

Analysis of Iranian EFL Teachers' Narrated Critical Incidents and Their Productive Coping Strategies

Saeedeh Esmae'li^{1*}, Katayoon Afzali²

^{1*} Ph.D. Candidate, English Language Department, Sheikhbahae University, Baharestan, Iran, saeedeh.3@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, English Language Department, Sheikhbahae University, Baharestan, Iran, k.afzali@shbu.ac.ir

Abstract

Critical incidents are unanticipated and unplanned events which happen in the classrooms and may throw teachers into a state of disequilibrium which results in teachers' losing their resilience. Therefore, when encountering critical incidents teachers are required to stop and reflect on the occurred event. However, teacher education programs do not prepare student teachers to cope with these situations appropriately. In view of this problem, the aim of the present study is to categorize critical incidents and provide a repertoire of teachers' productive coping strategies. To this end, fifteen English teachers, eight females and seven males, were selected from three universities and three institutes in Isfahan, Iran. They were asked to narrate the critical incidents they faced in their English classrooms and their coping strategies they used in their classrooms throughout one semester. The three-stage coding process of grounded theory was utilized to analyze 49 narrated critical incidents and teachers' coping strategies. Six categories and 14 subcategories of critical incidents were identified. The findings can have implications for teacher education programs. There should be educational programs to encourage teachers to reflect on the critical incidents and promote their resilience when encountering critical incidents in their classrooms. The programs could be used for pre- or in-service teachers. Critical incidents provide opportunities for reflection and challenges of teachers' beliefs and values to promote and foster teacher development.

Keywords: Critical Incidents, Productive Coping Strategies, Resilience, Teacher Education

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1. Introduction

In their teaching activities, teachers face many unexpected and overwhelming situations which demand immediate reaction on the part of teachers. In such situations, teachers consider themselves victims of circumstances and perceive students as the sources of problems (Larrivee, 2000). As a result of such perception, teachers are constantly engaged in a form of pre-reflection or non-reflection, i.e., reacting to unplanned and difficult events automatically and without conscious consideration of alternative responses (Larrivee, 2000). In other words, they do not question their tacit theories and ideologies behind them and take them for granted. Although, through reflective practice, teachers will be able to question their beliefs and practices, this issue has been ignored in teacher education programs (Bolton, 2005; Griffin, 2003; Marcos, Sanchez, & Tillema, 2009).

Within the realm of reflective practice, one area which is considered to be helpful for initiating reflective thinking is critical incidents (Meijer, De Graaf, & Meirink, 2011; Romano, 2006; Tripp, 1993; Yair, 2008). Challenging teachers to focus and reflect on critical incidents is considered as an opportunity to initiate more in-depth thinking and a source of “accelerated development” (Meijer, et al., 2011, p. 117). In this respect, Yair (2008) states that “[t]he qualitative information that critical incidents embody proves highly fruitful for influencing practitioner thinking and supporting professional development” (p. 94).

Richards and Farrell (2010) define critical incident as “an unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during a lesson and that serves to trigger insights about some aspects of teaching and learning” (p. 13). Thiel (1999) states that there may be “teaching high/positive or teaching low/negative” critical incidents in daily routines of teachers. According to Richards and Farrell (2010), if in a speaking class, for instance, an unplanned interference or change in the lesson plan promotes students’ participation, it could be considered as a teaching high/positive critical incident. On the other hand, problematic and puzzling classroom incidents such as a student’s behavior can be a teaching low/negative critical incident. When an unplanned event occurs in the classroom, teachers should ask themselves what happened and what caused it happen. In other words, critical incidents need reflection on the part of teachers. Analysis and reflection on critical incidents help teachers question their teaching performance and tacit theories in order to identify good practices as well as productive coping strategies (Joshi, 2018).

The unplanned and unanticipated events happening in classrooms could be considered as constraints and conflicts which have disempowering or marginalizing effect on teachers and throw them into a state of disequilibrium which results in teachers’ losing their resilience (Gu & Day, 2013). Teachers,

therefore, should encounter such challenges through increasing their knowledge about productive coping strategies to foster their resilience (Hong, 2012). In other words, teachers can be helped to cope with the problem through awareness raising, providing a repertoire of productive coping strategies and encouraging the formation of narratives to promote their resilience (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2015). Through narrative reflective practices of critical incidents, teachers would be able to reflect on and question their beliefs and practices, i.e., their tacit theories (Farrell, 2013).

The necessity and importance of reflection on critical incidents have been emphasized in the literature (e.g., Farrell, 2013, 2015; Finch, 2010; Johnson & Golombeck, 2002; Romano, 2006; Woods, 1993); however, there have been only a few studies which have focused on English language teachers' critical incidents, and especially EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers and their productive coping strategies (Farrell, 2008). Therefore, this study aims to provide a repertoire of productive coping strategies for teachers to help them use critical incidents, even the teaching low/negative ones to achieve the most important goal of the class, i.e., learning, and to promote their resilience in encountering critical incidents.

2. Literature Review

The term critical incident was coined by Flanagan (1954) while he was working on Aviation Psychology Program of the U.S. Air. Critical incidents are used in various disciplines such as medicine, management, communication, social work, psychology, and education. Therefore, different terminologies have been used to refer to critical incidents: bumpy moments (Romano, 2006), crystalizing experiences (Walters & Gardner, 1986) and peak experiences (Maslow, 1968). In addition, critical incidents have been defined differently. Schön (1987) defines critical incidents as situations which are unexpected and difficult to understand and unique cases for encouraging reflection. Measor (1985) characterizes critical incidents as “key events in individual life, and around which pivotal decisions revolve. ... These are the periods of strain” (pp. 61-62). These unplanned and unanticipated periods of strain are “vividly remembered” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 84), as a result they may have a lasting impact on the person experiencing them.

In ELT (English Language Teaching), the critical incident is explained as “any unplanned event that occurs during class ... [through reflection on it, trainee teachers] uncover new understanding of the teaching and learning process” (Farrell, 2008, p. 3). Richards and Farrell (2010) remark that critical incidents compel teachers to stop, rethink, and question the meaning of them and their long-term consequences.

It is important to identify critical incidents (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). Griffin (2003) examined the effect of using critical incidents to promote reflective thinking in preservice teachers through analyzing 135 critical incidents. The results showed that reporting critical incidents increased the teachers' orientation toward growth and inquiry. Similarly, Hamlin (2004) analyzed formal field reports written by student teachers in pre-education courses. The results revealed that through analyzing critical incidents, the student teachers were able to move beyond describing their observations.

Moreover, in a Singaporean context, Farrell (2008) analyzed reflection journals of 18 trainee English language teachers on their teaching acts which led to the following categories: language proficiency, classroom participation, behavior, gender, classroom space, lesson objectives, classroom activities, attention span, and additional class assistance. In another study, Pope, Green, Johnson, and Mitchell (2009) examined teachers' perception of ethical dilemmas related to classroom assessment. The results showed that most of the dilemmas were related to "score pollution and conflicts frequently arose between teachers' perceptions of institutional demand and the needs of students" (p. 778). In a similar study, Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) explored ethical dilemmas in critical incidents in Israel. The categories of ethical dilemmas were caring climate vs. formal climate; distributive justice vs. school standards; confidentiality vs. school rules; loyalty to a colleague vs. school norms; and family agenda vs. educational standards.

In a recent study Atai and Nejadghanbar (2016) analyzed the written critical incidents of six in-service EFL teachers in Iran. The results revealed six categories as behavior, language proficiency, clashes, individual differences, class participation, and teachers' unpreparedness. Finally, Chien (2017) analyzed six Taiwanese EFL student teachers' writing and discussion of critical incidents with their cooperating teacher. The results showed that student teachers learned four important lessons from this approach which included "individual learners' differences, classroom management strategies, instructional strategies, solutions to incidents and reflection" (Chien, 2017, p. 7).

Although, the previous studies focused on categorizing critical incidents; an in-depth research on how teachers cope with critical incidents in their classrooms is needed (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). The present study, therefore, focuses on critical incidents which happen specifically in English language classes in an EFL context, and teachers' productive coping strategies in such situations.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted in Iran which is an EFL context. Fifteen EFL teachers (eight females and seven males) from three universities and three institutes in Isfahan, Iran were selected to participate in this study. The rationale behind this selection is that mostly the classes of language institutes are single-gendered while university classes are mixed-gendered classroom. Since critical incidents could be different in different contexts (Farrell, 2008), the participants were selected from different contexts. The participants held the Ph.D., the M.A., or the B.A. degree in English teaching, literature or translation. Their ages ranged from 25 to 44 with two to 20 years of teaching experience. A pseudonym was selected by each participant in order to remain anonymous and protect the participants' privacy. Table 1 represents detailed information about the participants of the study.

Table 1

Participants' Background

Participant	Sex	Teaching Experience (Years)	University Teacher	Institute Teacher	Teacher Education	Age
Narges	F	18	✓	✓	Ph.D. in TEFL	41
Sarah	F	20	✓	✓	Ph.D. in TEFL	41
Goli	F	16	✓	✓	M.A. in TEFL	39
Angel	F	10		✓	M.A. in TEFL	33
Leila	F	14		✓	B.A. in English Translation	38
Yas	F	4		✓	B.A. in English Translation	26
Pegah	F	2		✓	B.A. in English Translation	25
Nazanin	F	10	✓		M.A. in English Translation	31
Jack	M	20	✓	✓	M.A. in TEFL	44
Hamid	M	18		✓	M.A. in Literature	
Omid	M	12	✓		M.A. in TEFL	36
Sepehr	M	17	✓	✓	PhD. in TEFL	39
Milad	M	13		✓	M.A. in English Translation	40
Nima	M	3		✓	B.A. in English Translation	27
Soheil	M	20	✓		Ph.D. in Literature	42

3.2. Materials and Instruments

In order to collect the data, the following instruments were used:

3.2.1. *Teachers' Recall and Reflection Journals*

The participants were asked to narrate and write the critical incidents happening in their classrooms during one semester (from February 2019 to June 2019) in their recall and reflection journals in English or Persian based on the following outline: what happened, the outcome, the implications, and what they would change. The length of their narrations was varied between one to three pages. According to Mackey and Gass (2016) a journal is a first person's experience of language teaching which has been documented through regular entries in a personal journal, then it will be analyzed for recurrent patterns. Journals can be used to allow participants to report their internal processes and thoughts which in the case of teachers they include individual instructors' insights into their own teaching processes, their selves, decision making processes and attitudes towards classroom teaching.

3.2.2. *Teachers' Interview*

A set of semi-structured interview questions based on narrated critical incidents was developed, reviewed and modified by two experts, and used in order to collect data on teachers' understanding of and reflection on critical incidents (see Appendix 1). The researcher interviewed the participants in an empty room in the university/institute. The interviews which were held for 60 to 90 minutes, with an average interview time of 75 minutes, were conducted in English and Persian, audiotaped and then transcribed.

3.3. Procedure

Primarily, participants were familiarized with the concept of critical incidents. To shed some light on the concept, some examples of critical incidents were cited, and the required information the participants were asked to write in their recall and reflection journals was explained. It was explained that critical incidents are unplanned and unanticipated events which occur during a lesson and can activate perceptions about some aspects of teaching and learning. Additionally, they were informed that critical incidents are both teaching high/positive and teaching low/negative situations which may support and limit teaching and learning respectively. Some examples from Atai and Nejadghanbar (2016) were provided for them. To ensure that they have grasped the concept, they were asked to express some of the critical incidents they had experienced in their own classes.

After exposing the participants to the concept of critical incidents, the outline of narration of critical incidents proposed by Goodell (2006) was introduced. According to Goodell (2006), when teachers report the critical incidents, they should follow these steps: what happened, the outcome, the

implications, and what you would change. Accordingly, the participants were asked to write the critical incidents through these phases of description, explanation and reflection. Then a journal to which the outline of the phases was attached was given to each teacher. Furthermore, they were asked to select a pseudonym, write their age, their education and their teaching experience on the first page of the journal.

In order to collect more in-depth data about critical incidents, a set of semi-structured interview questions based on narrated critical incidents was developed, reviewed and modified by two experts, and used. The interviews were conducted individually, in an empty room, in semi-structured way, in Persian and English, audiotaped and transcribed later. The use of teachers' journals and interviews as data sources resulted in data and methodological triangulation. In addition, two experts' reviewing and modifying the semi-structured interview questions resulted in investigator triangulation.

In order to categorize the narrated critical incidents, the three stages of grounded theory proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), i.e., open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were used. Through the open coding stage, the researcher continually examined, compared, conceptualized and categorized the collected data. Raw data were examined for similarities and differences, and initial conceptual categories were identified, and categories or different dimensions of critical incidents were identified. Then through the axial coding stage, the data were put together in new ways in order to connect subcategories to a category. Finally, in the selective coding stage, the core categories were identified and decided upon. For instance, one of the teachers had narrated: *It was a writing class and I wanted students to review each other's writing before giving them to me. But it seemed that students were anxious and they began to complain. They thought that their peer's comments were not accurate and helpful.* Since the critical incident happened because of students' reaction to peer review, through open coding stage, this critical incident was named being *anxious about peer review*. Considering the second stage, i.e., axial coding stage, this incident was sub-categorized under *writing* because it happened in the writing class. And finally, through selective coding stage, the incident was put under the category *language skills and components*.

Then the researcher focused on teachers' reported coping strategies for each category and subcategory of critical incidents and by applying the three stages of grounded theory proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) categorized productive coping strategies. For example, considering the cited critical incident which was related to *language skills and components*, the teacher had narrated: *I divided my class into five groups of four students. In groups they began to review each other's written tasks. I participated in each*

group to teach them how perform peer review. The teacher's coping strategy in encountering this situation could be categorized as grouping the students of the class.

Finally, to increase the dependability and credibility of data analysis, an expert was asked to code the critical incidents and productive coping strategies which resulted in investigator triangulation. The inter-coder agreement (calculation of the number of agreements over disagreements) was 89 percent for critical incidents and 92.4 percent for productive coping strategies.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Analysis of Critical Incidents

Forty-nine narrated critical incidents were analyzed into six categories and 14 subcategories. Table 2 indicates the categories and subcategories.

Table 2

Results of Analysis of Teachers' Critical Incidents

Categories	Sub-categories	Frequencies
Language Skills & Components	Writing	6
	Vocabulary	6
	Pronunciation	4
	Speaking	2
Heterogeneous Classrooms		12
Materials	Beyond Students' Level	5
	Not Interesting	1
	Not based on Course Goals	1
Mother Tongue	Students too much Use of L1	3
	Teacher Unfamiliarity with Students' L1	2
	Attrition of Students' L1	1
Testing Issues	Too much Importance Given to Scores	2
	Inconsistency between Materials Taught & Tests Given to them	1
Teaching L2 Cultural Aspects	Appreciating Western Culture	2
	Disagreement with Teaching Western Culture	1

4.1.1.1. Language Skills and Components

The first most frequently reported critical incident was related to *language skills and components* with four subcategories: *writing*, *vocabulary*, *pronunciation* and *speaking*. Considering the first subcategory, i.e., *writing*, Sarah perceived plagiarism in her students' project work as critical.

One problem that really bothers me is the prevalence of plagiarism among students. Few teachers care about that. Some students plagiarize. They copy the work of previous years' students, they copy each other's work, and they borrow from published materials. The students learn to devalue learning and to cheat teachers and the system.

In this context, the teacher faced a situation that while students plagiarize, other teachers do not pay attention to the issue and ignore it. Sarah considered this plagiarism as critical because students would learn to cheat teachers as well as the system, and they would also devalue learning. Since the critical incident is related to developing writing skill, it is classified into *language skills and components* category and *writing* subcategory.

The second subcategory of *language skills and components* is related to *vocabulary*. Teaching and learning vocabulary is one of the difficult aspects for teachers and learners respectively. As an example, Narges considered her students' difficulty in learning new words as critical.

The focus of the course was on developing learners' vocabulary knowledge. The learners were adult and they had so much difficulty in leaning words. Each session a list of at least 20 words was taught to them. The words were out of context. Learning vocabulary was really difficult for them.

Memorizing and learning vocabulary is a difficult task, and in this context the learners have learned long lists of words out of context. Narges perceived this situation a critical incident because she had to teach and the students should have learned the new words, but they had difficulty in learning. Since the critical incident is related to developing learners' vocabulary, it is classified as *language skills and components* and under the subcategory of *vocabulary*.

Pronunciation is the third subcategory of *language skills and components*. Leila considered her students' inability to pronounce the new words as a critical incident.

I used IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) during the class because the goal of the course was to help students to be able to read phonetics of the words correctly. I used a large IPA chart and separate sets of flash cards. I presented the sounds of vowels, consonants, diphthongs and consonant clusters and the students memorized them. Students were able to remember sounds from the chart and flash cards, but they couldn't pronounce words.

In this context, Leila had used IPA to teach the learners the correct pronunciation of the words. However, she encountered a situation in which learners had difficulty in pronouncing words. In other words, while they knew the sounds and could recall them, they were unable to pronounce words. This critical incident is related to *language skills and components* category and was classified under the *pronunciation* subcategory.

The last subcategory of *language skills and components* category is related to *speaking*. Jack perceived his students' too much focus on other skills instead of concentrating on speaking skill as a critical incident.

The objective of the course was developing all skills, but more focus on developing learners' speaking skill. The learners' focus was on other skills and they were concerned with reading, listening, vocabulary and grammar development. Whenever I wanted them to focus on speaking, they told me that the ability to speak English isn't useful.

In this situation, Jack considered the learners' unwillingness to speak English and develop their speaking ability as critical. The students believed that the ability to speak English was not advantageous, and they preferred to concentrate on other skills and subskills. Therefore, the critical incident is related to *language skills and components* and subcategory of *speaking*.

4.1.1.2. *Heterogeneous Classrooms*

The second most frequently narrated category of critical incidents is *heterogeneous classrooms* which can bring so many difficulties for teachers. Omid, for instance, considered students' heterogeneity as a critical incident.

This class features a wide range in maturity, age, motivation, and educational background. Some of the students of my class have just graduated from high school and others had graduated from high school several years ago. How could I meet the needs of each of them and keep them motivated?

The students of this class were heterogeneous considering their age, educational level, motivation and maturity. According to Omid's narration, he should have taught them based on their needs and kept them motivated throughout the term. Such situations can be classified as *heterogeneous classrooms*.

4.1.1.3. *Materials*

Materials are the third category of narrated critical incidents which is supported by three subcategories: *beyond students' level*, *too general and not interesting*, and *not based on course goals*. Considering the first subcategory, Sepehr perceived students struggling in reading texts as critical.

The goal of the course was fostering students' reading comprehension. The book was selected by the committee before knowing the students' level. I was familiar with the book and I knew it was for upper-intermediate and advanced students. The texts of the book were difficult to understand for lower levels. After the first two sessions I became sure that the students were unable to understand the texts. It was not a surprise, their level was lower-intermediate or intermediate and the texts were beyond their level. They couldn't understand them.

Sepehr encountered a situation that materials were beyond students' level. Students struggled to understand the texts, but they were far beyond their level and their inability to understand them was not a surprise to Sepehr. Since the critical incident is related to difficulty of materials, it is classified as *beyond students' level* subcategory of the category of *materials*.

The second subcategory of *materials* is *not interesting*. Jack perceived too general materials as a critical incident.

The available materials were too general and were not of students' interest. According to the objective of the course, that book was the only available coursebook. But it was too general and not interesting. As a teacher I wasn't interested in it. The reaction of students was predictable.

In this context, Jack did not have access to other materials and was forced to use the only available coursebook which was not interesting and was too general. The critical incident is related to the category of *materials* and subcategory of *not interesting*.

The third subcategory of *materials* is *not based on course goals*. Goli encountered a situation that the coursebook was not based on the objectives of the course.

The goal of the course was to develop all skills, but the focus of the book was on reading, grammar and vocabulary. The students had worked through Books 1 and 2 and manager showed no willingness to change the book or order more resources. There were no other materials I could use. How could I teach speaking and listening while all the book is about reading, grammar and words?

In this situation, Goli had problem with materials which were not based on the objectives of the course. She perceived this situation as critical because she did not know what to do and how to teach other skills. These events can be classified as *materials* category and *not based on course goals* subcategory.

4.1.1.4. Mother Tongue (L1)

The fourth category of narrated critical incidents is *mother tongue* with three subcategories: *students too much use of L1*, *teacher unfamiliarity with students' L1*, and *attrition of students' L1*. Considering the first category, i.e., *students too much use of L1* in the classroom, Leila perceived students use of L1 in the classroom as a critical incident.

Students use L1 in class for everything. They are able to use L2 (English), but they don't use it. They use L1 to call me or others, to say the meaning of words, and even to answer the questions. It isn't English class, it is Persian class. They just read, write and, to some extent, listen to English. They use Persian too much.

Leila, the teacher, had faced an event that students used L1 too much in the classroom and for every activity. In other words, they were learning English while they were using their L1. The critical incident is related to *L1* category and *students too much use of L1* subcategory.

The second subcategory of *L1* is *teacher unfamiliarity with students' L1*. It can be really difficult for teacher to face a class that speaks a language unfamiliar to them. Milad faced such a situation and perceived that as critical.

All the students of one of my classes were Armenian. I didn't know their language, and it was really difficult. We were able to speak Persian to make some misunderstanding in English learning clear. But they were using their own language to communicate with each other, and the only person who couldn't understand them was me. They spoke and laughed and I was unable to understand a word.

In this event, Milad had encountered a context that all students were able to use a language which was unknown to the teacher. He expected them to use Persian to avoid misunderstanding, but the students preferred to use their own language. This situation is related to *L1* category and *teacher does not know students' L1* subcategory.

The third subcategory of *L1* is *attrition of mother tongue*. Angel perceived her students' attrition of their mother tongue as a critical incident.

I didn't allow my students to speak Persian in class. I noticed that they were forgetting some of Persian words. It seemed that they were losing some aspects of their L1. Even when they were speaking Persian in the class, silently, I could understand that they were using so many English words and English structure for Persian.

In this situation, Angel faced an event that she thought students were losing their L1, because they were using English structure for Persian and in

using Persian they sometimes used English words. This critical incident is related to *L1* and is classified as *attrition of students' L1* subcategory.

4.1.1.5. Testing Issues

The fifth category of narrated critical incidents is *testing issues* which is mostly related to testing and assessing students with two subcategories: *too much importance given to scores* and *inconsistency between materials taught and tests given to them*. Considering the first subcategory, teachers such as Soheil faced a situation that students wanted to learn language just to get the best credits on the exam not to learn language to use it.

Testing is stressful for students and they want to get the best credits on the exams. They pass the tests with the best credits, but very soon they forget the subject. They just learn to get the best credits not to use it. It is really bad. They don't learn anything while their credits are really good.

In this event, Soheil encountered an event that students did not learn an aspect of language to use it, but they learned it to emulate other students which is related to *testing issues*.

The second category of *testing issues* is related to situations that the final exam which is prepared by a committee is not based on the materials of the course. Sepehr faced such situation.

I had a class and a textbook for the course was given to me by the committee. I began to teach according to the assigned textbook. One session one of the students told me 'Why do you try so hard to teach this useless book? None of these nonsenses are tested. I know. I failed this course.' I asked the committee, and unfortunately the student was right.

In this situation, the teacher considered the event as a critical incident because the test and assessment were not based on the course and what was taught in the course. The event is *testing issues* because students must be tested based on what they had learned.

4.1.1.6. Teaching L2 Cultural Aspects

Teaching L2 cultural aspects is the sixth category of narrated critical incidents with two subcategories: *appreciating western culture* and *disagreement with teaching western culture*. Considering the first subcategory, i.e., *appreciating western culture*, Jack faced an event in which students began to praise western culture.

I was teaching a story about Easter and Christmas. Suddenly one of the students began to praise western culture and their customs. She

said ‘They have beautiful customs. They have customs for every situation and they wear different costumes. We don’t have any special custom. We are the unluckiest country.’ Other students began to accept her, and they despised Iranian culture.

In this situation, the teacher faced an event that students began to talk about western culture and appreciated it while downgrading their own culture and country. This event is related to *teaching L2 cultural aspects* category and *appreciating western culture* subcategory.

The second subcategory of *teaching L2 cultural aspects* is related to students’ *disagreement with teaching western culture*. Nazanin encountered such an event and considered it as critical.

I was teaching a text which was about being beautiful/handsome. One of the students protested and said ‘These are against our culture, you shouldn’t teach them. Other students were staring at me. They were waiting for my answer.

Nazanin, the teacher, had faced a situation that while she was teaching some cultural aspects which were against Iranian culture, one of the students protested and opposed teaching cultural aspects. This event is categorized under the category of *teaching L2 cultural aspects* and subcategory of *disagreeing with teaching western culture*.

4.1.2. Analysis of Productive Coping Strategies

When encountering critical incidents, the participating teachers reacted in different ways. Their reactions to each category were analyzed by the researcher, and then in order to increase the dependability of data analysis, an expert was asked to code the productive coping strategies. As was mentioned, the inter-coder agreement was 92.4 percent for productive coping strategies. Through analysis of participating teachers’ productive reactions, the following repertoire of productive coping strategies for each category was developed.

4.1.2.1. Language Skills and Components

The first category of critical incidents was *language skills and components* with four subcategories. Considering the first subcategory, i.e., *writing*, teachers used the following productive coping strategies: grouping the students, changing teaching strategy and giving feedback, and having variation on the exercises. For example, Sarah encountered plagiarism in students’ project works. She decided to bring variation on the type of exercises.

I cannot tolerate cheating. Students should not cheat teachers and the educational system. I couldn’t change the type of the exercises, I

mean I couldn't want some students to write process essays and others descriptive ones. They should be able to write any type of essay, so I brought some variations. For example I changed the audience, I wanted students to write a process of making a cake for children, for adults, and for chefs. And it was useful.

In this context, Sarah wanted to teach the students to write different types of essays by themselves not copying them from the Internet or previous year students. Therefore, she managed the critical incident of plagiarism by making some changes such as changing the audience of the essays.

The second subcategory was *vocabulary*. In encountering critical incidents related to vocabulary, teachers used two productive coping strategies: making and writing stories (both teachers and students) and using real objects in teaching and assessing concrete words. In encountering a situation that student had to learn words out of context, Narges used making and writing stories as a coping strategy.

Learning words out of context is really difficult. I made a short story using the 20 words and 2 structures that the students had to learn. I recorded it. In class I taught the words and the structures. Then I played the story and wanted them to listen and summarize it. While summarizing the story, they used new words and new structures. As homework, they were to write a short story using new words and structures.

In this context, Narges used story writing and telling as a coping strategy to help students learn words and grammatical structures. Listening to the story made by the teacher helped the students understand words in the context, and making stories helped them use the words and grammatical structures in the context, and therefore, learn them.

Pronunciation was the third subcategory of this category. In facing critical incidents related to pronunciation, teachers used correction and practice as coping strategies. Leila used more practice to help the students to use their knowledge.

I thought that when they knew the sounds but couldn't use it to pronounce words, they should make words and practice to pronounce them. Therefore, we began to put sounds together to make words, phrases and sentences. And practice and practice and practice.

In this context, Leila encountered a situation that students knew the sounds and were able to remember them based on IPA, but they could not use their knowledge to pronounce unknown words. By putting the sounds in

context and making new words as well as practicing more, she was able to manage the situation of teaching sounds.

The last subcategory of this category was *speaking*. Facing such critical incidents, teachers used students' oral presentation and class discussion as coping strategies. Jack encountered a situation that students did not concentrate on speaking skill. Therefore, he used oral presentation and discussion to manage the incident.

The students didn't want to focus on speaking, so I wanted them to prepare oral presentations and speeches and after each presentation, we had class discussion on the topic. Little by little they liked it.

In this context, the teacher used oral presentation and discussion to develop students' speaking skill. He used students' oral presentation for helping each student to develop their speaking skills, and class discussion to share opinions on topics and develop discussion skills in students.

4.1.2.2. *Heterogeneous Classrooms*

Heterogeneous classrooms was the second category of critical incidents. In facing critical incidents related to *heterogeneous classrooms*, teachers used different types of productive coping strategies such as grouping the less proficient students with more proficient ones, introducing two books for two levels, story reading and writing activities, providing different types of exercises, and using L1 sometimes. For an instance, Omid used different kinds of exercises to manage the problem.

It was difficult, but I used different books and websites to prepare different types of exercises for my students. The exercises were for different levels and ages, and therefore, the students could answer them based on their levels. Little by little, the less proficient ones showed interest to answer more difficult questions.

In this situation, Omid encountered a situation that students were not homogeneous regarding their age, motivation, educational background and maturity. He used strategy providing different types of exercises to help the students develop their knowledge based on their level. In other words, through doing the exercises which were at the students' level and to some extent above their level, students became able to develop their proficiency.

4.1.2.3. *Materials*

The third category of critical incidents was *materials* with three subcategories. Considering the first subcategory, i.e., *beyond students' level*, teachers used grouping students, teaching strategies, and recommending simpler references as coping strategies. For example, Sepehr used teaching reading comprehension strategies to help the students.

I used a questionnaire in L1 to understand students' behavior. I mean to understand how they read a text. Then I began to teach reading comprehension strategies, most of them were unknown and misused. So I showed the students the way to use the strategies. I mean I modeled them in the class.

In this context, the teacher faced a situation that materials were difficult for students. He, therefore, used a questionnaire to understand students' knowledge about strategies and to understand their behavior, then he taught the unknown and misused reading strategies to students through teacher modeling.

The second subcategory was *not interesting materials*. In encountering such critical incidents, the teacher encouraged the students to participate in providing materials. Jack faced a situation that the available materials were too general and not interesting, so he asked for students' help in providing materials.

I provided a chapter and in one session, I explained the important parts of material development. After that they began to make some interesting chapters. We used them in the class. Students were learning while they were making the materials.

In this context, Jack taught some rules of material development and he had prepared a model for students, and then he wanted them to provide materials. Through the process of material development, students would be able to learn the subject and language.

The third subcategory was materials which were *not based on course goals*. In encountering such critical incidents, the teacher and students participated to develop authentic materials. Goli used group work to develop authentic materials.

I talked to the students about the deficiency of the materials. Then I told them that I need their help. They brought their movies, magazines, and songs to the class. We used the book and the materials students brought to the class. We worked on them and for example made some questions and exercises.

In this context, Goli encountered a situation that materials lack some kind of exercises according to the objectives of the course. Therefore, the teacher and students worked with each other on some movies, songs and magazines which belonged to the students to develop authentic materials. In other words, they used movies, songs and magazines to make exercises and activities for students to achieve the objectives of the course.

4.1.2.4. *Mother Tongue (L1)*

Mother tongue was the fourth category of critical incidents with three subcategories. In encountering *students too much use of L1* in class, teachers banned L1 use and defined penalty for L1 use in the class. Leila used the mentioned strategies to manage the situation.

I banned using bilingual dictionaries and use of L1 in the class. I also defined penalty for using L1 in the class. I told them that they should bring candy or ice-cream for all the students, if they use L1 in the class. I banned L1 use because the students were able to use English, but they didn't use it.

In this context, Leila faced a situation that students did not consider L2 as a medium for communication, and they just considered it as a subject to be learned. Since they had the ability to use it, Leila banned use of L1 in the class and defined penalty for using L1.

The second subcategory was *teacher unfamiliarity with students' L1*. In facing such critical incidents, teachers mentioned learning the students' L1 as the only strategy.

The only thing I could do was learning their language. It was a little difficult for me. But I had to.

In this context, Milad encountered a situation that he did not know the students' L1. Therefore, he decided to learn their language to manage the event although he believed that it was a difficult task for him.

Attrition of students' L1 was the third subcategory related to *L1*. In encountering this critical incident, Angel used compulsory classes of reading Persian literature as a strategy.

The students were losing their L1, so I told them that there was a compulsory class for reading Persian literature or translated literature. I forced them to participate in the class which its teacher was one of my friends. The students shouldn't pay for it, but they had to be present.

In encountering the situation of *attrition of students' L1*, the teacher used compulsory classes with focus on Persian literature or translated works. In other words, the teacher tried to provide some contexts for the students to concentrate on their L1.

4.1.2.5. *Testing Issues*

Testing issues was the fifth category of critical incidents with two subcategories. Considering the first subcategory, i.e., *too much importance given to scores*, in encountering such critical incidents teachers wanted

students to make tests as homework and answer each other's tests and correct them. Soheil faced a situation that students wanted good marks, but learning was not important for them.

I wanted each one of the students to make a test as their homework, for example 10 questions for lessons 1-5. Then I checked the questions and gave them to the students. Test of student A, for example, was given to student G. They answered them and checked them. It was really useful.

In this context, the teacher wanted students to make tests for other students. Then he wanted them to answer the tests and check them. Through preparing the tests, answering them and checking the tests, students will learn the subject and participate in testing without stress.

The second subcategory of *testing issues* category was *inconsistency between materials taught and tests given to them*. In encountering this situation, the teacher, Sepehr, used dynamic testing.

I decided to test the students throughout the semester based on the coursebook I was teaching. And I defined a level for those who were allowed to take final test.

In this context, Sepehr faced a situation that the final test was not based on the coursebook; therefore, he used dynamic assessment of the coursebook he was teaching; additionally, he defined a level which those students who had passed the level were allowed to take the final exam.

4.1.2.6. *Teaching L2 Cultural Aspects*

The last category of critical incidents was *teaching L2 cultural aspects* with two subcategories. In facing the first subcategory, i.e. *appreciating western culture*, teachers used comparing and contrasting C1 and C2. Jack in facing such critical incident, wanted students to compare and contrast C1 and C2.

I thought about the situation, cultures are different, and teachers shouldn't imply that one culture is better than the other. I assigned a project for students to search about Norooz and before it, and to present their researches. Then we compared and contrasted our culture with western culture.

In this situation, Jack used comparing and contrasting C1 and C2 to show students that every culture had its own customs, and no culture could be considered better than the other one. Through comparing and contrasting customs related to New Year, he was able to teach the students that every country had its own significant culture.

Considering the second category, i.e., *disagreement with teaching western culture*, the teacher used explanation. Nazanin explained the importance of teaching culture for the students.

I told the student that learning a language is not just learning the grammar and vocabulary. You should be able to use language appropriately, and appropriate usage means being familiar with the culture related to the language. I am not recommending these behaviors, I am telling you that this is the way of thinking for them.

In encountering students' disagreeing with teaching western culture, Nazanin, the teacher, explained the importance of knowing the culture. Student should become aware that learning language is the ability to use it appropriately according to the culture of the language. Therefore, students should have knowledge about the culture of the language they are learning.

4.2. Discussion

Previous studies (e.g., Finch, 2010; Griffin, 2003) have focused on the use of critical incidents to promote student teachers' reflection, or on the classification of critical incidents (Pope et al., 2009; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011; Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2016). The present study, however, went further and explored critical incidents happening in EFL classes and teachers' productive coping strategies when facing them. First, critical incidents that teachers faced during their teaching activities in classrooms and their productive coping strategies were collected through teachers' narrations. Then the narrated critical incidents and productive coping strategies were analyzed to identify and categorize them. Narrating, writing, and reflecting on critical incidents can be useful in identifying and solving problems (Cain & Harris, 2013). In other words, narrating and writing, i.e., documenting and reflecting on critical incidents are starting points for teachers and student teachers to fathom more about their learners as well as their own tacit theories and teaching practices in the classrooms (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2016).

The findings revealed that language skills and components, heterogeneous classrooms, materials, mother tongue, testing issues, and teaching L2 cultural aspects could result in critical incidents in English classrooms. However, as was shown by Shapira-Linshchinsky (2011), the results revealed that critical incidents tend to be multifaceted, i.e., the same critical incident may generate different coping strategies. For example, the heterogeneous classroom category led one teacher to ignore the situation while another teacher decided to use different exercises for different levels to help the students. In another critical incident, beyond students' level materials, one teacher managed the situation by recommending simpler references while another teacher grouped the learners to manage the critical

incident. These findings may reveal the fact that similar critical incidents may be responded to in many ways. In other words, critical incidents are seen and judged differently by teachers (Farrell, 2008); and therefore, are responded to differently as well (Shapira-Linshchinsky, 2011).

Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that the repertoire of productive coping strategies could be considered a tool to help teachers to deal with critical incidents. In other words, when teachers face a critical incident, through reflecting on the critical incident and becoming aware of the repertoire of productive coping strategies, they could stop partiality for some of their tacit theories; thus, the study encourages the construction of a repertoire of productive coping strategies for teachers in facing critical incidents. However, it means that the repertoire of productive coping strategies is not rules, rather it is a guideline, because critical incidents are multifaceted in nature (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011) and as a result, they need critical thinking on the part of the teacher, not blind compliance. Therefore, through teacher education programs which are based on critical incidents, it would be possible to develop a repertoire of productive coping strategies. Through such educational programs teachers' knowledge regarding the critical incidents will be enhanced, and they will be able to develop their attitudes about choices open to them in encountering critical incidents (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011).

The most frequent critical incidents in this study were language skills and components, indicating that caring for pupils and wanting them to learn perfectly are important factors that teachers consider when facing critical incidents (Brown, 2007), and the result of teachers' caring for students and attention to students' learning needs (Shapira-Linshchinsky, 2011; Victor & Cullen, 1988). Considering the heterogeneous classrooms and materials categories, when because of the limited resources of the educational system, a large number of students with a variety of proficiency levels are put in one class, and materials for EFL contexts are limited, teachers' sensitivity to division of resources for their pupils is heightened and according to Shapira-Linshchinsky (2011) teachers will become more sensitive to issues of distributive justice, and must decide between the principle of different treatment and allocation and the principle of equal treatment and allocation. The findings regarding mother tongue showed that EFL teachers are mostly uncomfortable about the degree of use of L1 in English classes.

The other category, i.e., testing issues, raises the question of what testing and evaluation mean. According to Brown (2012), although language tests of various kinds can help in making a variety of decisions in language programs, tests are treated as though they are isolated entities floating free of language teaching reality. The study results also suggest that administrators

and teachers must be clear about the purpose of the test and then match the correct type of test to their purpose. In addition, tests should be integral parts of language programs and be imbedded in them to provide situations for good teaching, learning, and evaluation.

The category of teaching L2 cultural aspect indicates that teachers encountered a dilemma in teaching L2 culture. Although students reacted differently to the teaching of L2 culture, teachers tried to encourage language learners to build an awareness of L2 culture. In other words, teachers showed that culture should be viewed as an integral part of language learning and students should be helped to understand how culture works, i.e., how to raise their cross-cultural awareness (Wintergerst & Mc Veigh, 2011).

The analysis of 49 critical incidents narrated by 15 teachers revealed that the six categories were negative critical incidents. However, this does not mean that teachers encounter negative critical incidents more than positive ones. Rather, teachers remember negative critical incidents faster than the positive critical incidents (Farrell, 2008; Francis, 1995). Furthermore, by reflecting on the critical incidents and using productive coping strategies, teachers can change teaching low critical incidents to teaching high critical incidents and provide the opportunity for students to benefit from the event and maintain their own resilience.

In sum, critical incidents happen and no one can prevent them from happening in the classrooms (Measor, 1985; Tripp, 1993). However, the important issue is the ability to deal with critical incidents. In other words, teachers cannot help encountering critical incidents in their classrooms, but they should be able to maintain their resilience through use of productive coping strategies. They would be able to use productive coping strategies to maintain their resilience and manage the situations through reflection and counter-factual thinking on the critical incidents (Dixon & Byrne, 2011). It means that teachers should be taught and encouraged to reflect on the critical incidents and their own practices in the classrooms. In addition, they should go through the process of counter-factual reflection to assess and evaluate their own reactions to the critical incidents. Teachers should learn how to reflect and they should use reflection during their teaching activities and practices (Meijer, et al., 2011; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). They should challenge and question their reactions and their tacit theories to be able to manage the situations appropriately, and maintain their resilience (Hiver, 2018).

However, reflection and questioning tacit theories are the missing parts of the teacher education programs (Reagan & Osborn, 2008). While they enter in teacher education programs, they should pass many subjects such as testing and evaluation, teaching English, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics,

linguistics, materials evaluation and development, but reflection has been missed out from their program. Critical incidents and reflecting on them can be used for teacher education. That is, critical incidents “can be part of the repertoire of skills and techniques that one uses to help students and trainees reflect on incidents which might be easily disregarded or incidents which they have noticed as turning points” (Lengeling & Mora Pablo, 2016, p. 86). Reflection on critical incidents provide opportunities for language teachers to “consolidate their theoretical understanding of their practices and lead to further exploration of different aspects of teaching” (Farrell, 2013, pp. 85-86). Therefore, it is recommended that reflection on critical incidents be scheduled in teacher education programs because “using actual experiences as the source of classroom discussion enhances relevance and meaningfulness, and compels students to construct their own knowledge about teaching” (Goodell, 2006, p. 240).

While critical incidents happen and interrupt or highlight “the taken for granted ways of thinking about teaching” (Farrell, 2016, p. 86), through reflecting and analyzing them, students teachers could examine beliefs and values which are the foundation of their perceptions about teaching (Farrell, 2007). Furthermore, the effective use of critical incidents in groups of student teachers may encourage other student teachers in the group to react to a critical incident differently (Francis, 1995), and as a result student teachers will develop their repertoire of productive coping strategies to manage critical incidents and maintain their resilience.

According to Richards and Farrell (2010), narration and reflection on critical incidents are helpful for a variety of reasons. Analysis of critical incidents helps teachers to identify problems and solve them and facilitates their professional development in the following ways: creating a greater level of self-awareness, prompting an evaluation of established procedures and routines, encouraging teachers to pose critical questions about teaching, bringing beliefs to the level of awareness, creating opportunities for action researches, and providing a resource for teachers (Richards & Farrell, 2010).

Although, narration, reflection on, and analysis of critical incidents are useful for teachers, they struggle to deal with critical incidents because they do not have access to professional tools and they have to use their own judgement without guidelines. In other words, teachers during teaching acts have to make immediate decisions when they encounter special situations (Romano, 2006). Therefore, student teachers should “be exposed to a wide range of critical incidents and ethical dilemmas long before they encounter their own ethical dilemmas” (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011, p. 655) and critical incidents. In other words, critical incidents should be part of skills and techniques which are used in teacher education. As is stated by Shapira-

Lishchinsky (2011), through exposure to a variety of critical incidents during teacher education, teachers will develop their autonomy in making on-the-spot decisions in encountering critical incidents.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The present study examined 49 critical incidents and coping strategies narrated by 15 EFL teachers to unpack and categorize critical incidents and productive coping strategies happening in EFL contexts. The three-stage coding process of grounded theory was used to analyze the critical incidents, and six categories were revealed. The findings of the study indicate that more discussion and clarification of teachers' values and beliefs, i.e., their tacit theories, are needed.

Additionally, the results could guide teacher educators to develop educational programs based on teachers' critical incidents. Pre- or in-service teachers could benefit from such programs. Critical incidents provide opportunities for reflection on teachers' beliefs and values to promote and foster teacher development.

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Appendix 1: Teachers' Interview Questions

1. Why did you consider this event critical?
2. What happened exactly before this event? / What were the circumstances which lead to this event?
3. What happened exactly after the event?
4. What was your reaction to the event?
5. What did others who were involved, i.e., students, do?
6. What do you interpret from this event?
7. Which of your assumptions about teaching was affected? / What assumptions about teaching were affected?
8. If the event happened again, would you react differently?

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