



## Critical Incidents in Iranian EFL Classrooms: Teacher and Student Perceptions

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### Abstract

Critical Incidents (CIs) have become central to language teacher development by promoting reflective practice, a key element of teacher education. This study examines critical incidents (CIs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in public high schools. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers and 15 students across 7 public schools, analyzing narratives using thematic analysis within a complexity theory framework. Three themes emerged: Teaching high and lows, classroom management issues, and language proficiency. Teachers felt challenged by the frequent number of CIs, associating their management skills and immunity with their response to these events, and viewed Iranian public schools as particularly susceptible. Similarly, students highlighted both the negative and positive aspects of CIs and noted cultural diversity and language skills as key factors. The study's findings align with complexity theory by highlighting the dynamic, interconnected, and adaptive nature of teaching and learning in public schools. The emergent patterns of emotional responses, classroom management strategies, and language proficiency interactions reflect the principles of sensitivity to initial conditions, self-organization, and co-evolution.

**Keywords:** Critical incidents, Complexity theory, Public high schools, EFL classes

Critical Incidents (CIs) have gained prominence as an essential component in fostering language teacher development by cultivating reflective practice—a process integral to teacher education programs (Farrell, 2008; Finch, 2010). Brookfield (1990) characterizes CIs as unforeseen, significant events that leave a lasting impression, occurring not only in the classroom but also in broader professional contexts. Reflective practice can be significantly enhanced by the extent of interactive and dialogic engagement between teachers and students as they collectively reflect on critical incidents within the learning environment (Hußner et al., 2023). Scholarly discourse presents a spectrum of interpretations of the essence of CIs. Farrell (2008) delineates a more specific domain, focusing on spontaneous events in the classroom and positing that structured reflection on such incidents can yield profound insights into

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pedagogical dynamics. [Tripp \(2012\)](#) expands upon this perspective, asserting that the ordinariness of events does not preclude their criticality; rather, it is the interpretive lens through which they are viewed. Consequently, an incident fosters criticality by disrupting the norm and eliciting an in-depth contemplation. For instance, while a simple mishap, such as a dropped textbook, may not constitute a CI, an incident in which a student tears a textbook in frustration could be considered critical. [Richards and Farrell \(2005\)](#) suggest that CIs serve as catalysts for teachers to engage in deep reflection on their pedagogical experiences ([Sarbandi et al., 2017](#)). Through meticulous analysis of these events and their implications, educators can acquire invaluable insights into their teaching practices, learner interactions, and personal professional growth. [Romano \(2006\)](#) highlights the analysis of CIs' underlying dynamics, showing how teachers draw on nuanced considerations, cognitive processes, and experiential knowledge in these critical moments. The scholarly examination of CIs has predominantly focused on teachers' perspectives, with research exploring ethical dilemmas, CIs in English for academic purposes, and interpretive analyses ([Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017](#); [Farrell, 2008](#)). Notably, the existing body of work has largely overlooked the context of these educators, with a significant bias toward the private sector and a consequent dearth of insights from public school teachers ([Nejadghanbar, 2021](#); [Moorhouse et al., 2025](#)). This study seeks to address this imbalance by focusing on the experiences of EFL teachers in Tehran's public high schools, thereby tapping into a previously underexplored source of rich, contextual data. Equally critical, yet strikingly underrepresented in the literature, is the student perspective on CIs. Students, as key participants in the educational process, offer unique and valuable viewpoints that are essential for a full comprehension of CIs. The absence of their voice in the discourse not only narrows the scope of understanding but also misses opportunities to foster genuine dialogue between educators and learners. This research aims to address this oversight by integrating students' perceptions of CIs into their EFL classrooms. While there is some precedent for exploring student perspectives on CIs in fields such as medical education, mathematics, and broader academic settings ([Metcalf & Matharu, 1995](#); [Goodell, 2006](#); [Khandelwal, 2009](#)), the investigation into language learning contexts is notably sparse, with [Finch's \(2010\)](#) study on undergraduate and graduate students being a rare exception.

Furthermore, the interrelationship between teacher and student perceptions of CIs has been largely neglected. This study addresses this gap by engaging teachers and their students in intact classes, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of a specific CI from both perspectives and providing participants with an opportunity to refine their understanding of the incident. The identification of these gaps underscores the significance of the current study and leads to the formulation of the following research questions:

RQ1: What are English teachers' and students' shared perceptions of CIs in public high schools?

### Background and Literature Review

This paper explored CIs in language learning through the perspective of complexity theory. CIs are inherently subjective events, made significant through the act of "noticing"—a process of conscious awareness and recognition ([Farrell, 2008](#); [Griffiths, 2008](#); [Schmidt, 2012](#)). Within complexity theory, such noticing often arises from moments of disruption or unpredictability, as learning emerges at the intersection of order and disorder. This perspective positions CIs as catalysts for growth, where seemingly chaotic experiences stimulate reflection and adaptation ([Pourhassan & Nazari, 2021](#)). Complexity theory emphasizes principles such as nonlinearity, interdependence, and emergent behavior ([Larsen-Freeman, 1997](#); [Farangi & Zabbah, 2023](#)). Unlike linear models of learning, it suggests that small, unexpected events can generate disproportionately significant outcomes. In this view, the classroom itself operates as a complex adaptive system, where every detail and interaction—however minor—can contribute to unpredictable yet meaningful learning trajectories ([Van Lier, 2014](#)). Building on this complexity perspective, public schools provide fertile ground for CI analysis. Large class sizes, limited resources, and diverse student populations create interdependent and unpredictable dynamics, especially in Iranian high schools, where the high cost of private education has driven more students into already crowded classrooms. Many teachers are also young and inexperienced, intensifying the potential for disruptions and what [Ly et al. \(2021\)](#) term "school chaos"—frequent interruptions, weak rule adherence, and inconsistent management. Such conditions illustrate how complexity theory helps explain CIs, as small events in these chaotic systems can trigger significant consequences for teaching and learning.

### Previous Studies

CIs have recently attracted attention in the field of language learning, leading to a body of literature on the topic. This section presents studies closely related to the objectives and theoretical framework of the current research. As previously discussed, the extant literature predominantly focuses on language teachers' perceptions, often neglecting the potentially insightful perspectives of their students.

[Finch \(2010\)](#) pioneered the application of CIs within the language-learning sphere, advocating the enhancement of awareness and development through deliberate reflection on unforeseen incidents. By integrating complexity theory, which suggests that minor initial events can profoundly influence long-term learning trajectories, Finch underscored the intricate and dynamic essence of language learning. His research, involving both graduate and undergraduate students, demonstrated that recognizing and reflecting upon CIs is crucial for catalyzing meaningful learning and development. [Karimi and Nazari \(2019\)](#) bridged a notable gap by examining CIs as a tool for professional development in L2 teaching contexts. Their study, centered around Iranian L2 teachers participating in a three-month course featuring dialogic interactions and reflections on written CIs, revealed the non-linear and cognitively impactful nature of CIs. Teachers reported enhanced awareness of classroom events and improved

pedagogical decision-making, highlighting the multifaceted factors influencing CIs and their implications for teacher education.

[Pourhassan and Nazari \(2021\)](#) examined the impact of a professional development course focused on sharing and discussing CIs on L2 teachers' understanding of teaching young learners. Through narratives and interviews, they uncovered a spectrum of interpersonal, pedagogical, and professional challenges, particularly regarding learner engagement and teacher knowledge. The course facilitated significant shifts in conceptual, practical, and personal-professional approaches to CIs, advocating for specialized teacher education that addresses the complex needs of young learners. [Weiss et al. \(2021\)](#) investigated CIs in multilingual classrooms from teachers' perspectives, drawing on identity theories to identify resources for successful multilingual education ([Nejadghanbar & Shaahdadi, 2025](#)). The study highlighted the dual nature of outcomes, with positive experiences stemming from supportive learning environments and negative ones from monolingual classroom frustrations. This research underscored the need for stakeholder-driven improvements in multilingual classroom dynamics.

[Nejadghanbar \(2021\)](#) explored the effects of individual and group reflection on CIs among pre-service teachers. Through thematic analysis of reflection journals from 12 training sessions, the study illustrated the positive evaluation of reflection activities, particularly group reflections, in enhancing understanding and responses to CIs. This suggests that collaborative reflection can significantly contribute to professional development and teaching efficacy. [Almacioglu and Yalcin Arslan \(2024\)](#) further affirmed the value of engaging with CIs for gaining pedagogical insights. Their study of Turkish EFL teachers' reflections over six weeks revealed that CI-based reflections markedly increased teachers' professional awareness and research orientation, leading to tangible improvements in classroom practice.

In summary, the evolving discourse on CIs techniques in language learning underscores the pivotal role of reflection, complexity, and professional development in fostering educational advancements. The highlighted studies collectively emphasize the transformative power of reflecting on CIs for both teachers and learners, advocating for a nuanced understanding of the learning and teaching process that accommodates the unpredictable nature of educational environments. However, these studies mainly provided general categories of critical incidents, with only a few insufficient examples, without going into detail. These generalities can barely represent the intricate complexity of a real-time language classroom. Therefore, the current study aimed to contribute to the literature by examining critical incidents in depth.

## Method

### Sampling

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. In the current study, convenience sampling was a strategic choice to efficiently gather relevant data while navigating practical constraints, ensuring voluntary and engaged participation, and laying the groundwork

for future research in similar educational settings. In this way, the researcher visited several male public schools in Tehran, Iran, and discussed the study with school principals and teachers. It included 7 public secondary high schools in Tehran, encompassing around 1568 students, 7 deans, 14 school managers, and approximately 100 teachers. The schools were located in diverse socio-economic areas to control for socio-economic variables. The schools did not charge tuition fees and operated from 7 A.M. to 2 P.M., with occasional extended hours for additional classes. The researcher consulted with the school deans and explained the research purpose and procedures to them. Upon obtaining their consent, the researcher talked with the teachers. The volunteer teachers agreed to narrate the CIs experienced in the last school year. In cases where the teachers narrated a CI related to their current students, the students were contacted to share their story with the researcher. Therefore, two groups of participants were targeted, namely, students and teachers. Demographic information for these groups is provided below.

### Student Participants

The study employed a sample of 15 student participants drawn from 20 intact English language classes across grades 9, 10, and 11. The criteria for selecting these students were: voluntary participation, initial contact with the teachers to learn about CIs, and involvement in the critical incidents narrated by the teachers. The participants' age ranged from 15 to 18 years, with a mean age of 16.4 years. Nearly half (47.3%) reported engaging in supplemental English-language learning outside the formal school setting. Over half (53.1%) expressed satisfaction with the school's English language curriculum. School satisfaction was also generally positive, with approximately 62.3% of students reporting contentment with their educational institutions. The participants' mean grade point average (GPA) was 15.33 on a 20-point scale, indicating an average academic performance. Socio-economic data revealed that the student sample originated from both high and low-income family backgrounds. In line with ethical research practices, the study ensured that informed consent was obtained from all participants, including students and teachers, prior to data collection. Given that the student participants were minors (under 18 years of age), special care was taken to obtain parental or guardian consent. The forms included a section for parents/guardians to indicate their approval of their child's participation and provided the researcher's contact information for any questions or concerns.

### Teacher Participants

The teacher participants comprised a sample of ten male English language instructors employed by the Ministry of Education. These educators delivered instruction to different grades during the 2022-2023 academic year. The age range of the teacher participants spanned from twenty-nine to forty-seven years, with a mean age of 33.6 years. Teaching experience varied within the sample, ranging from three to twenty-one years, with an average of 7.3 years. Their academic qualifications included Bachelor of Arts (n=4), Master of Arts (n=4), and

Doctor of Philosophy (n=2) degrees. Regarding school tenure, six teachers had been employed at their current school for at least three years, while the remaining participants were newcomers. Three teacher participants held additional responsibilities beyond classroom instruction, such as school library management or participation in the counseling group.

### Instrument

Employing a narrative inquiry approach, this study investigated CIs through semi-structured interviews with both teachers and students ([Bahrami et al., 2022](#)). All interviews were conducted in Persian, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the transcripts were thematically analyzed to capture recurring patterns and meanings. The interview protocol, informed by [Thiel's \(1999\)](#) guidelines for reporting CIs, consisted of at least four open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives. Participants were asked to recall incidents they considered critical, describe the sequence of events, explain underlying causes, and reflect on the consequences for their teaching or learning. They were further prompted to justify why they regarded the incident as "critical" and to discuss its influence on their perspectives or practices. Each interview lasted approximately 35 minutes. When teachers and students referred to the same CI, both accounts were collected to build a richer, multi-perspective description of the event. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with participants, the use of follow-up probes during interviews, and member checking, whereby selected participants reviewed summaries of their narratives for accuracy. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and incidents. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of coding decisions, memos, and analytic steps throughout the thematic analysis. Finally, confirmability was addressed through peer debriefing with two colleagues experienced in qualitative research, who reviewed the coding framework and emergent themes to minimize researcher bias. These procedures strengthened the rigor of the narrative inquiry and supported the reliability of the thematic findings.

To foster open and honest dialogue, interviews were conducted in private, comfortable settings. Recognizing the sensitive nature of the experiences to be shared, the researcher prioritized creating a non-threatening environment and maintained professional detachment while respecting participants' autonomy ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)).

### Interview Settings.

- *Teachers:* Interviews were conducted in quiet, familiar school spaces such as staff rooms or empty classrooms, usually during free periods or after school hours.
- *Students:* Given the age of the student participants (15–18 years), interviews were conducted in the presence of a school counselor or a trusted adult, in neutral, distraction-free locations such as meeting rooms or library spaces ([Farangi & Khojastemehr, 2024](#)).

Participants could choose the time and place of the interview, and all sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent. Before recording, the purpose and use of the data were carefully explained. Interviews were conducted in Persian, recorded, and transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' authentic words and expressions (Creswell, 2013). To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and all files were stored securely on a password-protected computer.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to elicit detailed narratives of CIs. The questions were based on Thiel's (1999) framework for reporting CIs and were piloted with two participants to ensure clarity and appropriateness. Each interview included at least four open-ended prompts. Based on Thiel's (1999) framework, the **four open-ended prompts** were phrased as follows:

1. **Describe** a classroom incident you consider critical.
2. **Explain** what factors or circumstances led to this incident.
3. **Discuss** why you think this incident was significant or critical.
4. **Reflect** on how this incident has influenced your subsequent teaching or learning practices.

These four prompts comprehensively addressed the **core dimensions of a Critical Incident**—description, causes, significance, and consequences—while keeping the interview flexible for elaboration through follow-up questions. This semi-structured format allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate while ensuring coverage of the key dimensions of CIs: description, causes, consequences, significance, and impact on practice.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim and coded them in MAXQDA. Initial open coding was conducted by the primary researcher and two TEFL PhD-holding coders, who independently coded 30% of the transcripts to assess inter-coder reliability (Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.83$ ). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion to enhance coding validity.

The study utilized an inductive coding process, allowing codes to emerge directly from the data, rather than imposing predefined categories. This approach is consistent with the exploratory nature of narrative inquiry and guarantees that the codes authentically represent the participants' experiences and perspectives. The data analysis process employed thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns (themes) within the transcripts. Initially, the researcher engaged in a familiarization process, involving multiple readings of the transcribed data to gain a deep understanding of the content. During this stage, initial impressions and codes were documented. The coding procedure commenced with open coding, in which the researcher segmented the text into meaningful units (paragraphs) and assigned

codes that captured the central ideas or concepts ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). During the initial open coding phase, the researcher identified distinct ideas, phrases, and concepts recurrent in the participants' narratives. Codes were developed based on their relevance to the research questions, particularly those related to personal experiences, perceptions, and critical incidents shared by teachers and students. Each code was assigned considering both semantic meaning (explicit content) and latent meaning (deeper, underlying themes).

Subsequently, axial coding was employed to group these codes into categories based on identified similarities and relationships. Axial coding enabled the identification of core categories, representing central phenomena that interconnected other categories. This process facilitated the linkage between individual codes and broader themes ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). Finally, selective coding enabled pinpointing core themes that integrated the categories and provided a coherent narrative of the teachers' experiences ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). The researcher employed a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns and shared meanings within the narratives. The thematic development was guided by the principle of thematic saturation, ensuring that all significant themes and patterns were identified. For instance, the categories "challenges in language learning" and "motivational strategies" converged to form the broader theme of "Teaching Highs and Lows."

To ensure interrater reliability, data transcription and analysis were conducted by two other TEFL PhD holders, resulting in an interrater reliability index of 0.83. Furthermore, member checking was implemented by sharing the identified themes and interpretations with the participants to verify the accuracy and relevance of the findings. Participant feedback informed minor adjustments to ensure the themes accurately reflected their narratives. All these stages ensured theoretical saturation, in which no new codes could be generated by analyzing further data. Throughout the research process, participant anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained ([Creswell, 2013](#)). Theme analysis reveals three main themes: Teaching highs and lows, classroom management incidents, and language proficiency.

To ensure trustworthiness, we employed triangulation (teacher-student paired accounts), member checking (participants reviewed final theme summaries), and reflexive journaling (to minimize researcher bias). The process continued until data saturation was confirmed, as no new themes emerged in the last three interviews. This rigorous process supported the reliability of the three final themes: *Teaching Highs and Lows*, *Classroom Management Incidents*, and *Language Proficiency*.

## Results

### Teaching Highs and Lows

Critical incidents dealing with high and low moments consisted of individual emotional and social challenges in language classrooms. The teachers mainly remembered low moments, while the students also talked about high moments. Teacher 7 shared a poignant story:

*T7. I had a student from a village outside the city who was eager to learn English. He worked mornings to support his impoverished family and attended school in the afternoons. One rainy day, he came to class with muddy shoes, and the class floor got dirty. I reacted angrily, shouting at him. He told me it's raining and that he's coming back from work. Seeing his shock, I immediately regretted my outburst and couldn't continue teaching. After class, I learned about his situation and felt deeply remorseful. With the help of fellow teachers, I bought him new clothes and shoes the following week.*

Being a newcomer and fairly unacquainted with the students, the teacher reacted harshly in a situation where such a reaction would not have arisen. However, he managed to turn a negative critical incident into a positive, inspiring one. The student told us he forgave his teacher and believed the teacher's reaction was unintentional. The teacher, however, considered it a low point in his career, as he managed, for a while, to forgive himself. T2 reported another low moment. He reported an incident which was not directly related to the student but his parent:

*T2. I had a student in school who was very interested in English. We had a very good relationship together. He used to take a private English class with me outside the school. He was very interested and I was also interested in his class. After one year of private class, I had a harsh argument with his mother over monetary issues. I intended to raise the fee by 30 percent and the mother threatened me to consult the issue with the ministry of education. That night I could not sleep as I thought his mother insulted me by discussing about the money and threatening me after all those efforts and hard works. Being angry, I cancelled his private class and despite the fact that both he and her mother apologized, I was stubborn and didn't start his class again. I still regret my decision and although we see each other in school, I can see in his eyes that he is sad.*

Teacher 2 argued that he was emotionally challenged after this incident, and after talking with this particular student, we found that he also felt very disappointed. The student argued that learning English was his best hobby, and he reprimanded his mother for arguing with his teacher over money. He believed:

*S13. I was doing very well with my English learning. I aspired to take my IELTS degree as soon as possible. I felt that the teacher is the best. Suddenly, everything changed. My dream disappeared. I am not into learning English right now.*

The number of conflicts due to these extra-hour classes is thought to be high in public schools, affecting teachers, students, and their parents. Due to financial problems, many Iranian teachers who work for the Ministry of Education also have a second job as private teachers outside of class. The ministry does not support this act, but it also does not stop the teachers.

Despite these low moments, students' reports of critical incidents included high moments when teachers inspired them through their lessons or general demeanor. One student shared:

*S1. One of my English teachers inspired me by incorporating movies into our high school classes. This wasn't a common practice in Iran specially in public schools, so he had to get permission from the principal to do so. At first, the principals resisted due to socio-political issues, but after the teachers' insistence, they gave up. His behavior was inspiring as majority of students in the classroom were in favor of watching movies and the teacher taught us how to stand for what we want. However, I think the teacher was criticized harshly by the school principals and had to leave playing movies in classes afterwards.*

Here, the teacher was a source of inspiration for that particular student by insisting on the right decision. The teacher told us that his insistence on playing movies in the classroom had cost him dearly, but he had to teach his students anyway. Another student recounted:

*S2. One of my English teachers, proficient in English and a seasoned tour guide, often intertwined life lessons with language learning. One session, instead of teaching our course book which is very dull, using his extensive travel experiences, like in a lesson on Chinese food, he painted vivid pictures of China, its people, and culture. As he spoke, I found myself transported to China, creating a cherished memory. He told the story of a Chinese dish and I was so intrigued that I asked my mom to make that for us. The dish was great and my mom called my teacher and thanked him for being so nice. It had a profound effect on my relationship with my English teacher.*

This student was intrigued by a particular aspect of his teacher's life. Previously, the teacher was not aware of this issue. However, reflection on critical incidents provided such an opportunity. When S2's story was shared with his teacher, the teacher was very happy to know he was a source of inspiration. He argued that he loves traveling and sharing his travel stories with his students, and knowing that his students enjoy them motivates him to travel more and share more.

### **Teachers' classroom management incidents**

Classroom management incidents were frequently mentioned alongside critical incidents in public schools. One teacher (T9) recounted:

*T9. Once, a student was laughing quietly for several minutes while I was teaching. The laughter was bothering as I thought students were not paying attention. Initially, I tried to control myself, but eventually, I lost my temper and shouted at him. He was shocked. Later, I discovered I wasn't the subject of laughter. Unfortunately, in the moment, I couldn't rectify the situation. Shouting at students in public schools make them bolder and they stand against the teacher more frequently.*

The teacher believed that the number of laughs in public schools is so high that it's sometimes impossible for teachers to remain in control. After talking with the student, we found that he was laughing at a joke his classmate told during class. He clarified that many students do not listen to the teachers during class and instead get busy with other things. Similarly, the participating teachers considered the number of jokes played on them in public schools very irritating. T3 narrated a story to us that is important in this regard:

*T3. One of my students took my car key as a joke, and I could not manage but to react to him very harshly. This harsh reaction was regretted afterward. I fear it may have caused the student to resent English classes. I was young and inexperienced. During the afternoon test, the student didn't participate, leaving me saddened. I even called him during the test, but he didn't answer. Unable to sleep that night, I decided to ask the school principal if he could retake the test.*

The sole fact that a student allows himself to make fun of his teacher by taking and hiding his car keys is indicative of a wrong relationship between the participants. The teacher claimed he believes in maintaining close relations with students, but that can lead to incidents such as this one. After discussing this incident with the student, he told us that he did not expect the teacher to react so harshly, as other students had made similar jokes previously. One teacher (T6) shared how an incident damaged his relationship with a student:

*T6. One of my students stood against me several times in the class time. I was consulting with the class about the midterm quiz and its time, but he tried to interrupt my efforts to take a quiz. At first, I warned him but he continued to resist against my idea for the test believing that English quiz is not important as they had more important lessons to study. After hearing this sentence, I lost my temper, moved toward him, took his shirt and drew him out of the class. Meantime, he yelled at me and went straight to the school principal.*

The teacher's harsh reaction stemmed from challenging his authority and his inability to control his anger. The student believed that the teacher's reaction was very harsh, as he only protested the number of tests and quizzes, and that he should have the right to do so. The school principal argued that the teacher did not have the right to use physical force against his students, and he will be questioned for his behavior. Actually, the school principal supported the student and his right to protest. The teacher and the student could not rebuild their relationship after this incident and the student preferred to change his class.

Examples of critical incidents which the teachers neatly managed were also reported. For example, T12 reported that:

*T12. One of my students purposely dropped his book to surprise others with a loud noise and get his friends' attention as the class ended. The loud noise of dropping startled me at once and the other students laughed. I noticed that but I tried to control myself. My*

*reaction was soft. I told that student with a funny tone if he is cripple or something. We both moved one.*

The teacher believed that in the early years of his career, he would react harshly to such behaviors. Now, he doesn't let it bother him as much, as he has learned to overlook such minor incidents. Experience has left its mark on this teacher's classroom management abilities. After talking to the student, he was happy that the teacher did not react seriously. He was afraid of his teacher, and his intention was only to make fun of his classmates. He argued that teachers in public schools often use rude words or phrases when students do something wrong, and he did not feel bad about it.

Some critical incidents involved managing cultural sensitivity issues. One student recounted an inappropriate rapport-building technique by his teacher:

*S3. I was very active in my English classes, and my young English teacher joked with me during the first session. Although we laughed initially, he continued using a specific nickname for me, which made me sad in later sessions. Despite knowing, I didn't like it, he persisted, showing his inexperience by not learning from his mistakes. One day, I had to stop him in front of the class and warn him that this nickname had a bad connotation in my culture. He blushed at once and stopped using it again.*

The teachers' lack of awareness of their students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds was the source of this incident. Sometimes, these cultural differences can lead to unforeseeable consequences. S3 mentioned that calling people by names other than their given names is not accepted in their culture, as they come from a specific ethnic group (Kurds). The teacher, unaware of this cultural sensitivity, continued the behavior, leading to discomfort for the student. After being warned, the teacher told us he didn't know about it, but the student should have told him privately, not in front of the whole class. He believed he could not pardon him for his behavior. Another student shared a critical incident related to a language misbehavior:

*S5. One day, our teacher wasn't feeling well. When one of my classmates mentioned a rude word, he explained it loudly, leading us to learn more offensive words. This left a bad impression on me. I think he was trying to insult us indirectly, and now I avoid his class and him entirely. I told the school principal about it and he promised to warn the teacher. But I think he did not do that. My father never lets us use rude words at home.*

The teacher apologized for using rude language in class, and he argued that long working hours and a feeling of burnout can make us lose our minds. The student who narrated this incident believed that there is no excuse for using rude language in class, and that the common belief that students in public schools come from low strata of society and have lower levels of ethical education is absolutely wrong.

The general atmosphere of public schools was another source of critical incidents related to classroom management. Such a case was reported by one of the teachers in the current study:

*T2. Recently, a student consumed Methamphetamine during class, leading to disruptive behavior like talking to himself and insulting classmates. No one intervened. I, myself, was also afraid of him. I informed the school principal, who promptly arranged for the student's removal with the help of other school managers. In an atmosphere like this, it is very difficult to manage these incidents. I was quite afraid and some classmates were also shocked.*

T2 claimed that he did not dare to respond to his students' misbehavior because he had not been trained to do so. After talking to that student, he argued that school is not a priority for him. He has many problems in his life, and dealing with them at the same time is very difficult.

### **Language proficiency**

In the current study, English language proficiency was reported as a source of critical incidents for both teachers and students. Some students believed that teachers with low proficiency often struggle to manage the class and maintain relevance in discussions:

*S4. My English teacher's proficiency is very low. One of my classmates asked a question, he answered that in Persian, and I felt the answer was irrelevant, though my classmates didn't notice. We learned nothing that day and ended up chatting in Persian. I believe the teacher used Persian to avoid discussing that topic in English. When I told him my English teacher (in a language institute) has told us something different about this question, he got angry. After a few minutes, he asked me a very difficult question to make fun of me in front of my classmates.*

The teacher felt threatened and tried to compensate for that by challenging S4. S4 has been learning English for several years at private institutes, and he believes the teacher's language proficiency is low. On the other hand, the teachers believed that he has a good command of English proficiency, and, sometimes, students do these things intentionally. Another student recounted:

*S6. I believe my teacher's proficiency in English is very low. He avoids certain topics and frequently uses Persian, even bringing Persian books to discuss English. This confuses us and forces us to learn many things on our own. Once, I asked him to use more English in the classroom and he got mad at me. He told us that English is the language of the liberal western world and we should learn it to fulfill our own needs not to master it.*

S6 argued that he cannot afford to take extra English classes and that he needs to do his best in school so that he will do well in exams. He thought that the teacher was covering up his low level of language proficiency under the guise of linguistics and cultural invasions. We talked

with the teacher about this, and he argued that the majority of students in his class have very low levels of language proficiency and that he has to teach the lessons in Persian, otherwise the students would not learn (Farangi et al., 2024). Another teacher remembered some other students protested those students who asked the teacher to teach in English. Therefore, the problem of language proficiency is not always the teachers' fault. Sometimes, especially in public high schools, some students oppose language teachers with high language proficiency. S7 narrated to us:

*S7. Our English class is so stressful because our teacher insists we speak only English. This approach doesn't work well in Iranian high schools. With a number of my classmates, we spoke to the principal, who promised to discuss it with the teacher. Excessive stress in English class can hinder our learning in other subjects. After that, the teacher came to class exhausted and started to reprimand the whole class. He felt that he cannot manage to fulfill the desires of everyone in a classroom with 43 students and he continued his previous approach.*

For this student, one of the sources of stress in the language classroom is the high level of English teachers' language proficiency. The teacher asks students to speak English in class (a practice uncommon in our context), which makes students with lower language proficiency stressed. In general, students in public schools are not always eager to learn from their teachers. S13 argued that

*S13. Once there was a fight between me and one of my classmates in the class. I believed that the teacher should use less English in the classroom so that I can understand the lessons. My classmate believed that the teacher should use more English in the class as it is an English class not Persian or Arabic. We started to shout at each other while some other students supported both of us.*

Language proficiency, a critical element in the language classroom, can provoke hot debates among students and teachers. The important point is that context plays a very important role in this case.

### Discussion

This qualitative study explored critical incidents in Iranian high school language classrooms through the perspectives of both teachers and students, revealing a complex interplay between teacher perceptions and student experiences. Generally, the findings suggested that promoting reflection on critical incidents can be a valuable tool for understanding and improving classroom dynamics, enhancing professional development, and supporting teachers' identity construction (Kılıç & Cinkara, 2020; Almacioglu & Yalcin Arslan, 2024). Nejadghanbar (2021) supports this, noting that reflection allows teachers to distinguish between minor and major incidents, develop appropriate responses, and gain confidence in

handling challenging situations. [Almacioglu and Yalcin Arslan \(2024\)](#) supported this by finding that participants became more engaged in professional growth and more cognizant of their capacity to learn from analyzing CIs. Our results indicated the emergence of three main themes, which are discussed below.

*Teaching Highs and Lows* highlighted a spectrum of emotional and social challenges in language classrooms. The narratives showed that teachers often remember the low moments more vividly, whereas students tend to recall high moments as well. For instance, teachers recounted instances where their initial harsh reactions, driven by a lack of understanding of students' circumstances, led to deep regret and strained relationships. These moments, such as the story of the teacher who initially shouted at a student for dirtying the floor only to discover the student's challenging circumstances later, underscore the importance of emotional intelligence and empathy in teaching. Conversely, high moments were characterized by teachers inspiring students through innovative methods, personal stories, or resilience in the face of challenges. Through his neat and tidy appearance, one teacher left a positive impression on his students, consistent with [Kashem \(2019\)](#), who found that when teachers enter the classroom in formal, clean, and tidy attire, they can make a good impression on their students. They can motivate them to be polite students in their class. These instances highlight the significant impact of positive student-teacher relationships on students' motivation and learning experiences. Instances of positive critical incidents reported in this study are consistent with the results of [Karimi and Nazari \(2019\)](#), [Kılıç and Cinkara \(2020\)](#), and [Weiss et al. \(2021\)](#). These instances suggest that with the right mindset and training, teachers can transform these events into learning opportunities. This dual nature of critical incidents underscores the need for a balanced approach in teacher training that incorporates reflective practices, helping teachers see potential positive outcomes ([McDonald, 2023](#)).

The theme of *Classroom Management Incidents* revealed frequent behavioral challenges in public schools, including disruptive behavior, practical jokes, and resistance to authority. There is no specific report of teachers or students using inappropriate words or sentences in Iranian high schools. However, this is a very critical issue that should be taken into account. It is clear that in teacher education courses for pre-service and in-service teachers, they learn how to address language misbehaviors. The problem is that sometimes the theory does not turn into practice. Moreover, the training should be conducted using real-life examples, such as the above narratives, to make the reality clear to the teachers. It is not enough to read a few pages on the topic, as our results showed that those pages cannot prevent teachers or students from engaging in misbehavior. Similarly, the laughing problem in English classrooms appears to be a widespread critical incident, as similar incidents were reported by participants in [Kılıç and Cinkara's \(2020\)](#) study.

Teachers' reactions to these incidents varied significantly, with some managing them effectively through experience, while others struggled due to emotional reactions or insufficient training. Extreme management approaches often led to additional critical incidents, confirming

[Sadeghi and Richards \(2021\)](#) findings. For example, T9's reaction to a student's laughter underscores the need for more effective, nuanced management strategies. Professional development should include training on balanced classroom management techniques and reflective practices, as suggested by [Hall and Townsend \(2017\)](#), to help teachers differentiate between minor and major incidents and respond appropriately. The findings also highlight the importance of emphasizing the need for schools to create safe and supportive environments (In case of T2). Providing resources and training to help teachers manage stress and navigate complex classroom dynamics is essential ([Dreer, 2023](#)). Many teachers perceived critical incidents primarily as negative events related to classroom management difficulties, which highlight challenges such as large class sizes, diverse student backgrounds, and limited support from the Ministry of Education (reported similarly by [Atai and Nejadghanbar, 2017](#); [Karimi and Nazari, 2019](#), as examples). These factors can lead to feelings of frustration and a decreased sense of immunity and self-efficacy among teachers. Improving the overall school environment is crucial, including ensuring safety, providing adequate resources, and fostering a supportive community of practice ([Becker, 2023](#)). Policies that enhance teacher immunity through support systems and professional development can mitigate the negative impacts of critical incidents on teachers' self-efficacy ([Li, 2023](#)). Teachers who work in public schools should follow different guidelines compared to those who work in private language institutes. English teachers in language institutes may feel greater immunity for several reasons, such as the institute context, students' motivation, managers' support, and families' expectations of their children, which differ from those in public schools ([Rashidi et al., 2025](#)). Many of these factors are not present in public schools, and different teacher-training protocols should be addressed.

Cultural sensitivity issues also emerged, as seen in the incident where a teacher's use of a culturally inappropriate nickname led to discomfort and tension. Emphasizing cultural sensitivity in teacher education, as S3 suggests, can help avoid misunderstandings and create a more inclusive classroom experience. King and Ng (2018) emphasized that language instructors often face significant intercultural challenges in their profession. Some incidents involved cultural insensitivity, as seen in S3's experience with inappropriate jokes, highlighting the need for cultural competence in teaching, especially in multicultural settings like Iran. These findings suggest that ongoing professional development in classroom management techniques and cultural sensitivity is crucial. Schools should provide support systems for teachers to discuss and reflect on classroom incidents, fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Enhanced teacher training programs focusing on effective classroom management and stress management are essential. Policies should provide stronger support systems for teachers, including counseling services and professional development opportunities that emphasize positive approaches to handling critical incidents.

*Language Proficiency* emerged as a critical factor influencing both teachers' and students' experiences. Some students emphasized the importance of teachers' language proficiency (S4, S6), aligning with [Richards et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Van Canh and Renandya \(2017\)](#). Interestingly,

this theme contrasted with perceptions of students in [Finch's \(2010\)](#) study. While in the current study, the majority of students considered teachers' language proficiency a source of critical incidents, in the Finch study students considered their own language proficiency a source of critical incidents. Teachers with low proficiency often struggled to maintain relevance in discussions and resorted to using their native language, leading to student dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, teachers with high proficiency faced resistance from students who found it challenging to follow lessons conducted entirely in English. This dichotomy underscores the need for a balanced approach to language use in the classroom that caters to students with varying proficiency levels. Improving teachers' language proficiency through targeted training programs can enhance their confidence and teaching effectiveness. Encouraging creative and contextual use of English can also make lessons more engaging and less stressful for students. Continuous professional development focused on improving teachers' language proficiency is necessary, and schools should ensure access to language training resources and support ([Heppt et al., 2022](#)). Like students in many other countries, Iranian students have welcomed learning foreign languages in recent years. English is the main foreign language taught in both public schools and private language institutes. English teachers in high schools are employees of the Iranian Ministry of Education. The majority of those who work in private language institutes are freelance teachers. The English language proficiency of these two groups differs, and freelancers generally enjoy higher English language proficiency, which is closely related to their well-being ([Mercer, 2023](#)). This fact has been reported by several students in the present study as the main source of CIs.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the study's findings align with complexity theory by highlighting the dynamic, interconnected, and adaptive nature of teaching and learning in Iranian public schools ([Farangi et al., 2025](#)). The emergent patterns of emotional responses, classroom management strategies, and language proficiency interactions reflect the principles of sensitivity to initial conditions, self-organization, and co-evolution. Understanding these educational dynamics through the lens of complexity theory offers valuable insights into the intricate, evolving nature of classroom environments, underscoring the need for adaptive, flexible, and context-sensitive approaches to teaching and learning ([Farangi & Naami, 2024](#)). Integrating complexity theory into educational practice can help educators navigate the complexities of their classrooms, fostering environments that support both teachers and students in their co-evolutionary journey towards improved learning outcomes.

### Implications for complexity theory

A limitation of previous studies that used complexity theory as their theoretical framework was that they did not consider other significant participants in the complex context of language learning. According to the principles of complexity theory, events are interrelated and non-linear; a seemingly minor behavior or demeanor can significantly impact a student's or teacher's life, and due to the fact that the educational environment is a highly multifaceted domain extending beyond the confines of the classroom, many participants can play a role in it.

Teaching Highs and Lows underscores the unpredictable and emergent nature of classroom interactions. Teachers' emotional and social challenges, coupled with their responses to critical incidents, illustrate the dynamic interplay between individual behaviors and broader systemic influences (Farangi & Kheradmand, 2025). For instance, the narrative of the teacher who reacted harshly to a student with muddy shoes, only to later learn about the student's difficult circumstances, highlights how initial reactions can trigger a cascade of unintended consequences. This aligns with complexity theory's notion of sensitivity to initial conditions, where small actions can lead to significant, and often unforeseen, outcomes. The ability of teachers to turn negative incidents into positive learning experiences by adapting their responses demonstrates the adaptive nature of complex systems.

The theme of Classroom Management Incidents further exemplifies the principles of complexity theory, particularly in relation to self-organization and emergence. Classroom management is not a straightforward process but rather an emergent property of numerous interactions among students, teachers, and the broader school environment. Incidents of disruptive behavior, practical jokes, and resistance to authority reveal how individual actions can collectively influence the classroom climate. Teachers' varied reactions to these incidents—ranging from harsh responses to more controlled and experienced handling—highlight the self-organizing capacity of the classroom environment. Effective classroom management emerges from the ongoing, adaptive interactions between teachers and students, rather than from rigid, top-down control.

Language Proficiency illustrates the concept of co-evolution in complexity theory, in which teachers and students mutually influence each other's development. Teachers with varying levels of language proficiency create different learning environments, which in turn affect students' engagement and proficiency. The feedback loops created by these interactions—where students' responses influence teachers' strategies and vice versa—demonstrate the interconnected and co-evolving nature of the educational system. The challenge of balancing English and the native language in the classroom further underscores the complex, adaptive nature of language-learning environments.

### Limitations and Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study has methodological limitations. The relatively small and uneven sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Although efforts were

made to include diverse student backgrounds, a larger, stratified sample could have captured a broader range of experiences. Furthermore, while the paired interview approach added depth, the absence of additional data sources, such as classroom observations or document analysis, limits triangulation. Future research could benefit from incorporating multiple qualitative tools to enrich contextual understanding and validate emergent themes.

A more comprehensive thematic analysis would involve a more systematic coding process and a deeper exploration of the relationships between the identified themes. Suggestions for future research are: Conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in teachers' perceptions and management of critical incidents over time. This would provide insights into how teachers' attitudes and strategies evolve with experience and training; Investigating the effectiveness of different teacher training programs in preparing teachers to handle critical incidents. Focus on programs that incorporate reflective practices, classroom management strategies, and cultural sensitivity training; Examining the influence of school environment and support systems on teachers' self-efficacy and their ability to manage critical incidents. Research could explore how factors such as administrative support, peer collaboration, and access to resources affect teachers' responses to critical incidents, and further explore students' perceptions of critical incidents, both positive and negative. This can provide a more balanced understanding of the impact of these incidents on the learning experience and inform strategies for fostering positive classroom dynamics; Assessing the impact of educational policies on the occurrence and management of critical incidents. Research could focus on how policy changes related to class size, teacher-student ratios, and funding affect teachers' ability to manage their classrooms effectively.

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