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# Navigating Cultural Curricula: Critical Cultural Awareness in Iranian Formal and Informal EFL Contexts

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Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA) is a fundamental part of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Despite this, there has been little exploration of this construct in Iran's English education landscape. The present study aimed to explore CCA presence, challenges, and pedagogy in Iran's formal (public schools) and informal (private language institutes) English education contexts. A sequential mixed-methods approach was used for this study, involving 250 EFL teachers and 300 learners. Data were collected through questionnaires, textbook content analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The results showed that there was a significant disparity between formal and informal contexts in using CCA in EFL education in Iran. Formal contexts showed a strong source culture bias and weak development of ICC, while informal contexts showed more target culture exposure (e.g., 60-75% on Western cultures) but uneven critical engagement. Five thematic challenges for CCA development were identified: ideology as gatekeeper, autonomy versus uncertainty in the informal sector, the training gap, learners' curiosity and identity negotiation, and resource and assessment gaps. Based on qualitative analysis of interview data and textbook examination, several pedagogical principles emerged that emphasize cultural representation, critical pedagogy training for teachers, and effective use of multimedia materials for this purpose. The findings contribute to understanding cultural pedagogy in contexts where English education intersects with national identity preservation and global engagement imperatives.

**Keywords**
**Critical Cultural Awareness, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Iranian EFL Context, Formal Education, Informal Language Institutes**

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## Introduction

The complex relationship between language and culture is a key part of modern language teaching. In today's globalized world, teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) goes beyond just linguistic skills. It demands that learners develop their intercultural skills. Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA) is a vital aspect of Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). It provides learners with not only knowledge of other cultures but also the ability to critically assess cultural practices, products, and viewpoints in their own society and in others. This critical perspective helps promote respectful discussions, reduce stereotypes, and prepare learners for meaningful interactions across cultures.

In Iran, a country with a rich history and unique socio-political identity, incorporating culture into EFL presents special challenges. The Iranian EFL landscape comprises two distinct sectors: a formal, state-controlled sector of public schools and universities, and an informal, commercial sector of private language institutes. These two areas have different philosophies, regulations, and teaching approaches, which greatly influence how culture is taught. The formal sector, guided by national educational policies, tends to emphasize national-Islamic identity and values. This sometimes limits the engagement with global, especially Western, cultures. On the other hand, the informal sector operates with more freedom in choosing materials and methods. It often aligns with international teaching trends, though it may lack critical depth or local relevance.

Previous studies on English Language Teaching (ELT) in Iran have pointed out a strong focus on the source culture (Persian-Islamic) in textbooks produced in the country, while target cultures tend to be underrepresented, oversimplified, or viewed through a critical lens (Aliakbari, 2002; Ghaffari et al., 2023). Research on the views of teachers and learners shows a general acknowledgment of the importance of culture, but there are significant gaps in teaching knowledge and training (Ghaffari et al., 2021; Soodmand Afshar & Moradifar, 2021). However, there is no thorough comparative analysis identifying the rules—the implicit and explicit norms, constraints, and operational principles—that influence CCA across the formal and informal sectors. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how CCA is understood, applied, and limited in these two different learning environments. While existing studies have examined the cultural content in Iranian textbooks (Aliakbari, 2002; Ghaffari et al., 2023) and explored teacher perceptions in isolation (Soodmand Afshar & Moradifar, 2021), no research has systematically compared how different institutional contexts, each with its own regulatory frameworks, material selection

processes, and pedagogical philosophies, shape the implementation of Cultural Content Analysis (CCA) in fundamentally different ways. Additionally, previous studies have not integrated multiple stakeholder perspectives, including those of teachers, learners, and textbook content, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for CCA development across Iran's dual EFL system. This study addresses these gaps through a multi-stakeholder, context-comparative approach that examines not only the cultural content present but also how it is experienced, constrained, and potentially transformed by those who teach and learn within these parallel educational systems. Therefore, it plans to address the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How is CCA shown, supported, and limited in the Iranian formal (public school) and informal (private institute) EFL settings?

**Research Question 2:** What challenges and obstacles do teachers and learners see in implementing and developing CCA in each context?

**Research Question 3:** Based on these findings, what teaching principles or guidelines emerge from the data to effectively integrate and promote CCA across the broader Iranian EFL landscape?

## Materials and Methods

### Research Design

To address the complexity of the research questions, we used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design started with collecting and analyzing quantitative data, followed by a qualitative phase that aimed to explain and elaborate on the initial quantitative findings. We chose this approach to identify important areas for deeper exploration through interviews and document analysis, based on the survey's general patterns.

### Participants

The study was conducted in three cities in Iran: Tehran, the capital and largest metropolitan area; Qazvin, a mid-sized provincial center; and Shiraz, a prominent city in the south. These cities were selected to represent diverse geographic regions and varying administrative and cultural contexts within Iran. Tehran as the capital hosts the highest density of both formal and informal institutions; Qazvin represents a typical mid-sized provincial city; and Shiraz was included for its distinct regional cultural characteristics. This purposive selection ensures that findings are not limited to a single urban environment and increases the transferability of results across Iran's diverse educational landscape.



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The quantitative phase includes 250 EFL teachers, comprising 150 from public high schools (formal context) and 100 from private language institutes (informal context). Their experience ranged from 3 to over 20 years. Moreover**,** 300 EFL learners participated. There were 200 from public high schools (grades 10-12) and 100 from intermediate to advanced levels in private institutes. Ages ranged from 15 to 30. After data cleaning, the final participant counts were 250 teachers and 300 learners. These represent the exact number of fully completed and valid questionnaires we retained. We used purposive and convenience sampling to reach a target sample size that would give us enough statistical power for the planned analyses. Incomplete or invalid responses were removed before analysis, which led to the precise numbers reported here. This approach ensures transparency about the actual sample on which all analyses were based.

The Qualitative Phase includes a total of 70 purposeful sample interviewees. We selected 30 teachers (18 from formal contexts and 12 from informal contexts) and 40 learners (25 from formal contexts and 15 from informal contexts) from the survey pool. This selection focused on capturing a diverse range of experiences, genders, and responses from the initial survey.

In the documents phase, we analyzed a total of 10 textbook series. Five were from the formal sector, including the complete Vision series for grades 10-12. The other five were widely used series from the informal sector, such as Interchange, Four Corners, and American English File.

**Data Collection Instruments**

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate critical cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence in Iranian ELT contexts. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data from surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and textbook analysis, the research achieved both breadth and depth in understanding perceptions and practices. Each method was carefully chosen to align with Byram's (1997) model of ICC and addressed specific research questions. The following sections outline the design and application of these instruments, illustrating how they collectively examined the perception and representation of CCA in formal and informal educational settings.

**CCA/ICC Perception Questionnaire**

This questionnaire is adapted and validated from Atai, Babaii, and Taghipour Bazargani (2017), including a 35-item Likert-scale questionnaire that assessed teachers' and learners' views on cultural content in their courses, the frequency of CCA-related activities (e.g., comparing cultural practices, analyzing cultural representations in media, discussing cultural stereotypes), and their

self-assessed ICC. Cronbach's alpha for this study was .89. The questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

**Teacher Background and Practice Survey**

This survey collected demographic information and details regarding textbook use, choices of supplementary materials, and the perceived freedom to teach cultural topics. The textbook series was selected based on two criteria: (1) mandatory use (Vision series for formal contexts), and (2) frequency of adoption based on teacher survey responses. In informal contexts, Interchange, Four Corners, and American English File were reported as primary texts by 78% of responding institute teachers across the three cities. The complete survey instrument is available in Appendix B.

**Semi-Structured Interview Protocols**

A separate protocol for teachers and learners was developed. Teacher interviews explored their definitions of CCA, descriptions of classroom practices, perceived institutional challenges or supports, training experiences, and personal issues. Learner interviews focused on their experiences with cultural content, interest in different cultures, perceived usefulness, and any conflicts they encountered. Teacher interviews averaged 45-60 minutes, while learner interviews averaged 30-45 minutes. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, confirmed when no new codes emerged in the final five interviews in each participant category.

**. Textbook Analysis Rubric**

For this part, a detailed analytical framework based on Byram's (1997) model and previous work (e.g., Yuen, 2011) was developed. It coded for: (a) Representation of source, target, and international cultures in both textual and visual forms; (b) Perspective on whose viewpoint is included (insider/outsider, critical/celebratory); (c) Interaction through activities that encourage comparison, reflection, or critical evaluation; (d) Knowledge regarding the type of cultural information presented (Big "C" versus small "c"). The complete rubric is provided in Appendix C.

**Data Collection Procedure**

We obtained ethical approval and informed consent. The questionnaires were distributed online through professional networks and in person at selected institutions. The qualitative phase followed; we conducted all interviews in Persian (the participants' first language) to ensure depth and comfort. These were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Interview excerpts presented in this paper were translated from Persian to English by the researchers, with back-



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translation verification by a bilingual expert to ensure accuracy and preservation of meaning. We analyzed the selected textbooks page-by-page using the established rubric.

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed by using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics summarized all variables. Before running any parametric tests, we checked the assumptions of normality using the Kolmogorov Smirnov and Shapiro Wilk tests, as well as the assumption of homogeneity of variances using Levene's test. Given that each group had more than one hundred participants, the central limit theorem makes our analysis robust to minor violations of normality. Even so, all assumptions were met satisfactorily. We used independent samples t-tests and ANOVA to compare means between formal and informal contexts for both teachers and learners. Correlation analyses examined relationships between teacher training, perceived freedom, and the frequency of CCA implementation.

Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interview transcripts and textbook analysis notes, utilizing MAXQDA software. Initially, we used an inductive approach to generate codes, which we later organized into broader themes (e.g., "Ideology as a Gatekeeper," "The Pragmatics of Market Demand"). The textbook analysis used a deductive approach based on the rubric, quantifying findings where possible (e.g., the percentage of activities involving critical comparison). We enhanced the validity and richness of the findings through triangulation between the survey, interview, and textbook data.

## Results

**RQ1: CCA Presence, Support, and Limitations in Formal and Informal EFL Contexts**

Teacher Perceptions and Practices: The data indicate a clear distinction between the two instructional settings. For the formal setting, teachers reported significantly less freedom in choosing cultural content ($t(248) = 9.12$, $p < .001$), but had a stronger perceived need to emphasize Iranian culture. Table 1 indicates that teachers in the formal setting used few authentic materials, such as movies or news programs from the target country. In contrast, teachers in the institute had more freedom in using supplementary materials; however, this was not necessarily consistent with the CCA approach.

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**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Teacher-Reported Practices and Perceptions Between Formal and Informal Contexts (N=250)

| Practice/Perception | Formal Context (n=150) Mean (SD) | Informal Context (n=100) Mean (SD) |
|---|---|---|
| **Perceived Freedom to Teach Target Culture (1=Very Low, 5=Very High)** | 1.8 (0.75) | 4.1 (0.82) |
| **Frequency of Using Authentic Materials (1=Never, 5=Very Often)** | 1.9 (0.88) | 3.8 (0.91) |
| **Frequency of Facilitating Cultural Comparisons** | 2.2 (0.79) | 3.3 (0.85) |
| **Received Training on Intercultural Teaching (% Yes)** | 15% | 45% |

**Table 2.** Inferential Statistics for Comparisons Between Formal and Informal Contexts

| Variable | t-value | Df | p-value (two-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Perceived Freedom | 9.12 | 248 | < .001 |
| Frequency of Using Authentic Materials | 8.76 | 248 | < .001 |
| Frequency of Facilitating Cultural Comparisons | 7.43 | 248 | < .001 |
| Training Received | $\chi^2(1) = 26.45$ | - | < .001 |

*Note.* $\chi^2$ = chi-square test used for categorical variable (training received: yes/no). All other comparisons used independent samples t-tests. Assumptions for t-tests were checked and met (normality and homogeneity of variances).

Learner Attitudes and Self-Assessment: Students in private schools reported a significantly stronger interest in learning about other cultures (M=4.2, SD=0.71 vs. M=3.4, SD=0.92; t(298)=7.89, $p < .001$) and a stronger feeling of their own ICC (intercultural communicative competence) (M=3.9, SD=0.68 vs. M=3.0, SD 0.81; t(298)=9.54, $p < .001$). Across all learners (N=300), there is a moderate positive relationship between the amount of diverse cultural material exposed to learners and their perceived competence level (correlation $r = .42$, $p < .01$).

**Table 3.** Learner Attitudes and Self-Assessed ICC by Context (N=300)

| Variable | Formal Context (n=200) Mean (SD) | Informal Context (n=100) Mean (SD) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interest in Other Cultures (1-5 scale) | 3.4 (0.92) | 4.2 (0.71) | < .001 |
| Self-Assessed ICC (1-5 scale) | 3 (0.81) | 3.9 (0.68) | < .001 |

Textbook Analysis (Quantified): The content analysis was consistent with the findings of the survey. The Vision series dedicated approximately 80-85% of cultural references to Iranian/Islamic culture, around 10% to neutral or international themes (such as science and the environment), and only around 5% to target culture specifics, often in a comparative or historical context. Cultural-critical thinking exercises were extremely rare, making up less than 5% of exercises. In contrast, the international textbook series used in private institutes focused on 60-75% of cultural material on inner-circle Western cultures, 15-20% on internationalized settings, and less than 10% on source culture. While these texts included more exercises requiring



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personalization and opinion, less than a quarter of the exercises encouraged critical evaluation of cultural viewpoints or practices. The Vision series cultural-critical thinking exercises were extremely rare, making up less than 5% of exercises, while international textbooks showed less than 25% of exercises encouraging critical evaluation, both falling short of Byram's (1997) model requiring evaluative engagement with multiple cultural perspectives.

The quantitative analysis revealed systematic differences in teacher autonomy, material usage, and cultural content across different sectors. This prompted a deeper investigation into the underlying mechanisms and stakeholder perceptions. The qualitative phase aimed to explain why these statistical differences exist and their implications for CCA implementation. Through interviews and document analysis, five interconnected themes emerged that shed light on the institutional logics shaping each context. To further explain the reasons behind these quantitative patterns, a thematic analysis of interviews and open-ended data identified five major challenges.

**RQ2: Challenges and Obstacles in Implementing and Developing CCA**

These interviews and open-ended responses revealed five major themes that continually emerged throughout the responses:

1) An Unstated Ideology Underlying Formal Education: Everyone spoke of an unstated but powerful "rule" that was intended to maintain national identity. As one seasoned educator from the formal sector explained, the fundamental task was to foster a strong Iranian Muslim identity. "We don't want to delve into Western ways of life, as this can foster confusion and desire." So, the educator explained, "We stick to the textbook and view any foreign culture from a safe, moralistic point of view."

2) Autonomy vs. Uncertainty in the Informal Sector: The instructors at the Institute value their autonomy but are not certain how to instruct regarding cultural matters that foster critical thinking skills. "We show them Friends, we discuss Thanksgiving, but this is mostly to improve their listening skills and vocabulary." The need to make the student happy and progress them toward communicative skills seems to overshadow any desire to foster critical thinking regarding cultural differences. Again, the unstated "rule" seems to be market pragmatism.

3) The Training Gap: In all cases, the major barrier identified by the teaching staff was a lack of training. “We were given training on how to teach grammar, but nothing on how to address cultural taboos or compare value systems,” said a teacher with an MA in TEFL.

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4) Learner's Curiosity and Identity Negotiation: The learners, particularly the teenagers, displayed a strong desire to learn more about global youth culture, music, and schooling around the world. However, it was also evident that there was a sense of anxiety and concern among them, as highlighted by a high school student: "I like learning about how life is in other countries, but at home, I'm reminded that I shouldn't forget who I am." This identity negotiation appeared to constrain cultural curiosity. This identity negotiation appeared to constrain cultural curiosity in formal contexts. The 200 public high school learners (grades 10-12) reported significantly lower interest in learning about other cultures (M=3.4, SD=0.92) compared to private institute learners (M=4.2, SD=0.71), potentially reflecting the tension between curiosity and cultural preservation messaging.

5) Resource and Assessment Gaps: In the formal sector, there was a significant lack of multimedia resources and internet connectivity. In addition, national exams, or Konkoor, the national university entrance exam, do not assess intercultural competency, and therefore, CCA is considered a low-priority skill. In the case of the institute, there was a better availability of resources, but the assessment gaps were the same, with a focus on language competency and a lack of emphasis on CCA. In light of the challenges identified above and the contextual patterns from RQ1, several pedagogical principles emerged from the qualitative data analysis.

**RQ3: Pedagogical Principles Emerging from the Data**

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and textbook examination revealed four key principles that participants (both teachers and learners) implicitly or explicitly identified as necessary for fostering CCA in Iranian EFL settings. These principles are grounded in the data and represent stakeholder-driven insights rather than researcher-imposed frameworks.

**Principle 1:** Balanced and Critical Cultural Representation: Analysis of textbook content and teacher interviews showed a consistent call for curricula that include source, target, and international cultures in a balanced manner. Participants expressed that mere exposure is insufficient; materials should facilitate comparative analysis and problematization of cultural assumptions. As one teacher from the informal sector noted, "Students need to see both sides, not just Western parties or Iranian traditions, but why they are different and what values they carry."

**Principle 2:** Teacher Empowerment Through Intercultural Pedagogy Training: Across both contexts, the most recurrent theme in teacher interviews was the need for practical training in intercultural teaching strategies. The data indicated that even teachers with high motivation lacked

the pedagogical tools to address cultural content critically. A formal-sector teacher commented, "I know culture is important, but I wasn't taught how to teach it without creating conflict." This principle underscores the demand for professional development programs that move beyond theoretical awareness to hands-on, context-sensitive methodologies.

**Principle 3:** Authentic and Multimodal Engagement: Learner interviews frequently mentioned the motivational value of authentic materials such as films, news clips, and social media content. However, participants also emphasized the need for guidance in critically analyzing these sources. "We watch movies in class, but we don't discuss the cultural messages," said one institute learner. This principle reflects the data-driven consensus that technology and authentic materials should be leveraged to foster critical digital literacy alongside language skills.

**Principle 4:** Contextual Synergy Between Formal and Informal Sectors: Interview data from teachers who worked in both sectors highlighted the potential for complementary roles. A teacher with experience in both contexts observed, "At school, we have the time for deeper discussion but no engaging content. At the institute, we have engaging content but no time for depth." This principle emerged from such insights, suggesting that formal education could provide analytical frameworks while informal institutions offer rich cultural texts for application.

## Discussion

The results present a picture of two parallel EFL worlds in Iran, with their own logic, which influences how CCA could develop. In the formal sector, the imperative is cultural preservation and ideological reproduction. The rules here are preservative, creating a curriculum that is rich in source culture but essentially a monologue instead of a dialogue. This monologic approach fundamentally contradicts Byram's (1997) concept of Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA) as an evaluative engagement that requires exposure to multiple cultural perspectives. According to Byram, CCA involves "the ability to evaluate critically and based on explicit criteria the perspectives, practices, and products of one's own and other cultures" (p. 53). Without comparative frameworks that present diverse cultural viewpoints, learners are unable to develop these explicit criteria for evaluation. Consequently, while the formal curriculum provides cultural knowledge (savoirs), it fails to foster the critical engagement (savoir s'engager) that distinguishes CCA from mere passive cultural awareness. This reflects Ghaffari et al.'s (2023) findings of cultural protectionism and speaks to a worldwide concern about education serving national identity



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projects (Apple, 2004). The textbooks like Vision offer nothing but the bare minimum for critical tasks, so cultural learning becomes a form of nationalistic self-affirmation rather than a form of savoir s'engager.

In the informal sector, the rules prioritize pragmatic globalization and market appeal. The imperative here is engagement, exposure, and communicative competence. Global textbooks and multimedia offer a window to another culture, satisfying the learner's curiosity and pushing ICC scores up, at least through self-assessment. However, this does not address the critical component necessary for true CCA. It has the potential to slide into a Kramsch (2013)-defined "consumerist" view of culture, where the learner is only able to taste the superficial differences between cultures without any tools to think critically. This is reminiscent of Tajeddin & Teimournezhad's (2014) description of a hidden agenda in global textbooks, which subtly reinforces cultural stereotypes.

A common thread in both stances is the lack of teacher preparation. In the case of teachers in the formal sector, their lack of preparation in intercultural pedagogy causes them to align with the textbook's ideological perspective, while for teachers in the informal sector, it causes them to focus on its communicative aspects. In both cases, teachers' ability to promote criticality is constrained. This underlines the need for teacher education to go beyond recognition of ICC in theory to developing context-sensitive approaches to critical culture teaching.

The pedagogical principles that emerged from the data (see Section 4.3) align closely with the challenges identified in RQ2. Principle 1 (Balanced Representation) directly addresses the monologic nature of formal textbooks and the superficial consumerism of informal materials. Principle 2 (Teacher Empowerment) responds to the pervasive training gap highlighted across both sectors. Principle 3 (Authentic Engagement) provides a framework for leveraging the resources available in informal contexts while compensating for resource gaps in formal settings. Finally, Principle 4 (Contextual Synergy) offers a way to bridge the divide between the two parallel systems without requiring immediate systemic overhaul.

Given the institutional constraints detailed in the findings, the implementation of these principles requires a phased, context-sensitive approach. Short-term strategies might include developing supplementary materials that embed critical comparison activities within existing textbooks. Medium-term initiatives could establish professional learning communities where teachers from both sectors share strategies for navigating institutional barriers. Long-term goals should involve advocacy for assessment reform that recognizes intercultural competence, thereby incentivizing

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pedagogical change. This graduated approach acknowledges that meaningful change must work within existing structures while building momentum for broader reform.

The findings have important implications for Iranian stakeholders in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Policymakers in the formal education sector should acknowledge that the current emphasis on source culture, while helpful for preserving identity, limits the development of Comparative Cultural Analysis (CCA) by restricting the comparative frameworks necessary for critical evaluation. Curriculum developers could incorporate a balanced representation of cultures without discarding national values. In the informal sector, the challenge lies in moving beyond superficial exposure to cultures and adopting a systematic critical pedagogy through structured teacher training. A significant issue is that the lack of intercultural competence in national assessments, particularly the Konkoor examinations, diminishes the perceived value of CCA. Even minor recognition in evaluation criteria could encourage pedagogical change. Teacher education programs must focus on practical training in intercultural pedagogy rather than solely providing theoretical exposure to intercultural competence. The interconnectedness of the formal and informal sectors—where formal education offers critical frameworks and informal institutions provide authentic materials—suggests that a collaborative approach, rather than a parallel one, could better serve learners navigating both contexts.

While these findings and recommendations provide valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. The inclusion of three cities—Tehran, Qazvin, and Shiraz—offers a broader geographic representation than studies conducted in a single location. However, the use of convenience sampling within institutions and a focus on major urban centers limit the generalizability of the results across Iran's diverse educational landscape, particularly in rural areas where resource constraints and sociocultural contexts may vary significantly. The cross-sectional design captures a snapshot of current perspectives and practices but does not reveal developmental trajectories or changes over time in teacher practices and learner attitudes toward CCA (Cultural Contextual Awareness). Additionally, social desirability bias may have influenced survey responses on culturally and politically sensitive topics. For instance, teachers may under-report their teaching of the target culture in formal settings due to institutional pressures, while students may over-report their interest in intercultural issues.

Although the mixed-methods design and the triangulation of questionnaires, interviews, and textbook analysis help address some of these concerns, the potential for response bias still exists.



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Furthermore, the textbook analysis focused on designed content and activities rather than on actual classroom practices; teachers might adapt, resist, or supplement the materials in ways that the document analysis does not capture. Lastly, while distinct patterns emerged that differentiate formal and informal contexts, both sectors exhibit internal variability—differences in individual teacher agency, specific institutional cultures, and student population characteristics—that warrant further investigation.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that developing CCA in Iran is caught in a tug of war between a need to maintain national identity and a need to fulfill global citizenship responsibilities. The results present a picture of two parallel EFL worlds in Iran, with their own logic, which influences how CCA could develop. The formal EFL system, in its attempt to promote cultural identity, inadvertently serves as a barrier to true intercultural dialogue. The informal system, in its attempt to promote global relevance, provides a dialogue that is not as rich in critical thinking. The consequence is a fragmented system in which learners are made to be either culturally insular or superficially global, with intercultural competence beyond their reach.

The pedagogical principles that emerged from stakeholder voices, offer a grounded pathway toward critical cosmopolitanism. These are not prescriptive mandates but rather data-driven signposts for incremental reform. The application of these principles will require a courageous dialogue between policymakers, curriculum developers, teacher educators, and practitioners. It will require a rethinking of textbooks as sites for exploration rather than indoctrination and teacher education as sites for critical educator development rather than language development alone.

Future research will need to develop intervention studies that apply these principles, examine long-term effects of CCA-informed pedagogies on learner attitudes and identities, and explore the potential of new technologies for true intercultural dialogue for Iranian learners. Ultimately, developing CCA in Iran will require learners to engage a complex world with a sense of confidence in their own identity and a critical respect for that of others, a key aim of true education.

Developing CCA (Cultural Content Awareness) in Iran involves navigating the ongoing tension between preserving cultural identity and engaging with the global community. This challenge is common in many english as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts worldwide, where language education intersects with national identity. While achieving a perfect balance may be difficult due to the competing institutional influences highlighted in this study, implementing incremental



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reforms—guided by teacher agency, learner needs, and context-sensitive teaching methods—can pave the way for more critical and dialogic approaches to culture in language education. The aim is not to completely adopt Western intercultural models but to foster a locally grounded form of critical cosmopolitanism. This approach will enable Iranian EFL learners to confidently engage with global diversity while maintaining a critical perspective on both their own culture and those of others.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

MG and DK contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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