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Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Friends Groups: Insights from a Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Despite the documented benefits of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) in various educational contexts, their application within the Iranian EFL system, characterized by top-down policies and limited teacher autonomy, remains underexplored. This study explores Iranian English teachers' perceptions of CFGs as a collaborative professional development model.

Methods: Situated within a larger research project on CFG implementation, this paper specifically reports the findings from semi-structured interviews with 10 junior high school EFL teachers who participated in CFG sessions.

Results: Thematic analysis of interview data reveals that teachers generally viewed CFGs as a valuable space for professional dialogue, mutual support, and reflective practice. Participants highlighted the benefits of structured peer feedback, increased collegiality, and the opportunity to discuss classroom challenges in a non-evaluative environment. However, some expressed concerns about time constraints, varying levels of engagement, and the need for clearer facilitation.

Conclusion: These insights contribute to the growing body of research on collaborative teacher development in EFL settings and offer practical implications for designing effective professional learning communities in centralized educational systems.

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1. Introduction

The dynamic landscape of education necessitates continuous teacher development to foster effective student learning. This imperative has driven a significant shift in how teacher learning and education are conceptualized, moving away from traditional transmission models towards more nuanced, collaborative, and context-aware approaches (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2009; Richardson, 1997). Sociocultural Theory (SCT), with its emphasis on mediation, internalization, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), provides a robust framework for understanding teacher development as a dynamic process of constructing and restructuring knowledge within a social context (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective highlights teachers not as passive recipients of information but as active learners who benefit from guided collaboration and reflective practice (Hanks, 2017; Warford, 2011). Within this framework, collaborative inquiry-based professional development models like Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) have emerged as a powerful vehicle for teacher growth (Bell & Gilbert, 1994; Kelley et al., 2022). CFGs, characterized by structured, protocol-guided conversations among teachers, foster a community of support, trust, and shared inquiry, where educators can analyze their practice, exchange ideas, and explore the complexities of student learning (Nolan & Hoover, 2004).

Research has demonstrated the positive impact of CFGs on various aspects of teacher development, including enhanced professionalism, shifts in thinking and practice, and the creation of collaborative school cultures (Chien, 2023; Curry, 2008; Dunne et al., 2000; Fahey, 2011; Harrington, 2009; Kelley et al., 2022; Mat Noor & Shafee, 2020; Merrell, 2024; Stolle et al., 2019; Toland et al., 2024). While the benefits of CFGs are well-documented in general education, their application in specific contexts, such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, remains less explored. Existing studies in EFL contexts, such as those conducted by Poehner (2011) and Vo and Nguyen (2010), highlight the potential of CFGs in empowering teachers, fostering creativity, and ultimately improving teaching practices.

However, there is still a notable gap in empirical research that examines the actual interactions, discussions, and reflections within CFG sessions in diverse educational settings. In the Iranian EFL context with top-down educational policies and an examination-oriented system, teacher dissatisfaction with existing professional development programs are prevalent (Baniasad-Azad et al., 2016; Mohammadi et al., 2015). Despite lack of collaborative opportunities for teachers and their subsequent isolation, the number of studies on collaborative professional methods, such as CFGs, in Iran is scarce. This current study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the practicality of CFGs in the Iranian context. Specifically, this study will focus on teachers' perceptions of CFG sessions, aiming to provide deeper insights into the efficacy of this approach in enhancing the professional growth of Iranian EFL teachers. Therefore, this study can contribute to the empirical understanding of the role of CFGs in enhancing teachers' professional development.

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2. Review of the Literature

Teacher development is imperative for enhancing student learning outcomes. The conceptualization of teacher learning, alongside the associated practices of teacher education, has undergone significant transformation as a result of epistemological shifts (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2009; Richardson, 1997). One prominent epistemological framework is Sociocultural Theory. The sociocultural perspective was initially articulated by Lev Vygotsky (1978). The three fundamental principles of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) are mediation, internalization, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky posited that human beings are perpetually mediated by social or cultural factors. Internalization is conceptualized as "the process through which a person moves from executing concrete actions in conjunction with the assistance of material artifacts and other individuals to performing actions cognitively without any discernible external aid" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 14). Internalization is likely to occur within an individual's ZPD, defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

The ramifications of SCT on teacher learning are multifaceted. First, SCT regards teachers as learners engaged in the process of teaching. As Hanks (2017) contends, the education of teachers is a fluid process that necessitates the reconfiguration of existing knowledge and practices in accordance with local and individual requirements. Second, teachers possess a Zone of Proximal Teaching Development (ZPTD), which "denotes the distance between what teaching candidates can accomplish independently and a proximal level they might achieve through strategically mediated assistance from more proficient others" (Warford, 2011, p. 253). Third, SCT posits that education should not merely be viewed as the transmission of specific knowledge and skills; rather, it emphasizes "the development of understanding" (Johnson, 2009, p. 62), wherein teaching is characterized as a dialogic mediation that incorporates contributions from learners alongside the expertise of an adept teacher. Fourth, SCT advocates for the implementation of collaborative inquiry-based methodologies for professional development, as such approaches possess the capacity to establish a meditational space in which ZPTD is accessible (Johnson, 2009).

Teacher collaboration holds significant potential as a catalyst for professional advancement (Bell & Gilbert 1994; Kelley et al., 2022; Tedick 2005; Woods 1993). Collaboration cultivates habitual assistance, support, trust, and openness (Burns & Richards, 2009). One exemplification of a collaborative inquiry-based model is the CFG. Originating from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in the mid-1990s, CFGs perceive teacher professional development as a collective and practitioner-led initiative, with a focused aim on exploring and scrutinizing the dynamic nature of student learning. Nolan and Hoover (2004, p.60) classified CFGs as collegial development groups. "We define a collegial development group as a small (usually 12 or fewer participants) voluntary group of teachers who convene regularly (at least once a month) over an extended period to mutually support one another's personal and professional development through rigorous analysis of theories and concepts, new and established practices, and student and teacher work." A distinctive feature of CFGs is that discussions are conducted within highly structured frameworks.

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CFGs are structured around protocol-driven dialogues that are mediated by a facilitator or coach (Johnson, 2009). The established protocol typically encompasses six distinct phases: 1) an introductory overview in which the facilitator elucidates the session's focal point and delineates temporal constraints; 2) the presentation of the artifact, observation, or issue by the presenter, during which the presenter articulates the specific questions or concerns that should guide the feedback; 3) a phase allowing participants to pose clarifying inquiries regarding the presenter; 4) a discussion concerning the artifact or issue wherein the presenter refrains from verbal contributions, opting instead to listen or take notes; 5) the presenter engages in reflection on the feedback received; and 6) the facilitator conducts a debriefing of the session.

Empirical research has demonstrated the effectiveness of CFGs in various dimensions, including the cultivation of a communal and collaborative culture, the enhancement of teacher professionalism, and the transformation of educators' pedagogical perspectives and practices (Dunne et al., 2000; Fahey, 2011; Harrington, 2009; Kelley et al., 2022; Stolle et al., 2019; Toland et al., 2024). Dunne et al. (2000) undertook a survey aimed at contrasting the responses of educators who participated in CFGs with those of their counterparts who did not. Their findings indicated that educators involved in CFGs exhibited a higher degree of agreement compared to non-CFG educators regarding the sharing of pedagogical ideas, the exchange of student work samples, the regular convening to discuss classroom challenges, collaborative development of teaching resources or activities, and the solicitation of mutual advice concerning professional dilemmas.

Within the contexts of EFL and ESL, the corpus of studies focused on CFGs remains relatively sparse. Phan and Loan (2021) investigated five novice EFL teachers at a Vietnamese university, examining how they collaboratively inquired into English language teaching practices and their attitudes toward participating in a CFG. Data collected through three months of Messenger chat room observations and semi-structured interviews revealed that while the novice teachers valued the opportunity for collaborative inquiry and professional growth within the CFG, their active engagement was sometimes limited by a lack of intimacy and time constraints.

Poehner (2011) investigated the realm of teacher professional development through the lens of CFGs. The results indicated that the CFG process facilitated a significant reframing of Anna's (an English teacher) pedagogical approach to writing instruction within her classroom, with a transformation that favored the enhancement of student agency and the cultivation of metacognitive strategies to promote self-directedness among learners (Johnson & Golombek, 2011).

Vo and Nguyen (2010) examined the CFG experiences of four Vietnamese EFL teachers. Their research revealed that the teachers reported affirmative sentiments regarding the CFG experience, experienced heightened creativity and motivation in their instructional practices, established positive professional relationships, and expressed a readiness to persist in their CFG engagement, owing to their belief that CFGs could significantly enhance teacher efficacy and student outcomes while fostering a robust sense of professional community.

Notwithstanding the extensive body of research elucidating the role of CFGs in teacher development, insufficient research has been done in EFL and ESL contexts. This study aspires

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to augment the empirical comprehension of the function of CFGs by delving into Iranian English teachers' perspectives.

3. Context of the Study

In Iran, the formal instruction of the English language is conducted in junior high schools for pupils aged between 11 and 13 years. The overarching educational framework is governed by the Ministry of Education. The process of language education within Iran is characterized as top-down, being dictated by high-ranking officials. Within this hierarchical framework, English language teachers possess minimal, if any, influence over the curriculum development process. Iranian educational settings are significantly shaped by a system that prioritizes examination outcomes. Consequently, as teachers become absorbed in elevating students' test scores, their autonomy and effectiveness as curriculum developers diminish.

Empirical studies have revealed a prevailing sense of dissatisfaction concerning EFL teacher education programs in Iran, highlighting issues such as systemic centralization and instructional uniformity (Baniasad-Azad et al., 2016), as well as the marginalization of foreign language specialists (Kiany et al., 2011), discrepancies between language planning and its practical application (Atai & Mazlum, 2013), and overall discontent with English teacher education initiatives (Baniasad-Azad et al., 2017).

Baniasad-Azad et al. (2016) undertook an examination of EFL teacher education frameworks in Iran, revealing that a predetermined corpus of pedagogical knowledge is conveyed from trainers to teachers; factors such as educators' creativity, prior expertise, contextual teaching environments, and the demographic characteristics of learners are frequently overlooked in the formulation of these programs.

Mohammadi et al. (2015) conducted research assessing the perceptions of Iranian EFL educators regarding in-service education initiatives. To this end, they distributed a questionnaire among 80 teachers. Their results indicated that the educators expressed a lack of substantial satisfaction with the professional development programs implemented by the Ministry of Education, deeming these training initiatives as insufficiently practical for their pedagogical needs.

Effective professional development programs are essential for equipping teachers to navigate the challenges encountered within educational settings (Yoshida, 2011). The researcher could not identify any studies concerning CFG within Iran, where teachers appear to work in isolation. Indeed, to the researcher's understanding, there has been an absence of attention directed toward the broader domain of teacher education, particularly within an EFL context.

Thus, one of the objectives of this study is investigating collaborative programs that allow colleagues within the same educational environment to share insights and experiences more specifically, this research aims to explore the efficacy of CFGs from English teachers' perspective.

Accordingly, the following research question is addressed in this study:

What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their experiences participating in a Critical Friends Group?

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4. Materials and Methods

This investigation examined how the CFG experience influenced educators' perceptions regarding professional development, pedagogical reflections, and instructional methodologies. The qualitative research methodology is deemed suitable for this inquiry as it facilitates the construction of an in-depth comprehension of a particular context or social interaction (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). This study was one component of a larger project that took a mixed-methods approach to understanding the role of CFGs in the professional development of Iranian EFL teachers. While the larger project included observations, focus group discussions, and field notes, this paper presented a focused analysis of interview data to explore teachers' perceptions of their experiences in CFGs.

4.1. Participants

A total of 10 teachers engaged in the CFG program. They were junior high school teachers and were also teaching at the institution, where the researcher conducted the study. They hold MA and BA degrees in English teaching, and their age range from 23 to 39. Comprehensive details regarding the participants are presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms were employed to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Background Information of the participants

Teachers	Gender	Teaching Experience	Degree
Teacher 1	Female	2	BA
Teacher 2	Female	7	MA
Teacher 3	Male	8	MA
Teacher 4	Male	15	MA
Teacher 5	Female	10	BA
Teacher 6	Female	5	BA
Teacher 7	Female	8	MA
Teacher 8	Male	13	BA
Teacher 9	Female	10	BA
Teacher 10	Female	4	BA

4.2. Instruments

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to explore their feelings and perceptions about participation in the CFG. The interviewees agreed to be interviewed in English, although they were allowed to choose their native language, Persian. Each interview lasted about 50 minutes.

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4.3. Procedure

This study is one component of a larger project that takes a mixed-methods approach to understanding the role of CFGs in the professional development of Iranian EFL teachers. Interviews with 10 teachers were conducted in English two months after the completion of the CFG process to investigate their experience of participating in CFG sessions. Interviews were audio-recorded for later analysis.

4.4. Data Analysis

The study aimed to explore the role of CFG in teachers' professional development, emotions, and interactions. Audio files were the primary data management method, and the researcher archived the data collected through interviews. Thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was conducted on the data. The analysis involved deriving and categorizing major themes that emerged from the interviews.

The coding process started with data reduction, which was the process of transforming a comprehensive bulk of data into smaller and manageable segments to simplify the researcher's access to the meanings and concepts hidden in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher tried to develop the categories by closely examining and constantly reviewing, revising, and synthesizing the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). To ensure the credibility of the results, the researcher used the member checking technique, in which the results were negotiated with the participants to check for accuracy with their experiences.

5. Results

The outcomes of the interviews are analyzed through four main themes: 1) feedback on CFG, 2) the impact of CFG on pedagogical thoughts and practices, 3) comparison with other kinds of professional development, and 4) prospective opportunities within CFG. Table 2 represents derived themes and codes.

Table 2. Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes
Feedback on CFG	First-time opportunity
	Absence of local alternatives
	General satisfaction
	Enjoyment/pleasure
	Being heard
	Trusting atmosphere
	Sense of belonging

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Themes	Codes
	Peer solutions
The impact on pedagogical thoughts and practices	Collaborative shift
	Shared problems
	Reflective practice
	New solutions
	Classroom adaptation
Comparison with Other Kinds of Professional Development	Theory vs. practice
	Lecture vs. dialogue
	Mutual feedback
	Contextual relevance
	Complementarity
Prospective CFG Opportunities	Ongoing commitment
	Peer growth
	Comfortable relationships

5.1. Feedback on CFG

The participants conveyed a sense of satisfaction, pleasure, and overwhelmingly positive sentiments regarding their experiences within CFG. Expressions such as 'It was great' and 'I liked it very much' emerged as the most prevalent responses during the interviews. All participants expressed contentment with their CFG experiences for various reasons. Primarily, CFG represented a novel and entirely distinct experience they encountered for the first time throughout their teaching careers.

Teacher 7: "It was something new for me. I did not think that there could be a place or a chance to talk about our teaching problems. I think there is not such an opportunity anywhere in the town".

They also reported that the opportunity to share experiences with peers was an aspiration they had consistently pursued yet seldom realized.

Teacher 10: "I feel great because after 10 years of teaching, I found an opportunity to talk about my problems and the sense of being heard encouraged me to participate. I have always liked to know what other teachers have done to solve a problem in their teaching context".

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Secondly, the CFG process facilitated the development of trusting relationships among the teachers. All of them asserted that participation in the group engendered a collegial and amicable work environment. They derived enjoyment from the CFG experience as it encouraged them to learn from their colleagues in a nurturing atmosphere without undue pressure.

Teacher 1: "Teachers do not talk about their problems because they are worried to be humiliated, blamed or criticized. But the comfortable atmosphere of the group was very motivating. It encouraged me to talk about my problems without the fear or anxiety of being judged".

Most participants expressed profound enthusiasm regarding the sense of belonging that group participation cultivated. They experienced positive emotions as they perceived that the CFG experience had transformed both their relationships with colleagues and their perspectives on collaborative engagement.

Teacher 3: "If you remember, I did not regularly attend the first three meetings. I was attending just because I had agreed to come. But gradually I became interested in the group and its discussions. Now, I don't like to lose even one minute of the meetings; I like to have meetings every week".

Thirdly, the CFG experience afforded innovative avenues for the exchange of professional ideas. The teachers believed that the group discussions presented diverse strategies to address or resolve issues. One of the more frequent remarks was:

Teacher 5: "Sharing experience with other teachers was very helpful in finding the best possible ways for overcoming a dilemma. I think discussing our teaching problems was the best part of the group".

5.2. The impact of CFG on pedagogical thoughts and practices

The teachers asserted that their involvement in CFG and the subsequent discussions substantially influenced their instructional practices. 'It significantly aided me' was the most recurrent feedback noted in the interviews. They stated that CFG impacted their perceptions regarding professional development. Six participants mentioned that before they engaged with CFG, they endeavored to enhance their knowledge and resolve pedagogical dilemmas through individual efforts. Nonetheless, participation in CFG illuminated for them the notion that teaching could be more fulfilling and effective with peer support.

Teacher 9: "I rarely asked other teachers, because I thought asking is a sign of inferiority in knowledge or I lose my face. I was always worried about others' reactions and thinking. In CFG, I understood that some problems are shared among teachers and asking questions gives me different options and solutions. This semester, it happened 4-5 times that I consulted with one of my colleagues and he friendly answered me".

Teacher mentioned varying impacts of CFG on their instructional practices as well. Four educators underscored that they became more reflective regarding their teaching methodologies and classroom environments.

Teacher 7: "I think more about my teaching, students' feedback, and the classroom atmosphere. I always have a flashback to the group discussions and try to use them in my teaching".

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The participants also stated that CFG discussions equipped them with a plethora of solutions to address challenges, obstacles, or dilemmas. Consequently, they exhibited increased adaptability and employed a wider range of techniques and strategies. One teacher, who had grappled with a challenge in her classroom for three consecutive terms, recounted her transformation:

Teacher 9: "I presented two problems that I had been facing three terms without any solution. In CFG, I understood that I had chosen the wrong way, I should have changed my strategy. The CFG process encouraged me to try different solutions and options".

One participant who was the group's youngest member with the least teaching experience articulated the significance and merit of CFG. She underscored that following her participation in CFG, she felt a heightened sense of responsibility for her instructional practices.

Teacher 1: "Most of the problems that I have faced were related to students' behavior and class management… Participation in CFG taught me that I should use more role plays, games, and activities in the classroom to make my teaching energetic and the learning enjoyable".

One teacher notably asserted that the CFG process did not significantly impact his pedagogical practices as he could not change the strategies he had been employing over a long period.

Teacher 5: "I cannot say it had much influence because I do not change most of the strategies I have been using in 12 years, but it had some effects, maybe up to 30percent".

5.3. Comparison with Other Kinds of Professional Development

The interviewees perceived CFG as fundamentally distinct from the teacher education programs they had previously undertaken. A notable difference pertained to the content, as they believed that traditional teacher education courses predominantly focused on theoretical explanations, whereas CFG was rooted in experiential learning.

Teacher 3: "In common in-service courses, trainers talk about theories and terminologies, e.g. deductive and inductive learning. They do not explore and analyze the problems that may happen in real situations. CFG was a totally different experience".

Another distinction highlighted by the teachers concerned the manner in which materials were presented. While lecturing constituted the predominant mode of disseminating pedagogical knowledge, methodologies, or strategies in in-service training, the collaborative discourse among teachers and their active engagement in the CFG learning process were deemed more satisfying by the teachers.

Teacher 8 "Most of teacher education courses are lecture-based. They do not work on teaching practices, challenges, or prior experience. But CFG was something new to me. Involving all the participating teachers is something specific to CFG".

The participants further asserted that the communication dynamics within CFG diverged markedly from those characterizing conventional in-service training. They noted that teacher education programs were deficient in feedback, collaborative efforts, and meaningful dialogue.

Teacher 3: "What I liked most about CFG was mutual feedback, understanding, and effective discussions we had. In other teacher education courses, they never ask us about our

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teaching problems, difficulties, and dilemmas. Trainers follow a one-way teaching. Our ideas are rarely requested".

Lastly, teachers deliberated the practicality of CFG in comparison to other teacher education courses. Five educators asserted that CFG was explicitly tailored to their particular teaching contexts. Conversely, they found that the materials presented in other programs were frequently overly generalized or prescriptive.

Teacher 6: "In most teacher education programs, a trainer explains a specific way and teachers think this may be the only one possible way. What is important is whether I can apply it in my class or not".

One teacher argued that both kinds of teacher education courses were indispensable, contending that theoretical knowledge and practical experiences are both necessary and complementary.

Teacher 1: "CFG was a great opportunity. But I think other teacher education courses are also useful and completing each other, especially for me. I am in the early years of my teaching and need both theories and teachers' experiences."

5.4. Prospective CFG Opportunities

The participants conveyed enthusiasm for the continuation of CFG. Each participant affirmed their interest in engaging in CFG endeavors in the future. One rationale for their desire to persist with CFG was that participation fostered diverse challenges and novel opportunities.

Teacher 1: "Surely. I think there is still too much I can learn from the group talks and discussions."

Teacher 5: "Not only the problems I myself presented, but also others' problems and the members' feedback help me to learn different teaching techniques and skills. I like it to continue and most of the teachers have the same idea."

Another justification pertained to the impact that CFG exerted on their instructional practices. All participants concurred that they derived significant learning from their colleagues and that CFG enhanced their teaching efficacy; they reported increased reflection on their pedagogical approaches and heightened concern for their students. They also emphasized that the trusting relationships among group members fostered a positive atmosphere and motivated their engagement in the process.

Teacher 8: "I like the group very much, because I had great feelings and I was in good mood in CFG. Now, I feel more comfortable asking questions even outside CFG."

6. Discussion

The findings of the study indicated that the participants had positive attitudes about their CFG experiences, attributed to the opportunities it afforded for experiential sharing, deliberation on teaching dilemmas, and peer learning; the establishment of trusting and supportive relationships among colleagues; and the sense of belonging through group participation. These findings have been substantiated in the literature (e.g. Merrell, 2024; Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014; Phan & Loan, 2021; Toland et al., 2024; Vo & Nguyen, 2010).

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Moreover, teachers asserted that CFG influenced their teaching in various dimensions, including their willingness to engage in collaboration and peer support; increased reflection on their instructional practices (Dunne et al., 2000; Phan & Loan, 2021); sensitivity to their students and classroom dynamics; greater flexibility in the application of pedagogical techniques; and sense of responsibility.

Findings also showed strong preference for CFG among teachers, as they characterized it as experiential, collaborative, exploratory, and practical (Nguyen, 2010; Toland et al., 2024) whereas, they believed that the in-services they had attended were predominantly theory-driven, lecture-based, and generalized (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Baniasad-Azad et al., 2016; Baniasad-Azad et al., 2017; Kiany et al., 2011).

The participants exhibited a pronounced inclination towards engaging in CFG in the future, attributable to its beneficial impact on their instructional practices, the encouraging professional dynamics it cultivated among colleagues, and the profound sense of fulfillment derived from collective involvement (Merrell, 2024; Toland et al., 2024; Vo & Nguyen, 2010).

7. Conclusion

This study investigated teachers' perceptions about practicality of CFG sessions. The findings revealed that participation in CFGs was a positive experience for teachers. Teachers enjoyed CFGs for the opportunities they created to share experiences, collaboratively reflect on dilemmas, and engage in peer learning. Trusting, supportive relationships and the sense of belonging that emerged from group participation contributed to teachers' positive perceptions (Merrell, 2024; Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014; Phan & Loan, 2021; Toland et al., 2024; Vo & Nguyen, 2010). Moreover, professional growth, reflective practice, pedagogical flexibility, and a sense of autonomy were among the effects of participation in CFGs. Teachers preferred CFGs over traditional professional development programs because they found CFGs practical, collaborative, and contextual.

This study has several important implications for EFL teacher education and professional development. It contributes to the growing body of research on collaborative teacher development in EFL contexts by providing insights into Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of CFGs. By fostering collaborative inquiry, critical reflection, and a sense of community, CFGs can empower teachers to take ownership of their professional growth and improve their teaching practices. Decision-makers should take these findings into account when designing EFL teacher education programs (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2011). It is essential to provide teachers with adequate time and resources to participate in CFGs.

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only ten teachers from one institution. Future research could expand the sample size and include teachers from diverse educational settings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of CFGs in Iran. Second, the study relied primarily on interview data, which may be subject to bias or social desirability effects. While the interviews provided rich insights into teachers' perceptions, they may not fully capture the complexities of teachers' actual experiences in CFG sessions.

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