Employing Participatory Learning through the Use of Photovoice in Iranian EFL Learning Settings: The Case of Reflective Narratives

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Abstract

Photovoice is a participatory action research method which aims to enable students to create compelling visual representations and identify the local social issues. This paper attempted to investigate the impact of photovoice as an innovative method on the levels of reflection manifested in EFL learners' narratives. To this end, a convenience sample of 48 Iranian intermediate EFL learners including 17 males and 31 females, learning English in two institutes located in Isfahan, Iran, were chosen. Before research implementation, the participants were provided with comprehensive photovoice guidance and workshop. The learners had to present their photos and narratives during a semester which took about two months. The collected data include 237 photographs and 48 essays which were learners' critical reflection on the photos. Then, the levels of reflection in their narratives were measured by Kember (2008) and Ryan and Ryan's (2012) frameworks. According to the results, poverty and air pollution were the most prominent social concerns captured by the participants. Furthermore, photovoice incredibly fostered Iranian EFL learners' reflection, and they all had positive attitudes toward participatory learning. This study could have pedagogical implications for the learners and practitioners in the field of SLA. They can employ innovative methods such as photovoice as a participatory learning tool to improve critical reflection.

Photovoice is a participatory action research method that could empower people to reflect upon the strengths and issues of their communities. It is a method that uses still pictures to document the participants' community realities (Novak, 2010; Thomas & Irwin, 2013). Photovoice is a form of qualitative research method that puts a camera in the hands of individuals to capture their voices about their social concerns. It challenges the traditional politics by shifting control from the powerful to powerless, the expert to the layperson, the professional to the client, and the observer to the observed. Images taken through photovoice evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words (Harper, 2002).

Photovoice is commonly defined as a participatory method (Wang & Burris, 1997) that encourages participants to reflect on their concerns and desires and discuss new issues with a critical lens. Through participatory learning, learners take on a participant-observer role. In other words, a participant-observer understands the setting as an insider and describes it precisely for outsiders (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2009). So, this innovative method can be employed for students who are challenged by not being able to reflect critically.

A desirable teaching goal is to have students write in a reflective manner which is considered as a useful tool for intellectual development (Tsang, 2011). Reflection, according to Moon (2004), is a form of mental processing with a specific purpose or predicted outcome that is applied to a relatively complex or even unstructured ideas. He believes that for students to engage in deep learning, reflection is required, whereas surface learning may occur because of a lack of reflection.

Reflective narratives may occur in various forms such as report, portfolios, journals and more recent emails. Ward and McCotter (2004) believe that reflections can act as a bridge of communication between the writer and the reader, allowing the reader to have an insight look into the experience the writer is writing about.

The process of critical reflection in photovoice could be explored by Freire's (1970) belief about critical consciousness. He explains critical

consciousness as an educative tool that engages learners in questioning the nature of their social situations. He maintained the belief that teachers and learners should be co-creator of knowledge. Individuals are challenged to reflect on not only how they are influenced by culture, but how they influence culture. In the same line, photovoice allows individuals to voice their perspectives and social concerns through photography.

Although extensive research (Freire, 2007; Hillocks, 2011; & Scott, 2005) has been carried on reflection, there are a few studies (Bowers, 2017 & Horwitz, *2012*) which attempted to investigate the effect of photovoice on participatory learning which could ultimately lead to reflection. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of photovoice as a participatory learning tool on reflective narratives of Iranian EFL learners.

Literature Review

Photovoice is a method that enables an educator to view the experience from a student's perspective. In the method, students' photographs are linked to their narratives where they illustrate perspectives that the teacher might not realize. In repositioning students "from the periphery to the core," photovoice asks learners to provide sufficient explanation and description for the taken photos (Okihiro, 2014).

Photovoice

Photovoice is participatory action research which enables people to express their outlooks and concerns in an innovative way. Also, it helps people to increase their knowledge and have a critical viewpoint which is essential for social changes. Photovoice is a qualitative research method that allows participants to document their community realities through photography (Novak, 2010; Thomas & Irwin, 2013).

Photovoice enables people to identify, represent, and improve their communities through a specific photographic technique. In other words,

photovoice has been popularized as a community development method because it develops the capacity for an action to solve a community problem. It has three original goals as following: (a) recording and reflecting community's strengths and concerns, (b) promoting critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through small and large group discussion of photographs, and (c) reaching policymakers (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Sharma (2010) states that photovoice has several advantages and is an excellent way to initiate dialogues in a community setting. It provides a space in which individuals explore curiosity and safety while considering different opinions, styles, values, and similarities.

Through utilizing this method, participants are co-researchers since they take the photos and reflect critically on their social concerns in L2. Therefore, this method differs fundamentally from traditional research. Blackman and Fairey (2007) mentioned some of the advantages as below:

- Participants felt empowered and enriched by being involved in participatory learning.
- Photographs could be powerful tools, challenging stereotypes and providing a platform for engaging reflection.
- Participants can expand their knowledge and experience.
- Participants may improve their self-esteem from skill building, competently taking photographs, and general participation.
- It develops a better understanding of the influence of socioeconomic status and culture.

All in all, photography is a powerful research tool, and its uses will depend on the focus and objectives of the research topic. Images have complex histories, including who produced them, who the intended audience was, and what they were used for. They encode an enormous amount of information in a single representation or display (Grady, 2007).

Participatory Learning

Participatory learning emphasizes the process of learning, stating that the process is as important as the outcome. The theoretical framework underlying participatory learning indicates the importance of perceptions such as self-worth at the individual level which ultimately leads to the improvement of the quality of life (Freire, 2007). In other words, individuals have to become vocal about their needs and social problems.

Photovoice is a method of participatory learning that makes individuals go to their communities and take pictures of their concerns (Wang & Burris, 1997). According to Strack, Lovelace, Jordan, and Holmes (2010), photovoice encourages community members to engage in a participatory process in which they can critically examine their community through photography, dialogue, and action.

In sum, photovoice has been seen to allow participants to define how they want to be represented. According to Skovdal and Cornish (2015), individuals are facilitated and given control to tell their stories and perspectives which empower them to be engaged and maintain a firm sense of authorship over their representations. They maintain that some qualitative research methods, such as photovoice can actively facilitate awareness raising and critical reflection. Such analytical skills are essential for an excellent educational program and enhancing participation in our communities.

Reflective Narratives

L2 writing provides an opportunity for learners to reflect their self-voice. According to Stapleton (2002), self-voice is an individual authorial identity and presence which reflects his or her autonomy of thought. He believes writing in L2 is an integral part of language learning since it seems to help the students to posit their ideas, experiences, and previous knowledge. Considering the importance of writing in L2, finding a place for critical reflection and presenting self-voice seem vital.

Dinkelman (2003) argues that reflection is conceptualized as a self-study, in which one engages in an intentional and systematic inquiry in one's practice. In educational settings, reflection is recognized as a complex and deliberate process of thinking about and interpreting experience in order to learn from the experience (Atkins & Murphey, 1995).

Several education programs require students to reflect in their writings (Bean & Steven, 2002). The importance of reflection has been confirmed by some scholars (Joy, 2005; & Taylor, 2007). Reflective writings focus on learners' experiences and prepare them to solve the problems of a complex world in which they must continuously analyze, evaluate, and revise their knowledge.

Assessment of levels of reflection in students' writings is controversial. Some researchers (Boud, 2001) believe that reflection cannot be evaluated precisely. However, others (King & Kitchener, 2004) maintain that, in developing reflective thinking, it is essential to determine whether students demonstrate the capacity to make reflective judgments through their writings or not. Also, Hatton and Smith (2006) claim that it is not enough to foster reflection by employing various techniques. Teachers should be able to specify levels of reflection that take place.

Despite the controversy mentioned above, many frameworks have been developed that define different levels of reflection (Jay & Johnson, 2002 & Larrivee, 2008). This study used the four-category scheme by Kember (2008) and the four-level hierarchy of reflection by Ryan and Ryan (2012).

Kember (2008) developed a scheme that included four levels of reflection. The first level is *non-reflection* and occurs when writers search for material on a topic without understanding the underlying concepts. The material might be paraphrased, summarized, or even plagiarized. The second level, *understanding*, takes place when students use an in-depth approach to understand the underlying concepts of the topic. The third level, reflection, means being able to interpret concepts

in connection to personal experiences and insights. The higher level of reflection, *critical reflection*, implies a change in perspective by conducting a critical review.

Furthermore, Ryan and Ryan (2012) proposed a model for assessing reflective practice. Their four-level hierarchy of reflection (the 4Rs) is as follows: (a) reporting and responding to an incident, (b) relating the topic to one's experiences, (c) reasoning through a focus on details, and (d) reconstructing future actions toward constructive change in society.

Literature Review

Carlson, Engebretson and Chamberlain' study in 2006 shed light on the efficacy of photovoice on critical reflection. They conducted a photovoice project in partnership with a local community that was mainly African American with low socioeconomic status. Four levels of critical reflection development were identified after investigating their photographs and field notes. Some participants demonstrated passive adaptation with a *cognitive-emotional* interpretation of helplessness. The next level is *emotional engagement,* in which individuals convey a sense of anger and despair to find out who is responsible for the oppression. Following this stage, is *cognitive awaking*, a stage in which sadness is represented as cognitive awareness. Finally, the most advanced stage is *intentions to act.* In sum, the researchers found that photovoice was useful in developing critical reflection.

Qualitative researchers such as Gibbs, Friese, and Mangaberia (2002) have emphasized the efficacy of visual methods, including photography to create knowledge and convey understanding. They established a connection between photography and social research. Killions (2001) investigated the effects of photovoice on learners' discussions. He concluded that photographs could stimulate discussions and increase participation.

Bowers (2017) researched the use of photovoice as critical reflection strategy which took place from 2016 to 2017 in an institution located in the Pacific Northwest. Firstly, the students have introduced the

idea of photovoice and its related strategies. Then, they collaboratively analyzed and shared their paragraphs. At the end of the year, they reflected on the collection of their photos and connected them to their professional identities. The PHOTO protocol suggested by Horwitz (2012) was the basic framework of the study and included four prompts as follows: (a) describe your pictures, (b) "what is happening in your picture?", (c) "what does this picture tell us about your life as a social worker?", Moreover, (d) "how can this picture provide opportunities to improve life?". In summary, Bowers (2017) concluded that using photovoice as a teaching strategy would help students process the development of their social identities and enhance their critical reflection. He posits that photovoice activities offer a creative and alternative medium for students to reflect on the prompts critically.

Moreover, photovoice can facilitate writing skills by bridging social and political realities (Zenvok & Harmon, 2009). According to their study, learners' knowledge of visual texts such as photographs could increase their engagement in literacy pedagogy. Moreover, as suggested by Chio and Fandt (2007), photovoice can provide an opportunity to increase participation and assist learners to develop compelling, reflective thinking.

Although many studies have investigated the efficacy of photovoice in empowering marginalized groups, not many studies with an academic perspective exist which have investigated whether photography of social issues could enhance L2 learners' reflective narrative. Moreover, to the best knowledge of the researchers, very little is known about Iranian L2 learners' perspectives about their social concerns and no studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of photovoice in improving their skills. Therefore, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Which social concerns are mostly captured by male and female Iranian EFL learners through photography?
2. Does photovoice facilitate different levels of reflection in Iranian EFL learners' narratives?

3. What are the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners toward using photovoice as a tool to teach English?

Method

The goal of the photovoice project was to identify the most current social problems which are captured through photography by Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, the effect of photovoice on learners' reflective narratives was under question. The following sections will elaborate on the design, setting, participants, instruments, and data collection and analysis procedures in detail.

Design and Context of the Study

The present study used a descriptive and mixed methods design combining both qualitative and quantitative parts. In the qualitative part, 237 photographs and 48 essays were collected and categorized according to their topics and levels of reflection by employing Kember's (2008) framework and Ryan and Ryan's (2012) coding scheme. In the quantitative part, the frequencies and percentages of captured photos were calculated. Also, a Chi-square test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between topics of photography and gender. The context of this study was not limited to educational settings; instead, it was a practical approach to community-based research. It was an empowering practice because it offered an alternative way for individuals to come together and reveal their social concerns. In other words, photovoice could offer an opportunity for every citizen in the community to take part in collaborative research.

Participants

A nonprobability sampling technique was utilized for its convenience. The research participants were recruited from five whole classes of EFL learners taking part in IELTS preparatory courses in two private institutes located in Isfahan, Iran. To ensure homogeneity, The Oxford Placement Test (2004) of English language proficiency was

administered. Accordingly, 48 Iranian EFL learners (both males and females) aged from 22 to 31 were recruited. They were all at the upper-intermediate level with the same years of studying English. Their mother tongue was Persian, and the target language was English. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1.

Demographic Background of the Participants

Number of participants	48
Gender	17 males and 31 females
Mother tongue	Persian
Years of studying English	Average of 6 years
Levels of proficiency	Upper-intermediate

Instruments

In order to familiarize the learners with the procedures of photovoice and critical reflection, a manual was prepared. The manual had three parts including introduction, photovoice method, and data collection. Some glossary terms, examples, and advantages of photovoice were gathered in the introductory part. Following this, the students had a glance at the steps of photovoice, data collection procedures, and preparing and sharing photovoice with others. Finally, the last part of the manual was devoted to the importance of critical thinking and reflective writing which could empower L2 learners by strengthening links between community members and policymakers.

Furthermore, to analyze the participants' narratives concerning the level of reflection, the four- category scheme proposed by Kember (2008) was utilized. Table 2 illustrates these four levels.

Table 2.

Kember's Reflection Framework

Non-reflection	Understanding	Reflection	Critical reflection
No evidence of attempting to reach	Evidence of understanding a	The theory is applied to a	Evidence of change in perspective over

Non-reflection	Understanding	Reflection	Critical reflection
an understanding of the concepts	concept or topic	practical situation	a fundamental belief or understanding of the key concepts
sentences have been placed into an essay without thinking seriously about it or interpretation	Sentences & ideas were confined to theory	There will be personal insights which go beyond book theories.	Recognizing and criticizing the belief and situation
Mostly reproduction without adaptation of the work of others	Reliance upon what was in a textbook or lecture notes		

As it is shown in Table 2, four constructs cover a broad spectrum of reflective thinking. Kember, Mckay, Sinclair, and Wong (2008) try to provide detailed descriptors for each category to guide other researchers. The protocol was tested by four assessors independently, and an excellent agreement was obtained. The detailed descriptors that were the basis of this study are as follows:

- *Non-reflection stage* or *habitual action* which has been developed through frequent uses of language. In other words, writing activity is performed automatically or with little conscious thought. In this stage, some sentences may seem ill-structured. Non-reflective students only focus on what is required rather than exploring additional issues.

- *Understanding* is situated at the second level in the reflection hierarchy. It is consistent with non-reflective thinking in that comprehension is valued over mental integration and personal assimilation. However, it represents a deeper form of sentence formation by utilizing pre-existing perspectives. Non-reflection

and understanding are viewed as being positioned nearer to surface learning.

- *Reflection* is associated more closely with deeper learning traits. It involves the critique of assumptions about the content or process of problem-solving. Central to reflection is a questioning of experiences and in turn a search for alternatives and identification of areas for improvement.

- *Critical reflection* represents a more intense form of reflection. It is the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self. It requires individuals to write a personal experience and reflect on the positive and negative aspects of an issue. Moreover, writers can formulate some suggestions for future change.

Kember et al. (2000) determined the reliability of the scales by computing Cronbach alpha values for each scale. The values all reach the acceptable levels. They are given in Table 2.

Table 3.
Cronbach alpha Values for the Four Scales

Scale	Cronbach alpha
Non-reflection	0.621
Understanding	0.757
Reflection	0.631
Critical reflection	0.675

To analyze reflection with a different perspective, the 4Rs models of reflective thinking proposed by Ryan and Ryan (2012) was also employed to identify different levels of reflection. Table 3 illustrates processes of a thorough reflection.

Table 3

4Rs Model of Reflective Thinking

Level 1: Reporting and Responding (focus on the topic at hand)	
1.1. Reporting an incident	Report what happened.
1.2. Reporting something relevantly	Establish perceived relevance to the topic.
1.3. Responding with observations, opinions, and questions	Respond by making observations, expressing an opinion, and asking questions.
Level 2: Relating (focus on relationships between topic and self)	
2.1. Relating to self	Make a connection between the incident and self: skills, professional experience or discipline knowledge
2.2. Relating to own experiences	Relate the incident to the past and ask questions such as, "Have I seen this before?"
2.3. Relating the knowledge to act	Ask the question "Do I have the skills and knowledge to deal with this?"
Level 3: Reasoning (focus on detail, perspective, how others would respond)	
3.1. Giving details about the topic	Give details underlying the incident and explain why they are essential.
3.2. Including theory and literature	Refer to relevant theory and literature in support of the reasoning.
3.3. Focusing on the possible responses of others	Consider different perspectives.
Level 4: Reconstructing	
4.1. Reframing own future practice or understanding	Reconstruct future practice or professional understanding.
4.2. Considering strategies for future occurrence	Ask "How would I deal with this next time?"
4.3. Considering strategies & aligning these with the theory	"Are my ideas supported by theory?"
4.4. Considering the potential change-agent role	"Can I make changes to benefit others?"

Ryan and Ryan's (2012) model can assess reflective practice. It is based on a four-level hierarchy of reflections (the 4Rs) which progresses from the most basic reporting of an incident to reconstructing.

After analyzing the participants' narratives, a semi-structured interview consisting of some questions was carried out to investigate learners' attitude toward participatory learning. The questions were as follows:

1. Are you willing to develop strong connections with your community?
2. Did you feel comfortable with photovoice as a method of data collection?
3. Has photovoice changed your view about social concerns and enabled you to think more critically than before?

Besides manuals and frameworks, participants had to use their cameras or smartphones for photography.

Data Collection Procedure

According to Grady (2007), many people are uncertain about incorporating visual images because of discomfort with camera technology. Therefore, some preparatory classes were held in October 2017 to make learners familiar with the importance of photography. Also, they were provided with a photovoice manual which presented a practical guide to photovoice, sharing photos, telling stories, and writing reflective writings.

The goal of the photovoice project was to provide L2 learners with some opportunities to identify their social concerns by empowering their critical thinking and improving the levels of reflection in their narratives. To this end, some preparatory classes were held on October 2017 to increase their understanding of photovoice, offer step-by-step processes for using photovoice, and motivate them to write an essay related to their favorite photo which depicted a social concern. Also, to diminish participants' misunderstandings, a comprehensive manual consisting of three parts that are the introduction, data collection, and importance of critical thinking and reflective narratives was prepared. This thorough guideline offered the following steps to the participants: (a) consulting with community members and identifying their social concerns, (b)

planning a photovoice project, (c) beginning the photovoice project, (d) data collection, and (e) preparing and sharing photographs with others, (f) having a reflective outlook toward social concerns, and (g) trying to manifest this reflection in a well-organized essay.

Moreover, it was frequently mentioned that their participatory action research is highly valued because social problems and concerns could be addressed from a new perspective. Since photographers might take pictures of human subjects, they had to be aware of individual privacy. Ethical considerations and guidelines about individual privacy were highly emphasized. They were warned not to take a photo of marginalized people or some locations without permission. According to the project timeline, the participants were asked to complete their photography and writings until the end of December 2017, which lasted about eight weeks. To facilitate the procedures of data analysis, they were supposed to email their photos to the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher suggested four subjects and themes to the participants including, (a) air pollution, (b) poverty, (c) educational problems, and (d) health issues to narrow down their attention and improve practicality. It should be mentioned that these four topics had been chosen by consultation with the participants.

Following photography completion, the participants were asked to write reflective writing about one of the photographs they were proud of and felt that it had a significant contribution to social change. Next, their writings were analyzed by two experts according to the four-category scheme proposed by Kember (2008) and Ryan and Ryan's (2012) reflection framework to determine the levels of reflection. Inter-rater reliability resulted in 85% agreement of the cases. Also, all the gathered photographs were categorized based on their subjects and themes. Finally, in order to identify the L2 learners' attitudes toward the use of photovoice and participatory learning, a semi-structured focus-group interview was carried out.

In order to analyze the results, interviews were recorded by a digital voice recorder with learners' permission and interviews were transcribed

verbatim. After the transcription, they were analyzed and coded by two researchers through grounded theory. In this respect, the researchers analyzed the data respectively to find out the participants' attitude towards the photovoice.

Data Analysis Procedure

Three main procedures carried out to analyze the data. These procedures were as follows: (a) selecting photographs which reflect the community strengths and concerns, (b) contextualizing the photographs by writing a reflective narrative, and (c) codifying the narratives by two raters by employing the two frameworks.

In order to analyze the data, descriptive analysis was done to measure the frequency and percentage of the photographs which were classified into four groups: air pollution, poverty, educational problems, and health issues. Furthermore, a Chi-squared test was used to analyze if gender played a role in the chosen social concerns captured through photography. Also, to increase interrater reliability, two raters were asked to analyze the levels of reflection.

Results

In order to answer the research questions, photovoice which is community-based participatory research was employed. Descriptive analysis was used to reveal the most striking social concerns which were captured by male and female participants through photography. Table 4 illustrates the results.

Table 4.

Descriptive Analysis

Topic	Frequency	Percentage	Chi-Square	Sig.
Air pollution	103	43.5		
Poverty	81	34.2		
Educational problems	32	13.5	77.515	<.001
Health issues	21	8.9		
Total	237	100.0		

According to the results, air pollution and poverty were mostly captured by Iranian EFL learners. However, educational problems and health issues were the least appealing subjects for their photography. In order to investigate the relationship between gender and social concern's interest, a Chi-Square test was employed. The results of the Chi-square test are set out in Table 5.

Table 5.

Gender and Social Concerns

Topic	Females		Males		Chi-Square	Sig.
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage		
Air pollution	56	55.4	47	34.6		
Poverty	19	18.8	62	45.6		
Educational problems	14	13.9	18	13.2	19.805	<.001
Health issues	12	11.9	9	6.6		
Total	101	100.0	136	100.0		

It is apparent from table five that there is a significant difference between males and females and social concern's interest (p<0.05). In other words, females showed a significant tendency toward pollution as a primary social concern whereas males considered poverty as the most recognizable issue for photography. Also, the analysis of 47 writings in terms of levels of reflection was done according to Kember (2008) and Ryan & Ryan's (2012) frameworks. The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2.
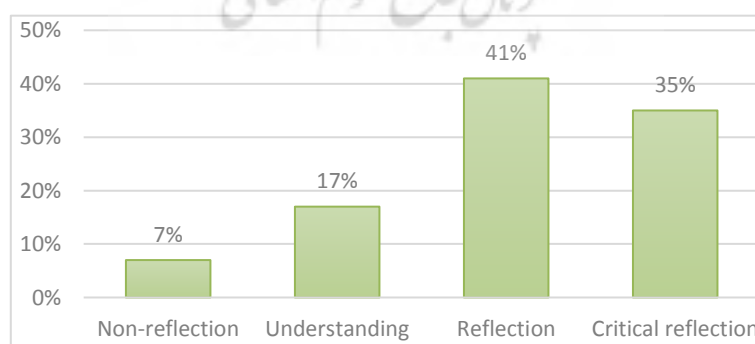

Figure 1. Levels of reflection, Kember's framework

As displayed in Figure 1, 41% and 35% of the writings could reach the levels of reflection and critical reflection respectively. 24% of the writings did not manifest any signs of critical thinking and remained at the level of non-reflection or understanding.
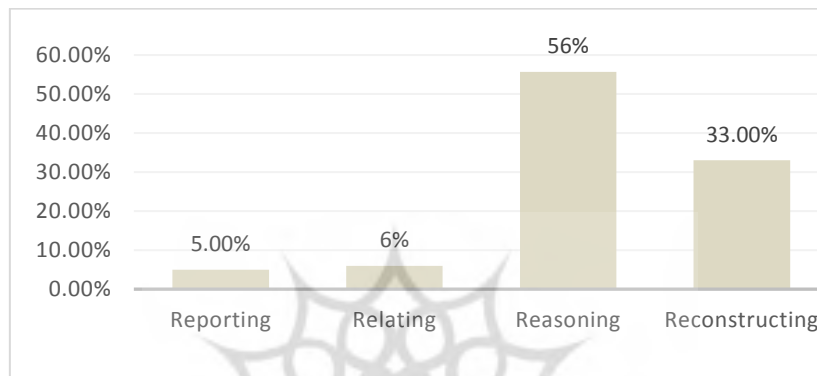

Figure 2. Ryan's framework of reflective thinking.

The results in Figure 2 revealed that 89% of the writings met the criteria to be placed in reasoning and reconstructing groups. However, 11% of the narratives could not be considered as reflective ones.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to determine the effects of photovoice on Iranian EFL learners' reflective narratives. In order to answer the first research question which aimed at identifying the most captured social concerns by EFL learners, they were guided toward thinking critically and taking some photos with four different themes including poverty, air pollution, educational problems, and health issues. According to the results, air pollution and poverty were the most outstanding issues for Iranian EFL learners, respectively. Moreover, a significant difference was observed between males and females and their social concern priorities ($p < 0.05$).

All 237 photos captured by EFL learners had a focus on critical issues within our Iranian society. Therefore, photovoice assignment

turned out to be a valuable way to construct knowledge and understand the surrounding world. These findings are in agreement with Novak (2010), Thomas and Irwin (2013) who valued photovoice as a qualitative research method that allows participants to document their community realities. Also, following the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that photovoice enables people to identify, represent, and improve their communities (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

Furthermore, the study set out to assess the effects of photovoice on EFL learners' reflective narratives. To accomplish this goal, 48 writings were analyzed by two raters. According to the results obtained by using Kember's (2008) framework, 41% and 35% of the writings were classified as 'reflection' and 'critical reflection' respectively since leaners moved beyond the problems and provided some personal insights. Moreover, not only much criticism went against, but also some suggestions were provided.

Also, Ryan and Ryan's (2012) framework was utilized to enhance validity. The result has shown that the majority of writings met the criteria of reasoning and reconstructing. At the reasoning level, L2 learners drew on experience and other evidence to form a new insight. For instance, they mentioned some strategies employed to diminish poverty in developing countries and tried to contextualize them. Also, at the reconstructing level, they made some rational judgment and anticipated a future change.

This finding corroborates the idea of Chio and Fandt (2007), who suggested that photovoice pedagogy can provide an opportunity to increase participation and assist learners to develop compelling, reflective thinking. Also, the finding further supports the idea of Bowers (2017) who claims that photovoice can foster students' analytic and interpretive skills. This also accords with earlier studies, which showed that when learners take on a participant-observer role, they understand the setting as an insider and describe it precisely for outsiders (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2009).

The last research question of this study was whether learners had a positive attitude toward the use of photovoice as participatory learning. As it was mentioned earlier, a semi-structured interview was carried out, recorded, and transcribed. The data were content analyzed in order to look for patterns and themes within the text. Notes were taken of the students' answers and were listed in descriptive phrases that could be presented in a clear, comprehensible fashion. For instance, two participants commented on the benefits received thorough photovoice this way:

"The photovoice project was a good one. I learned a lot about my neighborhood by being able to take pictures. I have learned that you have to look at things differently. It has been interesting learning about the community. I learned that I should have a voice in my writings."

"Breathing in polluted weather of Isfahan…motorcycles, minibusses, taxies…. [the project] helped me to realize things. I have been empowered to take control of my learning… feel more important than before."

Thus, some themes that emerged are the following: 'it was interesting,' 'it was empowering,' 'our self-esteem have improved,' and so on. The participants all had a positive attitude toward the use of innovative techniques such as photovoice in the learning process. This finding supports the findings of Strack, Lovelace, Jordan, and Holmes (2010), who claimed that photovoice encourages community members to engage in a participatory process in which they can critically examine their community through photography, dialogue, and action.

Conclusion

Taken together, these results suggest that the photovoice method is an excellent opportunity for L2 learners to move toward developing higher critical thinking and reflection. In other words, photovoice as a form of participatory action research is not only used for the sake of creating knowledge, but it can be utilized for social action and change. Photovoice is a promising program for various reasons. This

methodology supports teamwork and collaboration skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

All in all, the evidence from this study suggests that photovoice is an innovative and unique way to learn about the issues that concern people and develop a sense of passion and integrity with others. Besides, photovoice assignment can be incorporated into EFL classes to provide learners with the freedom to explore whatever subject they like and share their work with their classmates. Interpreting taken photos could develop critical thinking which is vital for learning a second language.

The present study makes several noteworthy contributions to empowerment education which encourages individuals to become vocal about the needs of their communities. Once photography is completed, they become decision makers and represent their photos to others. Photovoice creates an opportunity for thoughtful dialogue and narratives.

Visual research is a field where there is constant change as media is becoming popularized and people's relationship is enhanced through mobiles and mass technology. From a methodological perspective, this study adds to the current literature because of the context in which it operates. There are few accounts of photovoice projects outside of the western contexts. It could be concluded that photovoice as a western methodology can be adapted and fit into some specific contexts such as Iran. This study might be encouraging for community-based researchers who wish to implement the photovoice methodology to improve critical reflection and make L2 learners confident enough to have a voice about their social concerns.

Finally, many limitations need to be considered. First, the participants were limited to do photography under the four pre-defined subjects, and it affected their engagement negatively. Secondly, photovoice is social action research, and it needs a consulting community with enough funding and budget. However, this study was not conducted under this optimal situation. Also, the time commitment for some individuals might be difficult, and a wide range of skills is essential to complete the photovoice research. Therefore, community work and

participatory action research might be new and unfamiliar experiences for some researchers.

Further research regarding the role of photovoice would be worthwhile. It is recommended to assess the effects of photovoice on critical thinking not only for writing skill but also other skills such as speaking. Also, all forms of participatory learning such as photovoice depend heavily on a strong connection between community organizations and researchers. Thus, future researchers need to spend more time and effort into establishing the connection. Moreover, a similar study should be carried out on a larger sample of learners who are interested in participatory learning and paying attention to marginalized community members and social problems.

There is abundant room for further progress in determining the effect of scaffolding pre-photo-taking sessions which might deepen participants' engagement and critical consciousness development. Also, a researcher might be willing to investigate various steps of implementing photovoice, such as connecting and consulting with the community, planning a photovoice project, recruiting photovoice participants, photovoice group meetings, data collection, data analysis, preparing and sharing the photovoice exhibit, and social action and policy change.

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