

Humanized EAP Education in Iran: Exploring Barriers to Implementation

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Abstract: Humanized pedagogy, which prioritizes students' unique identities, voices, and lived experiences, aligns theoretically with the mission of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which aims to socialize learners into academic communities. Despite this alignment, there is a lack of empirical research examining how such pedagogy can be operationalized within the specific socio-educational context of Iranian EAP programs. This qualitative study employs Constructivist Grounded Theory to investigate the impediments to embedding humanized pedagogy within Iranian EAP programs. Through semi-structured interviews and life history narratives with 16 EAP instructors and eight ELT/EAP educators across Iranian universities, the research elucidates that a content-centric focus, misconceptions equating general English proficiency with academic competence, and a reductionist view of EAP as mere terminology acquisition undermine the integration of humanized principles. These challenges are compounded by fragmented curricula and a lack of specialized EAP teacher education. The findings offer transformative reforms, including participatory curriculum development and robust EAP-specific teacher education, to align instructional practices with learners' academic and professional aspirations. This study contributes to the literature by contextualizing humanized pedagogy within Iranian EAP, offering implications for policymakers and educators to foster inclusive, empowering academic environments. It proposes actionable reforms to align instructional practices with students' diverse identities, voices, and academic aspirations, enhancing their socialization into professional academic communities.

Keywords: Constructivist Grounded Theory, Curriculum Coherence, English for Academic Purposes, Humanized Pedagogy, Teacher Education

Introduction

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) represents a learner-centered paradigm designed to integrate students into their target academic communities (Hamp-Lyons, 2011; Hyland, 2006; Hyland, 2019). This integration is achieved by equipping learners with the appropriate discourse and language skills tailored to their specific academic disciplines. However, despite its potential to empower students, EAP faces significant challenges in both understanding and practice, especially in Iran (Atai & Taherkhani, 2018). Instructional approaches are often inconsistent and fail to adequately respond to students' needs

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(Atai & Fatahi-Majd, 2013; Atai & Taherkhani, 2018). A gap exists between students' perceived and actual academic requirements (Shahidipour & Tahririan, 2017; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018; Namaziandost et al., 2025), as well as between their preferred modes of instruction and the methods that would best support their learning (Eslami, 2010; Liu et al., 2011; Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016; Zohoorian, 2015). Moreover, many EAP instructors struggle to extend their teaching beyond reading and translation-based instruction, limiting students' ability to develop comprehensive academic communication skills (Kaivanpanah et al., 2021).

These challenges highlight the urgent need for a deeper exploration of the contextual factors that shape the effectiveness of EAP programs. A deeper understanding of these influences can help bridge the gap between desired teaching practices and mainstream education. The framework of humanizing pedagogy offers a promising path forward. Humanizing pedagogy recognizes learners as individuals with unique backgrounds, voices, and identities rather than merely as students (Bartolomé, 1994; Bruce, 2021; Huerta, 2011; Zahedi Moghaddam et al., 2025). It values their diverse experiences and strengths and fosters the development of their full potential (Zhahedi et al., 2025; Salazar, 2013). This approach aligns closely with the mission of EAP, which aims to equip learners with the skills and competencies necessary to professionalize within their chosen academic communities. Investigating the integration of humanized pedagogy in EAP education provides a nuanced understanding of EAP shortcomings and offers implications for potential renewal. The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the divergence between the ideals of humanizing pedagogy and the realities of EAP teaching and learning in the Iranian context. To examine the practical barriers to adopting a humanizing approach in Iranian EAP programs, the study will be guided by the following research questions:

Research Question One: What are the primary obstacles to integrating humanizing pedagogy into Iranian EAP programs?

Research Question Two: How do each of these obstacles impede the implementation of humanized EAP education?

Literature Review

Humanizing Pedagogy

Humanized pedagogy is an educational approach that views education as a collaborative and participatory process where students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active agents in their own learning (Freire, 1970). This pedagogy emphasizes learning should be not only academically enriching but also socially and emotionally relevant to students' lives (Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Thus, students need to be primarily respected as 'humans'—individuals with diverse potentials, identities, histories, challenges, and voices. Each student brings a range of human resources and strengths, from academic abilities to social, emotional, and creative talents. By acknowledging their cultural, linguistic, and social identities, humanized pedagogy helps student agency and contribution thrive (Huerta, 2011). This pedagogical model holds particular relevance in language education, as the diversity of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and learning styles critically shapes the learning experience (Bartolomé, 1994).

The theoretical architecture of humanizing pedagogy rests on four transformative pillars that collectively illuminate the path toward authentic education. First, it recognizes students' cultural and linguistic repertoires as vital intellectual assets rather than obstacles to overcome (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Girux, 2011). Second, it centers students' lived experiences and voices through methodologies that honor their agency in the learning process (Price & Osborn, 2000; Salazar, 2008, 2013). Third, it cultivates critical consciousness by engaging students in profound analytical thinking about their social realities (Carnerio, 2013; Freire, 1985). Fourth, it emphasizes the power of authentic teacher-student relationships as catalysts for meaningful learning (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Huerta, 2011). The implementation of humanizing pedagogy demands a context-sensitive approach that transcends prescribed methodologies (Salazar, 2013). Literature shows that humanized pedagogy empowers both students and educators. For instance, Osorio (2018) demonstrated that integrating

Latinx children's literature into early childhood classrooms helped students see their identities reflected in the curriculum, fostering engagement and critical thinking. Similarly, Assaf et al. (2019) showed that study abroad and international service-learning programs deepened preservice teachers' understanding of humanizing teaching practices, enabling them to create more inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms.

The integration of humanizing pedagogy into EAP education represents a theoretically robust and pedagogically sound framework. The alignment between these two approaches is particularly evident in their shared commitment to learners' holistic development and professional transformation. While EAP aims to socialize learners into their target discourse communities and develop their professional identities (Hyland, 2006; Paltridge & Starfield, 2013), humanizing pedagogy views learners as complete human beings with valuable experiences and potential for growth. At a practical level, EAP's emphasis on needs analysis naturally complements the core principle of humanizing pedagogy-honoring learners' backgrounds and experiences. When EAP practitioners conduct needs analyses, discourse analyses, and genre analyses, they engage in a fundamentally humanizing practice by acknowledging and validating learners' current positions while scaffolding their journeys toward desired academic and professional communities. This theoretical alignment suggests that incorporating humanizing pedagogical principles into EAP education can enrich both the learning experience and outcomes. By viewing academic discourse acquisition not merely as a technical skill but as part of learners' holistic development, EAP educators can create more meaningful and transformative learning environments that prepare students not only for academic success but for meaningful participation in their chosen professional communities.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

EAP aims to professionalize and socialize students into their desired discourse communities. This is achieved by exposing learners to the appropriate language and disciplinary discourse features, including language uses and professional communicative activities (Hyland, 2019). More often, a moderate version of EAP is prioritized, which aims to help students develop the language proficiency necessary for performing academic tasks such as writing research papers and participating in discussions (Jeon, 2022). Implementing EAP involves ongoing needs and then renewing instruction to make needs responsive (Basturkmen, 2010; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). The specificity of each discipline in discourse features and language uses forces EAP practitioners to make their EAPs discipline-specific and learner-sensitive (Hyland, 2006).

Another substantial challenge lies in motivating students and ensuring their engagement with EAP, as they may see EAP as simply a language course (Charles & Pecorari, 2015). Misaligned cognitions of EAP missions, teacher roles, and learners' needs pose significant challenges in making EAP empowering and transformative (Hamp-Lyons, 2011). Since the 1970s, Iranian universities have integrated discipline-based EAP into their curricula (Atai et al., 2017). Research reveals that EAP programs in Iran have failed to adequately align with professional disciplinary requirements, leading to significant shortcomings in course design, teacher training, and program evaluation (Atai et al., 2017; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018).

Further, Atai et al. (2017), as well as Atai and Fatahi-Majd (2014), identified inconsistencies in teaching practices between ELT instructors and subject teachers. While ELT instructors tend to focus on strategy-based activities for EAP reading comprehension, subject teachers lack a well-defined approach. Khany and Tarlani-Aliabadi (2016) found that Iranian EAP courses have been restricted to reading comprehension and translation. Atai et al. (2017) see the challenge in misalignment between teachers' cognitions and the goals of EAP. Kaivanpanah et al. (2021) expanded on this issue, revealing that Iranian EAP teachers need specialized teacher education programs. Eslami (2010) found that students prioritize practical language skills in EAP courses, while instructors emphasize theoretical content, highlighting a perceptual mismatch that hinders effective course design and learner engagement. Additionally, Soodmand Afshar and Movassagh (2016), as well as Tavakoli and Tavakol

(2018), called for Iranian policymakers to acknowledge deficiencies in EAP education and make necessary revisions.

Given the diverse settings of EAP and the situated nature of needs-responsive instruction, it is crucial to contextualize research on EAP programs to better understand their realities (Ding & Bruce, 2017). By examining local EAP programs through the theoretical lens of humanized pedagogy, researchers and educators can gain insights into the hidden challenges and untapped potentials of EAP instruction. This perspective encourages moving beyond a technical approach to academic English and instead embracing EAP as a holistic, transformative process that not only equips students with linguistic competencies but also empowers them to actively engage with their academic and professional communities. A humanized lens can help uncover the socio-cultural and institutional barriers that may hinder student professional development. Furthermore, it can highlight the role of teachers' agency and pedagogical beliefs in shaping EAP practices. Although both humanized pedagogy and EAP share common themes, there is limited research on effectively integrating these shared principles (Loffi Gaskaree et al., 2025). This gap is significant because examining the determining factors and barriers involved in the integration of humanized pedagogy could lead to a better understanding of the effectiveness of local EAPs.

Methodology

This study employed Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) to examine barriers to integrating humanized pedagogy in Iranian EAP programs (Charmaz, 2014). The iterative approach of CGT enabled collaborative meaning-making with participants, fostering a nuanced exploration of contextual challenges and stakeholder perspectives (Patton, 2014).

Participants

Recruitment began with purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of EAP educators within the Iranian context. Initially, 24 participants were recruited, including 16 EAP instructors and eight ELT/EAP educators from various Iranian universities (Recruitment began with purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of EAP educators within the Iranian context. Initially, 24 participants were recruited, including 16 EAP instructors and eight ELT/EAP educators from various Iranian universities (UOZS, KUOT, THU, BU- for confidentiality, abbreviations and modified names are used). As the study progressed, theoretical sampling guided further recruitment based on emerging themes, such as stakeholder misalignment and curriculum incoherence, to deepen the exploration of barriers to humanized pedagogy (Charmaz, 2014). The final sample consisted of 18 participants, as theoretical saturation was achieved when new data no longer provided novel insights (Charmaz, 2004). Participants were selected from multiple universities to capture varied experiences while maintaining cultural coherence within Iran's EAP context (Patten & Galvan, 2019).

Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and life history narratives. An interview guide, developed through an extensive literature review and consultations with EAP practitioners, included open-ended questions designed to explore barriers to humanizing EAP education (see Appendix 1). The questions were informed by key works, including Bartolomé (1994), Freire (1970), Hyland (2006), Salazar (2013), and Atai et al. (2017), addressing issues such as misconceptions about EAP goals and the neglect of learner agency. Interviews were conducted in English or Persian based on participant preference. Life history narratives (see Appendix 2), guided by prompts, encouraged participants to reflect on significant teaching experiences, student interactions, and professional challenges, providing a longitudinal perspective within Iran's socio-cultural context (Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

Data Collection Procedures

A pilot study involving two EAP instructors and one ELT educator was conducted to refine the interview guide and narrative prompts, ensuring cultural appropriateness and alignment with the study's objectives. Two independent researchers evaluated the instruments for suitability. Participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed study information, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw. Pseudonyms and secure data storage were used to protect privacy.

Data collection involving 18 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 120 minutes (Each interview was conducted in multiple sessions, rather than in a single continuous session, based on the interviewee's availability and preferences). Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Skype based on participant availability, and all were audio-recorded with permission, with field notes capturing initial impressions. Following initial interviews, participants provided life history narratives, either written or through follow-up interviews, guided by prompts (see Appendix). Initial coding after the first interviews informed theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). Interviews were transcribed, manually corrected two weeks later for accuracy, and imported analyzed manually.

Data Analysis

Using the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach, we employed the constant comparative method (CCM) to analyze data, beginning with initial coding to examine data line-by-line and identify emerging concepts (Charmaz, 2014). This was followed by focused coding to synthesize significant initial codes into broader categories, capturing key barriers to humanized pedagogy in Iranian EAP programs. Throughout the process, we wrote memos to explore ideas, refine categories, and facilitate CCM by continuously comparing data, codes, and categories. Theoretical coding was then applied to establish relationships between categories, moving from descriptive to analytical insights and forming a cohesive theoretical framework.

Theoretical sampling guided our iterative data collection. Based on emerging themes, such as 'misaligned stakeholder cognition' and 'curriculum incoherence', we conducted additional interviews to elaborate on these concepts and refine our developing theory. This process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, where no new properties of categories emerged (Charmaz, 2014). For example, the theme "Misaligned Stakeholder Cognition" emerged from initial codes such as 'content-centric priorities,' 'neglect of learner agency,' and 'misconceptions about EAP goals.' During focused coding, these were grouped into categories including 'overemphasis on content delivery,' 'disregard for learners' backgrounds and potentials,' and 'assumptions equating general English proficiency with academic competence.' Theoretical coding revealed interconnections, demonstrating how stakeholder beliefs reinforce a content-focused approach that undermines humanized pedagogy. Similarly, the theme "Incoherent EAP Curriculum" was derived from codes like 'disconnected policymaking,' 'exclusion of teachers from curriculum design,' and 'neglect of learner needs,' which were synthesized into categories reflecting fragmented stakeholder communication and misaligned educational practices.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, we implemented member checking by sharing findings with participants (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Regular peer debriefing sessions with colleagues refined our interpretations and enhanced analytical precision. Triangulation of data sources, combining semi-structured interviews and life history narratives, strengthened the robustness of our findings. Additionally, Memos, transcripts, and code updates were systematically documented to ensure transparency and traceability of the analytical process.

Results

Misaligned Stakeholder Cognition

One of the barriers to actualizing humanized EAP education in Iran was found to be the “cognition of stakeholders, encompassing their knowledge, beliefs, practices, and [the inputs] they provide to the educational system” (Tina, Semi-structured Interview). These stakeholders include policymakers, syllabus designers, materials developers, teacher educators, EAP instructors, and learners themselves. Their perceptions and assumptions about education shape “the structure and delivery of the curriculum [in ways] that impede the implementation of humanized pedagogy” (Vahid, Semi-structured Interview).

The Myth of Content Learning Leading to Holistic Development

According to the educators, Iranian EAP stakeholders often assume that "teaching and learning subject-specific content [naturally] led to the professional development [of students]" (Kian, Narratives). This belief prioritizes "content coverage and mastery" (Kian, Semi-structured Interview). The prevalent focus remains on transmitting content efficiently to ensure students are acquainted with disciplinary topics. However, this approach "overlooks the core principles of humanized education", which emphasizes the learner over the content (Delvin, Semi-structured Interview). From a humanized pedagogy perspective, disciplinary content is merely foundational data that becomes "valuable when paired with enriched learning opportunities", nurturing students as emerging experts in their academic communities (Tina, Semi-structured Interview).

A significant limitation of the current content-centric approach is its "neglect of learners' human resources, potentials, backgrounds, and abilities" (Hanieh, Semi-structured Interview). It also "minimizes opportunities for teacher and learner agency" (Vahid, Semi-structured Interview). Humanized EAP education advocates for the creation of learning environments that foster "learner agentic engagement, teacher agency, and discourse-oriented instruction" (Nika, Semi-structured Interview). Furthermore, the goal of EAP in “socializing students into their desired communities, [...] combined with the principles of humanized pedagogy that emphasize respecting learners' human resources, advocates for aligning instruction with the professional practices of target communities rather than solely focusing on content coverage” (Tina, Semi-structured Interview).

The Myth of General Proficiency's Transmission into Academic English

Educators believe that misconceptions about the relationship between English for General Purposes (EGP) and EAP contribute to instructors' misunderstandings of EAP education's primary goals. EGP prominence "has created an assumption that mastery of EGP naturally translates to academic competence" (Behzad, Semi-structured Interview). This misconception frequently results in instructors "prioritize[ing] general language skills over the specialized needs of academic English learners" (Parsa, Semi-structured Interview). EGP encompasses basic linguistic competencies in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. However, "treating [EGP] as the direct pathway to academic English proficiency can misdirect both instructors and learners” (Tina, Semi-structured Interview). EAP stands distinct from EGP with its "specialized focus on academic contexts, [requiring specific skills like] genre awareness, discipline-specific language use, critical analysis" (Ali, Semi-structured Interview). These components go well beyond the boundaries of general English proficiency. Mastering "[everyday] conversational skills in EGP does not address [the needs of EAP learners], who require engagement with specific academic discourse and a deeper understanding of academic conventions” (Vahid, Semi-structured Interview).

The Myth of Learning Discipline-Specific Terms as Mastery of Specialized Disciplinary Discourse

The participants believed that many educators conceptualize "EAP as a supplementary course" (Tina, Semi-structured Interview), narrowly defined by its focus on "subject-specific terms and concepts rather

than as a comprehensive discipline-specific discourse" (Vahid, Narratives). This reductive understanding fails to acknowledge that each academic discipline represents a unique community with its own ways of thinking, doing, acting, and seeing the world. As a result, EAP education in Iran "is [often] reduced to teaching discipline-specific themes and terminologies" without fostering the deeper, discipline-specific engagement necessary for professional growth (Niloofar, Semi-structured Interview).

In this limited conceptualization, the specificity of EAP—unique "communicative practices of distinct academic communities"—is neither fully understood nor effectively implemented (Tina, Semi-structured Interview). EAP courses tend to mirror "EGP courses, [with the only distinguishing feature being] the inclusion of subject-specific vocabulary" (Leila, Semi-structured Interview). This approach fundamentally "undermines the broader mission of EAP [which is socializing and] professionalizing learners into their desired professional communities" (Leila, Semi-structured Interview). This involves mastering the discourse features, communicative practices, and language use characteristic of these communities. To achieve this, "EAP education [must go beyond the teaching of terminology and instead] provide learners with the tools to engage deeply with the discursive and professional norms of their disciplines" (Ali, Semi-structured Interview).

Incoherent EAP Curriculum

Educators highlight that the EAP curriculum lacks coherence due to "poor communication and understanding among decision-makers and other stakeholders". For instance, "teachers are [often] excluded from policy development and decision-making processes", while policymakers remain disconnected from classroom realities (Ali, Semi-structured Interview). This disconnect "prevents policymakers from designing a curriculum that reflects learners' actual needs [...and] hinders teachers' ability to fully understand and implement the curriculum effectively" (Kian, Semi-structured Interview). Without mutual engagement, even a well-designed EAP curriculum risks misinterpretation, resulting in fragmented decisions and ineffective implementation.

The capabilities, potential, and aspirations of learners must be thoughtfully "integrated into every facet of curriculum design and implementation" (Nika, Narratives). Misalignment among stakeholders' perspectives, decisions, and practices results in policies, curricula, and classroom practices that fail to reflect the learners' potential and desires. Such disconnect "leads to the neglect of students' needs, aspirations, and cultural identities" (Parsa, Semi-structured Interview). Consequently, the educational process becomes "overly focused on content delivery and coverage, prioritizing the teaching of material over the holistic development [of the learners themselves]" (Delvin, Semi-structured Interview). Accordingly, humanized pedagogy demands a coherent curriculum that prioritizes the learner as the central focus of educational practice. A coherent curriculum is one that is "collaboratively designed with input from all stakeholders"—educators, policymakers, students, and communities—to ensure alignment between educational goals and the lived realities of the classroom (Behzad Narratives).

Humanizing education "works best when everyone involved" (Tina, Semi-structured Interview). That is, school leaders, policymakers, curriculum creators, and teachers work together to create a supportive system for students. When these groups align their efforts, they "build an educational environment where policies, lesson plans, and teaching methods all connect to support students' needs" (Mahan, Semi-structured Interview). For example, policymakers can create rules that value all students' backgrounds, curriculum designers can choose materials that reflect students' cultures and experiences, and teachers can tailor lessons to connect with students' real lives. This teamwork fosters open, meaningful conversations in the classroom and beyond. This alignment ensures that humanizing pedagogy "is not just a classroom practice but a systemic commitment" (Niloofar, Semi-structured Interview). By working together, humanizing education becomes more than just a teaching style—"it's a promise to put students at the heart of the entire school system" (Arya, Semi-structured Interview).

Educators pointed out that the current EAP curriculum often "fails to listen to and respect the voices of students, teachers, and others involved" (Leila, Narratives). When decisions are made without

considering everyone's needs and experiences, the curriculum and teaching practices “lack a clear pathway to look at learners as human beings with valuable resources and potential” (Vahid, Semi-structured Interview). As a result, the EAP system struggles to adapt and stay true to its goal of helping students become part of their chosen academic or professional communities. This disconnect means that efforts to make education more human-focused—where students feel valued and understood—only happen in some classrooms, not across the entire system. “Without [everyone] working together, the system can't fully support students in a meaningful way” (Behzad, Semi-structured Interview).

The Absence of EAP-Specific and Transformative Teacher Education

Educators highlight that “inadequate training for EAP teachers creates significant gaps in their understanding and ability to achieve EAP's [core] objectives” (Nasser, Semi-structured Interview). Humanizing EAP education requires a clear focus on its primary goal: socializing and professionally preparing students for their desired academic communities. However, this goal is often “misunderstood due to insufficient teacher preparation” (Tina, Semi-structured Interview). The issue stems from the fact that most EAP instructors are either content-area specialists or EFL educators, neither of whom typically “receive specialized training in academic language instruction” (Mahan, Semi-structured Interview). Many content-area instructors “teach EAP courses relying solely on their language proficiency”, while EFL educators often depend on general language teaching concepts and theories, assuming these alone qualify them to teach EAP effectively (Hanieh, Semi-structured Interview). “Both groups lack systematic education tailored to the unique demands of EAP”, such as fostering academic discourse and community integration (Tina, Semi-structured Interview). This problem is exacerbated by the reliance on traditional, “transmission-oriented teacher education” models in ELT. These models “prioritize language proficiency and theoretical knowledge over practical, student-centered pedagogical skills” (Leila, Narratives). As a result, “EAP teachers often focus narrowly on delivering subject-specific content, {... mistakenly] believing this is sufficient to help students thrive in their academic communities” (Mahan, Semi-structured Interview). To address these gaps, EAP teacher education must shift toward specialized, practical training that equips instructors to support students' academic and professional socialization effectively.

In Iran, many “content-area EAP instructors lack formal teacher education [... and] view their role primarily as delivering subject-specific material”, focusing heavily on technical terminology and concepts (Vahid, Semi-structured Interview). As a result, EAP education often resembles EGP supplemented with specialized vocabulary. While students may gain familiarity with subject-specific terms, they are frequently “unprepared to [actively] participate as competent members of their academic communities, missing the [broader] skills [needed for academic discourse and integration]” (Niloofer, Semi-structured Interview). The lack of specialized EAP teacher education, combined with reliance on traditional, transmission-oriented teaching methods, perpetuates a content- or language-centered approach. This approach mistakenly frames EAP learning as the passive absorption of subject-area knowledge or general English proficiency. EAP “instructors are [often] unprepared for the [diverse] roles” essential to effective teaching, such as analyzing students' needs, understanding academic discourse and genres, developing tailored materials and syllabi, assessing progress, collaborating with stakeholders, and engaging in reflective practice (Arya, Narratives). These roles are vital for delivering humanized EAP instruction that supports students' holistic academic and professional development.

Discussion

This study highlights critical barriers to integrating humanized pedagogy within Iranian EAP programs, stemming from misaligned stakeholder perspectives, fragmented curriculum design, and outdated pedagogical practices. These challenges undermine the development of learner-centered EAP education. This discussion interprets the findings through the lens of humanized pedagogy and relevant scholarship, identifying systemic issues and proposing pathways for reform.

Misalignment in Stakeholders' Perceptions and Practice

A key finding is the persistent misalignment among stakeholders—policymakers, educators, curriculum developers, and students—particularly in prioritizing content mastery over holistic learner development. Many stakeholders mistakenly equate EAP education with the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge, sidelining the critical, emotional, and social dimensions of learning. This content-centric focus reflects a misunderstanding of EAP's core mission: to socialize students into their academic and professional communities through meaningful engagement. This misalignment aligns with critiques from scholars like Freire (1970) and Benesch (2001), who advocate for learner-centered educational models. Humanized pedagogy, as articulated by Bartolomé (1994) and Salazar (2013), emphasizes contextualizing content to foster learners' agency, intellectual growth, and cultural identities. To overcome this barrier, stakeholders must shift toward a human-centered vision of EAP that integrates students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds into the learning process (Hyland, 2006; Huerta, 201; Salimi & Hadaeghi Azad, 2023). For instance, while teachers often focus on delivering subject-specific content, students require opportunities to develop practical skills such as critical thinking, genre awareness, and discipline-specific communication, which are essential for active participation in academic communities.

This issue is consistent with prior research in the Iranian context. Soodmand Afshar and Movassagh (2016) identified discrepancies between teachers' and students' perceptions of EAP goals, while Atai and Khazaei (2014) and Atai et al. (2017) noted a disconnect between EAP teachers' practices and the principles of EAP. Similarly, Taherkhani (2019) highlighted the lack of collaboration between language and content instructors. Iranmehr et al. (2018) further pointed to inconsistencies between EAP policies and classroom practices. Our study extends this literature by emphasizing the systemic nature of these misalignments and their impact on humanizing EAP education. The widespread assumption that EGP equates to academic English competence, for example, leads to an overemphasis on general language skills at the expense of specialized academic abilities, such as critical analysis and genre-specific writing (Hyland, 2006).

Another significant challenge is the reductionist approach to EAP, where learning subject-specific terminology is often mistaken for mastery of academic language. This narrow focus, noted by Atai et al. (2017) and Zand-Moghadam et al. (2018), prioritizes vocabulary acquisition over the development of skills needed to engage with the discourse, norms, and practices of academic communities. Such an approach undermines EAP's goal of preparing students for the complex demands of academic and professional environments (Hyland, 2006). This reductionist tendency is compounded by the lack of specialized EAP teacher training and reliance on transmission-oriented teaching methods. As a result, EAP instruction often fails to equip students with transferable skills, such as critical thinking and effective communication, which are vital for academic success (Johns, 1988). Recent studies, including Movahhedi et al. (2023) and Iranmehr and Davari (2024), underscore the need to reconstruct teachers' understanding to align with EAP principles, while Derakhshan et al. (2024) highlight gaps between current practices and learner-centered EAP ideals, particularly in addressing local socio-cultural contexts. Khajavi and Gordani (2010) further note that students prioritize skills like speaking, abstract writing, and presentations, which are often neglected in Iranian EAP programs.

By framing these challenges within the principles of humanized pedagogy, this study underscores the need to prioritize learners over content. Humanized pedagogy shifts the focus from mere content transmission to fostering learners' development as emerging experts within their academic fields. This involves recognizing disciplinary terms as tools within a broader framework of discourse and genre and nurturing students' agency through instruction aligned with their academic and professional needs (Hyland, 2018). The debate surrounding EAP's role in higher education further contextualizes these findings. While EAP is essential for navigating English-dominated academic landscapes, critics argue it may reinforce English dominance or impose conformity to disciplinary norms (Hyland, 2018). In non-English-speaking contexts like Iran, institutional constraints and underqualified instructors exacerbate these challenges. To address this, EAP programs must balance

linguistic competence with critical thinking and culturally responsive practices, ensuring students are equipped for both local and global academic contexts (Macaro & Aizawa, 2024).

Lack of Specialized EAP Teacher Education

A critical barrier to implementing humanized pedagogy in Iranian EAP programs is the absence of specialized teacher education for both ELT and content-area instructors. Many EAP teachers, regardless of their background, struggle to adopt learner-centered approaches due to a limited understanding of EAP's distinct goals, which differ significantly from EGP. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the need for tailored EAP teacher training in Iran (Atai et al., 2017; Estaji, 2024; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). While Kaivanpanah et al. (2021) suggest ELT teachers may exhibit stronger EAP competencies than content teachers, our study reveals that even ELT-trained instructors often lack a deep understanding of EAP's specific objectives, such as socializing students into academic communities (Hyland, 2006).

The shortcomings of current teacher education stem from two primary issues. First, ELT teachers typically receive transmission-oriented Second Language Teacher Education, which prioritizes theoretical knowledge—such as linguistics or grammar—over practical, learner-centered pedagogical skills (Wright, 2010). This approach assumes that subject-matter expertise automatically translates into effective teaching, neglecting the development of reflective practice, adaptability, and professional identities essential for EAP instruction. Second, content-area teachers often receive no formal teacher education, relying instead on the teaching practices they observed as students. This leads them to assume that subject knowledge and language proficiency are sufficient, overlooking the importance of pedagogical expertise as a distinct field.

Effective EAP teaching requires instructors to adopt multifaceted roles, including needs analysts, genre and discourse analysts, syllabus designers, materials developers, and reflective practitioners (Benesch, 2001). These roles enable teachers to align instruction with students' academic and professional needs, fostering agentic engagement and holistic development. However, the persistence of transmission-oriented training and the lack of EAP-specific education perpetuate impersonal, content-focused teaching practices. To address this, EAP teacher education must foster a dynamic interplay between theory and practice, as advocated by Richards (2008). For example, teachers might apply genre-based theories to design academic writing lessons, then refine their approach based on classroom observations, such as students' struggles with argument structure. This reflective cycle, supported by collaboration and attention to students' cultural and disciplinary needs, equips teachers to create impactful, learner-centered EAP instruction.

Incoherent EAP Curriculum

The third major challenge is the incoherence of the current EAP curriculum, characterized by a lack of alignment among stakeholders' decisions and practices. Policymakers, syllabus designers, teachers, and students often operate in isolation, pursuing disconnected goals without mutual collaboration (Zahedi Moghaddam, et al., 2025). This fragmentation undermines the implementation of humanized pedagogy, as curricula fail to reflect classroom realities or learners' needs. Our findings resonate with prior studies emphasizing the importance of coherence and stakeholder collaboration in EAP curriculum development (Alavi et al., 2024; Wong & Mishra, 2021). However, teachers and students are often marginalized in the curriculum development process, with students viewed as passive recipients of institutional requirements (Khany & Tarlani-Alibadi, 2016). Engaging teachers in policy-making enhances classroom practices and grounds policies in practical realities (Tohidian & Nodooshan, 2020).

Our study extends this literature by illustrating how curriculum incoherence weakens the educational ecosystem and hinders humanized pedagogy. EFL Teachers, in particular, should be involved at every stage of decision-making to foster shared understanding and ensure effective policy implementation. While critics may argue that teachers' contributions to curriculum development are not always constructive, we contend that their historical exclusion from these processes limits their capacity to engage meaningfully. Empowering teachers as active curriculum contributors is essential for

professionalizing EAP learners. To address curriculum incoherence, we advocate for Participatory Curriculum Development (PCD), a collaborative approach that involves all stakeholders—policymakers, syllabus designers, materials developers, teacher educators, teachers, and learners—in designing, implementing, and refining the curriculum (Banegas, 2011; Salimi & Hadaeghi Azad, 2023). PCD ensures that each stakeholder's decisions are informed by the perspectives of others, creating a dynamic, mutually supportive process. This approach results in curricula that are relevant, practical, and responsive to learners' academic and professional needs. By fostering collaboration and coherence, PCD enables EAP programs to integrate humanized pedagogy effectively, supporting students' holistic development and socialization in their academic communities.

To integrate humanized pedagogy into Iranian EAP programs, two key implications arise from the identified challenges of stakeholder misalignment, inadequate teacher education, and curriculum incoherence. First, institutions must implement specialized EAP teacher training programs that move beyond transmission-oriented models, equipping both ELT and content-area instructors with practical skills like needs analysis and genre-based instruction while fostering reflective practice and professional identities to support learner agency and socialization in academic communities (Hyland, 2006; Johnson, 2009; Alavi et al., 2024). Second, adopting PCD is essential to create coherent curricula through the collaborative engagement of policymakers, syllabus designers, teachers, and students, ensuring alignment with classroom realities and learners' needs to foster holistic development (Atai, 2002; Banegas, 2011; Wong & Mishra, 2020). These strategies address systemic barriers, enabling EAP programs to align with the transformative goals of humanized pedagogy.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the barriers to implementing humanized pedagogy in Iranian EAP programs. It found that a misalignment in stakeholder cognition—especially among policymakers, instructors, curriculum developers, teacher educators, teachers, and learners—leads to an overemphasis on content delivery and general English proficiency at the expense of learner development and academic socialization. The EAP curriculum lacks coherence due to limited collaboration among stakeholders, and teacher education remains rooted in outdated, transmission-based models that fail to prepare instructors for student-centered, disciplinary discourse teaching. Despite these limitations, the study highlights the strong theoretical and practical alignment between EAP and humanized pedagogy, both aiming to foster learner agency, meaningful academic participation, and learner holistic development as professionals within their chosen communities.

The study concludes that transforming EAP education in Iran requires a paradigm shift in how stakeholders conceive of both content and learners. Rather than viewing students as passive recipients of disciplinary knowledge, EAP must be reframed as a human-centered, socially responsive enterprise. This involves reconceptualizing teaching as a process that nurtures student agency, critical engagement, and academic identity formation. A significant part of this transformation depends on revamping teacher education to focus on reflective practice, discourse-based instruction, and context-sensitive pedagogy. Without this shift, efforts to humanize EAP will remain isolated and unsustainable. Further investigation into the design and outcomes of participatory curriculum models and specialized teacher training programs is also necessary to evaluate their real-world efficacy. In sum, aligning EAP instruction with the ideals of humanized pedagogy holds significant promise, but it requires systemic reform that engages all levels of educational planning and practice.

However, the study is not without limitations. Its contextual focus on Iranian universities restricts the generalizability of the findings, and the relatively small participant pool may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within the country's EAP programs. Additionally, relying solely on interviews and narratives limits the breadth of data and omits direct observation of classroom practices or learner outcomes. These factors suggest that further research is needed to expand the scope and depth of understanding in this area. Future studies could explore similar challenges in other cultural contexts to assess the universality of the findings or investigate the effects of implementing participatory curriculum development and humanized teacher training models in EAP programs. Longitudinal

research tracking student engagement and academic performance in humanized EAP classrooms would also provide valuable insight into the practical impact of such pedagogical shifts.

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Appendix 1:

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Exploring Barriers to Implementing Humanized Pedagogy in Iranian EAP Programs

1. To what extent do you see humanized education, which prioritizes students' identities, voices, and holistic development, being implemented in your EAP courses, and what are the main challenges in achieving this approach?
2. What specific obstacles do you encounter when trying to foster students' active engagement and agency in EAP classes, and how do these affect their learning experience?
3. Can you describe any challenges in incorporating students' cultural, social, or personal backgrounds into your EAP teaching, and how these barriers impact creating a learner-centered environment?
4. How the EAP curriculum in your institution supports or hinders efforts to create a learner-centered classroom that prioritizes students' identities, voices, and holistic development, and what specific aspects of the curriculum influence these outcomes?
5. How Teacher education influenced your ability to implement a humanized approach in EAP teaching?
6. How do different stakeholders, such as teachers, students, or administrators prioritize the goals of creating an EAP program that values students' identities and holistic development?

Appendix 2:

Life-History Narrative Prompts for Exploring Barriers to Implementing Humanized Pedagogy in Iranian EAP Programs

1. Reflect on a significant experience in your teaching career where you attempted to create an EAP classroom that prioritized students' identities, voices, or personal backgrounds, and describe what challenges you faced and how they shaped your approach to teaching.
2. Share a story from your professional journey as an EAP instructor where you encountered obstacles in aligning your teaching with the goal of preparing students as active members of their academic or professional communities, and explain how these obstacles influenced your perspective on EAP education.