes are determining factors in forming their intercultural competence. Creely (2024) regarded intercultural competence as the interaction of social, personal, professional, and strategic sub-skills, which are related to cognition, behavior, and affect. Kamila et al. (2025) viewed intercultural competence as a long-term responsibility that could be developed in any context.

The concept of intercultural competence has been added to the notion of communicative competence in foreign languages, through which Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has emerged. According to this model, five different factors, namely knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and political education, including knowledge of critical cultural awareness (CCA), come into play. Attitudes concern inquisitiveness and openness toward others, along with the willingness to modify social beliefs and to communicate with others. Skills of interpreting and relating relate to the ability to operate in new cultural communities. They refer to the individuals' potential in recognizing and interpreting cultural stereotypes. CCA includes understanding social groups, outcomes, routines, and communication methods. CCA, as one of the important components of intercultural competence, has attracted many researchers in different disciplines, particularly foreign language education.

English teaching should not be restricted to teaching cultural content since, as stated by Fenuku (2024), language and culture are two integral entities, and language teaching is not complete without knowing about the target culture. The socio-cultural information and intercultural skills can help learners to be socio-culturally competent. Many educators are interested in examining the issue of learning and teaching culture to help learners achieve both language proficiency and cultural information in a classroom setting. To help learners achieve an appropriate level of socio-cultural competence, language teaching and teaching culture need to be considered together, and English language teachers need to be trained in the area of English culture. This requires that teachers' cultural competence awareness has to be raised, which is closely related to their attitudes towards the target culture and their perspectives on teaching culture.

What teachers need to develop their cultural competence is to go through a developmental process that requires them to be cognitively, behaviorally, and effectively involved. They need to attain general knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are essential for effective interaction with others. If intercultural communication is linked to language teaching, the learners' cultural competence will be developed (Heidari Tabrizi & Mair, 2025). This will help them go beyond traditional ethnocentrism and move towards considering new relations across social boundaries. Consequently, to grow students' linguistic along intercultural competencies, English language teachers should make a transition from the traditional approaches to the intercultural perspective (Kamila et al., 2025). Although Byram and Conlon (2025) highlighted the significant role of CCA, not much research has assessed EFL teachers' CCA, particularly in the Iranian EFL context. The present study tried to fill this research gap in the Iranian EFL situation to evaluate and develop the CCA of Iranian EFL teachers and learners. However, due to reasons like time constraints, a lack of cultural awareness, or limited preparation regarding which aspects of culture to teach, among other factors, teachers may not adequately cover cultural concerns in language schools (Sattarpour et al., 2025). In addition, addressing too many cultural concerns may be seen as favoring the values of the target language in some circumstances when it is regarded as a foreign language and undercutting local values (Creely, 2024).

The significance of the present study can be multifold. First, the development of CCA is an important goal of foreign language teaching. One of the main elements of foreign language education programs is to train language learners who can properly interact when they are involved in intercultural relationships. In this regard, raising teachers' CCA seems necessary (Eren, 2021). Implementing CCA inspires language teachers to build

learning chances for the students by working on developing learners' critical thinking skills to support them in the process of comprehending the association between language learning and real-world events. On the other hand, the globalization of English has given rise to the need for a paradigm shift in teacher education to develop individuals' critical thinking ability, as the goal of language learning is training competent learners who can find solutions to complex problems and challenges. The ability to communicate across social boundaries has become even more important since societies have turned out to be more internationally related. Therefore, Cross-cultural awareness plays an important role in modern language research, since training students who can effectively interact cross-culturally requires instruction on linguistic skills as well as cultural knowledge. Accordingly, enhancing teachers' linguistic competence and intercultural qualification are very important issues (Bara, 2025).

Besides, a new paradigm is evolving in language pedagogy, which has caused many challenges. Language education has made a transition from linguistic and social orientations to teaching that is culturally responsive, which is a learner-centered teaching method (Khaki & Chalak, 2022). Responsive teaching fills the gap between what students learn in school and their own cultures, languages, and experiences to assist them in achieving advanced academic skills (Tyagi & Verma, 2022). In other words, CCA needs to be integrated into the foreign language teacher education programs. Thereafter, since teaching culture is still unfounded in foreign language classes and is widely underestimated in language teaching programs in Iran (Heidari Tabrizi & Mair, 2025; Khaki & Chalak, 2022; Kordestani et al., 2025), evaluating Iranian EFL teachers' CCA seems necessary. Finally, examining the relationship between gender and Iranian EFL teachers' CCA will also be informative for all stakeholders. Teacher education programs can personalize raising prospective teachers' CCA. Despite the global emphasis on intercultural communication, little empirical research has systematically examined Iranian teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward CCA, nor has it addressed possible gender-related differences. This knowledge gap represents a critical problem, as teachers' CCA directly influences how effectively learners develop intercultural competence.

The present study tried to fill this research gap in the Iranian EFL situation to assess and develop the CCA of Iranian EFL teachers and learners. It aimed to scrutinize the Iranian EFL female and male EFL teachers' perceptions of and attitudes toward CCA. In addition, the study also sought to discover the possible relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' CCA and gender factors. Implementing CCA inspires language teachers to build learning

chances for the students by working on developing learners' critical thinking skills to support them in the process of comprehending the association between language learning and real-world events. Finally, examining the relationship between gender and Iranian EFL teachers' CCA will also be informative for all stakeholders. Teacher education programs can personalize the preparation of prospective teachers' CCA. To offer some insight into the general state of teaching culture in an Iranian educational setting, the present study inspected teachers' CCA across female and male EFL teachers. To reach the goals, the subsequent research questions were developed:

RQ1. What are the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of and attitudes to different facets of critical cultural awareness?

RQ2. Does the Iranian EFL teachers' gender have any statistically significant effect on their critical cultural awareness?

RQ3. To what extent do Iranian EFL teachers implement critical cultural awareness in their classrooms?

2. Literature Review

The literature review indicates that the post-method pedagogy has been influential in creating CCA. The new movements in applied linguistics after the emergence of post-method pedagogy inspired multiple studies to focus on language instruction concerning the intercultural discipline. The results of these studies led to the identification of the variables involved in ICC, theoretical paradigms of ICC were formulated, and tools were developed to measure various aspects of this competence. Arasaratnam-Smith (2016) stated that while different theories have been suggested for the ICC, there is no particular dominant theory for the ICC. Some of the established theories are briefly mentioned in the following section.

2.1. Theoretical Background of the Study

Language and culture are closely related; thus, language teachers are also teachers of culture (Byram, 1997). The present study was grounded in Byram's model of ICC, in which CCA constitutes a central component. This framework highlights that language learning should extend beyond linguistic proficiency to include the ability to critically evaluate one's own culture and that of others, thereby fostering intercultural understanding. In line with recent theoretical developments, the updated version of the model proposed by Byram and Conlon (2025) was also taken into account, offering a more contemporary perspective on ICC. The principles of CCA, namely awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and skills, served as the basis for identifying the study variables and formulating the research questions.

ICC is defined by Byram and Conlon (2025) as learners' interaction skills with people of diverse cultural beliefs. Including three main features, namely, the individual's cognitive, affective, and behavioral aptitudes, is essential in conceptualizing the concept of ICC. New standards were defined for productive language learning that emphasized training learners who could perform successfully in different cultural communities (Kramsch, 2013). Teachers' roles were changed from training native-like speakers to encouraging learners to develop their intercultural skills to deal with cultural diversity.

CCA is also a central feature of the ICC that functions as a communication facilitator across cultural obstacles closely related to political education (Houghton, 2013). Promoting CCA is highly influential in helping language learners gain an enhanced understanding and recognition of diverse values and beliefs (Houghton, 2013). Raising CCA means providing chances for language learners to negotiate meaning with other cultures, critically assess their viewpoints and customs, and reflect on values and beliefs. Individuals with enhanced CCA can think critically and build a neutral understanding of their own and others' cultures (Byram & Conlon, 2025). The CCA considers language education a process and recommends that language instructors employ critical thinking skills to establish educational provisions to help learners perceive explicit connections between classroom lessons and real-life concerns.

2.2. Empirical Studies

CCA, as an essential part of intercultural competence, has recently drawn the attention of many academics from several disciplines, including language instruction, communication, culture, gender, and ethnicity studies. The majority of IC development studies have concentrated mainly on learning and higher education environments (Ruiz et al., 2014; Vu and Dinh, 2022; Yetis & Kurt, 2016), and different methods and programs for improving teaching materials in ELT classes (e.g., Mashudi et al., 2022; Takagi and Moeller, 2022). More recently, international research has highlighted the urgency of integrating intercultural competence into EFL teacher education to ensure learners acquire both linguistic and cultural fluency (Kamila et al., 2025). Besides, Heidari Tabrizi and Mair (2025) showed that intercultural communication in language teaching enhanced critical thinking in learners and helped slough away ethnocentric views. However, there is an apparent lack of studies on CCA in cross-cultural EFL settings.

Studies on intercultural sensitivity levels and education have found a link between educational attainment and intercultural sensitivity levels. Moreover,

the amount of intercultural sensitivity varies depending on the field of practice. Yetis and Kurt (2016) found significant differences in intercultural sensitivity among teachers of different languages, with more experienced teachers showing the highest levels; similarly, Ruiz et al. (2014) reported that higher education increases intercultural sensitivity. In line with these earlier findings, recent work by Sattarpour et al. (2025) revealed that Iranian EFL teachers often face difficulties in incorporating culture into their classrooms due to limited preparation and lack of resources, underscoring the importance of further training in this area.

Due to the lack of enough cultural courses in teacher preparation programs, a study was conducted by Lei (2021), concentrating on the degree of intercultural competency possessed by English teachers. Results suggested that the intercultural competence of pre-service instructors was at a medium level, and the participants had positive views despite their limited linguistic proficiency. Male English instructors had lower ICCs than pre-service female teachers. The research recommended that the university should focus more on promoting intercultural competence in the classroom and give more chances for intercultural communication to the pre-service English instructors due to their inadequate level of intercultural competence.

More importantly, fostering awareness, relationships, material opportunities, and symbolic power can be facilitated through language development. In an attempt to develop language learners' intercultural competence, Vu and Dinh (2022) asserted that by using their cultural identities and expertise, English language learners may experience, learn about, and engage with culture. They found that ICC constructs were closely related across different genders, ages, and English proficiency levels. In addition, it was noticed that gender factors affected the participants' perceptions of the ICC. The researchers recommended that English language learners use their knowledge and cultural backgrounds to experience, learn about, and engage with culture. Similarly, Kordestani et al. (2025) showed that Iranian EFL teachers often undervalue culture in their classrooms, which results in learners' limited exposure to intercultural dimensions of communication. This demonstrates the need for structured approaches to raising teachers' CCA.

Since language and culture are closely related, separating the two ideas is impossible. Both will continue to be lacking or defective if one of them is separated. In recent studies, such as Takagi and Moeller (2022) and Mashudi et al. (2022), it has been found that to help EFL learners utilize language communicatively in various circumstances, EFL contexts should include instruction in both English language and culture. Extending this line of thought, Creely (2024) and Khaki and Chalak (2022) argued that culturally

responsive pedagogy offers a learner-centered solution, while more recent evidence from 2025 studies emphasizes that neglecting intercultural training undermines both communicative and academic outcomes.

Takagi and Moeller (2022) presented a method to include CCA in the language classroom. The purpose was to encourage learners' interest, inquiry, and understanding to develop their cultural skills. They concluded that three main factors, including knowledge (cognitive), attitude (affective), and behavior (skill), are involved in understanding people from another culture. Moreover, Mashudi et al. (2022) investigated the effects of English CA on 40 advanced Indonesian EFL learners' knowledge of grammar using a pretest-posttest experimental design. They randomly assigned the participants to an experimental and a control group. Grammar instruction was given to the experimental group through the use of English cultural items, while the control group was exposed to a traditional method of grammar instruction. They concluded that the teaching materials that included cultural contexts helped the experimental group's participants improve their grammatical knowledge more than the control group.

To the extent of the researchers' awareness, until recently, very few studies have been carried out on CCA in the context of Iranian EFL. The limited research that does exist has mostly focused on evaluating ELT resources and materials regarding their capacity to encourage intercultural competence within language learners. For instance, most intercultural development studies in the Iranian context, such as Ahmadi Safa et al. (2015), Ghaffari et al. (2021), and Soodmand Afshar and Moradifar (2021), have concentrated primarily on the classroom and higher education environments, and textbook evaluation at both the national and international levels. However, the newest national research (Heidari Tabrizi & Mair, 2025; Kordestani et al., 2025) stresses that intercultural awareness is still underestimated in Iran's EFL programs, and highlights the urgent need for empirical investigations of teachers' CCA across different demographics, particularly gender.

The study by Ahmadi Safa et al. (2015) determined how EFL teachers and students perceived the potential for intercultural competence in the Top Notch Series. The findings indicated that both groups were pleased with this EFL textbook's overall potential for ICC. The first implication of the study was that ELT materials creators, instructors, and teacher trainers should take a critical approach toward the ICC development potential of ELT materials. Another implication was that teachers should make the students aware of different cultural concepts and resources in ELT textbooks.

Similarly, Ghaffari et al. (2021) explored Iranian high school EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions of CCA. They found that both L1 and L2 cultures deserve equal representation in ELT textbooks and resources based on teachers' and learners' views. In addition, they concluded that both teachers and learners need greater awareness about incorporating culture into language teaching and should place more focus on cultural content in their classes.

Furthermore, among all the factors employed in the study by Soodmand Afshar and Moradifar (2021), self-esteem was the highest indicator of work success among Iranian EFL instructors. Their study explored CCA, professional identity, confidence, reflective practices, and work performance among Iranian EFL teachers. Using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), they discovered that all of the parameters except CCA predicted the job performance of EFL teachers. According to their findings, the best indicator of this outcome was self-esteem.

Concerning the studies mentioned above, intercultural education has been an important topic area. However, only in the past few decades has teaching culture as a fundamental element in foreign language schools been emphasized. The role of culture and fostering cultural awareness in EFL classrooms is a prominent topic in current foreign language teaching literature. Although considerable research on cultural awareness in EFL classes and its different components has been addressed in various contexts throughout the world, little to no substantial research has looked at it in an Iranian educational environment. Recent scholarship (e.g., Kamila et al., 2025; Sattarpour et al., 2025) further highlights that Iranian EFL teachers still face challenges in adopting intercultural perspectives, making the investigation of teachers' CCA both timely and significant.

3. Method

3.1. Design

This study employed an ex post facto, correlational mixed-methods design (Cohen et al., 2023). Triangulation was employed to reach a higher level of research quality and to capture a more accurate depiction of the phenomenon under study using qualitative and quantitative approaches to fulfill the study's goals. Triangulation was achieved through mixing the qualitative and quantitative data, which provided rich insights into EFL teachers' CCA in language classrooms.

3.2. Participants

The study's participants included 108 English language teachers between the ages of 22 and 49 (with a mean age of 34.05), who were selected based on

convenience sampling (Mackey & Gass, 2005), in which individuals who were available and willing to participate were selected. The participants were selected from the private and state senior high schools in Guilan and Isfahan provinces, Iran. The participants comprised 46 males (42.6%) and 62 females (57.4%). Among the total number of participants, 32 held BA degrees (29.6%), 58 held MA degrees (53.7%), and 18 were Ph.D. graduates or candidates (16.7%) in the fields of English Translation, English Language Teaching, Literature, and Linguistics. In terms of academic fields, 40 participants specialized in English Language Teaching (37.0%), 28 in English Translation (25.9%), 24 in Literature (22.2%), and 16 in Linguistics (14.8%). The participants were also classified into three groups according to their teaching experience. Thirty-four participants (31.5%) had teaching experience of less than five years. There were also 32 participants (29.6%) with teaching experience between 6 and 10 years. Moreover, 42 participants (38.9%) had taught English for more than ten years. Fifteen participants were randomly chosen from the whole research population and requested to participate in a semi-structured interview. In addition, 15 classes were randomly selected for observation purposes. Table 1 displays key demographic details of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic Background of the Participants

Variable	Category	n
Age	22–49 years	108
Gender	Female	62
	Male	46
Native Language	Persian	108
Target Language	English	108
Major	TEFL	
	Linguistics	
	Literature	
	Translation	

Before joining the study, language teachers signed consent forms and were assured anonymity and confidentiality. They were also informed they could withdraw at any time, a condition that entails a limitation of self-selection (Dörnyei, 2014). Ensuring participants' comfort, willingness, and privacy is essential in ethical research (Pandey, 2024).

3.3. Instruments

To collect the required data, the researchers employed different instruments. Various types of data were gathered both quantitatively and qualitatively to deepen the insights of the findings and offer a more thorough knowledge of the study issues. The following sections provide more information about the instruments.

3.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

To obtain more in-depth qualitative insights, interviews were conducted to capture a detailed and comprehensive picture of participants' ideas and attitudes that could not be gathered through other data collection methods. The data for the study came from a semi-structured interview based on the CCA component of Byram's framework (Byram, 1997), with 15 language teachers randomly chosen among the research participants. The researchers formulated three open-ended questions, concentrating on the CCA section of Byram's framework (Byram, 1997), which were subsequently reviewed by two field specialists. The first item asked teachers to present a definition of CCA. The second item asked the teachers to list some of the characteristics of a teacher who has CCA, and the third item asked them about the factors or elements involved in teachers' CCA. Each interview lasted about 20 to 35 minutes. The intra-rater reliability for the coding made for the common themes of the interview amounted to 95%.

3.3.2. Observation Checklist

To provide more detailed information regarding the use of CCA by EFL teachers and to check the instructors' present status for assessing the fidelity or extent of CCA implementation in their courses, fifteen EFL classes were randomly selected for observation purposes. A checklist was adopted from Hoominian Sharifabad et al. (2020) to evaluate the extent to which EFL teachers tended to implement cultural activities in their EFL classes. It was previously validated by the original authors through expert review and pilot testing, demonstrating its reliability and content validity. The checklist comprised fifteen items, and two evaluators measured EFL teachers' use of cultural activities based on four Likert scale points. The inter-rater reliability obtained by percentage agreement equaled 97%. The internal consistency reliability of the checklist was also calculated, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, indicating a very good consistency among the items (DeVellis, 2021). It is worth noting that both evaluators (one female and one male) had a Ph.D. in TEFL and had over fifteen years of teaching experience focusing on language teacher education and ICC and CCA.

3.3.3. Critical Cultural Awareness Questionnaire

The CCAQ, comprising 37 five-point Likert scale items, was adopted from Atai et al. (2017) and was used to assess the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers were familiar with different facets of CCA. The questionnaire was given out in English because all of the participants were English language teachers. The scales ranged from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Therefore, scores could range between 37 and 185. The CCA questionnaire consisted of three key parts: a) CCA in ELT Programs (20 items), b) CCA in ELT Textbooks and Materials (13 items), and c) CCA in General Terms (4 items). Atai et al. (2017) adopted an expert viewpoint, pilot testing, and factor analysis to confirm the validity of this instrument. Cronbach's alpha value for the CCAQ was determined to be 0.75 (Atai et al., 2017). In the current study, the estimated reliability for the questionnaire amounted to 0.81, which was considered a very good value (DeVellis, 2021).

3.4. Procedure

As mentioned above, a semi-structured interview, a Likert-scale structured questionnaire (i.e., the CCAQ), and an observation checklist served to obtain data. The primary data was collected by distributing questionnaires through Google Forms. To do so, first, the researchers created a Google form and inserted the items in the questionnaire. Then, they shared the following link to the questionnaire with all the EFL teachers' WhatsApp Groups.

Researchers provided participants with examples when needed. The teachers' responses to the items of the CCA were codified, and one score was given to each choice. After codifying the items, the teachers' average scores for the whole questionnaire and average scores for each of the three components were computed. In the current study, the reliability of the CCAQ was re-estimated employing Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .81$).

Furthermore, as previously stated, to avoid undermining the research results by relying only on one or two specific instruments, 15 language teachers were chosen randomly from among the research participants and requested to take part in a semi-structured interview. The participants were asked about how they conceptualized CCA, how they felt about the importance of CCA in specialized fields, and how they would rate the curriculum of local professional development programs, particularly concerning intercultural awareness and critical involvement. The interviews were all conducted in English, audio-recorded, and transcribed for the thematic content analysis. Notably, in all phases of data collection, the participants were aware of the interview

recording, and their consent had already been obtained. The researchers tried to extract the main and common themes. Participants were reassured that the details they provided would be kept private and used exclusively for research. Likewise, due to confidentiality concerns, while citing the participants' remarks, the researchers employed pseudonyms or codes instead of their real names. Moreover, the transcriptions were then returned to the participants to double-check the data and make any necessary adjustments. Each interview lasted for 25 minutes. The researchers interviewed the teachers for two weeks.

For the third phase, 15 EFL classes were randomly chosen and observed using an observation checklist; the participants included 7 male and 8 female teachers. Each session lasted one and a half hours, and participants were observed during their practicum to be evaluated for any potential discrepancy between their perspective and behavior in their classrooms. The researcher did not tell the participants anything about the study's purpose to guarantee that the participants' performance was not due to the study's goal. A checklist comprising 15 items was adopted from Hoominian Sharifabad et al. (2020) and was utilized to see whether there was a link between their perspective and behavior. Then, the collected data from the interviews, observations, and CCA questionnaires were analyzed, and their results were integrated.

3.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including percentages and mean scores, were computed for the items of the questionnaire and the observation checklist utilizing SPSS (Version 26). To answer the first research question, the researchers used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze the data obtained from the CCA questionnaire and the interview. To this end, the collected qualitative data from the interviews were compared with the collected quantitative data from the questionnaire. Thus, the results obtained from the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire and interview informed the first research question. An independent sample t-test was run to answer the second research question that dealt with the possible differences between female and male EFL learners concerning their CCA. Before running the parametric test, the main assumptions were established. Finally, for the third research question, the observation checklist data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations) to examine the frequency and extent of classroom practices aligned with the CCA principles.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

The first research question addressed Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of different facets of CCA. The CCAQ included three factors: 20 items asked about the role of CCA in ELT programs, 13 items looked at the role of CCA in ELT textbooks and materials, and the third factor examined the position of CCA in general terms. Descriptive statistics for the first component of the CCA questionnaire are given in Table 2.

Table 2
Item Statistics for the First Component of the CCA

	M	SD	N
(24) Forgetting learners' culture to have effective communication	2.16	1.12	108
(11) Familiarity with English natives' culture	2.39	1.15	108
(9) The necessity of the cultural norms of native speakers	2.42	1.16	108
(6) Having culturally native-like behavior	2.55	1.06	108
(36) Focus of language instruction on English culture.	2.87	1.12	108
(21) Presenting a positive image of the English culture	2.67	1.19	108
(29) having adverse effects on learners' beliefs	3.12	1.09	108
(4) Highlighting native speakers' values in the ELT programs	3.25	1.10	108
(14) Disbelieving the neutrality of English.	3.23	1.01	108
(12) Emphasizing the negative aspects of the English culture	3.06	1.38	108
(20) Raising awareness about English and the global powers	3.67	.96	108
(19) Western cultural representation for language learners	3.05	1.15	108
(34) The necessity of the political aspects of English	3.63	1.18	108
(7) Knowledge of one's cultural identity among language learners	3.70	1.03	108
(27) Emphasizing learners' skills in their cultural norms	3.51	1.10	108
(2) Cultural equality	3.56	1.05	108
(26) Presenting socioculturally familiar contexts	3.67	.98	108
(10) Presenting an accurate impression of the English culture	3.56	1.13	108
(3) Developing multiple cultural perspectives	3.93	.99	108
(5) Being aware of their cultural identity	4.03	.89	108

The first component of the CCA questionnaire examined the participants' awareness of the CCA in the ELT program. The lowest mean rank was reported for item 24, which assessed the participants' views toward "forgetting L1 culture to have an effective communication in a cultural context in which the target language occurs." In contrast, the highest rating was made for item 5, which evaluated the respondents' perceptions concerning the need for "providing some awareness of the cultural identity of English language learners to help them become inter-culturally competent." Item 3 received the second-highest rating and assessed the respondents' views on "the need to develop multiple cultural perspectives for English language learners."

Table 3*Item Statistics for the Second Component of the CCA*

	M	SD	N
(28) ELT textbooks should highlight English cultural concerns.	2.93	1.19	108
(25) ELT textbooks and resources strongly emphasize English culture.	2.74	1.08	108
(32) The ELT textbooks show the lifestyle of the students	3.31	.93	108
(13) Negative results emerge from the growth of L2 culture in textbooks.	2.81	1.18	108
(15) In ELT textbooks, all cultures ought to have an equal place.	3.41	1.08	108
(30) The present ELT textbooks encourage invasive cultural practices.	3.17	1.03	108
(22) A hidden plan in the textbooks emphasizes the political views	3.13	1.04	108
(35) ELT textbooks ignore the local cultures of the students.	3.19	1.13	108
(16) ELT textbooks promote an American and British lifestyle	3.30	1.04	108
(23) Textbooks should include learners' local cultural experiences.	3.76	.99	108
(18) ELT textbooks focus on English culture,	3.29	1.04	108
(31) ELT textbooks should include both native and non-native English speakers' cultural standards.	4.04	.86	108
(17) Local sources developers can better develop ELT textbooks	3.13	1.13	108

The second section of the CCA questionnaire comprised 13 items that evaluated the role of CCA in ELT textbooks and resources. The lowest mean rank was reported for item 25, which inspected the respondents' viewpoints on "the attention paid to English culture in present globally produced ELT textbooks and materials so that it makes local culture appear less important." Item 31 received the highest rating. This item inspected the teachers' viewpoint concerning "reflecting the cultural values of native and non-native English speakers in ELT resources and content".

Table 4*Item Statistics for the Third Component of the CCA*

	M	SD	N
(1) The spread of English is culturally neutral.	2.72	1.18	108
(37) The expansion of English culture is beneficial.	3.06	1.18	108
(33) Local cultures are being replaced by English culture.	3.05	1.12	108
(8) English is learned and used simply for communication	2.76	1.22	108

The lowest rating was made for item 1, which asked the teachers "if the worldwide expansion of English is considered culturally neutral." In contrast, the highest rating was made for item 37, which inspected the teachers' perceptions of "the necessity of English culture spreading globally." Item 33 received the second-highest rating, which asked the teachers "if local or national cultures were being replaced by English culture."

An independent samples t-test was applied to see if the differences between female and male EFL learners in terms of their CCA were statistically

significant. It is worth mentioning that before running the parametric test, the normality assumption was checked through the Shapiro-Wilk test.

Table 5
Shapiro-Wilk Test for Normality

	gender	Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Role of CCA in ELT programs	female	.97	62	.16
	male	.97	46	.48
Role of CCA in ELT textbooks and materials	female	.97	62	.23
	male	.97	46	.53
Position of CCA in general terms	female	.97	62	.27
	male	.97	46	.32

As stated by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), the normality assumption is often interpreted using conventional alpha values of $\alpha=.01$ and $\alpha=.001$. The findings showed an average dispersion in the data ($p \geq .001$). After establishing the normality assumption, an independent samples t-test was performed on the data from the CCA for female and male participants. The independent samples t-test revealed no statistically significant difference between female and male EFL learners in terms of their CCA ($p \geq .05$).

Table 6
Independent Samples T-Tests

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	MD
CCA in the ELT program	Equal variances assumed	1.42	.23	.01	106	.99	.000
CCA in the ELT textbook	Equal variances assumed	2.03	.15	1.73	106	.08	.164
CCA, in general terms	Equal variances assumed	.00	.93	.29	106	.76	.036

Note: MD= Mean Difference

As it was indicated in Table 6, Levene's F test established that the variances were equal. The t-test results showed no significant group differences in CCA in the ELT program, $t(106) = 0.01$, $p = .99$, or in general terms, $t(106) = 0.29$, $p = .76$, while only CCA in the ELT textbook approached significance, $t(106) = 1.73$, $p = .08$. Additionally, to address the third research question, 15 EFL classes were observed using a checklist. The results of the observations made for 15 EFL classes are reported in Table 7.

Table 7*Results of the Observation*

Observation Statements	M	SD	N
1. Asking the students to consider how the media contributes to the perception of the target culture.	2.00	.92	15
2. Telling the students fascinating things about the foreign culture(s).	2.13	.91	15
3. Telling the students about the foreign culture or country.	2.20	1.01	15
4. Asking the students to examine a facet of the foreign culture independently.	1.93	.70	15
5. Using movies, CD-ROMs, or the Internet to demonstrate a cultural characteristic of a foreign country.	2.60	.98	15
6. Encouraging students to imagine life in another culture.	1.40	.50	15
7. Discussing students' personal experiences in other countries.	2.26	.79	15
8. Inviting students to share their travel experiences in a foreign nation	1.86	.74	15
9. Inviting a student from a different country to class	2.66	.89	15
10. Asking the students to explain a feature of their own culture	1.66	.89	15
11. Asking the students to take part in role-playing exercises	1.46	.63	15
12. Decorating the classroom with posters depicting various characteristics of the target culture.	1.53	.51	15
13. Commenting on how the foreign culture is represented	2.13	.83	15
14. Asking the pupils to compare a feature of their own culture to a feature of a foreign culture	1.40	.50	15
15. Discussing preconceptions about various cultures with the learners	1.73	.59	15
Total	1.93	.46	15

The results of the observation phase demonstrated that despite EFL teachers' willingness to develop CCA, as reflected in their ratings for the questionnaire items and stated in the interview process, their actual practices could not be considered based on CCA development. This was indicated by the low mean score for the total observation checklist ($M = 1.93$; $SD = .46$). The teacher occasionally invited someone from another country to the class ($M = 2.66$; $SD = .89$). They occasionally used movies, CD-ROMs, or the Internet to demonstrate a cultural characteristic of a foreign country ($M = 2.60$; $SD = .98$). In contrast, they rarely asked the students to compare a feature of their own culture to a feature of a foreign culture ($M = 1.40$; $SD = .50$). In addition, the teacher rarely asked the students to consider what it might be like to live in a different culture.

4.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

The interview was also conducted to gain detailed information about the teachers' CCA. Thematic analyses of the interview are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8
Main Themes Extracted from the Interview

Definition of CCA	Characteristics of a teacher who has CCA	Factors involved in teachers' CCA
1. Criticizing cultures based on explicit criteria.	1. Asking students to talk about their beliefs, traditions, social and cultural behaviors	1. Studying how people obtain their cultures
2. Encouraging learners to question their histories	2. Allowing students to share their thoughts, stories, and ideas	2. Studying the importance of culture in individual lifestyles
3. Helping learners to become more engaged in their society	3. Expressing interest in the ethnic background of students	3. Being aware of one's own culturally formed values
4. Knowing one's own culture and that of others,	4. Maintaining a strict level of sensitivity to different language concerns.	4. Developing attitudes, curiosity, and communication
5. Comprehending people in terms of attitudes and values Being aware that each culture is different and has no superior culture.	5. Reflecting on cultural and linguistic diversity 6. They are interested in students' ethnic backgrounds.	5. Being culturally sensitive 6. Paying attention to similarities and differences among cultures
6. Being sensitive to the adverse effects of cultures hidden in teaching materials	7. Encouraging learners to share facts about their cultures	7. Obtaining knowledge in the areas of sociocultural affairs
7. Being able to evaluate cultures critically based on perspectives and practices	8. Creating an "inclusive" curriculum that is sensitive to variances.	8. Gaining skill
8. Being aware of cultural invasion through the teaching materials	9. Learning about each student's non-school cultural life 10. Being familiar with the cultures associated with the target language	9. Developing a positive attitude towards a learning culture 10. Engaging in cultural research

The main themes that were extracted can be presented in three categories. First, it could be inferred that EFL teachers had a relatively good understanding of the concept of CCA. They knew the main characteristics of teachers familiar with the critical culture and realized the factors involved in teachers' CCA. The interview analysis revealed that the EFL teachers displayed a great deal of theoretical understanding of the CCA and its intents, which is expected to influence their teaching practices positively.

4.3. Integrating the Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data in this study provided a more comprehensive understanding of Iranian EFL teachers' CCA. The quantitative results from the questionnaire showed that teachers generally

expressed positive attitudes toward CCA and reported a relatively good level of awareness across its different dimensions. However, the independent samples t-test demonstrated no statistically significant gender-based differences in teachers' CCA ($p \geq .05$), indicating that male and female teachers held comparable levels of CCA.

In addition to the questionnaire, the classroom observation checklist also yielded quantitative results, which further enriched the analysis. Despite teachers' positive self-reports and their stated understanding in the interviews, their actual classroom practices reflected only limited implementation of the CCA principles. The low overall mean score of the observation checklist ($M = 1.93$, $SD = .46$) suggested that teachers' classroom behaviors did not align with their professed awareness. For example, while teachers occasionally invited someone from another country to class ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .89$) or used multimedia resources to demonstrate cultural aspects ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .98$), they rarely engaged students in activities requiring critical comparison between their own culture and a foreign one ($M = 1.40$, $SD = .50$).

The interview data offered deeper insights into these findings. Thematic analysis revealed that EFL teachers had a clear theoretical understanding of the concept of CCA, its key features, and the factors influencing its development. Teachers articulated awareness of the importance of fostering students' critical understanding of cultural issues and showed willingness to integrate cultural elements into their teaching.

Taken together, the integration of data sources revealed a gap between teachers' theoretical awareness of CCA and their classroom practices. While teachers demonstrated willingness and conceptual knowledge, the actual implementation of CCA in practice remained limited. This highlights the need for more focused training and practical strategies to bridge the gap between teachers' awareness and their pedagogical application of CCA in EFL classrooms.

Figure 1

Joint Display of the Integrated Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

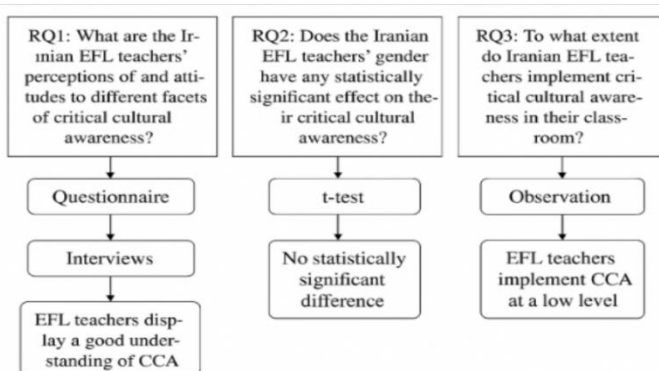


Figure 1 illustrates the joint display of the integrated quantitative (questionnaire and observation checklist) and qualitative (interview) findings, highlighting how the three research questions were addressed and how the results complemented each other.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate Iranian male and female senior high school EFL teachers' CCA by focusing on their perceptions, possible gender differences, and classroom practices. The findings showed that teachers generally expressed positive attitudes and reported a relatively good level of awareness of CCA. No statistically significant gender-based differences were found, indicating that male and female teachers held comparable levels of CCA. However, despite this theoretical awareness and willingness, classroom observations revealed that teachers' actual practices reflected only limited implementation of the CCA principles, as they seldom engaged students in activities requiring critical cultural comparisons.

A review of the relevant literature indicates that the findings of this study align with those of previous research (Heidari Tabrizi & Mair, 2025; Kamila et al., 2025; Khaki & Chalak, 2022; Sattarpour et al., 2025). The findings revealed that the Iranian EFL teachers were aware of the notion of criticality and perceived that they had a relatively high ability to evaluate their own and the English language culture critically. The study indicated that they were adequately sensitive to the concept of culture in EFL teaching and valued their learners' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Moreover, there was no difference in terms of the teachers' perceptions of CCA across genders. This meant that Iranian EFL learners' gender did not statistically affect their CCA. They strongly appreciated the cultural differences and thus could successfully build appropriate chances for developing their learners' critical thinking skills by reducing the biases in terms of the cultural variations between the native and target languages. In addition, teachers were highly willing to promote curiosity and empathy in their learners to enable them to understand the target culture. It was found that, based on the teachers' point of view, the concept of critical culture was not neglected in ELT programs. From the teachers' ratings, the textbooks and instructional materials' content appeared to be somewhat rich in terms of ICC. Nevertheless, teachers' ratings revealed that they still expected more integration of CCA in the ELT textbooks.

In line with the findings of Soodmand Afshar and Moradifar (2021) and Ghaffari et al. (2021), the present study found that L1 culture should be emphasized along with the target culture. It was also found that EFL teachers

expressed a high need for providing some awareness of the cultural identity of English language learners to help them become interculturally competent. They were also willing to develop multiple cultural perspectives for English language learners. Contrary to the findings of Vu and Dinh (2022), the findings did not show any significant difference between female and male EFL teachers regarding their CCA. In addition, the results were inconsistent with the findings of Yetis and Kurt (2016). They reported that male teachers had higher intercultural sensitivity than female teachers, leading them to conclude that there was a statistically significant difference between female and male teachers concerning their levels of intercultural sensitivity. The results are also in conflict with those of Lei (2021), who reported that female pre-service English teachers had higher intercultural competence than male teachers.

When it comes to classroom practice, the instructors did not make use of sufficient cultural activities in the classroom. When comparing our results to those of older studies such as Mashudi et al. (2022), it must be pointed out that integrating culturally related activities is influential in developing learners' language proficiency, and thus, cultural activities should not be neglected in language classes. Moreover, a recent study by Kamila et al. (2025) demonstrated that experiential learning approaches significantly enhance ICC, suggesting that incorporating experiential elements could be beneficial in EFL contexts.

Takagi and Moeller (2022) pointed out that different variables, such as educational facilities, national curriculum, and the goal of English learning in a community, determine the teachers' plan to incorporate culture into language teaching. Teachers need to implement pedagogical changes in language classes, including helping learners move from knowledge to understanding attitudes. This process, in turn, will result in behavioral changes in learners' performance and will equip them with cultural skills. Thus, in addition to linguistic and communicative competence, EFL teachers need to gain an appropriate level of intelligence, enthusiasm, and abilities to enable them to interact effectively with others from different cultures and then develop this competence in their language learners.

Additionally, a recent study by Bara (2025) found that while gender and ethnicity influence teachers' ICC differently, systemic teacher education approaches that include reflective practices and interactional training can effectively mitigate such disparities in intercultural competence. This insight emphasizes the importance of incorporating these components into professional development programs designed to enhance CCA among EFL teachers.

Collectively, the findings underscore a persistent gap between teachers' conceptual awareness and their actual classroom implementation of CCA. This gap highlights the urgent need for targeted training, experiential pedagogies, and supportive systemic frameworks to align teachers' theoretical understanding with practical application—thus fostering genuine intercultural competence in language classrooms.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study revealed the current language teaching situation regarding the teachers' CCA. From the findings, it could be concluded that although both female and male teachers possessed an appropriate level of CCA, they were highly inclined to employ a knowledge-based approach in teaching cultural competence in their real foreign language teaching, as they rarely implemented cultural activities in the class. In other words, it appears that language teaching in Iran has undergone a "cultural turn," as suggested by Byram and Conlon (2025), but what practically happens in language classes shows that teachers acknowledge the theoretical significance of these concepts but, in practice, the sociolinguistic, socio-cultural, social dimensions of language teaching have been neglected. Teachers need to complement learners' communicative competence by developing their intercultural competence.

Moreover, the research indicated that although Iranian EFL teachers demonstrated positive attitudes and theoretical awareness of CCA in questionnaires and interviews, their actual classroom practices reflected limited implementation of the CCA principles. The low mean scores across most classroom activities suggested that teachers rarely engaged learners in tasks requiring critical comparison between their own culture and the target culture. This gap between awareness and practice highlights the challenges of translating theoretical understanding into pedagogical action and indicates a need for practical strategies and professional development to foster active intercultural teaching in EFL classrooms.

Considering the role of cultural teaching in foreign language education, it is believed that if language teachers could recognize and appreciate their culture and those of others, they would easily handle the differences in their classrooms. The findings indicated a discrepancy between what instructors think about teaching culture and what they do in EFL classes. Additionally, it was shown that rather than emphasizing the development of abilities, teachers should focus on improving their students' awareness of the target culture. The English teaching programs in Iran need to pay more

attention to the psychological, socio-cultural, and cultural dimensions in planning the curriculum, developing textbooks, and training EFL teachers while integrating communicative competence and intercultural awareness.

The present study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the number of participants in the classroom observation phase was limited due to the confidential nature of classes and practical constraints, which may have affected the generalizability of the observational findings. More importantly, this study is not perfect by itself. It needs further investigation. Due to the challenges of acquiring a homogenous sample regarding the instructors' gender, age, and teaching tenure, these three criteria were not regulated in this study. The study was limited to looking at the CCA of Iranian EFL teachers. The findings of the study are limited to its specific context, participants, and setting, and therefore cannot be generalized to other contexts. While every effort was made to objectively analyze and interpret qualitative data, some bias may have unavoidably crept into the results. In addition, since no research study, especially one that uses a qualitative phase, is immune to at least the researchers' viewpoints, it is essential to analyze and generalize the study's findings with care. Thus, in order to completely understand how pedagogical discourses, social dynamics, linguistic regulations, instructional strategies, global experiences, and teaching experiences impact teachers' critical intercultural awareness, further studies with larger samples and other levels of EFL teachers are suggested. The implications of the present study are for teacher educators and stakeholders in teacher education programs at the university level to focus on improving EFL teachers' theoretical knowledge and practical skills in terms of intercultural competence.

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