

Challenging Neoliberalism: Iranian EFL Instructors' Strategies for Alternative English Pedagogies



Katayoon Afzali ✉  0000-0001-6357-2004

Department of English, TEFL, faculty of Foreign Languages and International Relations, Shahid Ashrafi Esfahani university, Isfahan, Iran..

Email: k.afzali@ashrafi.ac.ir



Faeze Shams Beygi **  0009-0005-9954-5549

Department of English, TEFL, faculty of foreign languages, Sheikhbahae university, Isfahan, Iran.

Email: faeze.shb77@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The influence of neoliberalism in education has shifted the focus of teaching and learning away from nurturing well-rounded individuals and societal betterment, instead emphasizing market-driven goals of efficiency, accountability, and profitability. In view of these effects, the current qualitative study explored Iranian university English instructors' perceptions and practices in resisting neoliberal influences within English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms. Drawing on thematic analysis of interviews and classroom observations with three professors, the research examined the strategies. Iranian EFL instructors employ to challenge neoliberal policies, such as marketisation, standardisation, and performance based accountability. While participants reported institutional pressures toward outcomes driven, commodified education, they also noted active resistance through alternative strategies. These included non standardised assessments, collaborative and student centred pedagogies, and emphasis on critical thinking and social justice—approaches aligned with critical and reflective teaching documented in similar contexts. The findings of the study underscores the instructors' dissatisfaction with commercialization of education and their efforts to de commodify ELT through flexible, inclusive practices. Implications highlight the need for professional development that supports educator agency under neoliberal constraints and contributes to discourse on alternative ELT pedagogies in non Western settings. Future research should expand sample size and investigate student responses and long term impacts.

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✉ Department of English, TEFL, faculty of Foreign Languages and International Relations, Shahid Ashrafi Esfahani university, Isfahan, Iran.

** Department of English, TEFL, faculty of foreign languages, Sheikhbahae university, Isfahan, Iran.

1. Introduction

Neoliberalism, emerging as a dominant ideology since the late 20th century, champions free markets, minimal government intervention, and privatization under the promise of promoting individual freedom and economic growth (Birch, Springer, & MacLeavy, 2016). However, while some proponents argue that neoliberalism fosters prosperity, critics contend that it exacerbates social inequalities and neglects critical societal concerns (Giroux, 2014). In education, neoliberalism's influence extends deeply into the structure and practice of teaching and learning, shifting focus from fostering well-rounded individuals and social betterment toward market-driven objectives of efficiency, accountability, and profitability (Ball, 2021; Marginson, 2021).

English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly within higher education, exemplifies this transformation. Neoliberal policies position language predominantly as an economic asset rather than a cultural and social phenomenon, aligning with what Wee (2003) terms "linguistic instrumentalism" the view of language primarily as a tool for occupational and geographical mobility. Consequently, ELT increasingly serves market imperatives, often at the expense of critical pedagogical aims such as fostering social justice, cultural awareness, and critical thinking (Pennycook, 2022). This utilitarian orientation diminishes the richness and transformative potential traditionally associated with language education,

reducing it to functional skill acquisition geared to enhance employability and competitiveness in a global marketplace (Alhinai, 2024).

A significant repercussion of neoliberalism in ELT is the de-professionalization and marginalization of language teachers. Educators face increasing job insecurity and an erosion of professional autonomy as their roles are narrowed to fulfillment of pre-determined, market-aligned outcomes (Villacañas de Castro et al., 2018). This commodification reduces teachers to facilitators of measurable skills rather than agents of holistic education, curtailing their ability to encourage critical engagement and socially responsive pedagogy (Pennycook, 2022). At the same time, students are positioned as entrepreneurial consumers, responsible for self-managing their language learning as an investment aimed at maximizing personal economic returns (Alhinai, 2024). Such framing risks sidelining essential educational outcomes, including cultural exploration, democratic participation, and intellectual independence (Bori & Canale, 2022). Furthermore, In addition, it often prioritizes economic considerations over broader educational goals such as critical thinking, social justice, and cultural understanding (Pennycook, 2022). With the increasing adoption of neoliberal policies in universities, English language teachers experience a range of negative consequences. Teachers' professional autonomy has been undermined, leading to de-professionalization and job insecurity

(Villacañas de Castro et al., 2018). Teachers are often perceived as facilitators of predetermined outcomes rather than educators with the expertise to foster a holistic language education. This commodification of education reduces teachers' roles to service providers in a competitive market, eroding their professional identity and agency (Canagarajah, 2021). The challenge, therefore, lies in identifying and implementing ELT pedagogies that can resist and counteract the adverse effects of neoliberalism. There is a critical need to explore and understand the perceptions of EFL instructors regarding neoliberalism's impact on their teaching practices. By examining how these instructors navigate, resist, or comply with neoliberal imperatives, this research aims to uncover strategies and pedagogies that prioritize comprehensive educational outcomes. Such outcomes include fostering critical thinking, promoting social justice, and deepening students' appreciation of the cultural and social dimensions of language (Kumaravadivelu 2012).

In addition to altering teaching roles and student identities, neoliberalism's privileging of efficiency and market logic has led to the marginalization of humanities, arts, and critical subjects within curricula (Nussbaum, 2010). This shift undermines the development of critical thinking skills and diminishes the joy and creativity integral to effective learning. Teachers, though often cognizant of these challenges, frequently experience

constraint due to the rigidity of neoliberal institutional demands (Canagarajah, 2021; Pennycook, 2022).

This research identifies a notable gap in the literature concerning how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors develop alternatives to the impact of neoliberal ideology in higher education classrooms. While broader critiques of neoliberalism's dominance in higher education abound, little attention has been directed toward the classroom-level experiences of language teachers who are tasked with implementing these market-driven policies. Understanding how instructors negotiate, resist, or conform to neoliberal imperatives is crucial for developing pedagogical approaches that foster critical thinking, social justice, and culturally and socially responsive language education (Pennycook, 2022). Therefore, the current study aims to reveal innovative strategies educators may employ to subvert neoliberal constraints.

2. Literature Review

Neoliberalism, a dominant economic and political ideology, advocates for free-market capitalism, deregulation, and the privatization of public services, with minimal state intervention. Over the past few decades, this ideology has profoundly impacted various sectors, including education, where market-driven policies now prioritize efficiency, competition, accountability, and measurable outcomes (Olssen & Peters, 2005). In higher education (HE), these neoliberal principles have reshaped

institutional structures, governance models, and pedagogical practices, prompting significant changes in how education is perceived, delivered, and assessed (Ball, 2012; Giroux, 2014). English Language Teaching (ELT) is no exception to these transformations, with neoliberalism influencing both the content and delivery of language education, as well as the roles of teachers and students (Gray, 2010; Holborow, 2015).

The specific components of neoliberalism include marketization, privatization, standardization, accountability, commodification, and globalization. Marketization in education, particularly in higher education ELT, involves applying market-driven principles such as competition, efficiency, and economic outcomes to academic institutions, which increasingly treat English as a commodified global product. This shift pressures universities to prioritize attracting international students and measurable outcomes like standardized test scores, often at the expense of educational quality, critical thinking, and cultural enrichment (Marginson, 2021).

Privatization in higher education ELT, driven by neoliberal policies, involves shifting responsibilities from public to private sectors, leading to increased reliance on private funding, for-profit institutions, and outsourced services. This trend is often motivated by fiscal pressures and results in the commercialization of English education, where profit and enrollment take precedence over teaching

quality and student engagement. Privatization exacerbates educational inequalities by making access to quality English instruction dependent on financial means, thus raising concerns about social equity and cultural diversity. Additionally, educators face job insecurity and pressure to align with market demands, leading to standardized, mass-appeal curricula that often neglect local contexts and critical pedagogical goals (Ford, 2021).

Commodification in ELT refers to treating education as a marketable product where students become consumers and learning outcomes are valued primarily for their economic utility (Ford, 2021). This neoliberal-driven shift links English proficiency to economic mobility, employability, and global competitiveness, often leading institutions to focus on practical, job-oriented skills such as business English and test preparation at the expense of critical thinking and cultural awareness (Phillipson, 2012).

Standardization in education involves implementing uniform curricula, assessments, and practices to ensure consistent learning outcomes across institutions, a trend intensified by neoliberal policies emphasizing accountability and measurable results (Sahlberg, 2011). In ELT, this is exemplified by widespread reliance on standardized tests like TOEFL and IELTS, which, while providing common benchmarks, often narrow curricula and promote "teaching to the test," limiting critical engagement and cultural relevance

(Phillipson, 2012; Roberts, 2019; Shor et al., 2017). Standardization also homogenizes teaching materials, neglecting local contexts and linguistic diversity, and reinforcing educational inequalities as students from wealthier backgrounds access better resources (Block, 2018).

Globalization, driven by advances in communication, trade, and technology, has profoundly influenced education by facilitating cross-border flows of ideas, people, and practices, thereby reshaping educational policies and pedagogies worldwide (Spring, 2008). In higher education, globalization manifests through international collaboration, mobility, and the adoption of global standards, with English positioned as a critical global lingua franca tied to economic success and international communication (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This rise in demand for English proficiency has expanded ELT programs globally, emphasizing language skills for global economic participation. However, it also raises challenges such as linguistic imperialism, where the dominance of English marginalizes local languages and cultures, thus threatening linguistic diversity and exacerbating educational inequalities (Gray, 2010).

Accountability in education, especially under neoliberalism, involves using performance metrics and evaluations to monitor institutions and educators, aiming to improve transparency and educational outcomes (Shakthi, 2025). In ELT, this focus on measurable results—often standardized test scores—can narrow

curricula, leading educators to prioritize test preparation over holistic language development, critical thinking, and cultural competence (Gioti, 2025). Such pressures constrain teacher autonomy, foster prescriptive teaching methods, and may deepen inequities by directing resources to higher-performing programs while disadvantaging those serving diverse or marginalized learners (Zhong & Gong, 2024).

In response to the restrictive, neoliberal turn in education—marked by standardization and competition—scholars have developed alternative pedagogies focused on critical thinking, equity, and inclusivity. Freire (1970) laid the foundation for critical pedagogy, promoting a dialogical and transformative model of education that empowers students to question social and political structures. Building on Freire's work, Shor (1992) conducted classroom-based research demonstrating how dialogical and participatory learning can foster student agency and critical consciousness, particularly among marginalized learners. Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced culturally relevant pedagogy through a study of exemplary teachers working in African American communities. She found that successful educators integrated students' cultural identities into curriculum and pedagogy, thereby enhancing engagement, promoting academic success, and developing sociopolitical awareness.

Other scholars have explored experiential models that counteract

neoliberal constraints. Bell (2021) examined project-based learning and found that when students engage with real-world issues through collaborative projects, they develop deeper critical thinking, problem-solving, and motivation. Sobel (2004), focusing on place-based education, illustrated how connecting learning to local environments cultivates environmental stewardship and community engagement. In the field of ELT, Babaii (2018) argued for pedagogies that foreground social justice and language's sociocultural role. Kumaravadivelu (2012) critiqued traditional methods for reinforcing neoliberal goals and instead advocated for learner-centered, culturally aware instruction. Sleeter (2014) emphasized social justice teaching as essential for addressing systemic inequities, while Bori and Bori and Canale (2022) called for pedagogical reforms in ELT that account for learner diversity and resist market-driven metrics. Collectively, these studies reveal that alternative pedagogies not only enrich learning but also challenge the status quo, pushing for more democratic, inclusive, and transformative educational practices. Therefore, the current study aimed to address the following research question:

What are the strategies Iranian English teachers employ in universities to develop alternatives to neoliberal ELT?

3. Method

The design, instruments and participants of the study will be explained below.

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is particularly well-suited for exploring subjective meanings and gaining in-depth insights into complex phenomena. The primary data collection methods consist of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews enable a detailed exploration of participants' perspectives on neoliberalism, marketization, and alternative pedagogical approaches, while allowing the flexibility for participants to articulate their views in their own terms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Classroom observations serve to enrich the data by offering real-time insights into how educators' philosophical orientations are enacted in their teaching practices. Together, these methods provide a holistic understanding of the relationship between neoliberal influences and ELT, capturing both theoretical frameworks and practical applications. The study is situated within an interpretive research paradigm, which emphasizes the subjective meanings that participants attribute to their experiences and professional practices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paradigm supports the investigation of how educators make sense of their roles and pedagogical choices within the broader context of neoliberal educational policies.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study were three ELT professors from University of Isfahan each selected for their extensive experience and expertise in higher education. Professor

A is a male academic in his early forties, holding a doctoral degree and possessing approximately eight years of teaching experience. Professor B, also male and in his early forties, has over 21 years of experience in the field, while Professor C, a female professor in the same age group, brings around 18 years of teaching experience. All three hold doctoral-level qualifications and have specialized in areas such as applied linguistics, translation studies, and ELT methodology. Their teaching portfolios include courses in language assessment, English drama, English poetry, and translation.

This purposive sampling strategy ensured that participants offered both local and global perspectives on English language education. Their diverse academic backgrounds and substantial teaching experience provided rich, contextually grounded insights into how neoliberal forces influence ELT and how alternative pedagogical approaches are conceptualized and enacted in Iranian higher education.

3.3. Instruments

Classroom observation and interview were used as the instruments of the study.

3.3.1. Classroom Observation Checklist

The Classroom Observation Checklist was developed through a systematic process informed by theoretical frameworks and a comprehensive literature review. Key themes such as critical thinking, cultural responsiveness, collaborative learning, and holistic

education were identified through an analysis of scholarly articles, books, and empirical studies critiquing neoliberalism in education and advocating for alternative pedagogies.

The checklist indicators were grounded in several well-established educational theories: Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970): Emphasized fostering critical thinking, challenging dominant ideologies, and addressing issues of social justice. Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978): Highlighted the centrality of social interaction and collaborative knowledge construction. Decolonial and Inclusive Education (Santos, 2014) Stressed the importance of cultural inclusivity, multilingualism, and adapting pedagogy to local contexts. Drawing from these frameworks, the checklist includes indicators organized under the following categories: Critical Pedagogy: Encouraging critical reflection, addressing real-world issues, and incorporating socio-political contexts into lessons; Collaborative Learning: Promoting group work, peer interaction, and knowledge co-construction over competition; Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Valuing student diversity, using multilingual strategies, and representing marginalized voices; Non-Market-Oriented Learning Goals: Focusing on personal development, creativity, and global citizenship rather than test performance or labor-market readiness; Resisting Standardization: Allowing curricular flexibility, teacher autonomy, and adaptation to local needs; Dialogic

Teaching and Social Interaction: Prioritizing student-centered dialogue and shared classroom discourse; Collective Assessment and Feedback: Employing formative, process-oriented assessment practices; Humanizing Education: Addressing emotional well-being, empathy, and mental health; Technology Use: Leveraging digital tools to enhance collaboration and creativity, while avoiding tech-driven competition or surveillance. The initial version of the checklist was piloted through classroom observations. Feedback from these sessions informed revisions to enhance the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the indicators. The finalized checklist serves as a practical tool to identify and analyze observable teaching practices that embody alternatives to neoliberal ideologies in ELT.

3.3.2. Interview

The purpose of the interviews was to gather in-depth qualitative data regarding participants' teaching practices, specifically focusing on how their methods diverge from standardized approaches in ELT and the perceived impact of these alternative practices on their students. The interview guide was designed to allow educators to elaborate on their experiences and to reveal the underlying principles that inform their teaching, thus offering insights into alternatives to neoliberal, market-driven pedagogies. Drawing on a review of relevant literature and guided by theoretical frameworks such as critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and decolonial

perspectives, the interview questions were formulated to elicit reflections on the following themes: 1. Underlying Principles: Participants were asked: "What underlying principles guide your teaching practices that differ from the standardized approach to English Language Teaching?" This question encourages educators to discuss elements such as fostering creativity, promoting critical thinking, and enhancing student agency, thereby highlighting the pedagogical alternatives they employ. 2. Impact on Students: Participants were also asked: "How do you perceive the impact of your teaching approach on your students' language learning experience?" This question seeks to uncover the observable effects of their alternative practices, such as improvements in student engagement, deeper understanding of socio-cultural issues, or increased student autonomy. These open-ended questions enable participants to provide detailed and thoughtful responses, which in turn support the study's analysis of how alternative teaching practices can resist neoliberal influences in ELT. By focusing on both the guiding principles of teaching and the resultant impact on student learning, the interviews serve as a critical component in understanding the potential for transformative educational practices.

3.4. Procedures

Classroom observations were scheduled in coordination with the participants to minimize disruption to their regular teaching routines. Observations were conducted discreetly to reduce any

influence on natural classroom dynamics and to mitigate the Hawthorne effect. During each session, researchers took detailed field notes on instructional strategies, classroom interactions, and any deviations from conventional, market-driven practices. These notes supported later triangulation and data interpretation.

Semi-structured interviews were arranged after the completion of classroom observations. Conducted individually in settings chosen by participants to ensure privacy and comfort, each interview lasted approximately ten minutes, with a total duration of about thirty minutes for all participants combined. Guided by the interview protocol, these interviews explored the underlying principles of participants' alternative teaching practices and their perceived effects on student learning. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by observational notes capturing non-verbal cues and contextual information. Following the interviews, all recordings were transcribed verbatim, and participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy through a member-checking process, thereby enhancing the credibility of the data.

The data collected from interviews and classroom observations were analyzed using qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Interview transcripts and field notes were

coded and categorized to uncover recurring themes related to neoliberalism and its alternatives in English Language Teaching (ELT).

1. **Coding:** Researchers immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly reading interview transcripts and field notes. Initial codes were generated based on recurring topics or ideas emerging from the data.

2. **Categorization:** These codes were then grouped into broader categories or themes aligned with the research questions, such as the influence of neoliberalism on ELT practices and the alternative approaches or forms of resistance employed by educators.

3. **Interpretation:** After establishing themes, researchers interpreted the findings within relevant theoretical frameworks, connecting insights to existing literature on neoliberalism, critical pedagogy, and alternative teaching practices.

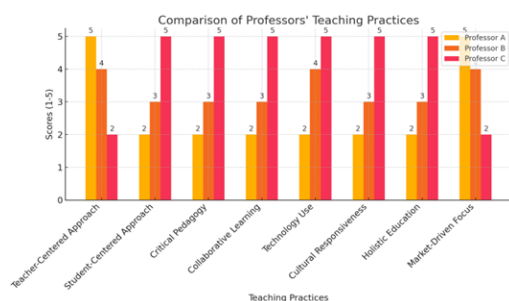
4. **Member Checking:** To ensure validity, member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review and confirm the researchers' interpretations and conclusions. This step enhanced the credibility of the study by verifying that participants' perspectives were accurately represented.

This rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis ensures the study will yield valid, reliable, and insightful findings on the impact of neoliberalism on ELT and the strategies educators use to challenge these influences.

4.Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis of classroom observations

Figure1 demonstrates the frequency of the items of the observation checklist employed by the instructors.



As the analysis of the data indicates, Professor C excels in critical pedagogy, collaborative learning, inclusivity, and humanizing education, fostering an engaging, student-centered environment. Professor B shows moderate progress in dialogue, technology use, and some resistance to standardization but remains constrained by exam structures. Professor A follows a traditional, teacher-centered approach, with limited innovation in pedagogy.

These findings highlight the complex reality of contemporary English language teaching - a field shaped by market forces but sustained by educators' dedication to their students and craft. The alternative practices documented here represent not just coping mechanisms, but the seeds of a more democratic and transformative approach to language education.

4.2. Analysis of interviews

Analysis of responses from Professors A, B, and C revealed two prominent themes: (1) the underlying principles of

alternative teaching methods, and (2) the effects of these methods on student learning.

4.3.1. Underlying Principles of Alternative Teaching Methods

The first theme was related to fostering creativity and critical thinking.

4.3.1.1. Fostering creativity and Critical thinking

All three professors underscored the importance of fostering creativity and critical thinking as fundamental to diverging from standardized approaches in ELT. They view these skills not just as supplementary, but as fundamental to moving away from rote or standardized teaching methods. Critical thinking is framed as a way for students to actively engage with content, question assumptions, and form independent judgments, while creativity allows learners to express ideas uniquely and innovatively.

Professor A explained that his approach is centered on encouraging students to express their own viewpoints and critically evaluate content rather than passively accepting information. He believes this strategy cultivates analytical skills and leads to a deeper understanding of social and cultural issues. Similarly, Professor B identified critical thinking as the key one, emphasizing that his primary goal is to equip students with the ability to question standard practices. He further highlighted that connecting classroom learning to practical, job-market-related outcomes is essential for enhancing the relevance of language education. Expanding on these

ideas, Professor C stressed not only the importance of creativity and critical thinking but also the empowerment of students through greater autonomy in managing their own learning. Additionally, she integrates real-world social and cultural issues into her lessons to broaden students' perspectives.

4.3.1.2. Student empowerment and autonomy

The three professors strongly believe in empowering students to take control of their own learning. Professor C explicitly highlights the importance of granting students autonomy in managing their educational experiences, while all three professors consistently advocate for active engagement over passive reception of knowledge. In Professor A's approach, for instance, students are encouraged to articulate their own viewpoints rather than simply accept information, reflecting a shared commitment to fostering student agency. This emphasis aligns closely with learner-centered pedagogies, which prioritize student involvement, independence, and active participation in the learning process.

4.3.1.3. Integration of social and cultural contexts

Another prominent theme in the text is the integration of social and cultural awareness into English Language Teaching. The professors consistently highlight the importance of connecting classroom learning to broader societal issues, thereby enriching students' understanding of cultural dynamics and the

real-world relevance of language. For example, Professor A emphasizes fostering a deeper comprehension of social and cultural matters, while Professor C actively incorporates contemporary social and cultural topics into her lessons to broaden students' perspectives. Alongside this focus, Professor B underscores the practical relevance of language learning by linking classroom activities to employability and real-world applications. This dual emphasis suggests that ELT can simultaneously cultivate higher-order cognitive skills and address pragmatic goals, such as preparing students for future careers, reflecting a pedagogy that values both intellectual growth and real-world applicability.

4.3.1.4. Linking learning to practical outcomes

Professor B introduces the theme of practical relevance, emphasizing the connection between classroom learning and employability or real-world application. This suggests that ELT can serve dual purposes: fostering higher-order cognitive skills while also addressing pragmatic goals like career readiness.

4.3.2. Perceived impact of alternative pedagogies on students learning experience

The text illustrates how professors perceive the influence of their teaching methods on students, showing both areas of overlap and distinct emphases.

4.3.2.1. Development of cognitive and intellectual skills

Professor A stresses that focusing on critical thinking and creativity helps

students gain a deeper understanding of social and cultural issues. Similarly, Professor C identifies comparable outcomes, linking her methods to greater classroom participation and heightened cultural and social awareness. Within this theme, critical and creative thinking are framed as essential tools for broadening learners' intellectual capacities and cultural horizons.

4.3.2.2. Practical and career-oriented relevance

Professor C highlights that her teaching fosters greater classroom participation and self-confidence, while Professor A underlines that critical and creative activities help students develop broader perspectives on cultural and social contexts. Empowerment here emerges both individually (through confidence and active participation) and collectively (through expanded worldviews).

4.3.2.3. Student engagement and empowerment

Despite their different emphases, all three professors share a commitment to moving away from standardized, neoliberal approaches. Their variations, however, are evident: Professor A focuses on cultural and social awareness, Professor B on practical, career-related outcomes, and Professor C on student engagement and empowerment. Collectively, these perspectives reveal that alternative pedagogies are multifaceted, balancing cognitive, cultural, and pragmatic benefits.

5. Discussion

This study examined the influence of neoliberal policies on ELT in Iranian higher education and explored how instructors employ alternative pedagogical approaches to mitigate these pressures. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the intersection between global market-driven trends and local teaching practices, revealing both the pervasive impact of neoliberalism and the capacity for educator agency and innovation.

The observation of the classes and interview data reveal that all three professors recognize neoliberal influences in ELT, including marketization, privatization, standardization, accountability, and globalization, although they differ in the intensity and interpretation of these pressures. Professors A and B largely reflect the characteristics associated with neoliberal policies. Professor A's classes, characterized by teacher-centered instruction and content-driven curricula, and Professor B's exam-focused sessions exemplify standardized, market-oriented practices that prioritize measurable outcomes and efficiency. These findings are consistent with literature highlighting how neoliberal policies tend to constrain teacher autonomy, limit creative pedagogical approaches, and emphasize economic utility over holistic educational goals (Ball, 2012; Shor et al., 2017; Giroux, 2014).

In contrast, Professor C's practices demonstrate alignment with alternative pedagogical frameworks, such as critical pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching

(Freire, 1970). Her focus on student autonomy, critical thinking, collaboration, and integration of real-world social and cultural issues reflects a deliberate challenge to market-driven, standardized approaches. Classroom observations confirm that Professor C creates a participatory and socially conscious learning environment, highlighting the transformative potential of alternative pedagogies even within the constraints imposed by neoliberal structures.

The study reveals distinct emphases among the professors regarding alternative pedagogy. Professors A and C prioritize the development of cognitive, social, and cultural skills, emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, and empowerment. Professor B, while acknowledging critical thinking, places stronger emphasis on practical and career-oriented outcomes, linking classroom learning to employability and market demands. This divergence illustrates that alternative pedagogical strategies are not monolithic; rather, they are multidimensional and can be implemented with varying priorities, reflecting instructors' individual pedagogical philosophies and the contextual demands of their institutions.

The coexistence of neoliberal and alternative practices reflects broader societal dynamics. Marketization, standardization, and accountability measures shape the institutional context, influencing instructors' decisions and the opportunities available for pedagogical innovation. At the same time, increasing

awareness of social equity, cultural diversity, and the transformative role of education encourages educators to resist purely economic imperatives. The tension between these forces manifests in classroom practices: while neoliberal pressures constrain the full adoption of alternative strategies, instructors like Professor C exemplify how innovative, student-centered approaches can operate within these systemic limitations.

The findings underscore the critical role of teacher agency in mediating the effects of neoliberalism. Professors demonstrate that, even within market-driven and standardized environments, there is scope for implementing alternative practices that promote critical thinking, cultural awareness, and student empowerment. These results emphasize that educators are not passive recipients of policy mandates but active agents capable of shaping learning environments to reflect social, cultural, and ethical priorities (Shor et al., 2017).

Luke (2010) argues that such forces can limit teacher autonomy and stifle creative pedagogical practices. In our observations, both Professors A and B adhered closely to summative assessments and a standardized curriculum. Their reliance on traditional, exam-oriented methodologies supports these concerns. For instance, Professor A's approach to poetry analysis and Professor B's exam-focused sessions both highlight a conformity to predetermined outcomes rather than the cultivation of critical inquiry.

Conversely, alternative strategies recommended in the literature such as project-based learning (Bell, 2010) and place-based education (Sobel, 2004) are evident in Professor C's methods. Her innovative use of multimedia tools and encouragement of student-led discussions create a more dynamic and engaging learning environment. Although her classes occasionally incorporate exam-oriented content, the overall emphasis on interactive and culturally responsive teaching distinguishes her practices from the conventional approaches observed in Professors A and B.

Furthermore, while research (e.g., Bori and Canale, 2022) underscores the need for a holistic, socially just approach to ELT, the prevailing neoliberal pressures often compel educators to focus on marketable outcomes. Our findings highlight this tension: Professors A and B prioritize revenue-oriented and standardized practices, whereas Professor C's commitment to student-centered learning, critical reflection, and collaborative decision-making serves as a countermeasure. This contrast not only validates the alternative strategies suggested in the literature but also illustrates the potential for educators to resist systemic pressures and innovate within constrained environments.

The coexistence of neoliberal and alternative practices in our findings reflects broader societal dynamics. Neoliberal policies prioritize economic efficiency, competition, and measurable outcomes

values that have become deeply entrenched in higher education. This economic imperative is evident in the standardized and market-oriented teaching methods of Professors A and B. However, increasing global awareness of cultural diversity, social equity, and the transformative power of education has spurred a counter-movement. Educators like Professor C, who integrate critical pedagogy and culturally responsive methods, embody this resistance. The differences among the professors may stem from their individual pedagogical philosophies, institutional constraints, or varying levels of commitment to transformative education. In today's society, where market pressures coexist with calls for social justice, such duality is inevitable. It reflects a tension between the demand for measurable, efficient outcomes and the need for holistic, empowering education that addresses real-world social and cultural challenges.

Overall, this study illustrates a dual narrative: neoliberal forces continue to shape ELT in Iranian universities, yet educators exercise agency to resist and transform these pressures. The contrasting practices of Professors A, B, and C highlight the complexity of this interplay, revealing both the limitations imposed by systemic structures and the potential for alternative pedagogical practices to create more inclusive, critical, and culturally responsive learning environments.

In conclusion, this study not only revealed the intricate relationship between neoliberalism and ELT but also emphasized

the agency of educators in shaping their teaching practices. This study provides both practical and theoretical insights into the impact of neoliberalism on ELT and the strategies employed by instructors to resist its influence. From a practical perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of providing teachers with professional autonomy and institutional support to effectively implement alternative pedagogies (Xin & Li, 2023). Additionally, the research highlights the urgent need for policymakers to reconsider market-driven metrics and evaluation systems that dominate higher education, focusing instead on frameworks that prioritize educational equity, social justice, and intellectual development.

This study also suffered from some limitations. First, the research focuses exclusively on Iranian universities, and as such, the findings may not be easily transferable to other cultural or educational contexts. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study means the perspectives of participants are influenced by their specific cultural and institutional environments. Future research could expand this work by exploring the experiences of English instructors in different countries or educational settings to determine the broader applicability of the findings. Future research could investigate the broader institutional and policy-level changes necessary to support alternative pedagogies in ELT. A deeper examination of the institutional barriers to adopting these pedagogies could offer insights into

the structural changes required for these approaches to thrive. Further studies could explore how students respond to these alternative teaching methods, offering a more comprehensive perspective on their effectiveness and impact.

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