



The conceptualization and exploration of socially just teaching: A qualitative study on higher education English professors

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We probed the conceptualization of socially just teaching in higher education.
- The participants were non-native English professors from Iran.
- Findings indicated the importance of the critique of dominant ideologies.
- The importance of a learner-centered curriculum was also highlighted.
- It was shown that socially just teaching requires the ontological turns.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the conceptualization of socially just teaching in higher education. Participants were English language professors who were studied through a qualitative study. The data collected through interviews and memos were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Three themes were extracted: a critical stance, a dialogic and emergent curriculum, and ontological turns. The findings indicated that socially just teaching requires foregrounding the questions of being. Furthermore, the findings revealed that socially just teaching necessitates critiquing othering based on essentialist stereotypes through the contextualized teaching which revolves around cultural recognition, political representation, and contextual sensitivity.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays one of the rising concerns in human life, and in academia and education in particular, is social justice and how people can reach a fair approach in their life without breaching ethical etiquettes. In spite of the existence of a plethora of definitions—both theoretically (e.g., North, 2006) and practically (e.g., Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, & Miller, 2001)—for socially just teaching, there is still controversy regarding what justice and being just would mean in different educational milieu. Exploring individual and structural orientations of social justice-informed teaching, Chubbuck (2010) defined socially just teaching as a pedagogy for fostering all learners' learning opportunities through

transformation of structures and policies that would exert inequality and discrimination. Reviewing the main themes of justice and equity in papers published during the last few years in the *Journal of Teaching and Teacher Education* (TATE), Kaur (2012) considered the creation of equal chance and justice for all learners as the biggest challenge for teachers. In their inquiry into higher education, Shay and Peseta (2016) also alluded to a global movement calling for a more socially just educational system, which “is profoundly dissonant to the dominant neoliberal discourses currently shaping higher education” (p. 361).

Consequently, the present study probed the conceptualization of socially just teaching by higher education professors. Despite its significance, socially just teaching is a term with ill-defined meaning (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2016). Moreover, the conceptualization of socially just teaching was addressed in this study because it will “best support and encourage burgeoning social justice educators” (Johnson, Oppenheim, & Suh, 2009, p. 294).

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According to Reagan, Chen, and Vernikoff (2016), the exploration of teachers' and professors' beliefs concerning social justice can be considered critical components of their pedagogical practices and relationships. Thus, the findings of this study can also shed some light on the realities of the classroom and provide guidelines for teacher education programs that address the preparation of socially just professors in higher education. Developing fundamental principles for teacher education programs and practices, Korthagen, Loughran, and Russell (2006) also referred to the importance of the relationships between schools and higher education. They argued that the dominant views of learning to teach in teacher education programs consider higher education institutions and universities as sites where theoretical frameworks of such teacher preparation programs are presented, whereas school teaching experience is regarded as the possibility for practicing learning principles of teaching. They explained that such a perception of teacher education programs "creates many difficulties, including the fact that the "expertise" of teaching practice is often assumed to reside largely in schools with teachers. This view diminishes the rich possibilities that can be made available at the university site" (p. 1029). Studying higher education professors, who were teaching at universities, the current study addressed such a rich possibility through an exploration of professors' own conceptualizations and practices.

Given that the participants of the present research were English language professors, more pedagogical implications and significance become visible. In other words, socially just teaching can be highly important in the context of English language teaching, because the global spread of English is the result of neoliberal ideologies and globalization whereby speakers of other languages are regarded as others (Pennycook, 2016).

Indeed, this study was an attempt to hear the voice of Iranian English language professors in higher education with regard to social justice in teaching English in higher education. As Osei-Kofi, Shahjahan, and Patton (2010) argued, "a significant amount of literature in the Higher Education field is positivist, grounded in Western, male-dominated epistemologies, objectifies the "other", and silences the voices of oppressed groups" (p. 327). Furthermore, Kaur (2012) indicated that most of the studies on justice in teaching were conducted in North America and Europe. She also referred to the scanty number of such studies in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Thus, we sought to study participants from a country in the Middle East as a new context.

2. Relevant literature and theoretical framework

Centering socially just teaching in higher education, Osei-Kofi et al. (2010) explained that socially just teaching has just recently attracted the attention of higher education researchers and scholars. They also referred to the extensive studies conducted on socially just teaching in K-12 settings and explained that "this type of programmatic emphasis has not had a significant presence in the field of Higher education" (p. 327). But in recent years, several studies have addressed socially just teaching in higher education.

Developing a framework for socially just pedagogies, Osman and Hornsby (2017) asserted that teachers and students are unique individuals, who are positioned along hierarchies of power with regard to their differences in gender, race, sexuality, and so forth. Indeed, they maintained that socially just pedagogies in higher education should provide an opportunity for teachers and students to question and challenge such taken-for-granted hierarchies. Referring to the use of different methods and activities—such as focus group discussions, dialogue, and narrative in socially just approaches—they acknowledged that such approaches "weave the private and public lives of teachers and students into integrated and

whole realities and call into question dichotomies that are ever present in our classrooms" (p. 8). Also, Osman and Hornsby argued that socially just pedagogies aim at hearing and enhancing students' voices through specific pedagogical practices that focus on their experiences with the world. In addition, in 2016, the journal of *Teaching in Higher Education* called for papers on curriculum as contestation and devoted an issue to a socially just curriculum. The authors of the issue (Abbas, Ashwin, & Mclean, 2016; Anwaruddin, 2016; Clegg, 2016; Coleman, 2016; Horden, 2016; Lockett, 2016; Millar, 2016; Winberg, Winberg, Jacobs, Garraway, & Engel-Hills, 2016) focused on knowledge as the site of contestation for providing the opportunity for distributive justice.

Although the above-mentioned studies addressed justice and equity in higher education, none of them could provide a substantive discussion on the meaning of this concept. Reviewing the theoretical and empirical literature on social justice and equity in higher education, Brennan and Naidoo (2008) also argued that such studies are mainly derived by policy attention and are not founded on a clear definition of the concept. Similarly, Chubbuck (2007) indicated that there is a strong need for theoretical and practical transparency considering contents and methods of socially just teaching and asserted that researchers are required to convey the voice of teachers to provide such a transparency. Although she studied preservice teachers, this point can be worthy of attention in higher education context. Therefore, we sought to address the conceptualization of socially just teaching by higher education English language professors in the present study.

In addition to the above-mentioned studies that probed the social justice in teaching in higher education, it is not pointless to refer to studies conducted by Chubbuck (2007, 2010), Whipp (2013), and Fraser (2009) because of their close relation to the present study. Focusing on teachers' candidates, Chubbuck (2007) studied 15 preservice teachers' definition and vision on socially just teaching. Participants of her study included 13 teacher candidates as white, one as Latina, and one as Asian American. All these teacher candidates participated in a teacher education program in an urban university. They were asked to write reflective journals and elaborate on their definition of teaching for social justice. They were also asked to write about the course content of teaching for social justice and illuminate its intellectual, affective, behavioral, and spiritual effects. As Chubbuck indicated, the analysis of her participants' reflective journals highlighted the importance of appropriate curricular content, effective pedagogical practices, and rationale for socially just teaching that revolved around ethics and faith. She also referred to the appropriate curricular content as covering both basic and high-level knowledge and skills and addressing subjects on justice to inform and empower learners. Based on the findings of her study, Chubbuck suggested that empowering students to read and write can create the possibility for a better personal life. Considering social justice topics, she indicated that such topics make students think about the realities of their lives, inform them of the existing inequities, and encourage them to improve their relationships with other people. Also, Chubbuck argued that effective pedagogical practices can include problem-posing activities and classroom discussion and debates to engage all of the learners into the classroom activities and realities. She asserted that extensive dialogues with students can make them engage in deep and personal explorations of various issues.

Furthermore, Chubbuck (2010) proposed a framework for socially just teaching in teacher education programs based on the theories and her experience as a teacher educator. She explained that socially just teaching means understanding students, acknowledging the societal structures of the places where they live, and providing them with high-status knowledge and skills. She argued that socially just teaching is culturally relevant and takes

advantages of students' cultural backgrounds and communicative practices as resources of knowledges. Moreover, Chubbuck indicated that a socially just curriculum is like a mirror that reflects the lives of students who are from diverse societal groups. She also referred to the importance of discussions on volatile topics such as racism and classism in the classrooms as they make students challenge and question taken-for-granted events of their lives that may cause discrimination and oppressions.

Based on Chubbuck's framework, Whipp (2013) also addressed socially just teaching in teacher education programs and alluded to a culturally responsive teaching, which takes students' race, ethnicity, language, gender, and socioeconomic class into account. In fact, Whipp defined socially just teaching as a practice that can create a connection between students' experiences and communities, and their learning. Moreover, she suggested that socially just teacher educators should be able to make use of teacher candidates' language, communication practices, and culture as funds of knowledge.

Moreover, Fraser (2009) proposed a theory of social justice which centers on economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation. Fraser elaborated on the meaning of economic redistribution and referred to the equal distribution of economic structures and resources by which people are able to interact with each other. Illuminating the meaning of economic dimension, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) defined economic resources as materials such as "food, transport, housing, electricity, health care, social literacies, and funding, poorly paid or exploitative work such as continued casualization" (p. 5). They argued that lack of access to such materials can cause social injustice in education.

By cultural recognition, Fraser also referred to the tendency to rule out discriminations and acknowledge differences. She asserted that there should be reciprocal recognition of "group identity, individual achievement, or autonomous personhood; cultural distinctiveness, common humanity, or the claimant's standing as a partner in social interaction" (p. 32). Addressing cultural recognition in education, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) stated that misrecognition of students' prior knowledge, attributes, and values can cause inequalities and explained that it is necessary. Fraser also explained that political representation focuses on the "newly salient questions about the (in)justice of boundaries and frames" (p. 147). She indicated that the misrepresentation of boundaries would prevent some people from equal participation in social interactions.

In a similar vein, the present study focused on socially just teaching. We probed Iranian higher education English language professors' conceptualization of socially just teaching. Social justice can be considered as an important concept in English Language Teaching (ELT) because this profession is "a field frequently affected by the world's sociopolitical climate. English language learners are often pushed to the periphery of society and are subject to inequitable power structures" (Hastings & Jacob, 2016, p. VII). Hastings and Jacob specifically dug into social justice in the context of English language teaching and learning and argued that there is scarce literature on such an important topic of inquiry in the English language teaching contexts, although teaching English can provide the possibility for peace and social transformation.

Also, the findings of our study were interpreted and discussed based on the existing literature around socially just teaching, because such a comparison between personal conceptions and formal conceptions proposed in theories will lead to a deeper understanding of a concept (Sternberg, 1990). In fact, the following meta-questions guided us:

1. How do Iranian higher education English language professors conceptualize socially just teaching?

2. How can the Iranian higher education English language professors' conceptualizations be interpreted based on the existing literature around socially just teaching?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were selected using the purposeful sampling whereby information-rich professors were selected. Patton (2002) explained that the information-rich cases "are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 230). As the present study addressed the conceptualization of socially just teaching by Iranian higher education professors, the participants were selected from Iranian university professors, who held master's or doctoral degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). In fact, these educational degrees are the requirements for teaching at universities in Iran. In addition to the educational degree, as one criterion for selecting the participants, we chose our participants from university professors with different years of teaching experience in order to increase the diversity in sample selection and improve the validity of our findings. In fact, Merriam (2009) referred to the search for variation and diversity in sample selection as a strategy for enhancing validity in qualitative research.

Indeed, the participants were 25 Iranian higher education English language professors among whom 14 were female and 11 others male. They all worked at Iranian universities and their experience ranged from 4 to 22 years. As Muslim and Iranian professors, they all taught English to undergraduate students in the field of English language.

3.2. Context of the study

The present research was conducted in Iran. Evaluating the paradigm shift in the current models of ELT in Iran, Talebinezhad and Aliakbari (2002) argued that English is mainly taught as an international language, which makes it possible for Iranian people to communicate with the world. Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) also explained that more attention has been paid to teaching English in Iran during the last two decades due to globalization, the role of social media and technology, and the educational transformations. Moreover, Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2014) referred to the critical-oriented shift in ELT and explained that such a movement can lead to the critical awareness of the mainstream trends of ELT, which overlook the political and social aspects of teaching English. They also indicated that "this trend has revealed for the Periphery that the teaching of English and English language itself which have for a long time been seen as clean and safe exports involve complex moral and political implications" (pp. 393–394).

3.3. Design of the study and instruments

Taking a relativist ontological stance, we conducted a qualitative study, including in-depth interviews, memo writing and inductive thematic coding. Considering thematic analysis as a qualitative method for extracting, analyzing, and presenting themes within data, Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke made a distinction between the deductive thematic analysis that is carried out based on the researcher's theoretical interest and inductive thematic analysis in which themes are closely related to

the data. Indeed, an inductive thematic analysis was carried out as a useful qualitative research method in the current study. Braun and Clarke indicated that the inductive thematic analysis is “a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions.” (p. 83). Elaborating on the meaning of the inductive thematic analysis, they also pointed out that the researchers should read and re-read the qualitative data with regard to the purpose of their study “without paying attention to the themes that previous research on the topic might have identified” (p. 84).

As for the participants of this research, each of the professors took part in two sets of in-depth interviews: in the first round of interviews, they were requested to answer open-ended questions about their definitions and perceptions of socially just teaching; the second round of interviews, on the other hand, was conducted for the purpose of member-checking whereby we—as two researchers of the current study—could confirm and modify our understanding of the data collected through the first interviews. In fact, we conducted interviews with the participants and through a dialogic discussion checked the accuracy of our findings from the first interviews. Additionally, member-checking could help us elaborate on our emerging findings.

In addition to the interview data, we also utilized memos as a method to further reach sources of data and also better compare the identified categories from the interviews against the notes in our memo.

3.4. Procedure

Having been selected through purposeful sampling, the participants were interviewed to solicit their meanings, perceptions, and experiences of socially just teaching. It should be noted that the interviews commenced with a tentative explanation of the purpose of the study and the participants were asked to express their own understandings and definitions of socially just teaching. Some of the guiding questions in the interviews are presented in Table 1.

Moreover, we wrote memos during the data collection in order to record our reflections on the analysis of the data. In memos, we also analyzed the codes, provided the detailed definition of categories, compared categories and sub-categories with each other, and clarified the relationships among categories. Once the first round of interviews was successfully run and the codes and themes were extracted and checked with the memos, we returned to the same participants to check the themes we had obtained.

3.5. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. Indeed, we organized the collected data and put them into different categories based on their dimensions. We carried out inductive thematic coding and utilized four coding phases that were proposed by Charmaz (2006). Charmaz referred to four coding phases of extracting themes within the qualitative data: initial, focused, axial, and theoretical. By initial coding, she referred to the

initial line-by-line, incident-by-incident, and segment-by-segment coding of the collected data by analyzing the data in terms of their properties and dimensions, assigning concepts and codes to the data, and putting codes into categories.

Therefore, we read the data line by line, generated the initial list of concepts and codes, and put the codes into more abstract categories. Charmaz (2006) also indicated that “focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data” (p. 57). In fact, we compared the initial codes with the data and read the data through the lens of the initial codes. In this manner, the data became more meaningful and we found the opportunity to modify the identified codes and categories.

The third phase was axial coding, which connects the “related categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). At this stage, we searched for themes. Thus, we analyzed the initial categories in terms of their properties and dimensions, discarded some of them, and considered some of them as sub-categories of larger categories or themes. It should be added that the themes emerged from the data without considering the existing themes in the literature on the topic of the study. The last stage was theoretical coding whereby the relationships between the categories—which were developed and refined through focused coding—were clarified. Indeed, the identified themes were reviewed and refined. Some of the obtained themes were also subsumed under broader and relevant categories. The collated extracts for each theme were also read to check whether they could create a coherent pattern. Charmaz (2006) argued that “theoretical codes are integrative; they lend form to the focused codes you have collected. These codes may help you tell an analytic story that has coherence” (p. 63).

4. Findings

The analysis of the obtained data led to the extraction of three main themes: a critical stance, a dialogic and emergent curriculum, and ontological turns. These three themes are further explained below.

4.1. A critical stance

We named the first theme a critical stance, which can be attributed to the professors’ critique to appraise and question the dominant ideologies and further acknowledge multiple voices. The following example is an extract from an interview with Hamed, a male professor with eight years of experience:

To be just in my teaching, I choose what I want to teach with my students. Then, we read and analyze the texts and papers when they are written by English people. And most of the time, we have to choose from such materials. We check the language that they used. I ask my students to think about the passive and

Table 1
Key questions in in-depth interviews

- 1 How do you define socially just teaching?
- 2 What does it mean to you to be a socially just teacher?
- 3 Would you describe how socially just teaching influences your relation with your learners?
- 4 Would you explain which materials you use in the classroom based on socially just teaching?
- 5 Would you explain which activities you use in the classroom based on socially just teaching?
- 6 Would you describe the atmosphere of a class guided by a socially just teacher?
- 7 What can be the consequences of socially just teaching?
- 8 Would you give us examples of your stories and experiences of socially just teaching?

active sentences, think about cases when names are used instead of verbs, think about the types and numbers of complements, or even focus on images. We discuss such important aspects of language in our free time. The way that they picture women, relations, and society should not be imposed on us just because we are learning their language.

Not unlike the previous excerpt, Zahra, a female professor with about seven years of experience said that:

They see us from the above. Perhaps, students are not aware and swallow what they receive. In such conditions, there is no place for their different ways of life. I make them aware by interpreting texts, focusing on time and places where stories in books are narrated, and thinking about cultural references.

One more example is an extract from an interview with Mobina, a female professor with seven years of experience:

If I want to be a socially just teacher and respect equality of my students, I should be able to know them and their world. We can talk to each other and discover each other. In universities, we have students from different contexts and backgrounds. It is very important to know them and their families and lives. I ask all of them, poor, rich, girls, boys, to participate in activities and talk about their own experiences and differences.

As it can be understood from the above-mentioned examples, the university professors practiced critical discourse analysis in their classes in order to identify the dominant ideologies of native speakers and writers. Focusing on the language used by native writers and speakers and analyzing their language in terms of structure and grammar, or even in the use of specific words, they sought to trigger their students' awareness that teaching English was value-laden and not neutral. They also explained that it was very important to know students from different backgrounds and with different experiences in order to become a socially just teacher. The participants also talked about the use of materials prepared by the non-native speakers in their classes in addition to the use of authentic materials written by native speakers. The following two examples were also extracted from the data set. The first excerpt is taken from Azim, a male university professor with five years of experience who said that:

In order to create a balance, I try to use texts, pictures, blogs, or other materials that are written by our writers and people, because they are based on our own lives and reflect who we are. Such texts or subjects are tangible and acceptable for my students. Of course, we face many limitations, because we are bombarded by texts that are written by Western writers. Anyway, I try to do my best in this case to create a class that is just.

Mehdi was another male university professor with four years of experience who said that:

I ask my students to choose a topic from their own lives and social contexts. Then, we talk with each other in English or we review papers and articles written by non-English scholars and discuss main points and contents using English. In this way, we are using our English.

Indeed, the participants preferred to use some locally developed materials written by Iranian authors to reflect on their own culture and life style. This option furnished them with the opportunity to

challenge the dominant ideology of native speakerism or the belief that native English speakers are the best models of teaching English. Also, they could focus on an alternative use of English. As it can be inferred from the examples, by an alternative use of English, they meant using English language in order to convey the issues and problems of their own context, i.e., Iran. However, the participants referred to the limitations of such materials in Iran and explained that they were overwhelmed by materials published outside Iran.

The majority of the participants also referred to the active participation of students in the classroom decision-making. They explained that they allowed their students to share their ideas about the materials that could be used in the class, the assessment procedures, the types of activities, or the topic of the classroom discussions. Moreover, they talked about the importance of negotiation with their learners about their needs and wishes, which could make it possible for them to listen to their learners and hear their voices. Some of the professors referred to the class blogs and student message board or student forums through which students could hold conversations concerning different classroom decisions. The following two examples were also extracted from the data set. The first one is an extract from Hajar, a female university professor with 15 years of experience:

If we honestly want to create social justice in our class and in our teaching, it is very important to share our class and university with our students who are very different and come from different families. This requires teachers to get closer to students and give them greater roles in the classroom by asking them to decide for their learning and classes. I ask them to help me choose the activities and materials appropriate for the class. We negotiate with each other in and out of the class for example through social networks and our class forums.

Mary as another female university professor with about four years of experience also pinpointed that:

I want my students to choose topics for discussions. In this way, they bring their interests, problems, and experiences to the classroom. In this way, in our class, all students can and will be seen. We know each other and become familiar with differences and problems. If differences cause discrimination, we talk with each other to find a solution for the problem.

4.2. *Dialogic and emergent curriculum*

The second extracted theme was a dialogic and emergent curriculum, which revolved around the needs of a given group of students. The majority of the participants referred to the learner-centered approach whereby the negotiation between the teacher and students culminated in teaching procedures and learning activities. Mary as one of the professors indicated that:

It is very important to know that our students are different and come from different contexts. So, I cannot predetermine what I want to teach without knowing my students' worlds and analyzing their needs. By knowing them and their needs, I can see their differences and diversity and try to take these points into account to avoid discriminations and oppression that come because of the ignorance of the students and focusing on our presumptions in choosing contents, methods, and syllabus. I should make it possible for students to speak and show themselves to me. I ask them to participate in class discussions and talk about different topics. We agree and disagree with each

other, but we speak. It is the first step for social justice in teaching.

Similarly, Mehdi explained that:

We discuss social and ethical issues in our class. We discuss issues related to our daily lives. In this way, I can understand my students and their individuality. When we learn to talk about an issue and hear our different views and ideas, we learn to reflect on our positions and bias. We collect new information by understanding other persons' perceptions on issues and become more knowledgeable. This helps me as a teacher to check different perspectives and avoid being a single voice in the class. Discussion with students help me choose the most appropriate materials, contents, activities, because I know what my students want and need.

As it can be inferred from the above-mentioned examples, professors mainly focused on processes such as discussion and critical thinking to select their teaching materials. Also, the analysis of data, regarding process of discussion and critical thinking, surfaced the importance of open-ended questions whereby teachers could ask students to argue, compare, criticize, and support their own stance towards different topics. In addition, we found out that some of the professors cautiously supported controversial and taboo topics in their classes. In the English teaching contexts, the term *PARSNIP* —as acronym for politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, and pork — is used to refer to taboo topics. In this study, some of the participants talked about controversial issues such as race, religion, and politics as topics related to social justice and equality. The following example was also extracted from an interview with Hoda, a female university professor with nine years of experience. She said that:

Considering your question about my practice for socially just teaching, I can talk about topics and subjects that I cover in the classes. There are some topics that are encouraging. I think it is very valuable to talk about those topics that were considered as bad topics. Students are curious and want to know and we say that these topics are banned. But it is wrong. They want to know because they want to change their conditions and limitations. I talk with them to choose topics for discussions. We choose political, social, and religious topics most of the time, because these subjects directly affect our life in and out of the university.

Likewise, Hassan, a male university professor with about eight years of experience suggested that:

To observe justice in teaching and pave the way for teaching how to be just and think about justice, I use challenging topics in classrooms. Challenging topics and open questions that have no single answer make it possible for us to think. Some of the students agree and some of them disagree. There will be a controversy. They may behave defensively. But they will learn to listen and hear different points of view. They will learn to speak based on information and reasons. They will learn to think critically.

It seems that teachers used controversial topics in their classes in order to provide the opportunity for dialogues and critical thinking. Students could listen to different views and examine different ideas. Taking different stances towards a topic, which seems to be challenging, made it possible for students and the professor to see different and even hidden agenda on an issue.

Analyzing different ideas could provide the chance for the students and the professors to evaluate their own stance and position and judge more fairly.

4.3. *Ontological turns*

The third theme which emerged from our data was labeled ontological turns. In addition to four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, it seems that our participants gave priority to teaching their students appropriate ways of being a student. They also talked about appropriate ways of being a teacher in their attempts to become a socially just teacher. The participants asserted that they aimed at changing their own learners' relation with the world through learning a new language. They also sought to provide a new place for themselves as non-native English teachers. It seems that our participants' focus was not on specific skills or knowledge, which should have been transformed from teachers to learners. By appropriate ways of being a teacher or students, they meant valuing their own and their students' personal experiences and perceptions and providing the opportunity for themselves as non-native English teachers and for their own students as English learners from the Middle East to find their own voice in the midst of the surrounding voices. The following example is an extract from the interview with Hassan:

What is necessary to get rid of this situation is to understand and think about who we are. I am an Iranian English teacher. I am a teacher with my own history and experiences that should not be overlooked in my teaching and my profession. If I want to be just and fair, I should know who I am. I have my weakness, strength, axioms, and values. When I think about these things, I know my position and think about it critically. I reflect on myself. I teach this great lesson to my students to make them good students and good humans even if they are from a society with limitations or even if they are banned.

As it can be inferred from the above-mentioned example, the professors asserted that it was very important to read the mainstream texts and know the major trends of thoughts in teaching and learning English, which were mainly proposed by native speakers. But this was not sufficient and our participants also talked about critical dialogue with mainstream texts and main trends of thoughts. Thus, we concluded that our participants referred to appropriate ways of being a teacher or a student as being a person who reads and studies major texts, knows the mainstream voices, and comes into critical dialogues with texts and voices to find his/her own voice. Finding their own voices, teachers and students can bring their own experiences and stories into their teaching and learning instead of parroting the major thoughts and texts. Delving into the obtained data, we also found out that some of the participants highlighted the importance of lecturing whereby the students were supposed to stand in front of others, present what they had read and studied, answer the professors' and other students' questions, and support their own interpretations. Some of the professors also talked about brainstorming through which they tried to work with their students to find the solution to a problem by gathering and evaluating students' idea. The following excerpt was taken from Sara, a female university professor with ten years of experience who said that:

When I ask this question and want my students to do their best to discover themselves, I know that it is not easy and first of all they should study and read. Students and even teachers should read and read to know the common trends of thoughts. To know themselves, they should be knowledgeable. And to know

themselves and find their own knowledge from the sea of knowledges, they should learn to think critically about what they read, think about themselves, and reflect on their positions. In my class, I do it through the practice of brainstorming.

5. Interpretation of findings

A close inspection of the data led to the emergence of three dominant themes, including a critical stance, a dialogic and emergent curriculum, and ontological turns. The first theme was a critical stance and included the critique of dominant ideologies and the recognition of multiple voices, which could be actualized through critical discourse analysis, the use of materials prepared by non-native scholars, and the active participation of learners in classroom decision-making. In his definition and exploration of a critical curriculum, Zepke (2016) referred to learning to critique ideological dominance, practicing democracy as active engagement of learners in decision making, and valuing differences. He also explained that a critical curriculum “includes all relevant purposes, knowledge and values leading to awareness of self, society and the ecosystem. It enables critique of mainstream knowledge, values and practices and works for greater social justice” (p. 151). Although Zepke argued that the purpose of a critical curriculum is rethinking and reexamining the norms and expectations of a neoliberal higher education, we referred to a critical stance in teaching English in higher education to address the possibility for reframing native speakerism and dominance of authentic materials in the classrooms.

Elaborating on the underlying meaning of native speakerism, Halliday (2006) also suggested that the main aim of such an ideal view of native speaker is “the ‘othering’ of students and colleagues from outside the English-speaking West according to essentialist regional or religious cultural stereotypes” (p. 385). Furthermore, Currie (2006) considered otherness of some teachers and learners as a factor that could lead to marginalization. Therefore, we talked about a critical stance in higher education whose aim is critiquing and challenging othering and marginalization based on essentialist stereotypes. In fact, a critical stance, as one of the themes extracted from the collected data, was in line with Fraser (2009) cultural recognition due to its insistence on the acknowledgement of differences between native speakers and non-native speakers, and its disaffirmation of discrimination just based on the regional and cultural stereotype of native speakerism. In addition, reframing the boundary between native speakers and non-native speakers, the findings of the current study were in line with Fraser (2009) political representation. Illuminating the meanings of cultural recognition and political representation, Leibowitz, Naidoo, and Mayet (2017) asserted that:

Matters of recognition of social status would include respect for one’s ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or age, but in addition, respect for one’s language background, culture, and prior learning. Attention to voice and framing would include being perceived to be a legitimate member of the school community, and being able to voice needs. (p. 82)

Consequently, the theme critical stance hinted at the discrimination between the native English language professors and non-native English language professors concerning their language backgrounds and cultures. Highlighting the existence of such discrimination, critical stance called for the recognition of students and colleagues from various cultures and language backgrounds that are mainly viewed as others, who stand outside the English-

speaking West and the world of native speakers. Hearing the voice of non-native English professors and legitimizing them as English professors, a critical stance also aimed at ruling out the wrong boundary between native speakers and non-native speakers and called for political representation. Indeed, our participants asserted that non-native English professors are wrongly excluded from a wider community of the English language professors and teachers. Fraser (2009) stated that the injustice is reproduced, when those who are excluded from one community are “included as subjects of justice in another—as long as the effect of the political division is to put some relevant aspects of justice beyond their reach” (p. 19). Therefore, the theme critical stance asked for ruling out the political boundary between native English language professors and non-native language professors.

Moreover, in our study, it was revealed that such a critical stance could be realized through critical discourse analysis in an attempt to identify dominant ideologies and more seriously acknowledge the value of materials prepared by non-native speakers and instead challenge ideological dominance of native speakerism and authentic materials. Also, the active engagement of learners in classroom decision-making made it possible for professors to hear the voice of learners—who could be from different contexts and backgrounds. Explaining theoretical and research framework of socially just teaching, Whipp (2013) also suggested that socially just teachers “affirm and sustain their students’ cultural backgrounds by drawing from their funds of knowledge” (languages, histories, cultural practices)” (p. 455). Engaging the learners in the classroom decision-making can also provide the opportunity for professors and university personnel to become aware of the diversity of the worlds that learners reside in and accordingly bring their issues and pains into their decisions. Kaur (2012) emphasized the importance of learners’ experiences and explained that creating a relationship between their experiences and learning would make their learning meaningful to their lives.

By a dialogic and emergent curriculum as the second extracted theme, we referred to a learner-centered approach whereby classroom contents and syllabus were determined by understanding learners’ needs and wishes through activities. Indeed, the majority of the participants explained that they mainly focused on procedures of inquiry such as discussions and critical thinking. Some of them also talked about the use of social-related topics, including PARSNIPS in their classes. In her explanation of curriculum of socially just teaching, Chubbuck (2007) also mentioned the social justice topic as a component of the socially just curriculum whereby it becomes possible for learners to broaden their own understanding of the world and the relations and acknowledge the practices of inequality. Furthermore, Chubbuck (2010) referred to the importance of volatile topics in creating the necessary atmosphere for socially just teaching as students are stimulated to challenge and question their status quo. She also argued that “all students need to be exposed to the particulars of societal injustice that can pierce apathy and provoke the empathy and outrage needed to prompt them to act for the betterment of society” (p. 206).

Although the findings of our study were in line with the themes of studies conducted by Chubbuck (2007, 2010), and addressed the significant role of social-related and volatile topics, the extracted theme of a dialogic and emergent curriculum extends beyond a curriculum that is formed based on the processes such as discussion and critical thinking. In fact, we also referred to a curriculum, which is retrospectively constructed through dialogues between professors and learners and revolves around the needs and wishes of a given group of learners. Therefore, we talked about a socially just teaching that is contextualized. In addition to its emphasis on equal participation, a socially just teaching should be sensitive to a

given context and equal participation should not be achieved at the expense of ignorance of contextual differences.

Furthermore, the third theme was named ontological turns and addressed the being of English learners and non-native English professors. For the participants of this study, socially just teaching meant understanding who they were and where they stood in the world of native speakerism. They also talked about providing the necessary conditions to make their students think about who they were and where they stood. Bhaskar (2007) argued that “when I have a new insight about my own or somebody else’s condition this will be an insight about ontology” (p. 203). Illuminating the meaning of ontological turn, Barnett (2007) explained that all people are right and are even responsible to ask who they are. He also argued that:

This, after all, is what is surely implied by the idea of criticality: that the student’s presuppositions are liable to be put on trial; that, ultimately, no personal belief can be taken for granted. Every belief is liable to put on trial. (p. 31)

Although Chubbuck (2007) participants who addressed the Christian higher education referred to socially just teaching as teaching that is grounded in faith, the participants of our study as Muslim and non-native English language professors highlighted the importance of the ontological turns. Indeed, the ontological turns are matters of what it is to be a teacher or a learner. As Barnett (2007) stated, the ontological turns are matters of “the kinds of human being that tutors might be looking to nurture, and of the pedagogic possibilities and even responsibilities” (p. 9). It seems that the findings of the present study hinted at a more universal rationale.

Our participants also addressed both teachers and students and referred to pedagogical practices such as lecturing and brainstorming whereby it could become possible for all learners to start speaking in front of others, sharing their ideas with others, and critically thinking about multiple stances. Thus, the findings of this study revealed the importance of ontological turns not only in students but also in teachers, which could provide the possibility of transformation. As Heidegger, 1998/1967 indicated, such a turn in education means “removing human beings from the region where they first encounter things and transferring and accustoming them to another realm where beings appear” (p. 167). Elaborating on Heidegger’s meaning, Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2008) argued that:

This would mean creating space and opportunities for students to encounter the familiar in unfamiliar ways. Through the strange and unfamiliar we engage with difference: the possibility that things could be otherwise. In other words, by considering the taken-for-granted from other perspectives, we can develop new ways of dealing with our world. (p. 685)

6. Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the conceptualization of socially just teaching in higher education. The participants of the study were higher education English language professors. We conducted a qualitative study the results of which yielded three dominant themes namely: a critical stance, a dialogic and emergent curriculum, and ontological turns. These themes indicated that socially just teaching necessitates critiquing marginalization and othering based on essentialist stereotypes through the acknowledgement of contextualized teaching that is founded on a dialogic and emergent curriculum. In fact, with regard to our first theme, i.e.

a critical stance, the findings of the study were in line with Fraser (2009) social justice theory and called for cultural recognition and political representation, although it was found that a socially just teaching should also be contextually sensitive. The findings of the study also showed that there is a strong need for ontological turns in both professors and learners by foregrounding the questions of being. Questions of being made it possible for the participants to challenge their status quo and seek for new ways of being in the world. Therefore, our participants suggested that socially just teaching involves cultural recognition, political representation, and contextual sensitivity. They also argued that these three features are founded on an ontological turn. Furthermore, the analysis of the data shed some light on pedagogical practices such as critical discourse analysis, negotiation with learners on their needs and wishes, discussion on volatile topics and open-ended questions, the use of materials prepared by scholars who were not from ideological dominance, lecturing, and brainstorming.

As was said in the previous sections, our study was on higher education professors. Consequently, the findings of this study can be helpful for university-level teachers, especially university-level English teachers. Similarly, the findings can be useful to university-level learners, because the ways teachers teach can “serve as either channels of just and equitable or unjust and inequitable access to learning” (Chubbuck, 2007, p. 240). The findings can be also helpful to teacher educators considering pedagogical practices, concepts, and relations that were highlighted by the participants. Furthermore, socially just teaching is mainly accompanied by the transformation of pedagogical practices and policies. Therefore, this study can offer benefits to policy-makers. As socially just teaching is a practice with individual and structural orientations (Chubbuck, 2007), the findings of the study may go beyond the limits of educational systems and cast some light on issues at societal-level.

But the present study was purely qualitative. Therefore, it seems that there is a need for further studies with larger numbers of participants in order to cross-validate the extracted themes of this study. Also, this study was conducted in Iran as a developing country with a collectivist culture. Thus, further studies in developed countries, industrialized countries, and countries with individualistic cultures can enrich and complement the findings of this study.

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