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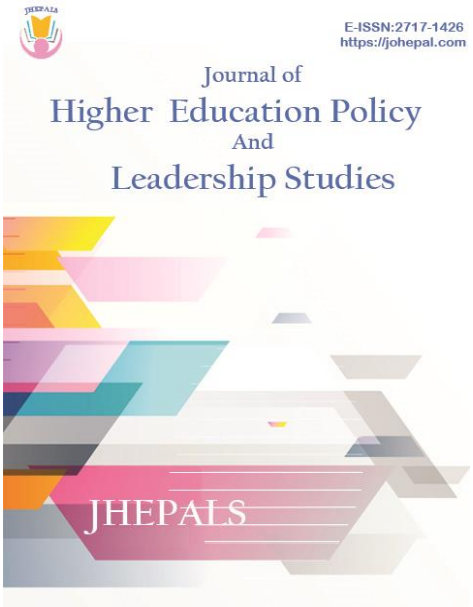
And

Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

https://johepal.com

Exploring Social Justice Experiences Among Iranian EFL Learners: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study



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Article Received	Article Accepted	Published Online
2025/10/20	**2026/03/17**	**2026/03/31**

Cite article as:

Adel, S. M. R., Zahedi Moghaddam, S., Mavaddat Kakhki, Al., & Ghelichi, M. (2026). Exploring social justice experiences among Iranian EFL learners: A qualitative phenomenological study. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, 7(1), 74-92. https://dx.doi.org/10.66224/johepal.7.1.74

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[DOI: 10.66224/johepal.7.1.74]

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Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 7 Issue: 1
pp. 74-92
DOI:
10.66224/johepal.7.1.74

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Abstract

This paper looks at the experiences of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in the context of social justice in terms of their education. Using intersectionality as the source of investigation, the research examines how various intersecting factors of gender, ethnicity, class, and context impact the equity and inclusion or discrimination experienced by learners in the EFL classroom. The sample of the study was 13 university students selected purposefully, who participated in semi-structured interviews. The results were interpreted by Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and three key themes were revealed, which include systemic inequities in access and resources, teacher prejudice and discriminatory practices, and fear of retaliation and institutional barriers to justice. The results of the study point to the fact that learners are faced with both structural and interpersonal forms of injustice that are intensified within a specific socio-cultural frame that suppresses the voice of dissent and agency. The study reveals the negative impact of such experiences on the confidence, motivation, and feeling of belonging of learners. The study has theoretical value in how intersectionality works under the conditions of the specific sociopolitical system of Iran, and practical value in how Iran-specific means of instigating educational equity can be achieved despite institutional constraints.

Keywords: Social Justice Education; Iranian EFL Learners; Educational Equity; Phenomenological Research; Intersectionality

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Introduction

Learning languages opens new opportunities for social interaction and communication, and enables individuals to join different cultures and societies, as well as their complex political layers (Afrilyasanti et al., 2024; Lomicka & Benoit, 2025). Relationships, domination, and power are intricately intertwined with world beliefs. Within this context, EFL classrooms, in particular EFL learners, are not blank slates (Burner & Carlsen, 2023; Tajeddin & Rezanejad, 2023). Although they are institutionally and socially defined as 'foreign' spaces, they have their own complex social dynamics through which Individuals blend their language hurdles with layers of social justice (or lack thereof) (Hart, 2023; Hastings & Jacob, 2016). The idea of social justice in learning, aiming to realize social equity and complete participatory citizenship of all (Bell, 2016), beckons us to discuss the unfair systems that hinder learning opportunities. It is evident that social justice encompasses many meanings (North, 2006, 2008), particularly in education. The belief in social justice is one of the key requirements in creating spaces of learning that embrace diversity and allow all students to make decisions. The Black feminist framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016) allows researchers to study how different social categories, such as sex, class, and race, create unique systems of advantage and disadvantage. Language education has been a research field that has seen a tremendous rise in studies that take into consideration social justice considerations. Some studies have emphasized the social justice possibilities within EFL classrooms as spaces of critical humanizing pedagogy (Ortega, 2024; Zahedi Moghaddam et al., 2025) as well as the socio-justice-focused mindsets of teachers (Chen & Abdullah, 2022), along with the social justice implementation challenges (Estaji et al., 2023; Sulistyowardani et al., 2020). Research about this topic continues to grow, but scholars have not yet filled the main knowledge gap in this field. Research studies about teacher practices and teacher views exist, but studies about student experiences and personal accounts remain scarce. The introduction of the intersectionality context for Iranian L2 learners by Khalili and Adel (2023, 2024) benefits more from qualitative research that explores how students experience and handle social justice problems at school.

Thus, this research seeks to provide a phenomenological narrative of social justice as lived by Iranian EFL learners to address the pressing gap. The research applies an intersectional perspective to study the educational experiences of learners by analyzing their multiple identity-based factors, which interact with each other. The study explores the experience of classroom oppression, the systemic inequalities, teaching practices, and identity-based disenfranchisement in EFL learning setting, and the social (in)justice and emotional social realities of that context to create a subtle understanding, which will shape improvements in teacher training, institutional policies, and curriculum development.

Literature Review

Certainly, the issue of social justice has turned into a single and, at the same time, a multilateral phenomenon when applied to EFL programs (Senbayrak & Hart, 2024). Social justice is a complex and disputable notion in education, and mostly it involves the pursuit of equity and recognition of diversity (Rowan et al., 2020). It requires such a system where everyone has equal access to opportunities and resources and where their ambiguous

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nature and multiple identities are taken into account and authenticated (Case, 2016; Weuffen et al., 2023). Social justice in education is believed to be a controversial term because it is usually dismissed as being a vague, idealistic, and politically sensitive notion (Thrupp & Tomlinson, 2005). Like most general concepts, it is not defined strictly in concrete terms and thus carries different meanings to various individuals (North, 2006, 2008). This also applies to most of the terms in education; they are more likely to be used in a loose manner with no strict, concrete definitions (North, 2006, 2008).

Social justice generally refers to the fair distribution of resources as well as the capacities (or opportunities) provided to an individual. The need to apply this multidimensional framework in educational settings requires different ways of appraisal (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007). Bell (2016) states that "Social justice is both a goal and a process. The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change" (p. 21).

Social Justice Education (SJE) pursues equity and inclusion but concentrates on fairness and diversity in learning settings (Pijanowski & Brady, 2020). It not only strives to correct historical injustices but also encourages teachers and learners to develop critical sensibility about the social injustices and learn how to deal with them directly (Torres-Harding & Meyers, 2013). The SJE debate, however, has been characterized by a split that is deeper in philosophical terms. The question of the right mix of identity is the subject of numerous debates by scholars: some of them insist on the model of assimilation and individual success as a melting pot, and others concentrate on the rights of groups and cultural maintenance (Williamson et al. 2007). This conflict, which has always existed in common school life as a process of including and preserving cultural identity, is especially relevant to the situation in Iranian EFL, where English use frequently serves as a mediator of cultural identity.

In the context of higher education, social justice is understood through the prism of capabilities and the necessity to make sure that every student, in particular, the marginalized ones, can obtain educational opportunities (Boyadjieva et al., 2024). Involvement in social justice-oriented pedagogies like dialogic conversations, problem-posing assignments, and reflection on lived experiences shape the learners to have knowledge about social justice through active engagement in raising questions related to inequities and building social awareness (Hart, 2023; Hastings & Jacob, 2016). Nonetheless, one problem that remains is the need to identify viable social justice teaching strategies that will help students become exposed to pertinent social justice issues (Torres-Harding & Meyers, 2013).

Social Justice Pedagogy

The focus of Social Justice Pedagogy (SJP) is on the historical and systemic oppression of marginalized students, to make activism and social change a crucial element of personal teaching and learning (Adams & Love, 2010). Based on critical theories, SJP strives to modify curriculum and instruction to promote inclusivity in education and foster student success, equipping students with the knowledge and skills required to turn society into a place where social justice can thrive. SJP's foundation is based on critical pedagogy approaches that

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consider teaching and learning as collaborative and participatory processes (Breunig, 2005; Clair & Groccia, 2010). The fundamental concept of SJP is teaching that directly addresses power and privilege, reduces stereotypes, employs a range of pedagogical strategies to foster a sense of belonging and communal values, promotes inclusivity, and highlights the relevance of the content to students' personal lives (Taylor et al., 2019, p. 141).

Recent Studies

Recent literature shows the revolutionary nature of SJE. Students who attend the classes of SJE are more likely to be confident and more devoted to social action (Carlisle et al., 2006; Laird et al., 2005; Pittman, 2009). In EFL situations, however, teachers are central in the picture. Equity-oriented teachers have a substantial impact on the classroom process (Chen and Abdullah, 2022), but they are hindered by institutional limitations, the lack of relevance of the current curriculum, and their own preconceptions (Estaji et al., 2023). Although instructors include the aspects of social justice, the impact on distributive justice is still minimal, which is why specific training is needed (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2022; Gerdin et al., 2025).

International case studies depict the opportunities as well as challenges. In Colombia, the implementation of social justice in the teaching of English allowed students to deal with social trauma by making pedagogy more human (Ortega, 2024). Pre-service teachers in Chile demonstrated that they were not sure about the role of being social justice advocates, and therefore, preparation was necessary (Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2024). Another example of educators and students collaborating to build socially just practices that can subvert colonial lines is the case of collaborative projects in Mexico (Lopez-Gopar et al., 2021).

Though these cases of international character demonstrate the prospects of EFL classrooms as arenas of social justice advocacy, the Iranian situation is associated with unique problems. Compared to Colombia or Mexico, where community-based projects and humanizing pedagogies are publicly offered in the curriculum, Iranian EFL classrooms are operated in a socio-political context that is more inclined to inhibit free conversations, lessen institutional support, and dishearten dissent. The urgency and complexity of these issues, in turn, emphasize the fact that the application of SJP becomes more urgent and complicated, which is why the voices of learners in Iran are to be preempted to comprehend the nature of equity and inclusion that can be sought in these circumstances.

Pedagogical inventions also spread to English for Academic Purpose (EAP), where the consideration of social justice motivates students to struggle with the past and present injustices (Mortenson, 2022). Other studies in Iran and Bangladesh also emphasize the importance of critical literacy to promote equity (Gholami et al., 2012; Hossain, 2018). Whether short-term or long-term, community-based experiences have been shown to be transformative in the preparation of culturally responsive teachers (Farnsworth, 2010; Zeichner et al., 2016). Notably, researchers warn that these experiences should be scaffolded and intentionally created to avoid replication of the existing hegemonic social structures of inequity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016).

Yet challenges persist. The gaps between the beliefs and practices of teachers are revealed in systematic reviews (Feifei, 2024; Sulistyowardani et al., 2020; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021), whereas the lack of focus on the experiences of learners and dialogue is revealed in lesson plan evaluations (Spitzman & Balconi, 2019). These results indicate that even though

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EFL teachers have become more concerned about the role of social justice, there are still structural and pedagogical obstacles to its complete implementation.

Theoretical Framework

The present research bases its analysis of social justice among Iranian EFL learners through the application of intersectionality as its theoretical framework. The approach allows the researchers to examine the interaction of various social traits, such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and educational background, to influence student learning opportunities and obstacles. The framework enables scholars to examine the ways in which educational environments produce and reproduce social inequalities through examining various identity variables.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) established intersectionality through Black feminist research to show how social categories, including race, gender, and class, interact with power systems to create oppression and privilege (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Research shows that peoples' life experiences develop through the active combination of their various social identity characteristics (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). The approach helps social justice advocates identify both institutional and relationship-based factors that create inequality.

The core concept of intersectionality states that social inequality exists throughout all social systems instead of being an unusual occurrence. Social research needs to establish that social injustices exist within all institutions, cultural systems, and human relationships. The analysis of power systems that maintain social inequalities stands as the essential research focus, according to Ferree (2010) and Dill and Zambrana (2009). Researchers who view inequality as the standard can identify the specific processes that maintain social advantages and disadvantages in educational settings.

Social movements analysis benefits from intersectionality theory because it shows how the dominant groups use their power to hide the needs of marginalized communities (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). The combination of the critical race theory (CRT) with intersectionality is an effective approach to studying the dynamics of power and promoting institutional changes (Collins, 2000; Young, 2008). The CRT/intersectionality framework requires researchers to study the social situations of participants while studying how race, class, and gender influence learning experiences.

Research on educational settings has demonstrated that students experience different outcomes because of their various social characteristics. It has been shown that achievement disparities are built up as a resultant expression of student identity, such as their race and their family income status (Oakes, 2005; Reardon, 2011). Educational materials and teaching methods tend to present dominant cultural perspectives, which result in the exclusion of students from diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2000). The research by Khalili and Adel (2023, 2024) shows how intersectionality produces intense emotional effects on Iranian L2 students.

In 2023, Khalili and Adel introduced the term "discrima" in their study to explain the emotional consequences of discrimination, and their subsequent work (2024) emphasized how certain types of teacher recruitment can unfairly disadvantage certain groups. Despite being relevant to the Iranian EFL context, these contributions are theoretical and teacher-focused. A qualitative investigation in which students themselves articulate and cope with discriminatory and unjustifiable experiences is lacking. It is essential to conduct research

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that highlights the input of Iranian EFL learners and employs a socio-ethical approach to analyze the actual outcomes of concepts like discrima.

Research in higher education shows that systems of inequality create complex power dynamics that result in disadvantages that affect people based on their racial background, gender identity, and socioeconomic status (Danic, 2015; MacKinnon, 2013). The studies show that effective solutions must deal with the interaction between identity factors and the systems of inequality in existence.

The Iranian EFL learning environment demonstrates how students experience unique challenges because of their gender roles, cultural background, and family income level. The social expectations of society restrict female students from full classroom participation, and students from low-income families encounter difficulties when accessing educational resources of high quality. The current system of institutions strives to prevent student voice and student control of the learning process. The current research employs intersectional methods to study Iranian EFL learners' social justice classroom experiences and their efforts to fight for educational equity in their learning environment. Guided by this framework, the study seeks to answer:

1. What are the lived experiences of Iranian EFL learners regarding social justice in their educational contexts?
2. What challenges do Iranian EFL learners face in advocating for social justice within their educational settings?

Research Methodology

Design

The research design of this study uses IPA as its methodological framework. The research method of IPA suits studies that investigate how people understand their personal and social environments through their lived experiences and their assigned meanings to these experiences (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). The research design of this study requires IPA because it seeks to understand Iranian EFL learners' social justice perspectives and their experiences with discrimination, their attempts to gain control, and their interpretations of unfair treatment. The research method allows the investigator to understand participant stories in detail while maintaining their connection to social and cultural environments. The research uses IPA to achieve more than recording experiences; IPA reveals how learners create understanding about social injustices, discriminatory practices, and institutional obstacles. The research questions require an interpretive approach because they need to reveal both the personal experiences of Iranian EFL learners and their difficulties when promoting social justice. The research method of IPA provides the most effective way to study the phenomenon because it focuses on meaning creation and conducts analysis from the learners' perspective.

Participants

In accordance with IPA, this study involved an exceptionally small, composed, and relatively homogeneous group of Iranian EFL learners. A group of 13 individuals was chosen because they not only shared the extensive experience of studying English at university in Iran, but they also demonstrated diversity in gender, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity that

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was significant to the intersectional perspective of this research. It is preferable to select informative cases as opposed to big samples (Smith et al., 2012) due to the depth of analysis afforded by the IPA. Through university notices and personal interactions with individuals at language institutes, volunteers who had questioned issues of fairness, equity, or discrimination in their EFL education were recruited. Learners with firsthand experiences of perceived unfairness or inclusion in their language learning and were open to a discussion of the same met the participation criteria. Participants were not randomly selected, as the intention was to illuminate the social justice phenomenon in EFL classrooms.

The sample consisted of 10 women and 3 men, aged 18 to 25 years old. Including Persian and Kurdish, they came from both urban areas and suburban regions with different socioeconomic statuses. Additionally, their access to resources was limited. All participants were non-native English speakers. The anonymity of the conversation was kept confidential due to the sensitivity of discussing social justice in Iran. The participants were given pseudonyms, and all identifying information, such as city or family name, was removed from their transcripts (e.g., the presentation of quotes is done under pseudonyms to ensure that the voices of learners are heard without risk). Besides pseudonymization and elimination of identifiers, audio recordings and transcripts were stored at a secure location that could only be accessed by the research team. Such procedures were in line with the permission by Gonabad University Ethics Committee.

Instrument

In this study, semi-structured phenomenological interviews were used to collect data. These interviews were designed to get Iranian EFL learners to talk about their experiences of social justice in their school setting. This section doesn't just talk about the format of semi-structured interviews; it also talks about how they were used in this study. The interview protocol was made to fit with the study's intersectional theoretical framework and research questions. The research used open-ended questions; respondents described their own experiences of classroom unfairness, discrimination, and inclusion as they investigated the influences of their multiple social identities on their experiences. The study asked students to describe their access to educational resources and their interactions with teachers while also sharing their experiences of bias, favoritism, and fair treatment. The researchers explored student agency in terms of their self-advocacy capacity and barriers that they faced to determine the effects of these elements on their self-confidence, motivation, and classroom belongingness. To increase validity, two experts in applied linguistics and social justice education looked over the interview guide to make sure it was relevant and clear. Participants were able to fully express themselves in Persian during the interviews. The interviews were then transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and yielded rich, detailed stories that were appropriate for IPA.

Data Collection

The data were gathered via semi-structured phenomenological interviews with the 13 intentionally chosen participants. In order to maintain privacy and comfort, interviews were conducted in quiet rooms within the campus, or, when necessary, in individual online sessions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was recorded with the

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participants' permission. All of the interviews were done in Persian because that was the language that the participants felt most comfortable speaking. Transcripts were made in Persian and then translated into English so that they could be analyzed. To make sure that the translations were conceptually equivalent, they were checked by bilingual experts who knew both applied linguistics and social justice terms. This was done to ensure that the nuances of what the participants intended were not lost, but rather, were accurately translated. There was a clear and organized way to transcribe and handle data. The research team then checked the accuracy of the verbatim Persian transcriptions of the audio recordings. During transcription, analytic memos were made to record first impressions and notes about the context. After that, the transcripts were brought into MAXQDA for coding and analysis of themes. This process created a clear record of the audit from the raw data to the new themes. To improve credibility, member checking was done at the transcript level. Participants were asked to look over their transcripts to make sure they were accurate. They did not have to justify codes or themes, consistent with with the IPA's interpretative paradigm, which emphasizes the role of the researcher in making sense of the accounts of interviewees. The researchers were also able to maintain reflexivity awareness that they were EFL teachers in the same context. The researchers were able to maintain reflexivity throughout as they acknowledged their own positionality as EFL teachers in the same situation.

Data Analysis

The IPA was used to analyze the data; this approach focuses on the ways in which the participants interpret their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The analysis followed the iterative phases of IPA, which included repetitive reading of the transcripts as a form of immersion, recording of notes on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects, the identification of emergent themes, classification into an overarching category, and synthesis into a comprehensive explanation illustrated by the quotes of the interviewees. Quality in IPA is not developed by applying generic frameworks of validity but by principles inherent in the phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry. Rigor in this study has been achieved by taking a long-term interest in the phenomenon, by engaging in the story of every participant throughout its development, and by using an idiographic approach to individual participants prior to discerning common themes. Reflexive attention to the need to interpret participants' own sense-making in order to understand their hermeneutical accomplishments in the foregrounding of interpretative engagements, reflexive journals, and analytic memos was instrumental in tracking the changing assumptions and interpretative actions of the researcher. An evident audit trail of notes, memos, and an account of the development of the themes made it easy to provide transparency and auditability because the readers could follow the line of analysis and evaluate its logic and reality. Lastly, depth of concept and resonance were desired through the foundation of themes in dense verbatim content with transitions to higher-order conceptualizations, resulting in accounts that are loyal to the voices of each subject but reveal worldly conceptual patterns. These principles were supported by peer debriefing to counter and revise interpretations, although the process of analysis was not viewed as a consensus-driven process. IPA acknowledges that various scientists can come up with different, but equally viable interpretations of the same data; the objective is not

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reproducibility but transparency and plausibility. Reflexivity was kept in play, and the researchers recognized their own positionality as EFL teachers in the same regard. This reflexivity maintained the place of interpretations, as well as their critical consciousness, which is in line with the hermeneutic tradition of IPA.

Results

The social justice issues of Iranian EFL learners have been thematically analyzed and condensed into three themes that encapsulate the learners' experience and advocacy. The following are the main ideas: (1) Systemic Inequities in Access and Resources, (2) Teacher Bias and Discriminatory Practices, and (3) Fear of Retaliation and Institutional Barriers to Justice. Each central theme has sub-themes that explain and expand on the learner's experience in great detail. The next sections address the main and sub-themes, and they also include quotes from the participants that show how they felt and what they thought.

Theme 1: Systemic Inequities in Access and Resources

This theme focuses on the structural barriers that make it hard for Iranian EFL learners to get equal access to educational opportunities. It also talks about their experiences of inequality in school.

Geographical disparities: The respondents pointed out extreme differences between urban and rural areas in terms of educational infrastructure and the number of teachers. The urban centers were believed to have better facilities and better-trained teachers, whereas the rural students were in need of resources.

> As an illustration, they may have superior teaching resources such as smart boards, the quality of additional books, or more experienced teachers in one city as compared to another city. But in another city, especially in deprived areas, they might not have those things. (Behruz)

> There's hardly any policies to begin with, and they're not consistent across the country. Maybe in Tehran you'll find some, but not everywhere. (Nasim)

Socioeconomic barriers: The costs of tests, private tutoring, and technology were said to be major obstacles, especially for students from lower-income families, that slowed down their academic progress.

> It's absolutely awful. Whoever has more money gets better resources and goes further. Those without money are miserable and have to struggle so much just to get anywhere. (Sarah)

> Not being able to afford private tutoring is a big one, and not being able to buy the extra practice books or go to the language learning centers that have better resources and native speakers. (Nasim)

Privilege and favoritism: Wealth, family ties, and Westernized accents were some of the things that gave some students unfair advantages, which made systemic inequalities worse and made it harder for people to succeed based on their skills.

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> We had a professor who only focused on the boys and didn't pay much attention to the girls. He even said he'd give the boys higher grades and pass them even if they didn't study. (Nasser)

Theme 2: Teacher Bias and Discriminatory Practices

This theme looks at how teachers' actions make it harder to achieve social justice by using unfair and biased methods that affect students' learning.

Favoritism/nepotism: Students observed cases of favoritism by teachers on the basis of family relations or regional/ethnic ties, which created the perception of injustice.

> For example, there were some students from different cultures or other cities, and it really affected how they interacted with professors. The professor only seemed to care about students from their own city or community. (Peyman)

> This is what I have observed in teachers who tend to treat students who are considered to be beautiful or those who belong to a renowned family better. Moreover, students with less accent (more Westernized) tend to receive more compliments, despite not having perfect grammar. (Hoda)

Gender bias: It was reported that certain teachers preferred male students or particular female students, and this meant that other students did not get equal chances of participation and representation.

> It feels like teachers sometimes expect girls to be quieter and obedient, and boys to be more confident. So, boys get called on more, even if they don't know the answer. (Sarah)

> One of my friends told me about a teacher who really favored a certain student. It was not only about her grades, as the teacher liked her personality and provided her with full marks because of it. (Narges)

Authoritarian vs. equitable pedagogy: The styles of teaching were different in authoritarian ways, where students were not allowed to contribute to the classroom environment, and in fair ways, where students were encouraged to talk, and this had a huge impact on the classroom environment.

> If we try to bring it up, they might shut us down, dock our grades, or send us to the principal, who always backs them up, saying, 'Whatever the teacher says goes. (Behruz)

> The teacher simply stopped me and told me that it was not a part of the English lesson. According to her, we should speak about grammar and vocabulary. (Hoda)

> They would have longer time with the weak students, to explain to them more, to bring them on to the same level. (Nasser)

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Theme 3: Fear of Retaliation and Institutional Barriers to Justice

This theme addresses the issue of the struggles faced by Iranian EFL learners in their pursuit of social justice, focusing on the institutional and cultural elements that suppress their voices.

Self-censorship: Learners were afraid of academic punishment, dismissal, or political implications of their views and complaints about injustices.

> I am scared of being in trouble at school, with the teachers, and even the authorities. I fear that I will be regarded as a troublemaker or a dissident. (Maryam)

> In case you do, you will be exposed to repercussions such as low grades or being locked out of opportunities. (Narges)

Lack of accountability mechanisms: Students had no way to complain about unfair treatment because there were no good grievance processes, and student evaluations were thrown out.

> They do not actually discuss the actual issues, such as poverty, discrimination, or the disparities in opportunities of people in various regions of Iran. I believe they are frightened of getting into trouble in case they discuss these things. (Nasim)

Cultural values suffocating opposition: The need to uphold authority and fear of being mocked by colleagues were other factors that discouraged learners from opposing the injustices.

> In Iran, we are taught that we have to respect authority and not ask too many questions, particularly in the street. (Shiva)

> It is taken as being disrespectful to confront those who are older or in authority, even when you believe they are wrong. (Peyman)

> When my peers are supportive, I feel confident to speak out. However, when they are dismissive or believe that I am being too sensitive, I would not say much. I don't want to be isolated. (Elnaz)

Discussion

This interpretative phenomenological research followed the case of Iranian EFL learners and their intersectional experiences of social justice. Their resposnes were analyzed and three essential themes were identified: Systemic Inequities in Access and Resources, Teacher Bias and Discriminatory Practices, and Fear of Retaliation and Institutional Barriers to Justice. The research questions from the introduction receive direct answers through the three identified themes, which show how Iranian EFL learners experience social justice in their learning environments and the obstacles that prevent them from fighting for equality. It has been established that there are systemic disparities, teacher bias, and institutional challenges in other places, but their manifestation in Iran is unique due to its specific socio-political context. The socio-political setting of Iran enhances existing inequalities because it

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lacks sufficient institutional backing and maintains traditional values that prevent individuals from speaking out, and follows hiring systems that block students from obtaining educational opportunities. The research expands our knowledge about social justice teaching because it demonstrates how Iranian EFL classroom inequalities develop into specific patterns that prevent students from expressing themselves and exercising their power.

Systemic Inequities and Structural Barriers

The issue of Systemic Inequities in Access and Resources highlights the educational inequities facing Iranian EFL learners as relates to prior studies on social justice frameworks in education. The participants observed that urban areas possessed superior educational facilities and teaching staff qualifications, which rural areas lacked. The study supports Unterhalter and Brighouse (2007), who explained that education resource distribution determines social justice in educational settings. The financial expenses for private tutoring and educational technology resources create greater learning disparities that affect students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds. The research of Reardon (2011) shows how significant economic differences between students lead to increased academic performance gaps, which create more challenges for students who already face discrimination. The described privilege and favoritism concerning wealth or family ties reinforce North's (2006, 2008) critique of social justice as a contested notion where systemic and structural inequities tend to favor the privileged few at the expense of meritocratic outcomes. These findings point out that the situation of Iranian EFL education is not unlike that of other countries where there are persistent inequities in education, revealing the need to eliminate disparities in resources and access in order to empower education for all.

Teacher Bias and Pedagogical Practices

The Biased and Discriminatory Actions of Teachers emerged as one of the significant themes in the way social justice is formed by educators. Favoritism, nepotism, and gender favoritism echo the results of Chen and Abdullah (2022) regarding the attitudes of equity-oriented teachers. Mindfulness of students with specific EFL accents in some territories is a discriminatory behavior, which is supported by Estaji and Zhaleh (2021) on the difficulties of social justice principles in EFL classrooms. The juxtaposition of the authoritarian instructional practices and the fair learning practices proves why SJP by Adams and Love (2010) is aimed at developing curricula that are inclusive of students. The instructional strategies employed by the authors Breunig (2005) and Clair and Groccia (2010) did not acknowledge student contributions and went against the main idea of SJP of students engaging in the learning process. The results of the research suggest that the new Iranian teacher education should include a new curriculum founded on critical pedagogy to eliminate discrimination and establish equal learning opportunities, which is consistent with what Hart (2023) offers in the social justice of language that centers on education frameworks to generate an inclusive learning environment.

Barriers to Advocacy and Institutional Constraints

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The Fear of Retaliation and Institutional Barriers to Justice outline the critical difficulties that Iranian EFL learners encounter when attempting to champion social justice. Participants' self-censorship due to fear of academic or political consequences aligns with Sulistyowardani et al. (2020) on the gap between teachers' beliefs and practices, which is fueled by institutional confines. According to Williamson et al. (2007), who explained the necessity of the inclusion of traditional culture in the education system, these issues are exacerbated by the absence of accountability mechanisms, whereby cultural norms do not permit dissent. The educational system faces ongoing problems because of ineffective grievance procedures, which prevent students from filing complaints about injustices, according to Cochran-Smith et al. (2016). The cultural practice of showing respect to authority figures, which participants described as matching the discrima theory concept developed by Khalili and Adel (2023), shows how social patterns lead to increased feelings of discrimination. All this data highlights the urgent need for institutional change to allow learners' advocacy within safe boundaries where they can freely speak and act.

Conclusion and Implications

This research shows how Iranian EFL learners experience social justice because of how their gender identity interacts with their economic background, their ethnic heritage, and their school environment. The research uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to study how learners experience confidence and motivation and belonging through the analysis of systemic inequalities, teacher prejudice, and institutional obstacles. The research findings demonstrate an immediate requirement for teacher training that focuses on equity and institutional oversight systems and curriculum changes that recognize student autonomy.

The implications of the findings of the research extend beyond Iran. As the study conducted by Lopez Gopar et al. (2021) explains, the collaboration of social justice methods of teaching language can also positively affect language learning in Mexico. The Iranian educational system faces specific obstacles because it lacks institutional backing and follows rules that prevent students from expressing their opinions. These local conditions make it both hard and necessary to use social justice pedagogy, which means that teachers need to come up with ways to teach that take into account the needs of different cultures.

The researcher used purposive sampling to choose participants who experienced discrimination in their EFL education. The research method produced detailed results, but the small participant number of 13 learners restricts the study's ability to make generalizations. The research findings present specific results for this particular setting, although they provide theoretical insights instead of statistical evidence. There are also a number of limitations that should be mentioned, other than the sample size.

First, the political sensitivity of Iran had the potential to affect what could be disclosed by the participants. Although confidentiality was promised, social desirability bias may have caused the participants to report certain experiences less or to present their accounts in a manner that is politically comfortable. Second, we might have been misled by our insider position in the Iranian EFL context to be blind to the normalized injustices that we did not even think of as problematic. Third, the university environment does not ensure high transferability to other educational settings, including private language schools or rural schools, where the power dynamic might be very different. Multi-site studies and

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anonymous survey methods need to be applied in the future to improve qualitative interviews, addressing these limitations of future research.

Future Research should explore how Iranian students from various educational backgrounds experience EFL education through studies that use extensive participant groups. Research studies that span multiple years will help scientists understand how social justice educational approaches affect student academic achievement and social development throughout their academic journey. Research that compares EFL education systems across different countries will reveal worldwide patterns while showing how political restrictions affect social justice teaching methods.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors maintain no conflicting interests to this research.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for this research.

Human Participants

The authors confirm that research involving human participants, or personal data complies with all legal and ethical requirements and other applicable guidelines.

Originality Note

The authors confirm that the manuscript is their original work, and if others' works are used, they are properly cited/quoted.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The authors claimed that there is "No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies" in preparing this research.

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