





# Tapping into Reflective Professional Development in Light of Critical Incidents Analysis: A Case of EAP Teachers

Mahtab Fathi<sup>1</sup>   
 Najmeh Maghsoudi<sup>2\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>M.A. in Applied Linguistics, Department of English, Ke. C., Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

<sup>2\*</sup>Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Department of English, Ke. C., Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 23 March 2025  
 Revised: 09 May 2025  
 Accepted: 20 August 2025  
 Published: 30 September 2025

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

E-mail: [maghsoudinajmeh@iau.ac.ir](mailto:maghsoudinajmeh@iau.ac.ir)

## ABSTRACT

A critical characteristic of effective teachers is their ability to manage unforeseen and critical incidents (CIs) defined as disruptive events that undermine teachers' resilience. While existing research has examined CIs across various educational contexts, their potential for the professional development (PD) of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers has remained under explored. This qualitative study sought to explore the types of CIs encountered by Iranian EAP teachers and to assess how reflection on such incidents contributes to their PD. Twelve EAP teachers participated in this study based on convenience sampling. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted individually at an English institute in Kerman, Iran, and the results went through inductive thematic analysis and inter-coder reliability which identified three primary themes of CIs: teacher-related, learner-related, and institution-related. Additionally, the findings indicated that reflection on CIs fostered EAP teachers' cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of PD. The study implies the necessity of targeted PD initiatives through reflection on CIs in the context of Iran. While complete mitigation of CIs may seem unlikely, reflective practice can lead to positive outcomes for all parties including EAP teachers, students, and administrators.

**KEYWORDS:** critical incidents, professional development, reflective practice, teacher education, English for academic purposes

## 1. Introduction

The journey toward becoming a teacher is a prolonged and challenging process, characterized by significant cognitive and affective tensions (Babaii, 2020; Borg, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2021; Kelchermans, 2023; Nguyen, 2022; Trent, 2020; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). Contemporary research no longer conceptualizes teacher preparation as a straightforward application of theory to practice; instead, it is recognized as a dynamic and conflict-laden journey (Darling-Hammond, 2021; Kelchermans, 2023). These conflicts often stem from misalignment between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and expectations of professional communities (Nguyen, 2022), discrepancies between their teaching philosophies and institutional demands (Babaii, 2020; Borg, 2015; Trent, 2020), conflicts between their self-perceptions and traditional roles of teachers (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018), and contradictions between their prior assumptions and the content of teacher training programs (Freeman, 2022).

Extensive research on teachers' professional development (PD) has underscored the pivotal role of cognitive and emotional conflicts to critically reassess their beliefs and practices (Farrell, 2021; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2023; Wyatt, 2024). PD is defined as ongoing and intentional process through which teachers enhance their professional competencies, knowledge, and skills to stay current and effective in the field (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Language teachers have the opportunity to engage in ongoing PD using different approaches, outlined by Farrell (2013) as top-down and bottom-up approaches. Top-down approach originates from higher authorities; in contrast, the bottom-up approach to PD involves teachers taking the initiative to

investigate aspects of their practices and beliefs in order to develop their own theories of teaching and learning. This approach emphasizes the importance of individual teachers' personal experiences and reflections on teaching, leading to a more personalized and self-directed PD process (Farrell, 2021).

Supporting teachers' hands-on experience in a lifelong learning process is known as reflective practice (RP) which is an evolving and cyclical process encompassing teachers' insights which enable them to make informed, evidence-based decisions regarding their teaching practice (Bolton, 2009; Farrell, 2019). The primary aim of engaging in RP is to enhance educational quality and assist teachers in maintaining an objective perspective away from habitual practices that may not effectively address all educational challenges.

Addressing cognitive and affective dissonance requires teachers to reconsider their pre-conceived notions of teaching (Britzman, 2007; Pinner, 2023) while navigating the gap between their idealized concept of teaching and the realities of classroom practice (Barkhuizen, 2022; Karimi & Nazari, 2019). By examining the types of dilemmas teachers encounter and the strategies they employ to resolve them, teachers can become more autonomous in directing their PD (Borg, 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2023). While teacher educators have been systematically promoting RP (Adey, 2004; Farrell, 2021; Hoban & Ferry, 2006; Kılıç & Cinkara, 2020), many teaching contexts still continue to use traditional, top-down forms of PD. A standard one-size-fits-all approach, however, may seem inadequate as these issues are shaped by contextual variables. As a result, a more context-specific approach needs to be implemented to bridge the disparity between theoretical principles and classroom reality.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers, as language professionals, help students develop the English skills needed for academic settings. They design and deliver lessons tailored to students' needs and assess both language proficiency as well as academic skills among students (Bayram et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2022). EAP teachers also face CIs in real classrooms where they question their assumptions and adapt their teaching to students' needs to achieve a deeper pedagogical understanding and improve learning outcomes (Esmaili & Afzali, 2020; Estaji & Fatalaki, 2022; Lotfi Gaskaree et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2016; Nazari & Atai, 2022). Ranging from student misbehavior to assessment dilemmas, CIs occur in EAP contexts of Iran and existing teacher training programs seem ineffective to help them tackle the conflicts (Esmaili & Afzali, 2020).

Traditional teacher training in Iran has overlooked the unpredictable nature of classroom realities, focusing instead on theoretical knowledge and standardized practices (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017). This gap implies that teachers are often ill-equipped to reflect on and learn from CIs, missing the valuable opportunities for their PD. Without reflection, teachers likely repeat ineffective strategies or become demotivated in their profession (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Soodmand Afshar & Donyaie, 2022). Despite all these challenges, EAP teachers' PD has received scant attention. Given this context, there is a dire need to investigate the types of CIs Iranian EAP teachers face and to explore how CIs can foster their PD.

The current study is significant because the analysis of EAP teachers' CIs can provide an accurate representation of the practical aspects of EAP teaching, thereby informing future EAP pedagogy in teacher education programs in the context of Iran. Additionally, investigating the factors contributing to CIs in EAP contexts, the strategies teachers employ to address them, and the PD derived from such experiences can facilitate sharing of professional knowledge. This, in turn, may enhance teachers' awareness and confidence in managing similar challenges effectively.

Previous research has focused on investigating CIs in different educational contexts rather than enhancing EAP teachers' PD through reflection on CIs. In order to fill the gap, the present study sought to explore on the types of CIs Iranian EAP teachers experience and the role of their reflection on CIs in their PD. Accordingly, the current study addressed the following questions:

- (1) What are the different types of critical incidents that EAP teachers encounter in Iran?
- (2) How is EAP teachers' professional development fostered through their reflection on CIs?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Reflective Teacher Professionalism

Reflective teacher professionalism refers to the practice of teachers critically assessing their teaching methods, beliefs, and experiences to enhance their professional growth and improve student learning outcomes. This approach encourages teachers to examine their instructional strategies, understand the impact of their decisions, and adapt their practices based on feedback and reflection (Farrell, 2018). This ongoing process encourages teachers to engage in self-assessment, fostering a deeper understanding of their instructional strategies and promoting continuous improvement in their practice. By reflecting on their experiences, teachers can identify strengths and weaknesses, adapt to diverse student needs, and enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. This approach not only contributes to personal and professional growth but also cultivates a culture of collaboration and shared learning among teachers. Ultimately, reflective teacher professionalism leads to improved educational outcomes and supports the development of a more responsive and adaptive teaching environment (Zeichner & Liston, 2014).

In EAP settings, reflective teacher professionalism is particularly vital as it addresses the unique challenges faced by students transitioning to academic language and discourse. EAP instructors must critically evaluate their pedagogical approaches to ensure they are effectively meeting the linguistic and cultural needs of their students. Through reflection, educators can adapt their teaching strategies to better facilitate language acquisition and academic success, fostering an inclusive learning atmosphere (Hamp-Lyons, 2010). This reflective practice also promotes collaboration among EAP professionals, enabling them to share best practices and resources that enhance student engagement and achievement. As the landscape of higher education continues to

evolve, reflective teacher professionalism in EAP contexts ensures that instruction remains relevant and responsive to the diverse needs of learners (Farrell, 2020).

Recent applications in EAP contexts demonstrate the strength of narrative inquiry in giving voice to teachers' marginalized perspectives. For instance, Atai and Nejadghanbar's (2017) study utilized narrative interviews to explore Iranian EAP teachers' CIs and to reveal how CIs became turning points in their PD. The narrative format allowed teachers to reconstruct these events with emotional and contextual richness that standardized assessments would miss. On the other hand, due to Hawthorne effect, teachers might have modified their narratives knowing they were being studied. In a similar vein, Hamlin (2004) reviewed formal field reports authored by student teachers in pre-education courses, revealing that the analysis of CIs enabled these student teachers to progress beyond mere descriptions of their observations.

Reflective journals often focus on teachers' challenges in EAP contexts. For instance, Pourhassan and Nazari (2021) found that journaling helped pre-service EAP teachers processing incidents related to student expectations and methodological uncertainties, incidents context, their responses, emotional reactions, and alternative approaches they might take in future similar situations.

Recent CIs research emphasize dialogic methods that move beyond individual reflection to incorporate collaborative analysis. These approaches recognize that CIs gain deeper meaning through discussion and multiple interpretations. A study by Estaji and Fatalaki (2022) demonstrated how dialogic CI analysis helped Iranian EFL teachers reframe classroom challenges through peer feedback and mentor guidance. Participants reported that collaborative reflection provided alternative interpretations they had not considered individually. Generally speaking, in the existing literature, the tools implemented for data collection regarding CIs mainly relied on self-reports and there is scarcity of research which used direct observation or classroom video-recording to provide a more unbiased and reliable source for data collection to investigate CIs.

## 2.2. Critical Incidents

Critical incidents (CIs) in educational settings are unplanned events that occur during teaching and learning, often revealing underlying challenges or opportunities for reflection (Richards & Farrell, 2020). These incidents, which may involve student misbehavior, instructional difficulties, or classroom dynamics, are not necessarily dramatic but are deemed critical based on their perceived significance by teachers. For example, a student's sudden disengagement or a conflict during group work can be characterized as CIs, prompting teachers to examine their practices. Such incidents are vital because they expose gaps between theory and practice, helping teachers refine their pedagogical approaches and develop problem-solving skills (Lithoxidou & Papadopoulou, 2024). CIs also foster reflective practice, enabling teachers to question assumptions and adapt strategies to diverse learner needs. Without analysis, these incidents may perpetuate ineffective teaching methods or unresolved classroom issues, ultimately hindering student outcomes (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Lotfi Gaskaree et al., 2024).

Critically analyzing incidents is essential to transform everyday challenges into professional growth opportunities. Various scholars have proposed distinct frameworks for the analysis of CIs. An effective method for systematically examining these incidents involves a thorough investigation and comprehension of the incident itself. Tripp (2006) identified two key stages in the process of understanding a CI. The first stage is called "what aspect" through which the CI is described. This initial phase focuses on the detailed description of a specific phenomenon or issue which is observed or recorded. Through the second stage, known as "why aspect", the teacher articulates the meaning or value of the incident, interpreting its implications and the role it plays in broader contexts.

Failure to analyze CIs can lead to repeated misunderstandings, eroded teacher-student relationships, and missed chances to address inequities (Dicke, 2024). Research highlights that unexamined incidents contribute to novice teachers' feelings of unpreparedness, as they lack the reflective tools to navigate complex classroom realities. Conversely, structured analysis bridges theory-practice divides and cultivates adaptive expertise (Lithoxidou & Papadopoulou, 2024).

## 2.3. Teachers of EAP

EAP teachers are language professionals who help students, specifically non-native speakers, develop the English skills needed for success in academic settings like universities. The roles and responsibilities of EAP teachers are diverse and demanding. Their expertise goes beyond general English, focusing on academic discourse, critical thinking, and understanding the conventions of university study (Bayram et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2022). They design and deliver lessons tailored to students' academic needs and assess both language proficiency and academic skills facilitating students' adjustment to academic life fostering autonomy through group and independent tasks (Mohammed, 2016; Nazari & Atai, 2022). They also provide feedback to students and stakeholders, collaborate with colleagues, develop curricula, and maintain a supportive, culturally aware classroom environment (Fitzpatrick, 2022).

To foster PD, especially in EAP contexts, CIs analysis is a powerful reflective tool. By examining real classroom events, EAP teachers can question their assumptions, adapt their teaching, and share insights with peers, leading to deeper pedagogical understanding and improved student outcomes (Fitzpatrick, 2022). This process is especially valuable in diverse EAP settings, where cultural and linguistic differences frequently present unique teaching moments that can drive professional growth and innovation (Mohammed, 2016). Reflecting on CIs serves as a tool for EAP teachers' PD by promoting self-awareness, problem-solving skills, informed decision-making, and emotional resilience (Glushko, 2023). The iterative nature of reflection means

that EAP teachers are continually assessing and refining their practices. This commitment to lifelong learning is essential for ongoing professional growth.

In practice, EAP teachers often unpack CIs individually or in groups, using reflective journals, workshops, or peer discussions. They might explore issues like time management, student motivation, or classroom dynamics, and then brainstorm solutions or new approaches. Sharing these experiences with colleagues helps build a supportive community and creates a valuable resource for both novice and experienced teachers, as collective reflection can lead to shared strategies and deeper insights (Estaji & Fatalaki, 2022). This reflective practice not only leads to more effective teaching but also supports emotional resilience and professional confidence. By turning classroom surprises into learning opportunities, EAP teachers continuously evolve, benefiting both themselves and their students (Nazari & Atai, 2022).

## 2.4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning the current study is “Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), developed by Mezirow (2008) emphasizing how adults undergo profound cognitive shifts by critically reflecting on their experiences, particularly through disorienting dilemmas which are considered as moments that challenge prior assumptions and necessitate new ways of thinking. In the context of EAP, the unexpected classroom events (CIs) serve as key tool for transformative learning. When EAP teachers engage in reflective professional development, they use these incidents to refine their teaching practices, adapt to learners’ needs, and enhance their professionalism.

Mezirow’s (2008) TLT begins with a disorienting dilemma, a situation where an individual’s existing beliefs are disrupted, prompting self-examination and critical reflection. For EAP teachers, CIs often serve as such dilemmas. Reflection is central to TLT, as it allows teachers to critically assess assumptions, develop flexible strategies to handle CIs, and contribute to their PD. Reflecting on CIs may inspire EAP teachers to experiment with new teaching methods or approaches that they might not have considered otherwise. In sum, CIs act as disruptive yet generative moments in EAP teaching, triggering Mezirow’s (2008) phases of transformative learning. When teachers engage in structured reflection, they move beyond technical skill development toward critical professionalism.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Design

The present study followed a qualitative research design focusing on interview methods. Qualitative design was used to provide a deep and comprehensive exploration of EAP teachers’ experiences and perspectives into CIs in the context of Iran and the enhancement of their PD through reflection on them (Ary, 2019).

### 3.2. Participants

The participants were twelve EAP teachers from an English language institute in Kerman, Iran. The participants were novice and experienced EAP teachers (five males & seven females) with the age range of 24-35. The largest group of participants held a master’s degree in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and English Literature, with seven individuals in this category (five TEFL & two English Literature). Three participants possessed a bachelor’s degree in TEFL and English Literature (one TEFL & two English Literature). Two interviewees held Ph.D degrees in English Literature and TEFL majors.

Worth mentioning, EAP teachers in the present study varied in terms of their teaching experience ranging from one to twelve years; as a result, a variety of CIs from the perspective of novice as well as experienced EAP teachers were explored. According to Graham (2020), teachers with more than five years of teaching experience are regarded as experienced ones. In this study, experienced teachers were operationally defined as those with more than five years of EAP teaching experience and those with fewer years than five were categorized as novice ones. Hence, the participants included seven experienced and five novice teachers. The study used convenience sampling due to the first researcher’s accessibility to the participants, as she was the participants’ colleague in the English language institute.



**Table 1.***EAP Teachers' Demographic Information*

Participants	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	University Degree	Major
T1	M	25	1	BA	Eng. Literature
T2	F	29	4	BA	TEFL
T3	F	26	2	MA	Eng. Literature
T4	M	30	1	MA	TEFL
T5	F	35	12	Ph.D.	TEFL
T6	F	33	8	MA	TEFL
T7	M	32	5	BA	Eng. Literature
T8	F	24	2	MA	TEFL
T9	F	27	3	MA	Eng. Literature
T10	M	31	7	MA	TEFL
T11	M	34	11	Ph.D.	Eng. Literature

### 3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, pilot interviews were conducted with three non-participants to refine the interview questions and to ensure they effectively capture the intended research focus allowing for necessary modifications based on non-participants feedbacks. Aligned with the research objectives, an interview protocol was developed based on the research objectives with an attempt to determine the number, order, flow, and level of details needed for interview questions. In this study, an interview protocol was developed to ensure consistency based on Tripp's (2006) stages of CIs analysis known as "what aspect" and "why aspect". Interviewees were mainly asked about details of what exactly happened in their classes and how they reflected on them. To maintain consistency and minimizing the interviewer's bias, a set of guiding questions were used during each interview. Interviews were conducted in English in a way that fostered a conversational atmosphere, encouraging participants to share their thoughts openly and honestly.

The data collection included several stages to ensure consistency, reliability, and ethical integrity. First, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the structure of interviews, and confidentiality of their responses. All the participants were required to sign an informed consent before participating in the interviews, acknowledging their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Interviews took place in person depending on the participants' availability and preference.

Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes, providing sufficient time to address the questions while allowing for follow-up questions and discussion. During the interviews, responses were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. This ensured that the data was accurately captured and could be transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

Once the transcriptions were complete, they were reviewed by the interviewer for any discrepancies or missing information. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the data collection phase. Participants' identities remained confidential and any personal information shared during the interviews were anonymized to ensure privacy. The data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

To enhance the credibility of the interviews, the researchers employed consistency checks, commonly referred to as peer review, which involved soliciting two additional researchers, who possessed a certain degree of familiarity with the subject matter, to conduct an independent analysis of the data. To reduce potential inconsistencies and discrepancies, the transcription was also carefully proofread by a skilled bilingual colleague. The trustworthiness of the findings was further reinforced through member checking wherein the researchers informally verified the accuracy of their interpretations with participants during the data collection phase. Additionally, the researchers utilized techniques such as echoing, paraphrasing, and seeking further clarification on ambiguous comments made by respondents during the interviews to ensure clarity and understanding.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

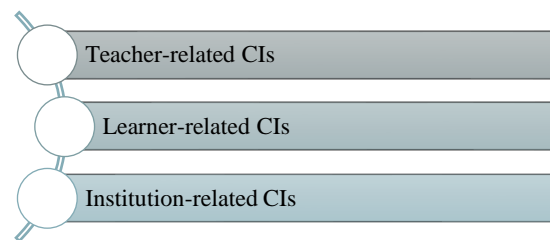
The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed to uncover themes and subthemes. In order to analyze the semi-structured interview data, inductive thematic analysis, proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted to carefully examine the CIs in EAP classes and the role of CIs analysis in the PD of EAP teachers. The study went through six stages of inductive thematic analysis: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. To be more exact, in the initial stage, the researchers made an attempt to anticipate potential emerging themes from the transcribed interviews. The second phase involved systematically coding noteworthy aspects of the data to summarize the core message. In the third stage, researchers identified themes within the coded data, aiming to arrive at significant aspects of participants' experiences. The fourth stage involved reviewing the potential themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data and considering how they related to the entire data set. Through the fifth stage, the researchers developed clear definitions and names for each theme, ensuring they accurately represent the content and meaning of the data. And finally, in the sixth phase, the researchers wrote the analysis, selecting compelling quotes to support each theme.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the coding process, inter-coder agreement was calculated. Two independent coders analyzed responses to twelve interview questions and reached agreement on ten, resulting in an inter-coder agreement rate of 83.3%. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. This level of agreement met established standards for reliability in qualitative research.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Results for the First Research Question

The inductive thematic analysis of the interview data revealed the themes related to the research questions that will be scrutinized in the following section. In response to the first research question which investigated the type of CIs occurring for EAP teachers in the context of Iran, three major themes namely teacher-related, learner-related, and institution-related CIs were identified. In the following section, each theme will be elaborated (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.**

*Types of CIs in EAP Classes*

#### 4.1.1. Teacher-Related CIs

According to Karimi and Nazari (2019), teacher-related CIs mostly emerge from teacher's actions, decisions, or behavior that affect the learning environment. As the interview data revealed, during bumpy moments in EAP classes, the interviewees reported four subcategories of teachers' insult, unclear instructions, insufficient proficiency, and their reluctance to seek advice. The following excerpts from the participants' interviews have been provided below. In order to avoid any ambiguity in the interviewees' responses, grammatical and lexical errors have been revised.

*"I remember a time when I ridiculed one of my students in a writing class. After reviewing the written assignments delivered to me, I highlighted that student's errors and showed them to the class. I emphasized that I didn't expect an EAP student to have such terrible grammar errors. I immediately noticed that she got embarrassed and discouraged". (T2)*

*"Once I ridiculed a student by stating: 'That's the silliest question I have ever heard'. I soon realized that my comment made her feel embarrassed. From that session on, she never asked any questions and kept silent". (T9)*

*"Teaching my students how to do note taking, I did not give them enough explanations and examples and this caused my students felt frustrated". (T4)*

*"One day I assigned a group project, but I failed to provide clear guidelines and this led to confusion among my students about what was expected of them". (T12)*

*"Once I was teaching a reading passage including advanced idiomatic expressions, but I failed to provide appropriate definitions and examples. This resulted in my students' disengagement". (T8)*

*"During a writing task, I struggled to explain basic grammar concepts due to my lack of grammar understanding. I have always been uninterested in English grammar and admit that I do not like to teach it either. I could not convey the right information to my students". (T3)*

*"Despite facing challenges with classroom management, I refused to ask my experienced colleagues for their strategies to tackle CIs, insisting that I could handle the situation alone". (T12)*

*"I had great struggles with integrating technology into my EAP classes. Although I found myself incapable of working with technology effectively, I did not like to get help from my tech-savvy peers. Honestly speaking, some of my colleagues are more competent at technology than me". (T6)*

#### 4.1.2. Learner-Related CIs

An issue which arises in EAP classes is a wide variety of students' behavior and attitude that influence the learning process (Riapina & Utkina, 2022). Analysis of the interviews revealed four subcategories of students' disruptive and rude behavior, academic nonconformity, disengagement, and absenteeism.

*"In my first year of teaching, a student started interrupting me several times trying to mock my accent. I addressed his behavior calmly, but he continued to disrupt the class. I felt very disappointed and didn't know how to tackle the problem". (T10)*

*"A student of mine used her phone a lot during the class. I asked her nicely to put her phone aside; however, she loudly shouted: 'This class is boring'. Her comment not only disrespected me but also influenced other students to behave similarly. Finally, I asked her to leave the class. To my surprise, she shrugged her shoulders and left the class quite indifferently". (T2)*

*"I assigned my students to write an academic essay for next week. One of my students submitted a creative writing task entirely ignoring the guidelines for academic essay writing. When I pointed out this nonconformity, she argued that she preferred to express herself freely and never cared about the guidelines. I felt frustrated believing that academic standard is essential for EAP writing tasks". (T8)*

*"During a collaborative listening activity, I found a silent student refusing to participate or engage with her peers. When I asked her questions in an attempt to encourage her to participate, she responded in an indifferent manner saying she did not care about the class and this discouraged other students". (T4)*

*"A student frequently missed the class without valid reasons and failed to catch up two missed assignments. When I asked about her many absent sessions, she responded that she could not see any reason for attending my class". (T1)*

#### 4.1.3. Institution-Related CIs

Institution-related CIs usually stem from policies and administrative decisions at the institutional level which influence the teaching and learning process (Babaii, 2020; Tsui, 2007). Participants reported three subcategories of policy change, insufficient teacher training, and priority of students over teachers.

*"My problem with the institute where I am teaching is that the institute changes class schedules without notice and this disrupts me, my students, and my lesson plans". (T7)*

*"In our institute, a new grading policy was introduced just before final exams and this has made assessment quite complicated for teachers". (T11)*

*"Some of my colleagues are insufficiently trained and do not implement effective teaching methods. Sometimes I heard students complain about some teachers and if I want to be fair, they are totally right. Our institute sometimes hires disqualified teachers". (T1)*

*"Our institute does not provide opportunities for our professional development. I think most teachers really need it to update themselves". (T3)*

*"After facing a lot of problems in my class with a cheeky and rude boy, I reported him to the manager of the institute. To my surprise, I was blamed, but not the student. I was also asked to ignore that student's rude behavior in my class. To tell you the truth, I did not expect such a reaction from the institute manager". (T12)*

## 4.2. Results for the Second Research Question

In response to the second research question, the interviewees reported their post-event and analytical reflection on CIs. After the thematic analysis of the interview data, three main themes emerged concerning the PD that EAP teachers achieved through reflection on CIs: Cognitive, affective, and social professional development (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.**

*EAP Teachers' Professional Development*

### 4.2.1. Cognitive Professional Development

Cognitive professional development refers to the enhancement of teachers' knowledge, skills, and understanding related to teaching practices, theories, and methodologies. This involves critical thinking and the ability to analyze and synthesize information to improve teaching effectiveness (Borg, 2015; Tsang & Wong, 2017). The participants' cognitive development consisted of four subcategories namely adapting teaching strategies, improving assessment techniques, enhancing classroom management, and expanding students' language proficiency. The following excerpts illustrate how EAP teachers learned from their reflection on CIs in various dimensions of their cognitive development after the CIs happened in the classroom.

*"Following a lesson where my students struggled with a particular grammar point, I reflected on my instruction and decided to implement different teaching strategies such as visual aids and interactive exercises leading to better student comprehension in my future classes". (T11)*

*"After noticing that my students performed poorly on a recent test, I thought about the alignment of my assessment with the course objectives. Then I decided to revise my assessment method to include formative assessment that better gauge the students' understanding". (T7)*

*"During a reading activity that revealed gaps in my students' vocabulary knowledge, I realized the importance of pre-teaching vocabulary and began to incorporate more explicit vocabulary teaching into my instruction, leading to improved language proficiency among my students and meeting my students' needs during reading tasks". (T3)*

### 4.2.2. Affective Professional Development

Affective professional development focuses on the emotional aspects of teaching, including attitudes, values, and feelings. It emphasizes the importance of teachers' emotional intelligence and their ability to connect with the students (Mercer, 2016). According to the interviewees, the following three subcategories contributed to their affective development: Building empathy, managing stress, and developing resilience. The following quotes from the interviewees will scrutinize the affective development achieved through reflection on CIs among EAP teachers.

*"After an incident where a student was reluctant to participate due to fear of making mistakes, I reflected on the emotional climate of the classroom. I learned to foster a supportive environment by sharing my own language learning struggles which encouraged my students to take risks". (T2)*

*"Following a challenging class where the tension was high, I reflected on my emotional response. I recognized the need for self-care and stress management techniques such as mindfulness practice which helped me maintain the composure of my class". (T10)*

*"After observing a student who was visibly upset during the class discussions, I reflected on how to better address my students' emotional needs. I learned to create opportunities for students to express their feelings, leading to stronger emotional connections and trust within the classroom". (T8)*

*"Upon reflecting on a successful project where students engaged deeply with the material, I recognized the joy of excited students. This reflection encouraged my passion for teaching and motivated me to design more engaging lessons". (T5)*

### 4.2.3. Social Professional Development

Social professional development pertains to the interactions and relationships that teachers build with colleagues, students, and the broader community. It emphasizes collaboration, communication, and networking (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). As a main category of learning achieved through teachers' reflection on CIs, social development was referred to by the participants. This category included subcategories such as fostering collaboration, networking with colleagues, and creating inclusive classes.

*"After witnessing how group dynamics affected student participation during a project, I reflected on the importance of collaboration skills. I implemented structured group roles and activities that promote teamwork, enhancing social interaction among students. In fact, the result was incredible". (T6)*

*"After facing challenges in teaching a new curriculum, I realized the value of collaboration with my peers. I reached out to my fellow teachers for support and ideas, leading to shared resources and strategies that benefit all involved". (T2)*

*"Following an incident where some students felt excluded during the activities, I reflected on inclusivity practice. I learned to implement diverse teaching methods that cater for different learning styles and backgrounds, promoting social cohesion among students". (T4)*

## 5. Discussion

The present qualitative study revealed a notable gap in the extant body of literature regarding CIs in EAP classrooms in the context of Iran. The first research question addressed the types of CIs experienced by Iranian EAP teachers. As the results of the



inductive thematic analysis of interviews revealed, Iranian EAP teachers faced unexpected moments in terms of three main types of teacher-related, learner-related, and institution-related CIs. The categorization of CIs into teacher-related, learner-related, and institution-related types provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities faced by EAP teachers. Teacher-related incidents often stem from personal challenges or pedagogical dilemmas, highlighting the need for ongoing professional development that is responsive to individual teacher experiences. For instance, a study by Farrell (2019) emphasizes the importance of reflective practice in addressing such challenges, suggesting that teachers who engage in reflection can better navigate their professional landscape. This categorization not only aids in identifying specific areas for growth but also underscores the interplay between personal and contextual factors in shaping teaching practices.

These findings are in line with Babaii (2020) and Karimi and Nazari (2019) who considered CIs as disrupting the classroom atmosphere, agitating classroom discipline, deteriorating the teacher effectiveness, and reducing the effectiveness of language institutes. Such situations were considered as critical because teachers found themselves between two options that resulted in ethical dilemmas. The results are also congruent with Borg (2015), Freeman (2022), and Trent (2020) in terms of EAP teachers' conflicts with institutions. Such CIs pose discrepancies between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and institutional demands. Moreover, the findings corroborate the previous research by Barkhuizen (2022), Estaji and Fatalaki (2022), and Soodmand Afshar and Donyaie (2022) who claimed CIs originating from students entail serious challenges in educational settings. Unquestionably, CIs arising from teacher-related, learner-related, and institution-related factors can significantly hinder the effectiveness of EAP teaching and learning processes.

The second research question aimed to investigate how teachers' reflection on CIs contributed to EAP teachers' PD. As the results of the interviews showed, the participants admitted that reflection on CIs assisted them develop professionally in three different aspects: Cognitive, affective, and social development. Cognitive development, according to the participants, included adapting teaching strategies, improving assessment techniques, enhancing classroom management, and expanding their students' language proficiency. Moreover, the interviewees pointed out that their reflection could escalate their affective development through building empathy, managing stress, and developing resilience. The last but not the least category contributing to EAP teachers' PD, as mentioned by the interviewees, was social development that included fostering collaboration, networking with colleagues, and creating inclusive classes. As Lester (1998) advocates, teachers' reflection on their practices makes connections between theory and practice and build up a new knowledge base.

The analysis of CIs revealed that EAP teachers experience cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of professional development. Cognitive development was particularly pronounced as teachers engaged in reflective practices that prompted them to reconsider their pedagogical strategies and assumptions about student learning. This aligns with the findings of Zeichner and Liston (2014), who argue that critical reflection is essential for effective teaching and learning. Affective development also emerged as EAP teachers navigated emotional responses to incidents, fostering resilience and adaptability. Meanwhile, social development was evident in the collaborative dialogs among teachers, which not only enhanced their professional networks but also facilitated a shared understanding of best practices in EAP instruction.

Undeniably, reflection on CIs fosters teachers' efficacy since they observe the positive effects of their own generated solutions which in turn boosts teachers' PD. As Kılıç & Cinkara (2020) mentioned, teachers can appraise their best practices and reflect on their future PD through stories of their classroom experiences. Additionally, Yost (2000) pointed out, if teachers get involved in the process of problem-solving for their CIs, their critical reflection increases substantially leading them towards professionalism. The findings seem congruent with the studies by Hall and Townsend (2017) and Nejadghanbar (2021) revealing that the careful investigation of CIs provides teachers with awareness about the nexus between assumptions and practices. In the EAP context of Iran where top-down PD opportunities are barely supported by language institutes, using CIs analysis as a bottom-up PD approach can function as an affordable and convenient approach for teachers' PD through which they shoulder the responsibility of proceeding towards professionalism. Following these critical events, reflection allows EAP teachers to contemplate the experiences they have undergone, examining the insights they applied in managing various circumstances. Although CIs are inevitable in diverse educational settings, their analysis as a bottom-up approach to teachers' PD assists them overcome the challenges in their classroom.

The interplay between these dimensions of PD highlights the multifaceted nature of EAP teaching. The interconnectedness of cognitive, affective, and social growth suggests that PD initiatives should adopt an integrative approach that encompasses all three areas. As noted by Richards and Farrell (2020), PD should be tailored to address the specific needs of teachers while promoting a holistic understanding of their roles within educational institutions. Therefore, recognizing and analyzing CIs can serve as a powerful tool for fostering comprehensive professional growth among EAP educators, ultimately enhancing the quality of instruction they provide.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, this qualitative study elucidates the significant role that CIs play in the PD of EAP teachers. This comprehensive understanding emphasizes the importance of context in shaping EAP teachers' practices and highlights the necessity for targeted PD initiatives that address the complexities of their teaching environments. Similarly, Hosseini and Modarresi (2015) underscore the role of reflection as a catalyst for improvement implying that individual and contextual factors influence outcomes. While complete mitigation of CIs may seem unlikely, encouraging educators to reflect on their experiences, along with the support from policy-makers in addressing challenging moments, can lead to positive outcomes for all parties involved including EAP teachers, students, and administrators. In sum, it can be concluded that every CI, despite appearing detrimental at the first glance,

presents an opportunity for EAP teachers' personal and professional growth.

The findings of the study can be reconnected to Mezirow's (2008) Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) that begins with a disorienting dilemma, a crisis, or a challenge that disrupts the existing assumptions of EAP teachers who need to reexamine their beliefs and teaching practices. TLT also emphasizes the critical reflection as the key mechanism for transformation. According to the findings, EAP teachers can reevaluate their beliefs and teaching practices through cognitive PD. Additionally, EAP teachers can foster their affective PD by managing frustration and building resilience. Social PD is also enhanced through engaging with peers, mentors, or receiving institutional support.

The implications of these findings are profound for both EAP practitioners and educational institutions. By acknowledging the diverse types of CIs that teachers encounter, institutions can design more effective PD programs that foster effective reflection among communities of practice by providing a supportive environment for teachers to learn from one another and exchange their best solutions for tackling unexpected moments in their classroom. In the same vein, Abbasian and Modarresi (2022) emphasize reflection and adaptation advocating for institutional support as an opportunity for growth.

Additionally, creating supportive environments where teachers feel empowered to share their experiences can enhance collective efficacy and lead to improved student outcomes. As suggested by Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2015), fostering a culture of continuous improvement through CIs analysis can significantly contribute to student engagement. Moreover, curriculum designers may benefit from the findings regarding the importance of CIs in teacher education curricula. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on teacher PD by underscoring the values of CIs in EAP contexts.

In the current study, several limitations must be acknowledged when generalizing the findings. Firstly, the study exclusively relied on qualitative data obtained from the interviews. It would have been preferable to investigate the CIs by directly observing the classroom or recording teachers' strategies rather than relying on their self-reports. Despite limited generalizability, the study offers transferability of the findings to similar under-supported EAP contexts globally.

It is recommended that further studies be carried out using mixed methods techniques to draw conclusions more readily generalizable to larger communities. Additionally, exploring the impact of CIs and their consequences on EAP teachers' emotional well-being in various educational contexts may provide precious insights. Further research investigating the CIs in educational contexts as English for specific purposes or English as a foreign/second language would also be a very useful follow-up to this study. As educational landscapes continue to evolve, it is imperative to equip teachers with the tools they need to thrive amidst challenges, thereby ensuring that they are well-prepared to meet the needs of their learners in an increasingly globalized academic environments.

## 7. References

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