

A Mixed-Methods Study of the Effect of Using Situation Comedies on Iranian EFL Learners' Critical Reasoning and Action

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Received: 02/03/2023

Accepted: 26/06/2023

Abstract

This mixed-methods study, adopting a sequential explanatory design, aimed to (a) investigate the effect of situation comedies (sitcoms) on Iranian EFL learners' critical reasoning and action, and (b) explore learners' attitudes about the way sitcoms could influence their critical reasoning and action. In this mixed-methods study, sixty learners were randomly selected and assigned to a control and an experimental group. While the control group participated in regular classes, the experimental group watched sitcoms. Before and after the treatment, the Persian version of the California Critical Thinking Skills Test, Form B (CCTST) (Khalili & Hossein Zadeh, 2003) was utilized to measure participants' reasoning skills. To assess critical action, the Activism Orientation Scale (Corning & Myers, 2002) was used. Quantitative data were analyzed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Some of the participants in the experimental group were interviewed about the way sitcoms affected their criticality. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis. The result of ANCOVA tests showed a significant difference between the two groups regarding their criticality. In support of quantitative results, the analysis of the interviews confirmed the effectiveness of sitcoms in improving learners' criticality. Qualitative findings showed that sitcoms enhanced

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learners' critical reasoning through inference and evaluation and raised their awareness of social issues and their eagerness to participate in life-changing activities. Integrating findings from the two phases confirmed that sitcoms increased learners' awareness of the world and deepened their understanding of diversities.

Keywords: mixed-methods research, critical reasoning, critical action, humor, sitcoms

Introduction

Second language educators utilize different types of educational resources, such as multimedia tools and applications, to find the most appealing and effective way of teaching the second language (Cook, 2016). Van Dam (2002) highlights the role humor can play in encouraging language learners to learn the language through mitigating face threats evident in learning a new language. Similarly, Pomerantz and Bell (2011) state that language learners can often be placed in positions of powerlessness due to face threatening acts in communicative events in second language classrooms and such face threatening exchanges can be prevented or alleviated by humorous performances.

To define humor, Banas et al. (2011), drawing on Martin's (2007) ideas, argue that "there is widespread agreement among scholars that humor involves the communication of multiple, incongruous meanings that are amusing in some manner" (p. 117). They suggest that humor refers to both verbal and non-verbal communicative behaviors that critically address social and political issues in a way that leads to laughter and joy. Bell (2009) encourages English language teachers to use humor in their classes. She considers using humor in language classrooms as an educational possibility not only for teaching important components of language, including vocabulary and grammar, but also for improving cultural understanding. Furthermore, she refers to jokes as speech acts that can be beneficial in improving language learners' sociolinguistic competence and highlights the importance of "an appreciation and understanding of certain values in American culture, of which the joke is an important conveyor" (p. 89). Also, Washburn (2001) argues that different types of humor like sitcoms or situation comedies should be used as a source of input to develop learners' communicative ability. Chang (2015) points out that sitcom "can be an effective platform for the language learners to be immersed in the culture or way of life of the target community" (p. 26).

Furthermore, the effect of using sitcoms in language classrooms on promoting language learners' speaking abilities has been confirmed in various studies (see Bacelar

da Silvia, 2003; Saito, 2013; Washburn, 2001). Saito (2013) argues that sitcoms such as *Friends* present better samples of real English conversations than written conversations in ELT textbooks as they offer culturally authentic materials. Also, investigating the effect of using the sitcom *Friends* on teaching the sequence organization such as refusals and invitations, Bacelar da Silvia (2003) suggests that using sitcoms in language classrooms can help L2 learners improve their conversation abilities. As emphasized by Washburn (2001), in comparison to other genres available on television such as dramas and soap operas, more copious sources of suitable conversational models are presented by sitcoms since they often demonstrate daily speech routines. More recently, analyzing the pedagogical roles of sitcoms in language classes, Larrea Espinar and Raigon Rodriguez (2019) point out that sitcoms offer the possibility of culture learning and improve language learners' intercultural awareness since they concentrate on cultural facts about the English-speaking societies.

Although the aforementioned studies, addressing language learners in various cultural contexts, confirm the educational benefits of sitcoms in enhancing L2 interactional competence and intercultural competence, there is a dearth of studies that investigate the role of sitcoms in improving English language learners' criticality through "holding a fun house mirror to contemporary culture, humor distorts, exaggerates, and reframes in ways that invite audiences to see themselves and society from new vantage points" (Rossing, 2012, p. 46). More importantly, Tsami and Skoura (2021) maintain that humor in language classes enhances language learners' critical literacy by providing a space for them to reflect on the racist or sexist discourse and enabling them to uncover the discrimination embedded in social power relationships.

Yazdan and Rudolph (2018) regard criticality as the core goal of critical pedagogy and state that there is a dire need for broadening the scope of the concept of criticality in English language teaching and learning processes in order to deeply apprehend and probe nativeness, marginalization, identity, and (in)equity, which are important topics of inquiry in this domain of knowledge. According to Barnett (1997), higher education teachers should go beyond the concept of critical thinking in order to cultivate criticality among university students. Broadly speaking, as mentioned by Dunne (2015), "universities thrive on students who are inquisitive, prudent, willing to reconsider their positions, and diligent in seeking relevant information. These qualities are essential tools in the pursuit of truth through critical investigation" (p. 89).

According to Banegas and de Castro (2016), criticality means “considering an issue from multiple perspectives, even when these involve self-critique. Thus, being critical does not mean being negative about other people’s or one’s own assumptions; it means being able to identify assumptions and evaluate evidence and issues logically” (p. 455). Referring to the importance of criticality in higher education, Barnett (1997) states that a higher education learner as a critical person is nurtured and empowered to reason and act critically. In other words, criticality involves two components: critical reasoning and critical action. Barnett believes that educators should cultivate criticality in their learners by offering spaces for them to think and act critically in order to form “critical persons who are not subject to the world, but to act autonomously and purposively within it” (p. 7). Barnett (2015) explicates that critical reasoning involves knowledge critique, critical thoughts, and reflection on one’s own understanding. Indeed, he explains that critical reasoning involves both critical thinking and critical reflection. He conceptualizes critical reasoning as a high level of openness towards various issues, re-evaluation of the existing knowledge claims, and reflection on one’s own understandings. He also defines critical action as critique-in-action and maintains that “critical action demands that persons fully inhabit their actions; that they are brave enough to live out their understandings in the world” (p. 68). As Dunne (2015) suggests, critical action represents the way individuals’ reasoning and reflection influence their ability to take action and make decisions. Addressing knowledge and the world as two domains of criticality, he acknowledges that “understanding, therefore, has to be reunited with performance so as to produce action. Critique in the domain of knowledge has to be brought into a relationship with critique in the domain of the world” (p. 65).

However, ignoring critical action as one component of criticality as well as critical reflection as a constitutive component of critical reasoning, Iranian EFL scholars have limited the scope of their studies to critical thinking and explored the way it can be related to other variables such as learners’ speaking skills (Bakhshayesh et al., 2023; Kaviani & Mashhadi Heidar, 2020; Malmir & Shoorcheh, 2012), reading comprehension and strategies (Fahim & Sa’ee pour, 2011; Marboot et al., 2020; Nour Mohammadi et al., 2012), vocabulary knowledge (Nosratinia et al., 2015), and autonomy and creativity (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2014). Nonetheless, making a distinction between critical thinking and criticality, Canagarajah (2006) argues that critical practice as a feature of being critical is different from critical thinking that is mainly addressed in language education. He explains that critical thinking typically defines thinking as an individual activity and

ignores social positioning, whereas criticality examines thinking in relation to one's own biases and positioning.

Accordingly, the present study addressed the two main components of criticality, i.e., critical reasoning and critical action. Indeed, this study aimed at investigating the way humor, especially humor coming from the identification and solution of incongruity, found in jokes, metaphors, puns, and visual representations of sitcoms, can promote the fundamental processes of critical reasoning and critical action among Iranian EFL learners. The study utilized a mixed-methods approach because this approach can offer deeper insights into various levels or units of analysis (Creswell, 2014). As Ivankova and Creswell (2006) state, the sequential explanatory design "implies collecting and analyzing first quantitative and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases within one study" (p. 4). They indicate that, in the sequential explanatory design, the collection and analysis of quantitative data in the first phase of the study offers a general understanding of the topic of inquiry and the collection and analysis of the qualitative data in the second phase, which aims at probing into the participants' views in more depth explicate the statistical findings obtained in the quantitative phase. Accordingly, in the present study, the first phase of the study sought to investigate the effect of sitcoms on Iranian EFL learners' critical reasoning and critical action, while the second phase of the study, in which data were collected through in-depth interviews, explored participants' views about the way sitcoms could influence their criticality.

Relevant Studies on Critical Reasoning and Action in Language Education

In this section, the relevant studies on critical reasoning and action in language education are reviewed. Carrying out a qualitative study, Lin et al. (2016) explored the roles new technologies can play in providing innovative ways to enhance L2 learners' reasoning skills. The researchers selected nine participants from among EFL postgraduates. Before taking part in the research project, they were given a possibility to learn more about the DM tabletop application. In the new atmosphere offered by this application, the participants were allowed to communicate using multimodal codes of communication. Moreover, the DM tasks revolved around the themes of shopping and land use change. Scenarios were created based on the above-mentioned themes and the participants were asked to explicate the reasons for which characters in the scenarios acted in a specific way. Analyzing the communicative events constructed within scenarios with regard to the presence of reasoning skills, Lin et al. (2016) state that the

task-based language teaching supported by the use of new technologies can offer an opportunity to enhance language learners' reasoning skills as they are given space to think more logically and articulate their reasoning.

Likewise, Nunn et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study to describe and demonstrate principles of critical reasoning and reflection within project-based learning for undergraduate education. They stated that a holistic approach is required to comprehensively consider the wide range of skills and knowledge that contribute to academic competence. They used excerpts from recordings of groups of students doing projects over the course of a semester and samples of students' written work on those projects to examine their critical reasoning skills. Furthermore, they made comments on the videotaped evidence of the principles of reasoning that were shared during the project's group discussions. Extensive excerpts from video-recorded data showed the interactive process in which students took part throughout the project. Generally speaking, it was revealed that project-based learning provides continuous opportunities for students to practice assessment skills. They would be encouraged to use evaluation skills in the early stages of their projects when they need to decide what specific issues to address in their project. This would help students to talk about different challenges that they or those around them encounter. The fact that they worked in a group made them assess alternative ideas presented by the group members.

In another qualitative study, Yoedo and Mustofa (2022) investigated how primary school teachers use Indonesian folklore in English classes to help students improve their analytical and critical reasoning skills. Researchers used images from folktales to show to the participants and received their direct responses. In addition, the visual culture theory was used as the conceptual framework through which the data from interviews were examined. It should be added that the participants of the study consisted of five English language teachers. These five teachers believed that using Indonesian folklore in their classes enhanced their students' analytical and critical reasoning skills because folktale texts moderate foreign language readers' or learners' understanding of how cultural issues play a role in the everyday life, make them more eager about English lessons, familiarize them with their daily environment, and encourage them to learn a foreign language while developing their analytical and critical reasoning skills.

In their quantitative study adopting an ex-post facto design, Mathews et al. (2022) investigated the reciprocal relationship between critical action and ethnic-racial identity exploration among Black college students through a longitudinal project. Data

for their study came from the Minority College Cohort Study, a longitudinal investigation of 533 Black and Latin students. Only the students who were identified as Black or African American were selected for inclusion in this study. Findings of the study revealed that critical action and ERI exploration had mutual relationships with one another during the college transition. In fact, it was shown that critical action was positively related to ERI exploration. In addition, it was revealed that the mutual relationships between critical action and ERI exploration remained stable over time, as the two processes, most probably, improved one another among Black students within predominately White institutions. Reviewing the above-mentioned studies indicated that the existing studies on critical reasoning and critical action in English language education mainly adopted a qualitative method of research and focused on a small sample of participants. However, the present study adopted a mixed-methods design not only to explore the effect of sitcoms on Iranian EFL learners' critical reasoning and action, but also to probe their attitudes about the way sitcoms could affect their critical reasoning and action. Accordingly, the current study sought to answer the following research questions.

1. Does the use of situation comedies in language classes improve EFL learners' critical reasoning?
2. Does the use of situation comedies in language classes improve EFL learners' critical action?
3. How can situation comedies used in language classes improve EFL learners' critical reasoning?
4. How can situation comedies used in language classes improve EFL learners' critical action?

Methodology

Research Design

The present study utilized a mixed-methods research strategy in which the data were collected sequentially. The sequential explanatory strategy was used as the quantitative data collection and analysis were followed by the qualitative data collection and analysis in order to further explain and interpret the results of the quantitative method through the qualitative method. To be more specific, we should add that, after the quantitative phase of the study that involved a pre-test post-test control group design, some of those who participated in the experimental study were interviewed to share their views about the way sitcoms could affect their critical reasoning and action.

Participants of the Study

a) **Quantitative Phase.** For the purpose of the present study, nested sampling as a point of interface was used to choose the participants. That is, the sample members selected for the qualitative phase involved a subset of the participants, who were selected for the quantitative phase of the study. Therefore, for the quantitative phase, 60 intermediate language learners studying at private language institutes were randomly selected. Before carrying out the treatment, the participants were given the standardized 200A test of Nelson English Tests (Fowler & Coe, 1976) to ensure their homogeneity. These learners were randomly assigned to a control and an experimental group.

b) **Qualitative Phase.** Furthermore, the participants selected for the second phase of the study, that is, the qualitative phase, included a subset of the learners (10 learners) in the experimental group, who were selected using convenience sampling. Indeed, some of the learners in the experimental group who were available for inclusion and were volunteered for in-depth interviews were chosen.

Instruments

a) **Quantitative Phase.** The first instrument that was used in the quantitative phase was the Persian version of the California Critical Thinking Skills Test, Form B (CCTST). This instrument was utilized to measure the participants' core reasoning skills, which were required for reflective and critical thinking processes. This test is composed of 34 multiple-choice questions on five critical thinking skills: analysis, evaluation, inference, inductive reasoning, and deductive reasoning. The original version of the questionnaire was translated into Persian by Khodamorady, Saidozakerin, Alavi Majd, Yaghmaei, & Shahabi (2005) who confirmed its construct validity and reliability. Khalili and Hossein Zadeh (2003) argued that the CCTST is more comprehensive than other measuring tools of critical thinking skills because it is mainly based on the APA Delphi consensus conceptualization of critical thinking. Also, in the present study, Cronbach's alpha formula was employed to check the reliability of the questionnaire. The result indicated a moderately strong reliability ($r = .79$).

To assess the second quantitative variable of the study, that is, critical action, the researchers used the Activism Orientation Scale developed by Corning and Myers (2002). As Corning and Myers confirm, this instrument was also found to have adequate construct validity, discriminant validity, convergent validity, and test-retest reliability.

Cronbach's alpha formula was also employed in the current study for this test items and the result showed a strong level of reliability ($r = .81$).

b) Qualitative Phase. For the qualitative phase of the study, semi-structured interview was utilized to examine the attitudes of the participants of the experimental group in the quantitative phase towards the use of sitcoms for improving their critical reasoning and action. The interviewer asked open-ended questions about the way sitcoms could influence the critical reasoning and action of the participants, who received the treatments.

Procedures

a) Quantitative Phase. This mixed-methods study sought to (a) explore the effect of situation comedies (sitcoms) on Iranian EFL learners' critical reasoning and action and (b) probe the learners' attitudes about the way sitcoms could influence their critical reasoning and action. To this end, for the quantitative phase, 60 intermediate-level learners of English, who studied in language institutes in Lorestan were selected. These learners were randomly assigned to a control and an experimental group. Each group included 30 learners. Both groups took the same course and were taught by the same teacher. Before the experiment, all participants were pretested. First, the CCTST was utilized to measure the participants' critical reasoning skills. The second instrument was the Activism Orientation Scale (AOS) that was used to assess critical action. While learners in the control group participated in a regular class, the learners in the experimental group received the treatments. The main purpose of the current research was to investigate the effect of sitcoms such as the Top Notch fundamental short movies, Stand Up comedies, some parts of Friends' Series, some parts of TED speech comedies or any short comedies which could promote the fundamental processes of critical reasoning and action among Iranian EFL learners. At the beginning of the semester, the researchers informed the students that they were required to watch the short comedy clips. The researchers created a joyful atmosphere and the students were strongly encouraged to express their views on such clips critically. They eagerly followed the funny movies. They were also asked to write funny stories, funny jokes in English and perform them in front of the class. In fact, watching funny clips were considered as a part of their regular class requirements. All participants in the experimental group were asked to practice a kind of stand-up comedy and perform it in English. Also, they could write their ideas critically about different issues in the class and society. The purpose of this activity was to provide an opportunity for learners to express their views critically

on different topics covered by comedies during the semester. Learners could ask their own questions, have interactions together, and air their comments when they felt it was necessary. At the end of the treatment, in order to examine the effectiveness of the treatment by comparing the learners in the control and experimental groups with regard to their criticality, all participants were post-tested by using the CCTST and the AOS once more. To analyze the quantitative data and examine the difference in the mean values of critical reasoning and critical action that were related to the impact of the independent variable of sitcoms, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used.

b) Qualitative Phase. For the second phase of the study, that is, the qualitative phase, 10 learners from the experimental groups were selected. These learners were interviewed using the semi-structured interviews and were invited to express their views about the way the use of sitcoms in their classes affected their criticality. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were also analyzed using deductive content analysis through which the components identified for critical reasoning and action in the two quantitative methods of data collection were re-examined. As Elo and Kungas (2008) explain, deductive content analysis as one of the methods used to analyze the qualitative data, which aims at re-examining the existing categories, involves the preparation of the categorization matrix based on the existing theories and models. They stated that when the categorization matrix is prepared, the existing data are analyzed and coded for correspondence with the identified categories.

Results of the Study

Initially, the data collected through the pre- and post-tests was subjected to descriptive statistics measures. The results are presented in Table 1:

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Critical Reasoning and Action

	M	SD
Critical reasoning pretest	19.26	5.33
Critical reasoning posttest	22.23	5.85
Critical action pretest	43.91	11.25
Critical action posttest	72.96	21.66

Findings Related to the First Research Question

In order to answer the first research question and examine the impact of using sitcoms in language classes on language learners' critical reasoning, a one-way between groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used. As Leech, Barrett, & Morgan (2014) explain, ANCOVA can be utilized when there is a pre-test and post-test design in order to control pre-existing differences between groups by considering pre-tests as covariates. In this analysis, pretests of critical reasoning served as the covariates. Moreover, the treatment used in the study, that is, using sitcoms in language classrooms, was the independent variable. The post-test that was used for assessing language learners' reasoning was the dependent variable. As Pallant (2010) explains, to run ANCOVA the following pre-assumptions should be observed:

- 1) Data should be normally distributed.
- 2) Slope of regressions should be homogeneous.
- 3) Variances should be homogeneous.

To check the normality of data distribution for the post-tests related to the first research question, the researchers measured the Shapiro-Wilk test, whose result is presented in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2

Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality

Statistics	Df	Sig
	60	0.12

Based on the findings shown in the table above ($P_1 = 0.12$, $P_2 = 0.06$), the normality of the data distribution is confirmed. In order to measure the homogeneity of variance, the Levene's test of equality of error variance was checked, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	df1	df2	Sig
6.234	1	58	0.06

The result confirmed the homogeneity of variance ($F = 6.23, P = 0.06$). In order to check the homogeneity of the slope of regression, the test of between subjects-effect was run, the result of which is shown in Table 4:

Table 4

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig
Methods*Pretest1	15.09	1	15.09	3.51	0.06

As data in Table 4 show ($F = 3.51, P = 0.06$), the homogeneity of the slope of regression was verified. Then, ANCOVA was run to answer the first research question. The results of this test are shown in Table 5:

Table 5

Results of ANCOVA for the First Research Question

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	F	Sig	Partial Eta Squared	Effect Size
Methods	72.42	1				
Error	1883.25	57	16.17	0.00	0.52	0.22
Total	26487.00	60				

As the result of ANCOVA for the first research question shows ($F_{(1, 57)} = 16.17, P = 0.00 < 0.05$), sitcoms could highly improve the participants' critical action. In order to understand which group had performed better with regard to the variable of critical reasoning, marginal mean score was calculated (Table 6), which shows the adjusted means on the dependent variable for each of the existing groups. Based on following table, the experimental group outperformed the control group.

Table 6

Marginal Mean Score

Methods	Mean	95%Confidence Interval		
		Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
New	22.34	0.38	20.57	23.12
Old	19.15	0.38	18.37	19.92

Findings Related to the Second Research Question

In order to answer the second research question and investigate the effect of using sitcoms on language learners' critical action, another ANCOVA test was used. The post-test that was used for assessing language learners' critical action was the dependent variable. Before calculating ANCOVA, the three pre-assumptions for this test were taken into account: normality of the distribution of data, homogeneity of the slope of regressions, and homogeneity of variances. In order to check the normality of data distribution for the posttests related to the second research question, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used (Table 7).

Table 7

Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality

Statistics	Df	Sig
.0947	60	0.06

The result indicates that the data distribution was normal ($P1 = 0.06$, $P2 = 0.07$). In order to check the homogeneity of variance, Levene's test of equality of error variance was run. The result of the test is shown in Table 8:

Table 8

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	df1	df2	Sig
.291	1	58	.59

The result of the analysis shown in Table 8 ($F = 0.29$, $P = 0.59$) shows that the homogeneity of variance was confirmed. In order to check the homogeneity of the slope of regression, the test of between subjects-effect was run (Table 9):

Table 9

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig
Methods*Pretest1	748.44	1	748.44	2.38	0.12

After obtaining homogenous variances (Table 9), the ANCOVA test was employed to answer the second research question (Table 10):

Table 10

Results of ANCOVA for the Second Quantitative Research Question

Source	Sum of squares	Df	F	Sig	Partial Eta	Effect Size Squared
Methods	85550.45	1	26.5	0.00	0.31	0.77
Error	18324.63	57				
Total	347148.00	60				

As the result of ANCOVA for the second research question shows (Table 10), sitcoms could highly improve the participants' critical action ($F_{(1,57)} = 26.59, P = 0.00 < 0.05$). In order to understand which group had significantly performed better with regard to the variable of critical action, marginal mean scores were calculated (Table 11), which show the adjusted means on the dependent variable for each of the existing groups. As Table 11 shows, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group.

Table 11

Marginal Mean Score

Methods	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
New	85.44	3.34	78.74	92.15
Old	60.48	3.34	53.78	67.19

Findings of the Study Related to the Qualitative Data

The rationale for the mixed methods approach taken in this study was that the results of quantitative data analysis can offer a general understanding of the research problem, while the analysis of qualitative data can elaborate on the statistical results by probing into participants' views through interviews. During interviews carried out in the qualitative phase of the present study, the participants in the experimental group were asked to share their ideas about the way the use of sitcoms in language classes could improve their critical reasoning and critical action. The content analysis of the

interviews showed that two notions were noteworthy in participants' comments as is shown in Table 12:

Table 12

Noteworthy Notions Identified Using Content Analysis

Critical Reasoning	Critical Action
Inference	Being informed of social and political issues
Evaluation	Eagerness to take part in life-changing activities

The two main notions related to the role of sitcoms in improving the participants' critical reasoning were inference and evaluation. Inference involved the attempts made by learners to reach a conclusion through the collection of data and recognition of conditions and facts. Facione (1990) defines inference as the ability to reach a conclusion after reasoning, gathering evidence, and recognizing conditions and facts. The following examples extracted from the data set show the importance of the notion of inference. One of the participating learners of the present study indicated:

We watched sitcoms in the classrooms and were given the chance to talk about what we had watched. You know, getting the jokes and understanding the meanings required the ability to analyze the situations in the sitcoms and recognize the events and facts on which joking scenes were formed.

She also explained:

Some scenes were really about bitter facts, although we were watching comedies. To deeply understand sitcoms, we should have enough information about events and characters to form an opinion.

The second example extracted from the qualitative data set also refers to the improvement of the inference-making ability in language learners after watching sitcoms in language classrooms:

Analyzing sitcoms in every class was really challenging. To understand the jokes and humor in the films, we tried to focus on the clues and our own experiences. Also, we had to work hard to connect information across different scenes.

Moreover, the second noteworthy notion observed in the participants' comments was evaluation, which is defined as evaluating the credibility of the sources which are used to collect data and information for assessing the quality of inferences and arguments (Facione, 1990). One of the learner participants explained:

After watching sitcoms, our teacher asked us to talk with each other about the movie. It was really interesting and made us think. She asked us to judge characters and joking scenes. We shared our ideas. I could listen to my friends' ideas. This helped me think carefully about different ideas and make more appropriate judgements about the meanings of jokes.

The second extract taken from the qualitative data indicating the improvement of the evaluative thinking through the treatment used by their teacher is presented below:

We could talk with each other about the sitcoms we watched in the class. I think understanding comedies is really hard and we need to think. When we talked with each other, we could hear different things from each other. Listening to each other, we could check our own understanding once more because we received new evidence.

The analysis of the transcription of the participants' interviews with regard to the way the use of sitcoms could improve their critical action skills led to the identification of two important notions: being informed of social and political issues and eagerness to take part in life-changing activities. One of the participating learners explained:

When our teacher asked us to watch such programs and discuss about their important points, I didn't know how they could change my views about the world. Now, we've got familiar with many problems in our society and are able to think about them. Before these classes, I was blind and was not aware of social issues.

The second learner participant also suggested:

Because of the content of such comedies that are about the bitter events of the society, we could learn many things about our social life. I think my political literacy has improved. I can participate in political discussions with my friends.

Another participating learner spoke of the eagerness to take part in life-changing activities and said:

I have learned many new things. This made me ready to be an active member of the society and become a member of many social groups that are formed to help people and make a better society. I am ready to invest my time and energy to participate in such groups and activities that result in a better life and more effective society.

Discussion

Findings of the present study revealed that sitcoms used in language classes could significantly improve Iranian EFL learners' critical reasoning and action skills. Also, analyzing learners' attitudes about the way sitcoms improved their criticality resulted in the identification of noteworthy themes such as inference, evaluation, being informed of social issues, and eagerness to take part in life-changing activities. In a similar way, Chabeli (2008) points out that the use of humorous practices promotes thinking skills, although Chabeli specifically addresses the use of humorous practices in higher education systems in South Africa. Indeed, Chabeli indicates that using humor "can challenge learners to engage in problem-solving activities, the resolution of contradictions, and the justification of their views" (p. 55). She also argues that using humor offers a space to learners to pay deep attention to various alternatives to the solution of the problem. Indeed, she explicates that using humor in educational contexts encourages learners to think about various issues, re-evaluate their understanding, and re-examine their reasoning, which result in the improvement of critical reasoning skills. Broadly speaking, as Ryo (2019) states, "playfulness encouraged through pedagogies of humor and joy lead to ways of thinking differently and communicating those different ideas in exciting ways" (p. 189). Similarly, elaborating on the way sitcoms could improve their criticality, the participant learners stated that sitcoms helped them evaluate various viewpoints on a subject which enhanced their critical reasoning skills. This point was consistent with Hložková's (2014) interpretation of the role of sitcoms in language classes, indicating that watching sitcoms provides a space for language learners to become familiar with various attitudes and beliefs towards social and cultural issues. Likewise, Mudawe (2020) acknowledges that sitcoms in language classes familiarize students with alternative perspectives on various issues beyond the restriction of textbooks and course materials. Additionally, sitcoms are abundant with contextual cultural information, which, as Yoedo and Mustofa (2022) state, can help students "build

a sense of connection to their local culture while also developing their critical reasoning skills” (p. 110).

Also, humorous practices presented in sitcoms enhance learners’ critical action skills as they mainly aim at de-constructing and re-defining the existing dominant discourse when they address controversial and thought-provoking societal issues (Kypker, 2017). According to Rossing (2012), humorous practices are representation of a critical project as well as a novel possibility for meaning-making through which a solution can be offered to the existing deadlocks on social issues such as race and racism. Furthermore, he points out that humor “directs attention back to often overlooked discrepancies and social failings” (p. 45). Ferguson (2019) maintains that humour should be regarded as a critique of taken-for-granted norms through the subverting power that involves “the ability to say the unsayable, to confront hypocrisy, to kick the pricks” (p. 247). As Wagg (2004) explicates, comedies, including situation comedies, draw the attention of the audience to the social differences people experience with regard to their biological, social, or cultural features, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and nationhood. However, Wagg explains that comedies provide opportunities to question and change the existing power relationships in society. The findings of the present study showed that the use of sitcoms in language classes could relate the context of the language class to the social context. Having this function of sitcom in language classes in mind, we can relate this instructional strategy to critical pedagogy (see Akbari, 2008). Akbari maintains that the discourse of critical pedagogy is “the discourse of liberation and hope; it is the discourse of liberation since it questions the legitimacy of accepted power relations and recognizes the necessity of going beyond arbitrary social constraints” (p. 277). Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of situation comedies in language classes can lead to the creation of the discourse of hope and liberation.

Conclusion

The present research was an attempt to examine the impact of using sitcoms in language classes on language learners’ critical reasoning and action skills and to explore learners’ own attitudes about the way sitcoms could influence their criticality. While the majority of the studies within ELT have focused on the educational benefits of sitcoms in enhancing L2 interactional competence, this study showed the effectiveness of sitcoms in improving English language learners’ criticality, and it specifically addressed the two main components of criticality, that is, critical reasoning and critical action. It is noteworthy that this study specifically focused on Iranian EFL learners at private language institutes. Yazdan and Rudolph (2018) consider criticality as the main goal of

critical pedagogy and state that there is an urgent need to expand the scope of the critical concept in the processes of teaching and learning English language. The present study provided new perspectives towards criticality in language education in light of the conception of criticality proposed by Barnett (1997) and Dunne (2015), which involves two components: a) critical reasoning as a concept composed of critical thinking and critical reflection, and b) critical action. Though the findings of the present research are not conclusive, they could be employed by a variety of individuals in the ELT and SLA domain, especially in the Iranian context. Material and curriculum developers, and language teachers can employ the principles of critical reasoning and action through humor in both macro- and micro-levels of second language development among Iranian students. English language teachers are encouraged to help learners develop critical reasoning and action strategies and provide an opportunity for learners to express their views critically on different topics covered by comedies. Learners can ask their own questions, have interactions together, and air their comments when they feel it is necessary. In fact, EFL teachers can integrate humor, especially sitcoms as one of the sub-classes of humor abundant with daily speech routines and cultural references, into their lesson plans and course activities in order to raise their learners' awareness of thought-provoking societal issues and help them reflect on their own understanding. Also, humorous cartoons or scripts that include a series of humorous situations can be integrated in teaching and learning materials.

However, the scope of this study was delimited to Iranian EFL learners studying at private English language institutes. Accordingly, carrying out studies on the effectiveness of sitcoms in improving language learners' criticality in the context of Iranian schools and higher education can shed more light on the pedagogical roles of sitcoms in language education in Iran. While learners' attitudes towards the role of sitcoms in enhancing their critical reasoning and action skills were explored in the qualitative phase of the present study, further studies are needed to probe Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes towards the role of humor in general, and sitcoms in particular, to provide the opportunity for a comparative analysis of learners' and teachers' attitudes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

There is no funding source.

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