



## Socio-Cultural Determinants of Teacher–Student Relationships in Iranian EFL Contexts

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### Abstract

Teacher–Student Relationships (TSRs) influence classroom realities and educational experiences. This study examines the socio-cultural factors that shape these relationships in the Iranian EFL context. Adopting a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) design, the study employed an iterative data collection and analysis process. Sixteen participants (10 university ELT educators and 6 EFL teachers) were recruited through purposive and theoretical sampling. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and life-history narratives and analyzed using the constant comparative method, including initial, focused, and theoretical coding, to develop a context-sensitive explanatory framework. The findings reveal three main socio-cultural factors shaping TSRs. Authoritative culture promotes power imbalance and restricts meaningful interaction. Collectivist culture substitutes genuine collaboration with group conformity. Content-focused education prioritizes syllabus coverage and summative assessment at the expense of dialogic teaching and reciprocal engagement. The study advances three interconnected theoretical concepts—Authority–Relationship Tension Cycle, Harmonized Collectivism vs. Collaborative Personalization, and Reciprocal Scaling of Content and Learning Conditions—to explain how these factors interact to constrain constructive TSRs. The findings carry important pedagogical implications. First, teacher education programs should critically address hierarchical norms. Second, instructional practices should balance authority with relational engagement. Third, curriculum and assessment reforms should create space for dialogic, needs-responsive teaching. By situating TSRs within their socio-cultural ecology, this study provides a contextually grounded framework for rethinking relational pedagogy in exam-oriented educational systems.

**Keywords:** collectivism, content-oriented education, power-imbalance, socio-cultural influences, teacher-student relationships

TSRs have consistently been identified as central to shaping teaching and learning experiences. Across diverse educational contexts, scholars converge on the view that TSRs operate as relational infrastructures that influence both instructional processes and learning outcomes ([Hagenauer et al., 2023](#); [Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018](#); [Wubbels et al., 2014](#)).

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Research has approached this influence from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand, studies emphasize teachers' professional development, instructional decision-making, and well-being as relationally situated phenomena (Claessens et al., 2017). On the other hand, student-centered research highlights motivation, engagement, and academic achievement as relationally mediated outcomes (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005; Wanders et al., 2020). Taken together, this body of work conceptualizes TSRs not merely as interpersonal dynamics but as structurally embedded determinants of educational quality.

For students, the quality of these relationships influences their motivation, engagement, and achievement (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005; Wanders et al., 2020). Despite extensive definitions, there is a lack of a unified conceptualization of TSRs. More recently, Hagenauer, Muehlbacher, and Ivanova (2022) expanded this conceptual debate by emphasizing that TSRs in higher education comprise both professional and interpersonal dimensions. This highlights that the teacher's role as a relational partner is as central as his role as an academic instructor. Their findings highlight that TSRs and their qualities are multidimensional and context-bound. Accordingly, to help shared understanding, in this study, a 'constructive TSR' is defined as "a professional connection between the teacher and students characterized by guidance, mentorship, and clear boundaries, aimed at fostering an environment of trust, respect, and mutual commitment to students' learning and growth." This conceptualization integrates both affective and professional dimensions of TSRs.

TSRs are simultaneously constructed by and help construct classroom interactions, creating space for the ongoing negotiation of agency for both teachers and students (Wubbels et al., 2014). Teacher agency involves maximizing learning opportunities by providing needs-responsive teaching, reflecting on theories and practices, and subsequently renewing instructional approaches (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). Learner agency refers to students' active engagement in assessing their learning needs, assuming responsibility for their own learning, and contributing meaningfully to the flow of instruction (Stenalt & Lasseesen, 2021). Thus, classroom interactions fostered and enhanced by quality TSRs strengthen the effectiveness of both teacher and learner agency (Horowitz & Strack, 2011).

TSRs are influenced by the classroom's social and cultural environment, particularly the quantity and nature of interactions (Quin, 2017). Cultural frameworks play a constitutive role in shaping TSRs. Rather than functioning as neutral interpersonal exchanges, TSRs are embedded in broader value systems that define acceptable forms of authority, warmth, and reciprocity (Claessens et al., 2017; Wubbels et al., 2014). More recent scholarship further argues that teachers' and students' relational expectations are culturally constructed, thereby influencing how closeness, distance, and professionalism are interpreted within specific contexts (Hagenauer et al., 2023). This suggests that TSRs cannot be understood independently of their socio-cultural ecology. Likewise, TSRs are influenced by teachers' professional identities, which are shaped by broader societal and institutional contexts (Reeves, 2018). Thus, cultural and social contexts determine the appropriateness of TSRs.

Recent Iranian scholarship has begun to explore teacher-student relationships and classroom interaction within local educational contexts, highlighting the influence of authority patterns, institutional norms, and exam-oriented practices on classroom dynamics. Studies on teacher-student interaction and classroom discourse in Iran have highlighted the persistence of hierarchical communication structures and the centrality of content coverage in shaping instructional practices. For example, [Ghasemi \(2021\)](#), employing a phenomenological approach, examined middle school teachers' lived experiences and identified classroom activities, contextual constraints, and the personal attributes of teachers and students as key determinants of TSR quality. While such research provides valuable insight into teachers' perceptions and micro-level relational processes, it primarily foregrounds individual experiences rather than systematically examining the broader socio-cultural structures that shape these relationships. Consequently, despite emerging attention to contextual influences, a theoretically grounded analysis of macro-level socio-cultural determinants of TSRs, particularly within Iranian EFL classrooms, remains underdeveloped.

While the existing literature has offered valuable insights into the nature and significance of TSRs, there remains a clear need to examine the context-specific socio-cultural influences that shape them. In light of the considerable gap in research on how socio-cultural factors affect the development of TSRs, the present study seeks to investigate these influences within Iranian EFL classrooms. Specifically, it addresses the question: *What socio-cultural factors influence the development and quality of TSRs in Iranian EFL classrooms?*

### **Constructive Teacher-Student Relationship**

A constructive TSR is distinguished from other types of relationships by its unique characteristics. According to [Hagenauer and Volet \(2014\)](#), positive TSRs rely on a meaningful emotional connection and the support teachers provide, both academically and personally. The hallmark of a strong TSR is a balance between teacher control and friendliness ([Horowitz & Strack, 2011](#)). [Markey et al. \(2003\)](#) argue that high teacher control and imbalanced power lead to students' submissive behaviors, whereas teachers' friendly behaviors and balanced power encourage similar positive responses from students. For instance, a teacher's control often results in student compliance, while a teacher's warmth typically elicits warmth in return. A constructive TSR enables teachers to uphold authority while simultaneously fostering warmth and supporting student autonomy ([Salazar, 2013](#); [Veldman et al., 2013](#); [Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005](#)). Interestingly, while TSRs naturally exist, constructive TSRs are particularly significant in education and require intentional effort ([Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018](#); [Veldman et al., 2013](#)).

Research indicates that both the frequency and quality of teacher-student interactions, as well as teacher and learner personal traits, influence TSRs. Among these, the quality of interactions is more critical for fostering constructive relationships ([Komarraju et al., 2010](#)).

Teacher traits, such as approachability, respect, fairness, and care, and student traits, such as engagement and independence, significantly affect TSRs ([Komarraju et al., 2010](#)).

Cultural factors shape teachers' and students' perceptions and expectations of TSRs. International students often hold distinct expectations of TSRs compared to national students ([Zhou et al., 2008](#)). Teachers' cultural backgrounds influence their understanding of teacher roles within TSRs and guide their approaches and practices ([Hsieh, 2011](#)). Furthermore, students across different disciplines vary in the importance they assign to their relationships with teachers. Despite extensive research on TSRs, there is a limited understanding of their development in the Iranian EFL context, where unique cultural and social values and educational traditions prevail. Investigating these socio-cultural factors in Iran may promise important implications for educational practices and help develop informed perspectives on TSRs.

### Method

The study adopted Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) to explore the socio-cultural factors that determine TSRs in Iran ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). With its iterative nature, CGT allowed for continuous refinement of the inquiry, creating space for the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants—an element regarded as fundamental to grounded theory methodology ([Patton, 2015](#)).

### Participants

Participant recruitment followed the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory and was aligned with the study's aim of developing a context-sensitive explanation of socio-cultural determinants of teacher-student relationships (TSRs) in Iranian EFL settings. Sampling began purposively and proceeded theoretically ([Charmaz, 2014](#)).

In the initial phase, participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) active professional engagement as university ELT educators or school EFL teachers; (b) sufficient teaching experience to enable reflective accounts of classroom relational dynamics; (c) substantial familiarity with the educational and socio-cultural context of eastern Iran; and (d) willingness to participate in iterative interviews and life-history narratives. These criteria ensured that participants possessed rich experiential knowledge of TSRs within the context under study. Accordingly, 20 individuals (10 university ELT educators and 10 EFL teachers) were initially recruited.

As analysis progressed, theoretical sampling guided subsequent recruitment to refine emerging categories related to hierarchical authority, collectivist norms, and content-focused education. Participants were selected to enhance conceptual variation across institutional levels, professional seniority, and involvement in high-stakes examination contexts. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The final sample comprised 16 participants—10 university ELT educators and 6 EFL teachers. Although participants varied in

age, gender, and experience, they shared familiarity with the local educational culture, supporting the development of a context-specific grounded theory of TSRs.

### Instruments

We gathered data through interviews and life-history narratives (see Appendices A and B). The research team developed the semi-structured interview guide through a systematic process grounded in both theoretical engagement and the exploratory aims of this CGT study. Initially, a pool of 18 open-ended questions was generated based on a thorough review of the recent literature on teacher-student relationships (TSRs), with particular attention to studies examining socio-cultural influences ([Claessens et al., 2017](#); [Hagenauer et al., 2023](#); [Hagenauer & Volet, 2014](#); [Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018](#); [Lee, 2012](#); [Quin, 2017](#); [Wanders et al., 2020](#); [Wubbels et al., 2014](#)). These questions were designed not as fixed instruments but as flexible prompts to facilitate co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants, consistent with the iterative and emergent logic of CGT ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). Following initial development, the 18-question guide was piloted with two university ELT educators and two EFL teachers who did not participate in the main study. The pilot served to assess the clarity, cultural appropriateness, and relevance of each question to the Iranian EFL context. Based on pilot feedback, four questions were omitted as redundant or eliciting overly generic responses unrelated to socio-cultural determinants. Three other questions were modified to replace potentially abstract phrasing with more concrete, experience-near language (e.g., revising “How do power dynamics manifest in classrooms?” to “Can you describe a specific classroom moment that showed how authority between teacher and students worked?”). The final interview guide thus comprised 14 questions (see Appendix A), which served as a starting point for dialogue; in keeping with CGT principles, subsequent interviews incorporated emergent, participant-driven probes and theoretically sampled follow-up questions.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, life-history narratives were employed to capture participants' longitudinal reflections on teacher-student relationships across their educational trajectories ([Murray, 2009](#)). An initial set of seven narrative prompts was developed by the research team, drawing on theoretical insights from the literature on socio-cultural influences on TSRs ([Claessens et al., 2017](#); [Ghasemi, 2022](#); [Hagenauer et al., 2023](#); [Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018](#); [Quin, 2017](#)). These prompts were designed to encourage participants to situate their relational experiences within broader cultural and temporal contexts, consistent with the CGT commitment to co-constructing meaning through participant-driven reflection ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). The seven prompts were piloted with the same two university ELT educators and two EFL teachers who participated in the interview guide pilot study. Based on pilot feedback, two prompts were merged because they elicited overlapping narrative content (specifically, prompts addressing "significant educational turning points" and "critical incidents with teachers" were combined). One prompt was rephrased to reduce leading language; originally asking "How did cultural norms negatively affect your relationship with teachers?", it was revised to the more

neutral "Describe the unwritten rules and expectations you've observed in Iranian educational environments and how they shaped interactions between teachers and students." No prompts were omitted entirely, as pilot participants found all remaining six prompts relevant and generative of rich narrative data. The final set of six life-history narrative prompts (see Appendix B) served as flexible starting points, allowing participants to select and prioritize experiences most salient to their understanding of TSRs while permitting researchers to introduce theoretically sampled follow-up questions during subsequent interviews.

### Data Collection

Data collection unfolded through an iterative process. Semi-structured interviews, life-history narratives, and ongoing analysis were conducted simultaneously. This helped inform the data analysis and enabled theoretical sampling and saturation. Before data collection, a pilot study was conducted with two ELT educators and two EFL teachers to assess the appropriateness of the interview guides and narrative prompts to cultural norms and values. To further ensure alignment with the study's aims, two independent researchers reviewed the guide and prompts for their suitability.

Participants initially engaged in in-depth semi-structured interviews that explored their experiences of teacher-student relationships. Interviews were conducted in Persian to facilitate communication and were held face-to-face, by telephone, or online, depending on logistical constraints. After each interview, transcripts were reviewed and analyzed to develop a primary understanding and guide subsequent data collection. This process allowed the formulation of follow-up questions and a deeper exploration of ideas.

Following the interviews, participants were invited to produce life-history narratives, either in writing or orally. These narratives gave participants space to revisit their earlier experiences and situate their reflections within broader socio-cultural contexts. A second interview was then conducted with each participant after preliminary analysis. This stage served to clarify meanings and assess whether further data collection was necessary. Throughout the process, researchers maintained field notes to capture their observations and reflections.

### Data Analysis

As data collection progressed, we transcribed all interviews verbatim. Coding began after the first few interviews to identify emerging themes, and this early analysis guided the recruitment of additional participants as well as the design of follow-up interviews. A second round of interviews was then conducted to explore these themes in greater depth ([Charmaz, 2014](#)).

At that point, we integrated the developed categories into a coherent theoretical framework. For instance, to develop the theme, we applied the constant comparative method (CCM), beginning with initial coding to analyze the data line by line and segment by segment, comparing codes with codes and codes with categories ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). Then we moved to

focused coding to identify the initial significant codes. Throughout this process, we wrote analytic memos to probe idea further and record our reflections during analysis. Finally, we adopted theoretical coding to identify relationships between categories. Theoretical sampling was central to our approach. As concepts and categories emerged, we collected additional data to refine and elaborate on our developing theory. This iterative process continued until no new properties of our categories appeared in the data.

of *Content-Focused Education*, initial coding generated codes such as a ‘dominant teacher role’, ‘minimal student interaction’, ‘strong emphasis on content delivery’, ‘standardized testing’, ‘external pressures from stakeholders (including parental demands)’, and ‘requirements related to *Konkur* preparation’. Focused coding then integrated these into three categories, including ‘a teacher-centered approach’, ‘assessment influence emphasizing standardized and summative evaluations’, and ‘stakeholder pressure.’ Finally, theoretical coding revealed how these categories interconnected. For example, the heavy emphasis on content delivery and assessment practices reinforced a teacher-centered approach. Ultimately, the theme *Content-Focused Education* emerged from the interplay of codes and categories.

To illustrate, Table 1 presents a coding tree showing how initial codes were progressively grouped into focused codes and, ultimately, into the overarching theme of *Content-Focused Education*.

**Table 1**

*Sample coding tree: development of the theme ‘content-focused education’ from initial codes to theoretical category*

Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Theoretical Code (Theme)
“dominant teacher role” “minimal student interaction” “strong emphasis on content delivery” “standardized testing”	Teacher-centered approach	<b>Content-Focused Education</b>
“summative evaluation” “external pressures from parents” “ <i>Konkur</i> preparation requirements”	Assessment influence (standardized & summative)	
	Stakeholder pressure	

In addition, analytic memos were written throughout the coding process to record ongoing interpretations and to link emerging categories. Below (Figure 1) is an excerpt from memos written during data analysis on the relationship between *Content-Focused Education* and *Authority-Relationship Tension Cycle*.

**Figure 1**

*Analytic Memo Excerpt Illustrating the Relationship between Content-Focused Education and the Authority-Relationship Tension Cycle*

Component	Details
<b>Data excerpts</b> (Parsa & Delvin, interviews)	Parsa: “Quality of teaching is often measured by the extent of content coverage.”  Delvin: “Following the prescribed syllabus” defines teacher and learner responsibility.
<b>Analytic memo</b>	I am now seeing how Content-Focused Education feeds directly into the Authority-Relationship Tension Cycle. First, when teaching quality is measured by content coverage (Parsa), teachers are incentivized to prioritize syllabus completion over interaction.  Second, this external metric (from stakeholders, parents, Konkur) turns authority into a tool for control rather than for relational engagement. Third, the tension arises because any move toward constructive TSR (e.g., dialogue, needs-responsive teaching) is perceived as risking content loss. So, the cycle is both cultural (respect for authority) and structural (assessment paradigms).  This suggests that breaking the cycle requires changing not only teacher beliefs but also how “good teaching” is evaluated.

To ensure the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis, we followed the criteria recommended for Constructivist Grounded Theory ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). Credibility was established through member checking ([Williams & Morrow, 2009](#)). First, after initial and focused coding, we shared written summaries of emerging categories with all 16 participants. Fourteen participants confirmed that the interpretations resonated with their experiences, and their minor wording suggestions were incorporated. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through peer debriefing. Accordingly, three bi-weekly sessions were held with two doctoral colleagues familiar with qualitative methods but not involved in the study, who reviewed the coding trail and challenged premature conclusions. Transferability was supported by a thick description of the Iranian EFL context and participant characteristics, and by detailed excerpts in the Results section. Triangulation of data sources (semi-structured interviews and life-history narratives) allowed cross-checking of themes across different types of participant accounts. Finally, reflexivity was maintained through ongoing analytic memos in which we explicitly examined potential biases (particularly our professional training favoring dialogic pedagogy and our prolonged embeddedness in the same educational culture). These memos helped us distinguish participants' voices from our own pedagogical preferences.

As this study adopted a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, clarifying the researcher's positionality is important. The research team consisted of three scholars embedded in the Iranian EFL context. Two of the researchers are university professors with over 17 years of experience teaching in eastern Iran, supervising ELT programs, and providing professional development for in-service EFL teachers in the region. Through this sustained engagement, we have developed a close familiarity with local institutional practices and with students transitioning from regional high schools to university settings. The third researcher is an experienced EFL teacher working within the same educational context. While this shared

professional and cultural embeddedness provided deep contextual insight into hierarchical norms, collectivist expectations, and content-focused practices shaping teacher-student relationships, our academic training and long-standing engagement with contemporary language pedagogy may incline us toward dialogic and relational approaches. To mitigate potential bias, we engaged in ongoing reflexive memo writing, peer debriefing, and member checking to ensure that the emerging categories were grounded in participants' accounts rather than in our pedagogical preferences.

### Results

A grounded theory study revealed three cultural factors that impact TSRs in Iranian EFL education. Below, we examine these influences.

#### Hierarchical social structure

The participants identified *authoritative culture* in education as the primary cultural factor influencing the development of TSRs. This reflects broader societal norms in Iran, where “respect [...] for authority is highly [...] valued and mirrored in family, workplace, and government structures” (Iliad, semi-structured interview). This authoritative culture manifests in various ways within the classroom. Teachers' tendency to “hold a position of respect and authority” creates a significant power distance between themselves and their students (Aysan, semi-structured interview). This includes formal communication with formal forms of address to denote respect. The assumption behind this inclination is that knowledge flows unidirectionally from teacher to student rather than being co-constructed. Therefore, “students may refrain from challenging classroom procedures, [...] fearing it could be seen as undermining the teacher's authority...” (Maryam, semi-structured interview). Accordingly, teachers are viewed as deliverers of material, while students are expected to practice, retain, and later recollect these materials during exams.

As students [...] we perceived that ideal teachers present as much content as possible, [...] and ideal students recall as much as possible (Taha, Narratives).

In such a condition, efforts to make TSRs closer encounter several barriers. Firstly, TSRs require reducing power distance, which itself might be understood as a lack of teacher authority. In addition, teachers also worry that “students might interpret attempts to develop [close] TSRs as signs of incompetence or a lack of seriousness” (Hesam, interviews). Moreover, teachers, along with other stakeholders such as parents and school administrators, may interpret teachers' approachability “as a lack of commitment to students' academic progress” (Parnia, interview). They assume that a “good [and serious] teacher focuses on content delivery and repeated exams” (Delvin, interviews). This may lead to a belief that interactive and “collaborative learning activities reduce content coverage and lead to less mastery of material by students” (Anita, narratives).

When I try to be more relaxed with my students, they seem to get uneasy. [...] they don't trust a teacher who isn't strict; they might think I'm not serious about my job (Hamin, interviews).

### **Collectivist culture**

The second major cultural factor, as perceived by the participating teachers, centers on the impact of collectivist culture in Iranian society. As the teachers believed, “the attempts to incorporate dialogic teaching and collaborative learning in schools encounter challenges due to [the prevailing] collectivist culture in our society” (Iliad, interviews). This collectivism emphasizes “group harmony and social cohesion rather than collaborative pursuit of individual needs” (Maryam, interviews). Learners conform without true engagement, and their performance mirrors each other's thoughts and actions. Instead of engaging in meaningful collaboration, “they resort to passive unity” (Anita, interviews). This creates an environment where they prefer to fit into collective action rather than stand out. Their relationships rely more on silent agreement than active participation. In this space, people aren't “connected by shared effort [or ideas] but by an unspoken acceptance of the same way of thinking” (Parnia, narratives). The group focuses on maintaining a sense of sameness and an unspoken agreement to think alike (Naser, interviews).

Teachers note that collectivist culture affects TSRs in several ways. The teachers focus on one-size-fits-all instruction and standardized achievement. This leads to neglecting “personalized teaching responsive to [actual] learners' needs” (Aysan, interviews). This leaves no space for them to foster constructive engagement with students. Students might also hesitate to participate actively in class or interact with the teacher and peers, fearing they could disrupt group harmony (Maryam, interviews).

According to one of the participating teachers, “the difference between collectivist culture and collaborative learning [in EFL contexts] is misunderstood” (Arsham, interviews). Collectivist cultures emphasize group harmony, but this does not necessarily foster true collaboration in the classroom. As another teacher explained, “the focus on group harmony can create a learning environment without [genuine] collaboration and personalization” (Mahan, interviews). In such contexts, individual activities do not address their own specific needs, nor do students collaborate to address their peers' needs. Their tendency toward uniformity presents a false picture of collaboration. This emphasis on group harmony “results in identical tasks for all students, mistakenly seen as collaborative” (Ghazal, narratives). In reality, people collaborate to meet their needs, but group harmony that neglects personal needs limits opportunities for genuine collaboration. Accordingly, teachers are encouraged to “present the same material in the same way” (Delvin, narratives). Although this approach might appear fair on the surface, it is unlikely to provide needs-responsive instruction.

As one participant noted, collectivism promotes a one-size-fits-all approach that aims to please everyone but often fails to meet anyone's true needs (Maryam, Interviews). Uniformity

in instruction and materials “may seem equitable, but [...] it overlooks individual learning differences. For instance, [...] some thrive with visual aids, while others prefer hands-on activities” (Kiana, Interviews). Reflecting on her own experience, Kiana added, “I liked to learn words in sentences, but the teachers always asked us to memorize word lists [...] some students liked it, but it didn’t work for everyone” (Kiana, Narratives).

### **Content-focused education**

The participating teachers believed that content-oriented education “has historically been a favored approach for teachers, students, and parents” (Parsa, interviews). This approach prioritizes the delivery and coverage of extensive material. It defines both teachers’ and learners’ responsibilities as “following the prescribed syllabus” (Delvin, interviews). The extent of content coverage often measures the “quality of teaching” (Parsa, interviews). Similarly, learners are primarily viewed as “recipients of information whose main responsibility is to recall and reproduce the material delivered by teachers” (Maryam, interviews).

Teachers and learners tend to appreciate content-focused education, as it is perceived to provide a clear, unified, and measurable syllabus (Iliad, interviews). For teachers, it provides a standard framework for instruction, simplifying lesson planning and classroom management (Aysan, interviews). Students, too, are more comfortable with content-focused teaching, as it “represents clear teacher expectations and specified materials” (Parnia, interviews). For many students, this clarity “reduces anxiety and provides a sense of direction” (Ghazal, interviews).

The emphasis on content delivery and recall discourages collaborative and dialogic teaching because “developing strong TSRs may seem irrelevant” (Iliad, Interviews). Thus, teaching is construed as an act of “imparting knowledge,” and learning is understood as an “act of receiving it” (Aysan, Interviews). Accordingly, “defining learning as mere knowledge retention rather than active knowledge construction eliminates the need for a [... constructive] TSR”, ... (Iliad, interviews).

The educators believed that content-focused education is reinforced by the Konkur, Iran’s high-stakes university entrance exam, which emphasizes “content knowledge recollection and test-taking strategies” (Delvin, interviews). Iranian parents and teachers, having experienced the same system, expect similar instruction for their children. As a result, they may “fear that collaborative activities [...] may not adequately prepare them for the Konkur” (Maryam, interviews). This parental pressure discourages teachers from adopting dialogic teaching, which encourages and requires TSRs. As one teacher recounted, “When I implemented an interactive classroom activity, parents criticized me and asked me to teach in a way that prepares students for the Konkur exam” (Naser, narrative).

Content-focused education relies heavily on summative assessment, which aims to “measure acquired knowledge at the end of a unit or semester” (Aysan, interviews). As this kind of assessment is not intended to facilitate learning, it “provides little opportunity for ongoing feedback or instructional refinement” (Iliad, interviews). Continuous and

comprehensible feedback requires collaboration and interaction between teachers and learners. Thus, instead of creating space for TSR, summative assessment fosters a “competitive environment focused on content mastery” (Taha, interviews). In such a condition, teachers are “under pressure to cover all necessary content,” leaving little time for interactive learning (Iliad, interviews).

At exam time, we often competed to recall as much material [...]. Sometimes, we would even pretend [to our classmates] that we hadn’t studied certain material, in an attempt to discourage them from studying so that we could excel in the class (Anita, Narratives).

We generally model our teaching methods after those of our former teachers... They used tests to evaluate our hard work, sometimes including questions from less obvious parts of the textbook to assess our dedication.... Some teachers felt proud and gained admiration from others when a majority of students were unable to pass their courses (Aysan, Narratives).

## Discussion

### Authority-relationship tension cycle

The study reveals that hierarchical social structures, collectivist cultural orientations, and a content-centered educational approach influence TSRs in Iranian EFL classrooms. These conditions sustain formal communication and reinforce power imbalances, thereby constraining student participation and reciprocity in the classroom. This power distance creates an ‘authority-relationship tension cycle.’ This recurring pattern puts teachers in a position where they try to preserve hierarchical authority by resorting to greater control and reduced engagement. The finding echoes [Hagenauer and Volet’s \(2014\)](#) and [Zhou et al.’s \(2008\)](#) observations that TSRs are socio-culturally embedded and evolve within specific institutional logics. [Ghasemi \(2021\)](#) identified that Iranian teachers’ personal perceptions of attentiveness to students, immediacy in communication, and contextual constraints determine TSRs within the Iranian educational context. Building on this foundation, our study argues that these everyday relational factors do not remain confined to the micro-level of teacher viewpoints; rather, they interact in ways that reproduce a broader and recurring cycle of tension between teacher authority and classroom relationships.

[Thornberg et al.’s \(2020\)](#) distinction between the teacher’s relational stance and pedagogical practices illuminates the inner mechanics of this cycle. Within Iranian classrooms, teachers often maintain professional distance and limited openness while simultaneously expecting student collaboration. This pursuit of order and respect undermines the interpersonal foundation necessary for dialogic teaching. When relational stance prioritizes authority over rapport, pedagogical practice becomes performative rather than participatory.

[Lee’s \(2012\)](#) concept of academic press further clarifies this paradox. High academic expectations, when paired with relational support, can enhance student learning. Yet in the Iranian context, academic seriousness is frequently defined as authoritarian demand rather than

constructive engagement. Both our findings and Lee's suggest that academic rigor without constructive TSRs loses its motivational and pedagogical function.

Consistent with [Hagenauer et al. \(2023\)](#), our findings confirm that constructive TSRs rely on maintaining a balance between professional boundaries and interpersonal closeness. However, in the Iranian EFL context, this balance is strained by hierarchical expectations that privilege authority over reciprocity. Aligned with this view, [Karpouza and Emvalotis \(2018\)](#) caution that professionalism should not be conflated with rigid formality. Our findings substantiate this claim, showing that overly authoritative communication restricts student voice and discourages authentic dialogue. Although professionalism and boundaries are essential, excessive formality inhibits rapport building. In such environments, instruction becomes a one-way transmission rather than a co-construction of knowledge. Consequently, teachers struggle to balance authority with immediacy, care, and approachability ([Hagenauer et al., 2023](#); [Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018](#)).

### **Harmonized Collectivism vs. Collaborative Personalization in Education**

Our findings revealed that Iranian instructors draw on collectivism to encourage collaborative learning. In practice, however, this emphasis tends to foster group cohesion rather than true participation. Such an approach reflects a form of collective conformity that discourages students from voicing their own learning needs or seeking personalized feedback and assistance ([Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018](#)). Within this educational culture, teachers may assume that instructional uniformity guarantees fairness and interpret it as genuine collaboration ([Andrade & Brookhart, 2020](#)).

This finding aligns with [Liang and Matthews \(2022\)](#), who argue that collectivism constrains dialogic and needs-responsive pedagogy. Likewise, [Hamre and Pianta \(2001\)](#) and [Khani and Gaskaree \(2024\)](#) note that collectivist educational settings can restrict the development of meaningful TSRs. Consequently, the pursuit of group unity may limit opportunities for authentic dialogue and individualized learning. Dialogues tailored to learners' specific needs are the key to constructive TSRs.

To explain this paradox, we need to contrast two confusing orientations that may be considered the same: Harmonized Collectivism and Collaborative Personalization. Harmonized Collectivism refers to pedagogical approaches and practices that emphasize group harmony. It focuses on a one-size-fits-all pedagogy, neglecting individual needs and differences ([Liang & Matthews, 2022](#)). Collaborative Personalization, on the other hand, refers to interactive practices in which teachers and students collaborate to co-construct learning. They collaborate to identify learners' needs and tailor instruction accordingly ([Cheung et al., 2021](#)). It fosters learner autonomy and collaborative engagement. In this context, personalized learning is not construed as individualism but as collaboration to address learners' actual needs.

In Iranian EFL classrooms, dominant Harmonized Collectivism encourages students to remain silent and conform, and teachers to avoid tailoring their instruction to individual learner

needs. Our findings suggest that personalized education can create the ground for dialogic teaching, where reflection and formative feedback create space for collaborative activities. This aligns with [Tassell et al.'s \(2010\)](#) findings that genuine collaborative pedagogy is promoted through reciprocal engagement rather than conformity.

### Reciprocal Scaling of Content and Learning Conditions

Our study found that an excessive focus on content delivery in education negatively influences TSRs. This content-heavy approach creates a phenomenon known as the “content-rapport trade-off.” Teachers who focus on content coverage have less time to build relationships with students ([Cornelius-White, 2007](#); [Diamond, 2010](#)).

This happens because of three critical factors. These include the dominance of standardized testing (as exemplified by the Iranian Konkur examination), stakeholder expectations favoring content delivery, and an assessment system that prioritizes summative assessment over ongoing learning. These findings agree with those of [Wanders et al. \(2020\)](#) in Dutch schools. They showed that high-stakes testing and summative assessment leave no space for meaningful TSRs, as instruction mainly relies on unidirectional explanations and on students’ careful note-taking and information recollection.

While content is a critical component of education, it should not be the end goal. Content is a medium through which learners acquire disciplinary knowledge and engage in discourse ([Diamond, 2010](#)). True learning transcends content recollection and requires engagement that facilitates learners’ holistic development. For content to effectively support student growth, its presentation must be paired with sufficient learning opportunities ([Wirth, 2007](#)). These include opportunities for reciprocal engagement between teachers and learners. This is the classroom reciprocity that creates sufficient space for the co-construction of meaning, ongoing assessment, and feedback or assistance seeking and provision ([Xiao & Yang, 2019](#)).

Relying on our findings, we propose the concept of *Reciprocal Scaling of Content and Learning Conditions*, which refers to the interdependence between educational content delivery and the conditions needed for meaningful learning ([Diamond, 2010](#)). As content volume increases, improvements in learning conditions such as engagement, interaction, and constructive TSRs become essential. Without these conditions, dialogic and collaborative environments are discouraged, leaving little space for TSRs.

### Conclusion

In the Iranian EFL context, hierarchical social structures, collectivist culture, and a content-focused education discourage the development of collaborative TSRs. These factors reinforce the authority–relationship tension cycle, in which authority and power imbalance hinder authentic communication and mutual engagement ([Hagenauer & Volet, 2014](#)). The excessive focus on group harmony further underscores the need for collaborative personalization, in which students’ personal needs serve as the foundation for teacher–learner

collaboration ([Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018](#); [Cheung et al., 2021](#)). Moreover, the heavy emphasis on content mastery discourages TSRs by leaving no space for interactive, dialogic, and needs-responsive instruction ([Diamond, 2010](#)).

These findings show that culture, social norms, and pedagogy interact to influence TSRs. This suggests three main pedagogical implications. First, adopting culturally responsive pedagogy should not entail respecting traditional hierarchies at the expense of classroom collaboration and student agency ([Hagenauer et al., 2023](#)). Second, teachers should balance content mastery with opportunities for agentic engagement. Content should be used as a mediating tool for meaningful collaboration, where teachers and learners co-construct meanings around a focused issue ([Xiao & Yang, 2019](#)). Constructive TSRs form the foundation for this process and are also encouraged by it. Finally, the move toward collaborative personalization can create learning spaces where instruction centers on recognizing and supporting every student.

However, this study is not without limitations. The cultural homogeneity of participants may reduce the generalizability of the findings to multicultural contexts. Furthermore, relying solely on qualitative data, despite its depth, makes the interpretations more tentative. Future research can therefore adopt mixed-methods designs to integrate in-depth qualitative inquiry with large-scale quantitative surveys. Investigating teacher education programs could improve our understanding of how pedagogical practices might be dialogic in hierarchical, content-focused educational contexts.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Semi-structured interview questions exploring the socio-cultural influences on TSRs in Iranian EFL classrooms

1. How would you describe the typical relationships between teachers and students in your educational experiences?
2. Can you reflect on the communication patterns you've observed or experienced in EFL classrooms throughout your educational journey?
3. In what ways do you think cultural expectations shape the role of teachers and students in the learning process?
4. Describe a memorable moment in your educational experience that highlighted the relationship between a teacher and students.
5. How do you perceive the balance between respecting academic authority and fostering open, collaborative learning environments?
6. Can you share some insights into how group dynamics influence individual learning experiences in your context?
7. What factors do you believe most significantly impact the way teachers and students relate with and interact in the classroom?
8. How do assessment practices in your educational context influence teacher-student relationship?
9. Reflect on the ways personal and professional boundaries are maintained between teachers and students in your experience.
10. In what ways do you think societal norms and expectations shape educational relationship and interactions?
11. Can you describe how students typically participate in classroom discussions and learning activities?
12. How do you view the role of emotional connection in the teaching and learning process?
13. What challenges do you see in creating more personalized and interactive learning experiences within your current educational context?
14. How do external pressures (such as standardized testing, parental expectations, or institutional requirements) impact classroom interactions?

**Appendix B. life-history narrative prompts**

Reflect on your entire educational journey from primary school through higher education. Describe the most significant moments that shaped your understanding of what it means to be a student and how teachers and students typically interact in Iranian educational settings.

1. Think about a teacher who particularly influenced your learning experience. Describe your relationship with this teacher, including how communication and interactions typically occurred?
2. Trace the evolution of your learning experiences from childhood to your current professional role. How have your perceptions of teacher-student relationships changed over time? What cultural or personal experiences have most significantly influenced these perceptions?
3. Recall your experiences with different assessment methods throughout your educational journey. How did these assessments impact your learning, your relationships with teachers, and your understanding of your role as a student?
4. Describe the unwritten rules and expectations you've observed in Iranian educational environments. How do these cultural norms shape interactions between teachers and students? Provide specific examples from your personal experiences that illustrate these dynamics.
5. Reflect on moments when you felt most engaged or most disconnected in your learning experiences. What factors contributed to these feelings? How did the cultural and social context of your educational environment influence your ability to participate, communicate, and learn?