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Dual Realities of Cultural Pedagogy: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Critical Cultural Awareness in Iran's Formal and Informal EFL Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA) is a key part of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), but it has not been well-studied in Iran's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. This sequential mixed-methods study looked at how CCA is shown, the challenges it faces, and its teaching possibilities in Iran's two educational systems: formal (public schools) and informal (private language institutes). Participants included 250 EFL teachers and 300 learners from three major cities. Data collection used surveys, textbook analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Findings showed a clear difference between the two contexts. Formal education focused mainly on source culture and had limited ICC development, while informal settings offered more exposure to target cultures (60–75% Western content) but lacked systematic critical engagement. A thematic analysis of qualitative data identified five main challenges: ideological control, teacher training gaps, learners' struggles with identity, uncertainty in the informal sector, and resource/assessment issues. From these insights, four teaching principles emerged. They emphasized balanced cultural representation, teacher training, authentic multimodal resources, and collaboration between sectors. This study adds to global discussions on cultural teaching in contexts where English education intersects with national identity and global engagement.

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1. 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 involves developing intercultural abilities.

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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 approach encourages respectful intercultural dialogue, reduces stereotypical thinking, and prepares learners for meaningful cross-cultural interactions.

In Iran, known for its rich history and unique sociopolitical identity, incorporating culture into EFL teaching presents specific challenges. The Iranian EFL system consists of two different sectors: a formal, state-controlled sector of public schools and universities, and an informal, commercial sector of private language institutes. These sectors differ significantly in their guiding philosophies, regulations, and teaching practices, which affects how culture is taught. The formal sector, guided by national educational policies, focuses on reinforcing national-Islamic identity and values. This sometimes limits the engagement with global, especially Western, cultures. In contrast, the informal sector has more freedom in selecting materials and teaching methods, often aligning with international trends, but sometimes lacks depth or local relevance.

Previous studies on English Language Teaching (ELT) in Iran have shown a strong focus on source culture (Persian-Islamic) in local textbooks, with underrepresentation or a distorted view of target cultures (Aliakbari, 2002; Ghaffari et al., 2023). Research on teacher and learner views indicates a general understanding of culture's importance but highlights significant gaps in teaching content knowledge and training (Soodmand Afshar & Moradifar, 2021). However, no previous study has systematically compared how institutional norms shape CCA in both formal and informal settings. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a comparative analysis of CCA's concept, implementation, and constraints in these two different educational environments. Unlike prior research that focused on single aspects (like textbook content or teacher beliefs), this study takes a multi-stakeholder approach involving teachers, learners, and curricular materials. It seeks to answer these research questions:

Research Question 1: How is CCA shown, supported, and limited in Iran's formal (public school) and informal (private institute) EFL contexts?

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

Research Question 3: What context-sensitive teaching principles can be developed from stakeholder views to effectively incorporate and promote CCA in Iran's broader EFL landscape?

2. Review of Literature

2-1. Defining Critical Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Communicative Competence

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) goes beyond the usual idea of communicative competence. It includes the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed for effective and suitable interaction across cultural boundaries. Byram's (1997) influential framework outlines five connected components: attitudes (curiosity and openness), knowledge (about social groups and their products/practices), interpreting and relating skills, discovery and interaction skills, and Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA). CCA, the fifth component, is "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 53). This ability sets CCA apart from basic cultural

awareness. It changes passive reception into active, reflexive engagement. Recent research has expanded Byram's model. This work highlights that CCA involves questioning underlying assumptions, recognizing power differences in cultural representations, and making reasoned judgments (Baker, 2015; Porto 2014). In EFL contexts, this means teaching practices that encourage learners to compare cultural norms, deconstruct stereotypes found in media and materials, and reflect on their own cultural positions.

2-2. Culture in EFL: Global Debates and Pedagogical Shifts

The understanding of culture in language teaching has evolved significantly. The communicative approach, which was groundbreaking in its time, later received criticism for favoring native-speaker norms and cultures. This criticism is seen as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). The emergence of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has challenged the dominance of "inner-circle" cultures, such as the UK and USA, calling for more inclusive, intercultural perspectives (Baker, 2022; Jenkins, 2015). These views emphasize skills like mediation, meaning negotiation, and intercultural sensitivity as vital for varied, multilingual communication. However, translating these ideas into classroom practice is difficult. Educators often face conflicts between the global appeal of "standard" English and the broader goal of promoting global citizenship (Kramsch, 2013).

2.3. The Iranian Context: Institutional Contradictions and Cultural Politics

Iran's EFL context presents a unique set of contradictions. On one side, there is a strong societal desire for English skills, seen as a ticket to higher education and better job opportunities. However, there are also official concerns about "cultural invasion" (tahājom-e farhangi) and the loss of local values. This tension reflects in educational policies and curricular materials.

Formal Sector (Public Schools): Curricula and nationally produced textbooks, especially the Vision series for secondary education, are developed with clear ideological goals. Content analyses (Ghaffari et al., 2023; Aliakbari, 2002) show a primary focus on Iranian history, scientific achievements, Islamic values, and national pride. References to Western cultures are scarce and usually portrayed neutrally or critically (for instance, addressing social issues). Instruction mainly follows a model of transmitting cultural facts without promoting critical inquiry.

Informal Sector (Private Institutes): Private institutes generally use internationally published textbooks (e.g., Interchange, Headway, English File). These materials provide more exposure to Western lifestyles, customs, and ways of communicating but are criticized for presenting a simplified, often idealized view of target cultures and for lacking relevance to Iranian learners' lives (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014). Although teachers here have more freedom to add supplementary materials, their focus is often on achieving communicative fluency rather than systematic intercultural objectives.

2.4. Teacher Readiness and Implementation Challenges

Successful integration of CCA depends on teacher knowledge and initiative. Research on Iranian EFL teachers shows an increasing awareness of the importance of culture but highlights ongoing gaps in their ability to teach culture critically. Many teachers feel

unprepared to discuss controversial subjects or to lead detailed cultural comparisons (Soodmand Afshar & Moradifar, 2021). Teacher education programs for both pre-service and in-service instructors have been slow to include thorough training in intercultural teaching methods. As a result, teachers often rely heavily on textbook content, which, as noted, carries ideological biases in the formal sector or only offers superficial international views in the informal sector (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014). Newer studies (e.g., Ghaffari et al., 2021) have suggested professional development models that move beyond theoretical ICC awareness to focus on practical, context-sensitive classroom strategies.

3. Methods

3-1. Research Design

To effectively address the research questions, we used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design began with collecting and analyzing quantitative data, followed by a qualitative phase to clarify and expand on the initial quantitative trends. The purpose of this approach was to identify key areas needing further exploration through interviews and document analysis, informed by broad trends from the survey data.

3-2. Participants

The study took place in three Iranian cities: Tehran (the capital and largest city), Qazvin (a mid-sized provincial center), and Shiraz (a significant southern city). We chose these locations deliberately to capture geographic, administrative, and cultural variety, making the findings applicable beyond one urban area.

Quantitative Phase: A total of 250 EFL teachers participated (150 from public high schools and 100 from private language institutes), with teaching experience ranging from 3 to over 20 years. Additionally, 300 EFL learners took part (200 from public high schools in grades 10–12 and 100 at intermediate to advanced levels in private institutes), aged 15 to 30. We used purposive and convenience sampling to ensure enough statistical power. We excluded incomplete or invalid responses, resulting in the final numbers reported.

Qualitative Phase: From the survey participants, we selected 70 individuals for semi-structured interviews: 30 teachers (18 from formal settings and 12 from informal ones) and 40 learners (25 from formal settings and 15 from informal ones), ensuring diversity in experience, gender, and survey responses.

Document Phase: We analyzed ten textbook series: five from the formal sector (including the complete Vision series for grades 10–12) and five commonly used series from the informal sector (Interchange, Four Corners, American English File).

3-3. 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.

3-3-1. 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.

3-3-2. 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.

3-3-3. 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.

3-3-4. 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.

3-4. Data Collection Procedure

We obtained ethical approval and informed consent. We distributed questionnaires online and in person. All interviews were conducted in Persian, audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English, with back-translation verification for accuracy. We analyzed the textbooks page by page using the rubric.

3-5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed by using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics summarized the 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.

4. Results

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

Teacher perceptions showed a clear difference between settings. Formal-sector teachers reported much less freedom to choose cultural content ($t(248)=9.12$, $p<.001$) and felt a stronger pressure to focus on Iranian culture. As indicated in Table 1, the use of authentic materials, like films and news, was low in formal settings. In contrast, institute teachers had more flexibility, but this did not always lead to instruction aligned with cultural content awareness (CCA). Table 2 provides inferential statistics that confirm these differences (t-tests and chi-square). Learner attitudes also varied: private institute learners showed much greater interest in other cultures ($M=4.2$ vs. 3.4; $t(298)=7.89$, $p<.001$) and rated their intercultural competence higher ($M=3.9$ vs. 3.0; $t(298)=9.54$, $p<.001$). A moderate positive correlation appeared between exposure to diverse cultural materials and perceived intercultural competence ($r=.42$, $p<.01$).

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. χ^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).

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 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.

4.2. RQ2: Challenges and Obstacles in Implementing and Developing CCA

Thematic analysis of interviews and open-ended responses identified five common challenges:

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.

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. 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.

4.3. 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.

5. Discussion

This study reveals two parallel EFL environments in Iran, each shaped by different institutional logics that influence CCA development. In the formal sector, the main focus is on cultural preservation and ideological reproduction. This leads to a curriculum that is rich in source-culture content but functions mainly as a one-sided conversation rather than a discussion. Such a one-sided approach contradicts Byram's (1997) idea of CCA, which needs evaluative engagement with different cultural perspectives to establish clear evaluation criteria. Without comparative frameworks, learners gain cultural knowledge (savoirs) but lack the critical engagement (savoir s'engager) necessary for CCA. This observation aligns with Ghaffari et al. (2023) on cultural protectionism and reflects global concerns about education serving national identity projects (Apple, 2004).

On the other hand, the informal sector operates through practical globalization and market attractiveness. Exposure to global textbooks and multimedia meets learner curiosity and raises self-reported ICC scores, but it still lacks critical depth. This can lead to a "consumerist" view of culture (Kramsch, 2013), where learners only experience superficial differences without the analytical tools for deeper understanding. Such trends support Tajeddin & Teimournezhad's (2014) findings on hidden ideologies in global textbooks.

A shared issue in both sectors is inadequate teacher preparation. Teachers in the formal sector, without training in intercultural pedagogy, tend to reflect the ideological stance of the textbook. Likewise, teachers in the informal sector, also unprepared, focus on communication skills. In both scenarios, teachers struggle to encourage critical thinking. This highlights the need for teacher education that goes beyond theoretical understanding of ICC to include practical, context-sensitive methods.

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

For Iranian stakeholders, the policy implications are clear. Formal-sector policymakers should understand that a focus solely on source culture limits CCA by narrowing comparative frameworks. Curriculum developers can integrate balanced representation without losing national values. Leaders in the informal sector need to go beyond surface-level exposure to structured critical pedagogy through organized training. National assessments (e.g., Konkoor) should include intercultural competence to encourage change. Teacher education programs should emphasize practical intercultural pedagogy instead of just theoretical knowledge.

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. 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.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that CCA development in Iran is caught between preserving national identity and embracing global citizenship. The formal EFL system, while trying to protect cultural identity, unintentionally hinders genuine intercultural dialogue. The informal system, in seeking global relevance, offers discussions that lack critical depth. The result is a fragmented landscape where learners risk becoming either culturally isolated or superficially global, making robust intercultural competence hard to achieve.

The teaching principles derived from stakeholder input offer a practical, step-by-step approach to achieving critical cosmopolitanism. These principles are not strict guidelines but data-informed pointers. To implement them requires open dialogue among policymakers, curriculum developers, teacher educators, and practitioners—reconsidering textbooks as tools for exploration instead of indoctrination, and teacher education as a place for developing critical educators, not just language teachers.

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 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.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Disclosure of AI Use in Manuscript Preparation

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors did not use any AI tools. They accept full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final work.

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Appendices

Appendix A
CCA/ICC Perception Questionnaire
(Adapted from Atai, Babaii, Taghipour Bazargani, 2017)

Instructions: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement regarding culture in your English classes.
Use the scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree,
5 = Strongly Agree.

Section 1: Cultural Content Awareness

1. I am aware of the cultural content in my textbook.
2. The textbook presents a balanced view of different cultures.
3. Iranian culture is adequately represented in my course materials.
4. I feel that Western cultures are overrepresented in my classes.
5. I would like to learn more about the cultures of English-speaking countries.

Section 2: Critical Cultural Activities

1. In class, we compare Iranian cultural practices with those of other countries.
2. We analyze how media (films, news, social media) portray different cultures.
3. We discuss cultural stereotypes and their origins.
4. The teacher encourages us to question cultural assumptions presented in the textbook.
5. I feel comfortable discussing sensitive cultural topics in class.

Section 3: Self-Assessed Intercultural Competence

1. I can recognize when cultural misunderstandings occur.
2. I know how to adapt my communication style when interacting with someone from another culture.
3. I am curious about the values and beliefs of people from other cultures.
4. I can critically evaluate my own cultural practices.
5. I feel prepared to communicate effectively in multicultural settings.

Note. The full 35-item questionnaire is available from the authors upon request. This appendix presents a representative sample of items for transparency.)

Appendix B
Teacher Background and Practice Survey

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Gender: Male [ ] Female [ ] Prefer not to say [ ]
2. Years of teaching experience: -----
3. Highest educational qualification: BA [ ] MA [ ] PhD [ ] Other: -----
4. Teaching context: Public High School [ ] Private Language Institute [ ] Both [ ]

5. City of current employment: Tehran [ ] Qazvin [ ] Shiraz [ ]

Section B: Textbook and Material Use

1. Which textbook(s) do you primarily use? (List title and publisher)
2. Do you use supplementary materials? Yes [ ] No [ ]
If yes, please specify types (e.g., movies, news articles, online videos, music): -----
3. On a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often), how frequently do you use the following in your teaching?

- Authentic audio/video materials: 1 2 3 4 5
- Authentic written texts (news, blogs): 1 2 3 4 5
- Teacher-made cultural comparison activities: 1 2 3 4 5

Section C: Perceived Autonomy and Training

1. How much freedom do you feel you have to introduce cultural topics beyond the required textbook?
1 (Very Low) 2 (Low) 3 (Moderate) 4 (High) 5 (Very High)
2. Have you received any formal training on teaching intercultural communicative competence?
Yes [ ] No [ ]
3. If yes, please briefly describe the nature of the training: ------

1. What is the biggest challenge you face when addressing culture in your EFL classroom? (Open-ended)

Appendix C

Textbook Analysis Rubric

(Based on Byram, 1997; Yuen, 2011)

Instructions: Analyze each unit/chapter using the following criteria.
Code for textual and visual content separately where applicable.

Category	Code	Description	Example Indicators
1. Cultural Representation			
Source Culture	SC	References to Iranian history, traditions, values, daily life, national figures.	Images of Iranian landmarks, texts about Persian holidays, dialogues set in Iranian cities.
Target Culture (Inner Circle English)	TC	References to cultures of UK, USA, Canada, Australia, NZ.	Discussions of Thanksgiving, images of London, dialogues with native-speaker names.
International Culture	IC	References to cultures of non-English-speaking	Texts about environmental issues in Brazil,

		countries or global themes.	UNESCO sites, international food.
Neutral/Unmarked	NU	Content without clear cultural reference (e.g., science facts, grammar drills).	Generic images of nature, dialogues in non-specific settings.
2. Perspective			
Insider View	IV	Culture presented from the viewpoint of a member of that culture.	A first-person narrative about celebrating Nowruz (for SC) or a diary entry about a day in New York.
Outsider View	OV	Culture presented from an external observer's standpoint.	A description of Iranian customs by a foreign traveler.
Critical Lens	CL	Explicit invitation to evaluate or question cultural practices/ products	Questions like "Do you think this tradition is still relevant? Why or why not?"
Celebratory/Neutral Lens	CN	Culture presented factually or positively without critical examination.	"The British celebrate Bonfire Night on November 5th." (without further analysis).
3. Interaction (Tasks)			
Factual Recall	FR	Task requires only identifying or remembering cultural information.	"What do Americans eat on Thanksgiving?"
Personalization	PE	Task asks learners to relate cultural content to their own experience.	"How do you celebrate New Year in your family?"
Comparison	CO	Task explicitly asks learners to compare two or more cultural practices/ products.	"Compare wedding traditions in Iran and the UK."
Critical Evaluation	CE	Task requires learners to analyze, judge, or question cultural content.	"Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this cultural

			practice. Is it fair? Who benefits?"
4. Knowledge Type			
Big "C" Culture	BC	Formal institutions, history, literature, art, political systems.	Texts about the US Constitution, Shakespeare, Iranian Revolution.
Small "c" Culture	SC	Everyday life, customs, beliefs, communication styles, values.	Texts about greetings, family roles, punctuality, food habits