



Investigating the applicability of critical pedagogy among Saudi EFL Teachers: An exploratory study

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Abstract

Crooks (2010) has elucidated that Critical Pedagogy (CP) is more likely to be dismissed when it may be perceived as culturally inappropriate. Hence, this paper aims to unpack the possible applicability of implementing tenets of critical pedagogy in the context of Saudi Arabia. The article explores the potentiality of CP among higher education English language teachers in Saudi Arabia; the populations of this mixed method (i.e., survey and interviews) study are teachers who teach at colleges of language and translation and departments of English and literary studies at two Saudi universities. Findings indicate that the participants' perspectives on CP showcase their ideational stance towards their own pedagogical orientations, which included: high awareness of CP principles, tactically using CP in some classroom scenarios, at the micro-level, and sometimes rejecting the application of such a tool due to its serious consequences. The paper thus implicates that applying CP in Saudi Arabia can foster the concept of teaching as a 'value,' (Crookes, 2021) which sustains the globalized collective waves of emancipatory education.

Keywords: critical Pedagogy; EFL in Saudi Arabia; emancipatory education; critical language awareness; transformative teaching; power relations in education

1. Introduction

In his outstanding book, Canagarajah (1999) raises many questions concerning the politics of teaching English in the United States and in the global context. Highlighting the current shift to teaching English from a postcolonial and postmodern paradigm, he asserts that teaching English these days should be questioned from many angles. One such way that empowers English learners and helps teachers of English to examine their identities and power as knowledge makers is critical pedagogy, a way of teaching that aims to elevate learners and question the unequal power dynamic in the classroom (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 2021). An outgrowth of the school of critical theory, critical pedagogy perceives the classroom as a site through which educators and students alike come together to openly negotiate and question social inequality and identities (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992; Akbari, 2008). Moreover, educators who advocate for an emancipatory education for marginalized students champion several global applications of such tools and make education more political rather than

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natural (Giroux, 1985; Connely & Barriteau, 2000; Shor, 1996). Along these lines, CP has been always perceived as a tool through which learners find ways to express rather than to imitate (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 2001). The rationale of CP is to resist the classical, teacher-dominant banking educational model, and to reject the monological form of thinking that projects teachers as ‘authoritative masters of knowledge that is to be transmitted to their students’ (Pollack & Kodikant, 2011, p.130). Rejecting a monological ideology and nurturing voices of students in a safe democratic environment is critical as student-centered pedagogy should be the core value of daily teaching practices (Crookes, 2012; Palmer & Emmons, 2004).

According to Barnawi’s argument (2019), the Saudi context is ripe for exploring the functionality of CP, especially with the spread of a neoliberal educational system. Barnawi argues that in the context of Saudi Arabia students are rarely asked to freely express their views in the classroom, and this is because English language teachers are strictly following the structural norms of language teaching and pay less attention to students’ life skills such as reading and analyzing texts with a critical lens in the classroom. That is, the test-oriented instruction is the dominant pedagogical approach in the Saudi education context. Moreover, Barnawi emphasizes that such a paradigm of education “does not provide space for critical thinking, self-voicing, and/or self-expression inside or outside schools, nor do they help Saudi students develop a critical consciousness, and at the same time read their social and cultural realities to challenge the status quo” (p.45).

In general, researchers whose interests revolve around the use of critical pedagogy may find the term used differently across studies, such as transformative pedagogy (Pennycook, 1999), pedagogies of possibility (Simon, 1987), and critical education (Apple, 1971). All in all, these transformative ways of teaching aim to transform the educational as well as societal practices (Giroux & Simon, 1984). Advocates of such pedagogy believe that teaching in a democratic way and adopting a pedagogy that questions the status quo can help learners as well as teachers to reconstruct their perception of knowledge and learning (Canagarajah, 1999). Applying CP demands that teachers encourage students collectively to reimagine a reality which is rooted in social justice, equity, and social empowerment (McLaren, 2009). This way, students can re-think of their social roles and positions in relation to power. One must bear mind that utilizing such pedagogy can pose a challenge in a non-democratic society and will very likely entail negative consequences for teachers. This is because in a totalitarian system, challenging power, resisting the dominant discourse, and teaching students to think critically are explicitly unwelcome in some educational contexts, especially in some areas of the Middle East. In fact, much less attention has been directed to the practicality and reliability of such an approach in a context such as EFL, and Crooks (2010) has elucidated that CP is more likely to be dismissed when it may be perceived as culturally inappropriate. Hence, this paper aims to unpack the possible applicability of implementing tenets of critical pedagogy in the context of Saudi Arabia.

This study specifically aims to explore the applicability of Critical Pedagogy (CP) among higher education English language teachers in Saudi Arabia; the population of this mixed method study are teachers who teach at colleges of language and translation and departments of English and literary studies in two Saudi universities. Influenced and inspired by critical theorists such as Giroux and Freire, I refer to CP as the process through which students are provided with tools of problem-solving to reflect critically, challenged to think about their social roles and identities, and encouraged to actively engage in public commitment (Pennycook, 2021; Giroux, 2001). Furthermore, CP is conventionally referred to as critical literacy, in which students have “the capacity to decode, demystify, and deconstruct the taken-for-granted narratives, symbols, metaphors, and tropes that guide the production of truth within texts” (Carlson, 2003, pp. 46-47). In the following section, a brief literature review about the use of CP will be discussed.

2. Relevant Empirical Studies about Critical Pedagogies

One of the main tenets that critical pedagogy promotes is that progressive education that can greatly help students and teachers alike to participate more meaningfully in society. As Freire suggested, education can give people tools to (re)construct better lives and to participate more fully in determining their own destinies. Freire (1970) proposed the problem-posing model, which aims to empower marginalized and oppressed students and criticizes the traditional educational model which presents students as empty vessels who receive knowledge from teachers. The model has been applied and studied extensively in the ESL context but there has not been a courageous conversation about the applicability of democratic, progressive education in the context of the Middle East that takes stock of Critical Pedagogy as a leading force for social transformation. In this section, I will shed light on some of the relevant work that has been conducted and discussed concerning the concept of Critical Pedagogy (CP) from a relatively different lens in the context of Arabia. According to Rexhepi (2019), a region like Saudi Arabia with diverse ethnoreligious and sociocultural groups is an ideal spot for the work of Freire and CP to be diligently explored and further investigated. He further emphasized that

Reforming [in Saudi Arabia] makes transforming education a priority. It is a multitiered agenda aimed at revitalizing teacher training and curricula, and moving beyond a rote learning-banking model that instead will produce critical thinking-global citizens to compete in the knowledge economy and meet local market demands (Saudization) (p.23).

From the above stated perspective, recent works that revolve around the application of critical thinking, conscious education and critical pedagogy have been studied from a wide range of theoretical orientations. For example, Ammar (2018) proposed that teaching writing to EFL female students should be integrated with feminist work and tools of critical literacy through which students can be empowered to question their lives. Ammar (2018) advocated for critical literacy in female EFL writing classes as a means of implementing the mission of CP: scaffolding students to read both the word and the world (Freire, 1985; hooks, 2014). In a similar vein, Kareepadath (2018) found that Indian teachers “continuously face challenges that are created by ‘institutional norms and standards’” (p.49) as the overall schooling system and curriculum are rigid and standardized—which is not conducive to the realm of critical pedagogy. Given these challenges, teachers in the study were able to subtly resist and incorporate critical features in their teaching process.

Al Jumiah (2016) used critical literacy, which is crucial to mental and social liberation, as an analytical tool to investigate the EFL Saudi English textbooks and unpack issues related to power and ideology in them. Interestingly, findings of his study revealed that the Saudi English EFL textbooks are loaded with issues that promote naturalization of English teaching and learning, promoting banking education and unequal gender representations. Al Jumiah’s (2016) critical study calls attention to the need for all educators to incorporate critical literacy instruction, and especially for English language teachers and in teacher training sessions so that educators can have a positive impact on their students by critically teaching them the interrelationship between language, social identities, and power. Furthermore, influenced by and rooted in the premises of social justice and critical literacy, Mohammed and Adam (2016) conducted a quantitative study in the context of Saudi Arabia. They surveyed 40 college English major students to explore the extent to which students can have their voices heard in the process of syllabus design and their role as participants rather than recipients in the educational process. Findings of their study reveal that students do need to have more agentive voices in deciding which courses they need the most to meet their future professional expectations. This way, as Mohammed and Adam (2016) emphasized, EFL students will be more motivated to succeed in their studies and build a meaningful life.

Inspired by the neoliberal theory of education and implementing a pedagogy of critical thinking through the teaching of writing, Barnawi (2019) conducted a qualitative study for several undergraduate college writing students in Saudi Arabia. By using the protocol of “*read, reason, and respond*”, students in the study were asked to choose from a wide range of readings that suited their interests and then to critically reflect on their chosen reading in a writing assignment—relating these readings to their daily encounters and experiences. Later on, students were asked to share their papers with their peers and the teacher for comments—using dialogue as a form of constructing effective comments and raising some questions where necessary. Employing the read, reason, and respond protocol gave students a space to critique each other’s drafts, pose several questions, and share their experiences and values,” while scaffolding their critical skills. One of the students in the study, Alaa, pushed against this pedagogy at first and felt confused about how to complete the assignment. After a one-on-one conference with his teacher, Alaa felt that he started to enact his agentive identity and use some of his cultural and ideational discourse (i.e., he used some verses of the holy Quran) to negotiate his writerly identity and authoritatively construct his views critically. By allowing his peers to challenge him by posing critical comments on his paper and including multiple drafts, this process allowed Alaa to write a more critical essay with confidence. Barnawi also stated that applying such a pedagogy—the critical one—can open spaces for teachers to be much more reflective, challenge presupposed assumptions about the linguistic capacity of their students and allow teachers to “revisit some dominant ideologies” while adopting teaching practices that suit students culturally and academically. Therefore, while a majority of existing studies on critical pedagogy and its relevant theories in education focus on the application of language teaching instructions in the classroom, there is an exigency to see how macro and micro issues influence and control CP application in higher education classrooms in Saudi Arabia. This investigation attempts to transcend the focus on language instruction and the perception of learning as merely in the classroom while considering how teachers can lead students to become social agents of change, disrupting the reproduction of hegemony in the name of critical literacy.

3. Data Collection and Procedures

3.1. Data Analysis

In this paper, the results of the data analysis—mixed method approach—of the research instrument are presented. The data was analyzed using SPSS “Statistical Product and Service Solutions” v.26. The main aim of the study is to explore the applicability of Critical Pedagogy among English language teachers in Saudi Arabia, i.e., to reveal the readiness of English language teachers (ELT) in Saudi Arabia towards applying partial tenets of CP and CL in the process of teaching and learning. The study instrument, which is the questionnaire, was analyzed to answer two main questions:

1. How aware are English language teachers in Saudi higher education of critical pedagogy and its underlying principles in the process of teaching?
2. To what extent can English language teachers in Saudi higher education implement and familiarize students with tenets of critical pedagogy in their classrooms?

This article begins by setting out the results of the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data, presenting a sample profile as well as a descriptive summary of the participants’ responses to the questionnaire items. A one-sample t-test is used to provide the significance of participating teachers responses to the questionnaire items, at $\alpha = 0.05$.

3.2. Interview protocol

I held semi-structured interviews with four English college teachers in which I gave them the following prompts: describe your pedagogical orientations, what do you know about critical pedagogy, do you apply critical and transformative pedagogy? And what are possible applications of CP in the classroom. These interviews were conducted after school using the Zoom application. Each interview lasted around forty minutes, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The interview data was analyzed using a descriptive coding approach (Saldana, 2016). Carefully reading each interview, coding each one individually and then reading over all of the data again to cross check similar themes and depict instances of CP attitudes, practices and possible hurdles as informed by the participants.

3.3. Sample Profile

A total of 60 teachers at colleges of language and translation and departments of English and literary studies across Saudi universities participated in this study. The sample profile is summarized in *Table 1*, which reveals that 53% of participating teachers hold a Ph.D. while 47% hold MA degrees. The majority of participants (68%) received their graduate education from Western education systems. Regarding courses that participants teach, the majority 77% of participants teach upper-division English courses, and the mean teaching experience of English-related courses is 13.5 years with a standard deviation of 8.05 years. Finally, females' percentage 52% is higher than males', 48%. The sample profile is graphically illustrated in **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.**,

Figure 1, and **Error! Reference source not found.**

Table 1. Sample Profile (N = 60)

	n	%		n	%
Level of Education:			Received Graduate Education in:		
MA	28	46.7	Non-Western education system	19	31.7
Ph.D.	32	53.3	Western education system	41	68.3
Teaching...			Teaching...		
Lower-division English courses	14	23.3	Female	23	38.3
Upper-division English courses	46	76.7	Male	17	28.3
			Both	20	33.3
Gender:			Teaching English-related Courses for...		
Female	31	51.7	M = 13.53 years, SD = 8.052 years		
Male	29	48.3	Min = 1 to Max = 37 years		

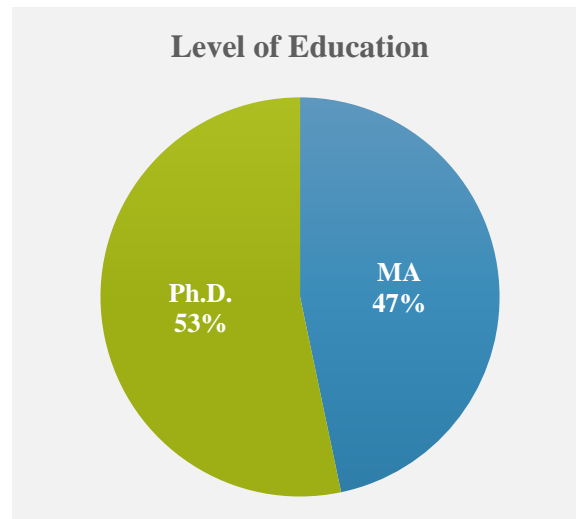


Figure 1. Pie Chart of Education Level

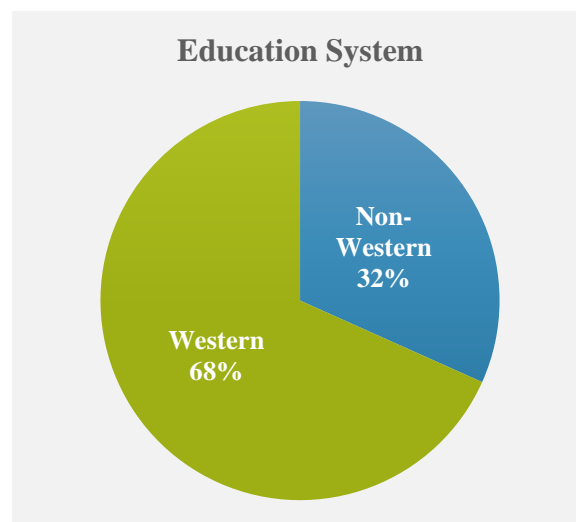


Figure 2. Pie Chart of Education System

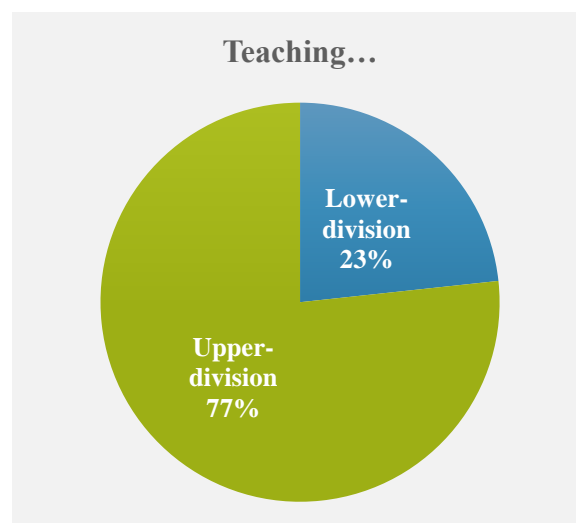


Figure 3. Pie Chart of English Course Level

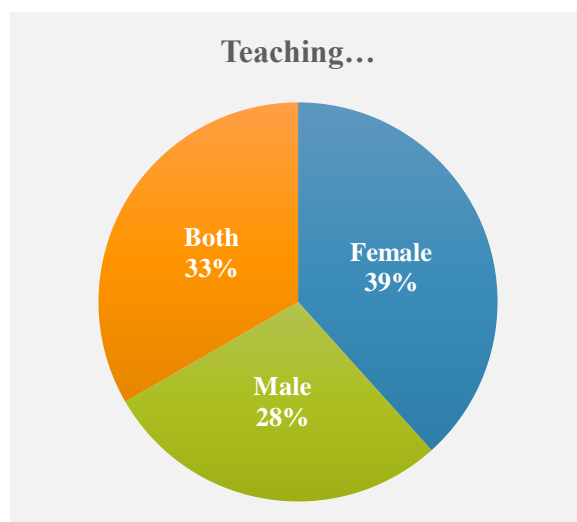


Figure 4. Pie Chart of Students' Gender

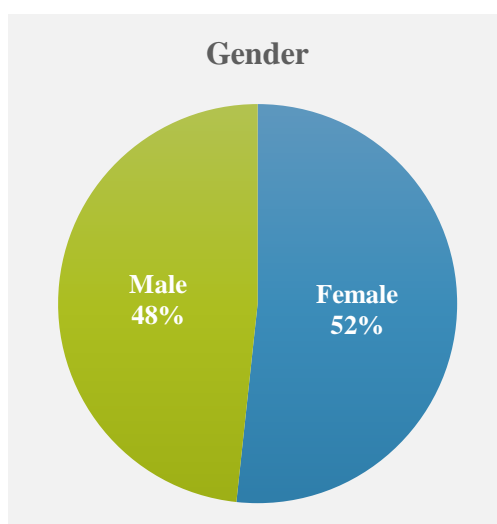


Figure 1. Pie Chart of Gender

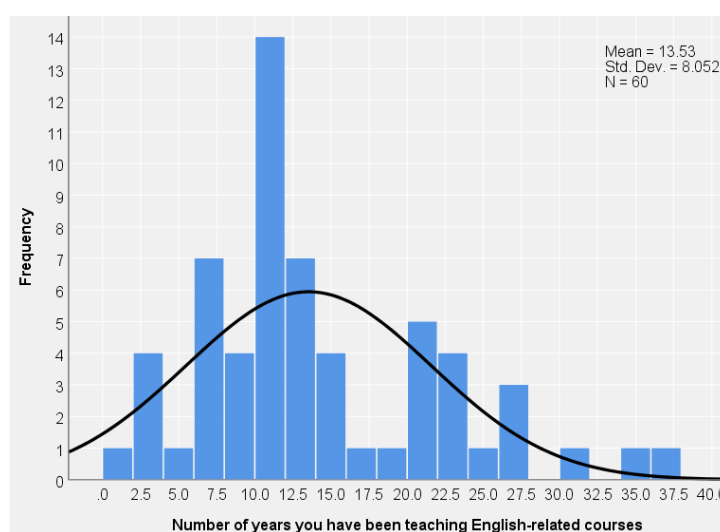


Figure 6. Histogram of English Teaching Years

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Question One: English Language Teachers Awareness of Critical Pedagogy in the Saudi Context: A Descriptive Summary

Ten items are used to measure this Teaching topic. The descriptive summary for teaching-related items is shown in Table 2; and graphically represented in Figure 2. On average, 59% of teachers agree with the teaching-related items, with an overall mean score of 3.46 and standard deviation of 0.558. Item mean scores range between 2.53 (for item 1) and 4.32 (for item 3). From the table and the bar chart, we can see that the majority (62%) of teachers disagree that their role as language teacher is merely to transfer correct elements of grammar, pronunciation, etc. Also, a large proportion (45%) of teachers disagree with items 6 and 7, with low mean scores of 2.87 and 2.92, respectively. On the other hand, most teachers (92%) agree that “they must be aware of implicit and explicit ideologies in the textbooks”, and 82% agree that “instructors are responsible for ensuring equal accessibility to students from different backgrounds, levels of digital literacy, financial resources, and abilities/disabilities”, with mean scores of 4.32 and 4.15, respectively.

Table 2. Teachers' Responses to Teaching-Related Items (N = 60)

Items	SD	D	NS	A	SA	M	Std
1. My role as language teacher is merely to transfer correct elements of grammar, pronunciation, etc.	19	18	4	10	9	2.53	1.467
2. Teaching a language is loaded with ideological layers; therefore, teaching a language is inevitably ideological	3	6	13	26	12	3.63	1.073
3. Teachers must be aware of implicit and explicit ideologies in the textbooks	1	0	4	29	26	4.32	.748
4. Instructors are responsible for ensuring equal accessibility to students from different backgrounds, levels of digital literacy, financial resources, and abilities/disabilities	1	1	9	26	23	4.15	.860
5. Gender & social class in language teaching are critical issues that should be discussed openly in the classroom	5	6	15	19	15	3.55	1.213
6. Lecture style is my go-to teaching method	13	14	9	16	8	2.87	1.384
7. I prefer end-of-the-term multiple choice and short answer exams to assigning exploratory final research projects	8	19	10	16	7	2.92	1.266
8. I feel that my department's administration and policy provide sufficient support, creative space, resources, and professional development opportunities that encourage instructors to implement crit...	10	11	8	18	13	3.22	1.415
9. I think that my students have the capacity and willingness to understand and engage in projects of critical literacy	6	8	12	24	10	3.40	1.210
10. I think it is critical to recognize the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning	1	2	10	31	16	3.98	.854

SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, NS: Not Sure, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree, M: Mean, Std: Standard Deviation

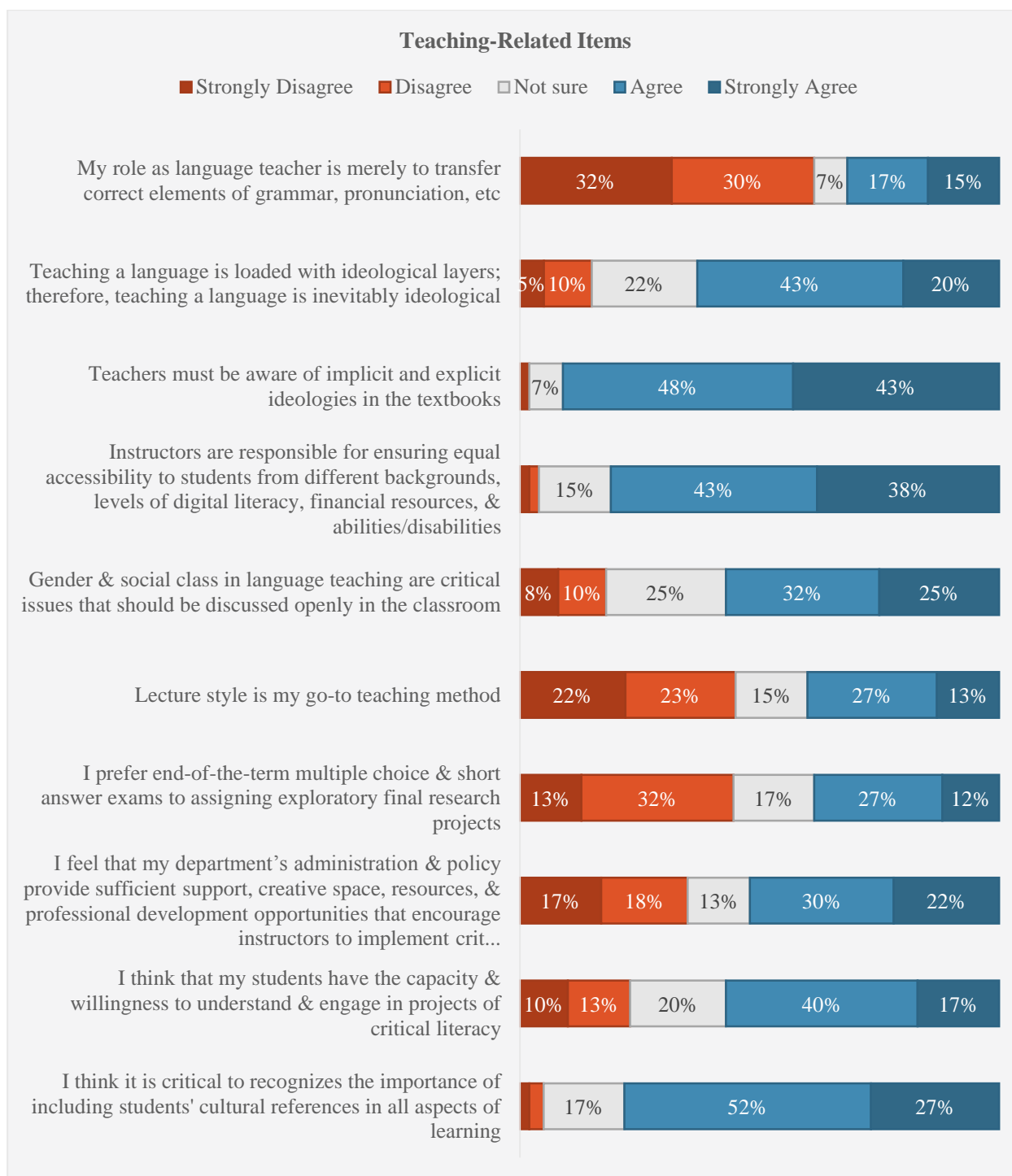


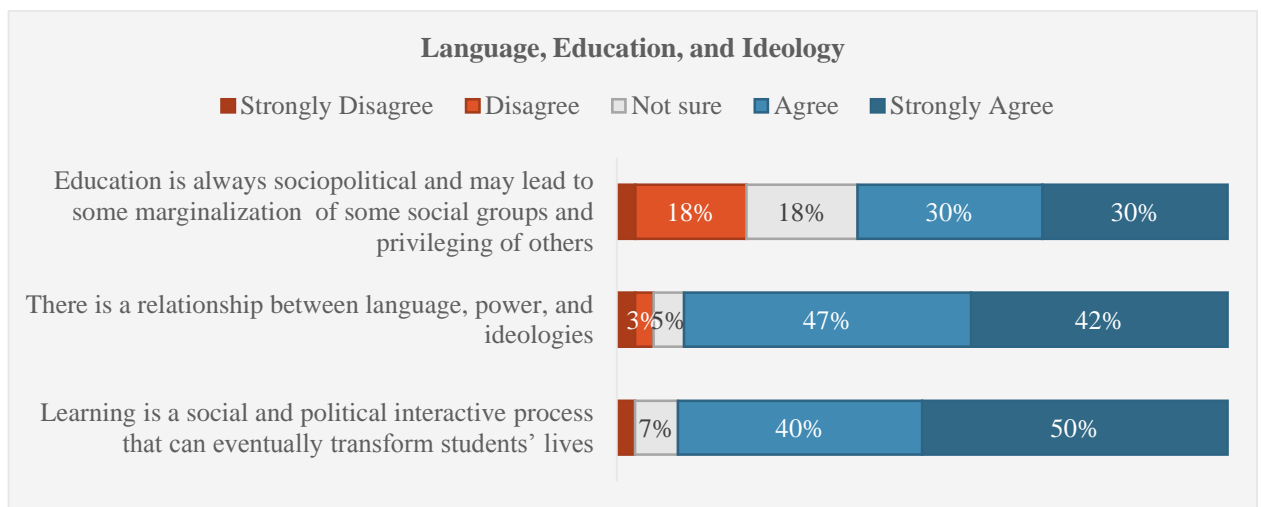
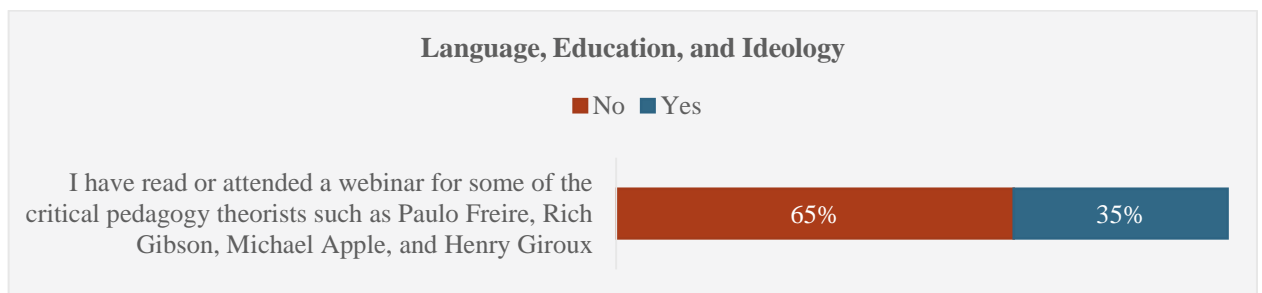
Figure 2. Teaching-Related Items Bar Chart

This part of the questionnaire (*Language, Education, and Ideology*) is measured by four items; three items are measured on a five-point Likert scale and one item is a binary variable (Yes/No responses). The descriptive summary is shown in Table 3, graphically represented in Figure 3 and Figure 4. On average, 79% of teachers gave positive responses (“agree” or “strongly agree”) to the three items, with an overall mean score of 4.06 and a standard deviation of 0.651. Only 35% of teachers have read or attended a webinar for some of the critical pedagogy theorists such as Paulo Freire, Rich Gibson, Michael Apple, and Henry Giroux.

Table 3. Teachers' Responses to Language, Education, and Ideology (N = 60)

Items	SD	D	NS	A	SA	M	Std
1. Education is always sociopolitical and may lead to some marginalization of some social groups and privileging of others	2	11	11	18	18	3.65	1.191
2. There is a relationship between language, power, and ideologies	2	2	3	28	25	4.20	.935
3. Learning is a social and political interactive process that can eventually transform students' lives	2	0	4	24	30	4.33	.877

SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, NS: Not Sure, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree, M: Mean, Std: Standard Deviation

**Figure 3.** Language, Education, and Ideology Bar Chart – Likert-scale**Figure 4.** Language, Education, and Ideology Bar Chart – Binary Variable

5. Test of Significance

A one-sample t test was used to find whether the participating teachers are aware of critical pedagogy and its underlying principles in the process of teaching. That is, by testing the mean score of each item against a hypothesized mean score of “3”, referring to the minimum level of awareness. The results of the t tests of teaching-related items and language, education, and ideology items are reported in Table 4. The results show that the t tests are statistically significant for “Teaching-related Items” and “Language, Education, and Ideology Items”, $p < 0.001$, as reported in Table 4. That is, the participating teachers are significantly aware of CP and its underlying principles in the process of teaching.

The t tests for individual items reveal more detailed overview of teaching-related items as the tests are statistically significant ($P < 0.05$). That is, they are significantly aware that:

- Their role as language teacher is merely to transfer correct elements of grammar, pronunciation, etc.
- Teaching a language is loaded with ideological layers.
- Teachers must be aware of implicit and explicit ideologies in the textbooks.
- Instructors are responsible for ensuring equal accessibility to students from different backgrounds, levels of digital literacy, financial resources, and abilities/disabilities.
- Gender and social class in language teaching are critical issues that should be discussed openly in the classroom.
- Their students have the capacity and willingness to understand and engage in projects of critical literacy.
- It is critical to recognize the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning.

On the Language, Education, and Ideology items part, the three t tests are statistically significant, $p < 0.001$, indicating that teachers are significantly aware that:

- Education is always sociopolitical and may lead to some marginalization of some social groups and privileging of others
- There is a relationship between language, power, and ideologies
- Learning is a social and political interactive process that can eventually transform students' lives

Table 4. Awareness of English Language Teachers in Saudi Higher Education of CP and its underlying principles in the process of teaching

Items	Test Value = 3			Statistics			
	t	Sig.	MD	95% C.I.		M	SD
				L	U		
Teaching-related Items	6.340	<.001	.457	.313	.601	3.46	.558
1. My role as language teacher is merely to transfer correct elements of grammar, pronunciation, etc.	-2.464	.017	-.467	-.85	-.09	2.53	1.467
2. Teaching a language is loaded with ideological layers; therefore, teaching a language is inevitably ideological	4.572	<.001	.633	.36	.91	3.63	1.073
3. Teachers must be aware of implicit and explicit ideologies in the textbooks	13.640	<.001	1.317	1.12	1.51	4.32	.748
4. Instructors are responsible for ensuring equal accessibility to students from different backgrounds, levels of digital literacy, financial resources, and abilities/disabilities.	10.356	<.001	1.150	.93	1.37	4.15	.860
5. Gender and social class in language teaching are critical issues that should be discussed openly in the classroom.	3.511	.001	.550	.24	.86	3.55	1.213
6. Lecture style is my go-to teaching method.	-.746	.458	-.133	-.49	.22	2.87	1.384
7. I prefer end-of-the-term multiple choice and short answer exams to assigning exploratory final research projects.	-.510	.612	-.083	-.41	.24	2.92	1.266
8. I feel that my department's administration and policy provide sufficient support, creative space, resources, and professional development opportunities that encourage instructors to implement crit...	1.186	.240	.217	-.15	.58	3.22	1.415

Items	Test Value = 3				Statistics		
	t	Sig.	MD	95% C.I.		M	SD
				L	U		
9. I think that my students have the capacity and willingness to understand and engage in projects of critical literacy.	2.560	.013	.400	.09	.71	3.40	1.210
10. I think it is critical to recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning.	8.924	<.001	.983	.76	1.20	3.98	.854
Language, Education, and Ideology Items	12.627	<.001	1.061	.89	1.23	4.06	.651
1. Education is always sociopolitical and may lead to some marginalization of some social groups and privileging of others.	4.228	<.001	.650	.34	.96	3.65	1.191
2. There is a relationship between language, power, and ideologies.	9.939	<.001	1.200	.96	1.44	4.20	.935
3. Learning is a social and political interactive process that can eventually transform students' lives.	11.782	<.001	1.333	1.11	1.56	4.33	.877

5.1. Question Two: The Extent to which English Language Teachers Can Implement and Familiarize Students with CP: A Descriptive Summary

The researcher used nine items to measure students-related topics. The descriptive summary for this part is reported in Table 5; graphically represented in Figure 5, where the percentages are shown for all items. From the table and bar chart, on average, the majority of responses are either “agree” (41%) or “strongly agree” (35%), with a total of 76% agreement and an overall mean score of 3.97 and standard deviation of 0.714. The mean scores of the nine items range between 3.55 (for item 9) and 4.25 (for item 5), check Table 5. On top of the items that teachers agree is that “students can debate and question my opinions and statements in the classroom”, as 50% “strongly agree” and 37% “agree”. Second comes “students should study issues related to language and society in an inquiring way, rather through rote learning alone”, with 48% “strongly agree” and 38% “agree”.

Table 5. Teachers' Responses to Students-Related Items (N = 60)

Items	SD	A	SA	M	StD		
1. Students in EFL context should critique dominant ideologies	1	4	17	25	13	3.75	.932
2. Students should reflect on the influences of popular culture and social media in shaping their social realities	2	3	10	24	21	3.98	1.017
3. Students should be introduced to critical theories for personal development proposed by structural developmental theorists	2	0	13	26	19	4.00	.921
4. Students should study issues related to language and society in an inquiring way, rather through rote learning alone	1	5	2	23	29	4.23	.981
5. Students can debate and question my opinions and statements in the classroom	3	1	4	22	30	4.25	1.019
6. Students should deconstruct texts so that they can be understood from different perspectives and across contexts	1	1	5	31	22	4.20	.798
7. Students should search for the underlying economic, political, and social interests that affect a situation	3	3	11	25	18	3.87	1.065
8. Students should highlight justice issues when examining various social issues and language uses	5	3	7	24	21	3.88	1.195
9. Students should be part of the syllabus design at the very start of the semester	4	10	11	19	16	3.55	1.241

SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, NS: Not Sure, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree, M: Mean, StD: Standard Deviation

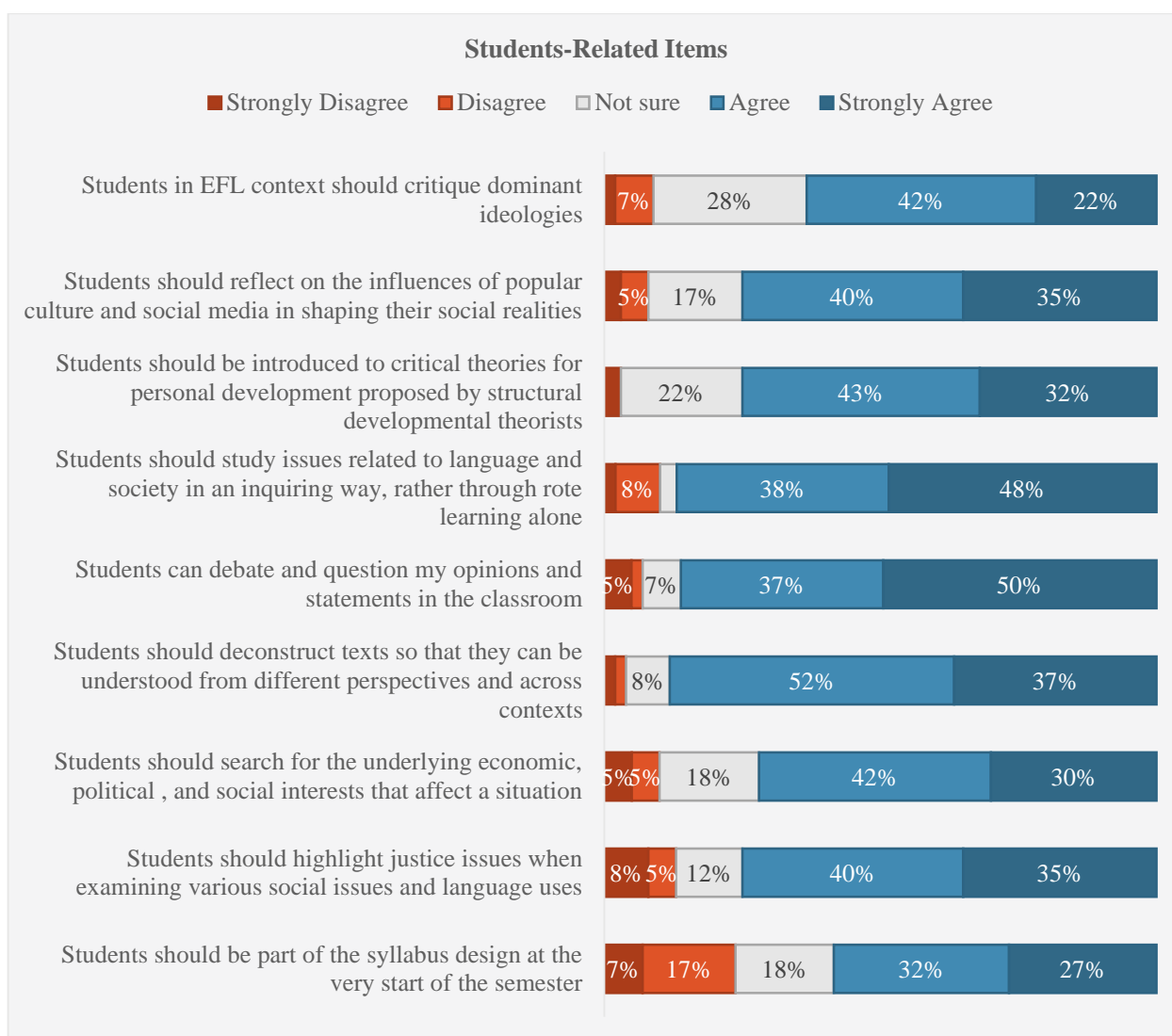


Figure 5. Students-related Items Bar Chart

6. Test of Significance

A one-sample *t* test of student-related items mean score is found to be statistically significant, $t = 10.512$, $p < 0.001$; indicating that English Language Teachers in Saudi higher education can significantly implement and familiarize students with tenets of critical pedagogy in their language learning classrooms in culturally responsive ways. Performing the *t* test on all student-related items produced statistically significant results, reported in *Table 6*. The results show that English Language Teachers in Saudi Higher Education can significantly let students:

- critique dominant ideologies
- reflect on the influences of popular culture and social media in shaping their social realities
- be introduced to critical theories for personal development proposed by structural developmental theorists
 - study issues related to language and society in an inquiring way, rather through rote learning alone
 - debate and question my opinions and statements in the classroom
 - deconstruct texts so that they can be understood from different perspectives and across contexts

- search for the underlying economic, political, and social interests that affect a situation
- highlight justice issues when examining various social issues and language uses
- be part of the syllabus design at the very start of the semester

Table 6. The Extent to which English Language Teachers in Saudi Higher Education Can Implement and Familiarize Students with Tenets of CP in their Language Learning Classrooms

Items	Test Value = 3					Statistics	
	t	Sig.	MD	95% C.I.		M	SD
				L	U		
Students-related Items	10.512	<.001	.969	.78	1.15	3.97	.714
1. Students in EFL context should critique dominant ideologies	6.233	<.001	.750	.51	.99	3.75	.932
2. Students should reflect on the influences of popular culture and social media in shaping their social realities	7.492	<.001	.983	.72	1.25	3.98	1.017
3. Students should be introduced to critical theories for personal development proposed by structural developmental theorists	8.414	<.001	1.000	.76	1.24	4.00	.921
4. Students should study issues related to language and society in an inquiring way, rather through rote learning alone	9.742	<.001	1.233	.98	1.49	4.23	.981
5. Students can debate and question my opinions and statements in the classroom	9.503	<.001	1.250	.99	1.51	4.25	1.019
6. Students should deconstruct texts so that they can be understood from different perspectives and across contexts	11.644	<.001	1.200	.99	1.41	4.20	.798
7. Students should search for the underlying economic, political, and social interests that affect a situation	6.303	<.001	.867	.59	1.14	3.87	1.065
8. Students should highlight justice issues when examining various social issues and language uses	5.728	<.001	.883	.57	1.19	3.88	1.195
9. Students should be part of the syllabus design at the very start of the semester	3.433	.001	.550	.23	.87	3.55	1.241

6.1. A Short Report of Participants' Interviews

Interviewing four participants about their stance towards implementing some tenets of critical pedagogy (CP) in their EFL Saudi classroom has revealed the use or denial of using CP in nuanced, implicit ways. In the following conversation, four teachers discussed some of their attitudes toward the use of CP in their classrooms without directly referring to the pedagogy as CP. Generally, all of the teachers in the study demonstrate a value in their teaching for promoting a rhetoric of equality in the classroom by giving each student equal footing in regard to any topic discussed in the class without any stigmatization. Owing to limitations of space and access, I report teachers' ideational and attitudinal stances in respect to CP. Interviewing Omar, Ali, Ahmad and Sara about their pedagogical practices and knowledge of critical pedagogy in their profession is a great point of departure to understand how teachers in an apparently authoritative, hierarchical educational system may implement and/or suppress their pedagogical tools to perpetuate the state's ideology.

Sara highlighted the important role of creating a safe space for “dialogic conversation” between teachers, students, and peers. In this process, she mentioned that “students come together in class to deconstruct, by any means they have, and challenge the topic being discussed in class.” Teachers in this scenario, she elaborated, “help students critically interrogate the topic of study” by asking

questions and posing critical social problems. Nevertheless, she, warned that “teachers should not talk about issues that trigger some macro issue problems, otherwise, we may experience some institutional sociopolitical consequences.” On the contrary, Ali undoubtedly celebrated the idea of liberal education in general but avoided any context-specific statements and even put finding or expressing his own voice down as “unattainable.” Ali reflected in the interview by stating that:

Humm . . . [long pause] . . . see currently no . . . even critical theorists always have some reservation on some other ideologies. That these actions or ideas are not applicable or cannot be applied in today’s society . . . they know that some ideas or ideology are utopian ideas and not realistic . . .

As such, Ali’s discourse can be interpreted as vocal avoidance of Saudi institutional backlash—the trouble that an educator can get into by encouraging students to question power. Nonetheless, he seems slightly hesitant (such as “hmm” and “long pause”). He also chooses to avoid any potential ideological conflict that might happen in the process of teaching. Ali’s statements contradict those of fellow teachers. In our conversation, he stated that he aspires for a liberal education that gives equal footing to students, teachers, and policy makers. Yet, in the interview, he dismissed all of these concepts as merely “utopian” and as a “dream” in his home institution.

Interestingly, Sara explicitly stated that she is trying to unpack the gender ideological biases in her English classroom by posing some societal issues in her writing class and then letting her students reflect about the issue by using writing as a form of *linguaging*. She stated, “I try to teach my students critical thinking through writing and also try to raise some relevant critical issues in the classroom such as women’s rights and global movements.” Along these lines Ahmad, also, confessed that “pushing students out of their comfort zones and using English as a shield to get away from any culturally-taboo topic is a great method to apply a critical way of teaching in English classrooms.” Reflections in the interview represent the cautious, qualified willingness to critically scaffold student’s ways of thinking, to support students in fashioning proactive identities and to help them negotiate their subjectivities among networks of complex power dynamics and ideologies. On the other hand, Ali mentioned that it is sometimes so challenging for teachers to make connections between what the state wants students to learn and how teachers should go beyond this and teach students the tools to navigate life critically and consciously. Omar, furthermore, delineated his thoughts about the application of CP in his classroom and stated that:

For teachers who use critical theory or pedagogy, I think I should be very careful when I use or write about this theory in my university for several reasons; I would not touch on or critique any domination in the society. Doing this will pose some difficulties because teaching critical topics is sensitive especially when you try to tackle issues pertinent to marginalization of minority groups or students.

Omar referred to the effects of institutional silencing in the above quote by stating clearly that he wants to “be very careful when [he] uses or writes about this theory.” Hence, the act of avoidance in his narrative reflects the possible difficulties of implementing CP in the Saudi context.

Being accustomed to rote learning, which has crafted the way the majority of Saudi students think of education and their role, participants raise the issues that students sometimes prefer to be silent about as they are not used to being asked to participate as part of the course requirements. Omar and Ali stated that they give their students a space to co-think the syllabus and collectively design it wherever there is an opportunity to do so. Omar articulated that “in perpetuating a democratic way of education, I think that it is important to give students choices to pick readings of their interests, dialogue with them about the course assessment, and so on.” Standing at the crossroads, Ahmad reported one critical issue in his teaching experience that students need, sometimes, to be linguistically fluent and culturally competent to be able to become critical writers or learners: he said, “I have no

idea how my students will be able to balance what they should know in academia and how they should act in the world.”

The question here should be ‘is CP transferable?’ Can educators in general adopt a culturally and socially relevant pedagogy to transform their classroom and the community where they live? Is it possible to encourage students to use their voices and in turn cause a holistic personal journey of evolution in some other social and intellectual aspects of their lives? Answering such questions is not easy, as these participants enacted and reflected complex identities and voices that are constructed via several macro and micro factors. Using CP as a catalytic voice that aims to transform student learning experiences and their societies seem is an immensely challenging task in relatively collective societies. Digging deeper into the issue, it seems that in all cases, the participants expressed a desire to scaffold students into the transformative model by which eventually they can become ideologically different individuals with different options of ideologies and identities. With extreme caution, they all seem to implement, at times, some forms of CP in a rhetorical and tactical way without explicitly talking about CP or triggering student discomfort.

7. Discussions

The findings indicate that the participants’ perspectives on CP showcase their ideational stance towards their own pedagogical orientations, which included: high awareness of CP principles, tactically using CP in some classroom scenarios, at the micro-level, and sometimes rejecting the application of such a tool due to its serious consequences. According to data collected, “banking” pedagogical practices appeared to be less dominant on the theoretical level and sometimes in praxis. Interestingly, participants such as Sara indicated their positive pedagogical orientation towards CP, even though on the micro, surface level; however, the survey revealed that, on average, 59% of teachers agree with the teaching-related propositions on a high percentage (92%) of the survey items; for example, most teachers agree that “they must be aware of implicit and explicit ideologies in the textbooks”, and (82%) agree that “instructors are responsible for ensuring equal access for students from different backgrounds, levels of digital literacy, financial resources, and abilities/disabilities”, with mean scores of (4.32) and (4.15), respectively. Moreover, data in the survey debunk the assertion that teachers in the study perpetuate the banking-model education as the majority (62%) of teachers disagree that their role as language teachers is merely to transfer correct elements of grammar, pronunciation, etc. It is also critical to notice that most teachers surveyed (68%) and interviewed (all of them) received their graduate education from Western education systems, which might explain the level of their awareness of some CP principles. Data in the study, also, indicate that teachers in Saudi Arabia are aware of the concept of CP as 79% of teachers gave positive responses to the idea that education is sociopolitical and is connected to power (Freire, 1970; Kareepadath, 2018). From the data above, participants showcased that they do not solely use the rote teaching style and are willing to scaffold students to learn in an “inquiring way, rather through rote learning alone” with a total percentage of 86% agreement. As well as in the interview, two participants stated that they incorporate some of the forms of democratic education (by using writing to think critically and by allowing students to co-design the syllabus), and these findings corroborate Barnawi’s (2019) and Mohammed and Adam’s (2016) studies.

Practically speaking, however, and delving deeply into the conversation about the applicability of CP in the Saudi context, participants would shrink back from such ideas due to institutional and macro backlash and they enacted a form of avoidance in some classroom scenarios to maintain a safe space and social harmony, as reported in the interview (Al Jumiah, 2016; Ammar, 2018). Furthermore, teachers in the interview and in the survey seem to have a tendency toward applying some principles of CP in their English language classrooms. For instance, the majority of teachers reported positively,

with a total of 76% agreement, that they are willing to help students “critique dominant ideologies” and “facilitate the questioning of power in the classroom, including the teacher,” which reflects the emancipatory stance and ideological orientation towards education (Canagarajah, 1999; Giroux, 1985; Parpart, Connely & Barribeau, 2000; Shor, 1996). On the contrary, some participants in the study clearly expressed that trying to apply CP in such a totalitarian system is “unattainable.” Perpetuating a monological ideology through teaching and ignoring the student-centered approach (Palmer & Emmons, 2004; Crookes, 2012) in education is still pervasive. Stances such as “teachers should be careful when using CP” and essentializing learners as “less linguistically legitimate” are instances of the ingrained ideology that casts CP and learners alike as incompatible with the status quo. This is of course contradictory to what researchers in the area have promoted regarding the need for CP as a tool for neoliberal education in competitive economic markets (Clemitshaw, 2013; Barnawi, 2019; Rexhepi, 2019). Thus, based on the findings of this mixed method, there is an exigency to initiate dialogical exchanges between critical scholars, policymakers, and Saudi English teachers, and I advocate for a culture of voice that critically examines educational practices and knowledge construction in relatively homogeneous societies.

8. Pedagogical Implication

Findings of the current study reinforce the value of looking at the political nature of English language teaching and also show that addressing power relations and empowering students through language teaching and learning is at the core of emancipatory education. The critical significance of the present study is that it encourages English teachers and students to recognize conflicting ideologies, deconstruct implicit power exercise and hierarchy, and to scaffold students to make meaning of their lived experiences (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992). CP at the philosophical level is a somewhat familiar concept for most of the teachers in this study, however, EFL researchers should go beyond the theoretical level and conduct more critical research on how EFL English materials, plans, and classroom interaction and assessment can be modified and reorganized to apply CP more effectively. Such pedagogical and practical practices can greatly help teachers to avoid reproducing the western critical materials and make it more culturally and linguistically relevant (Freire, 1970; Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2021). Such a critical stance can foster the concept of teaching as a ‘*value*,’ (Crookes, 2021) which sustains the globalized collective waves of emancipatory education. This also goes along with the rhetorical teaching practice of meaningfully helping students learn to influence the world around them and re-envision and reimagine the “pre-packaged curricula and rigid institutionalized policies in Saudi education” (Ammar, 2018, p.30). All in all, policy makers in Saudi educational system should practice such pedagogy as a long-lasting social and educational process rather than just merely a one-classroom method (Crookes & Lehner, 1998). What is urgently needed in the context of teaching English in Saudi higher education is to collectively design materials that can empower student learners and cultivate their agency during the process of language learning.

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