



Professional Distance Theory (PDT) in Iranian EFL High School Classrooms: A Framework for Managing Student Exploitation of Teacher Goodwill

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Abstract

This study develops and empirically tests Professional Distance Theory (PDT), which proposes that in Iran's high-power-distance and collectivist culture, an optimal teacher-student distance, neither overly close nor excessively authoritarian, is necessary to prevent students from exploiting teacher goodwill and to maintain effective classroom management. Data collection involved 150 Iranian EFL high school teachers surveyed using the Teacher Professional Distance Scale (TPDS) and semi-structured interviews within a sequential explanatory mixed-method design. Quantitative findings revealed that teachers reporting closer proximity also reported significantly greater instances of classroom norm violations, including grade negotiation, favoritism-seeking, and manipulation of teacher flexibility. In contrast, teachers maintaining moderate professional distance reported lower exploitation rates and higher perceived authority without sacrificing student engagement. Qualitative evidence underscored three primary mechanisms: (1) the Kindness Trap (students learn to interpret closeness as weakness to be exploited), (2) Role Ambiguity (blurred boundaries give rise to increased testing behaviors), and (3) Authority Erosion (excessive friendliness undermines perceived legitimacy). The findings support a four-level Professional Distance Continuum, Distant, Moderate Professional Distance, Personal, and Overinvolved, with Moderate Professional Distance identified as most effective. These results challenge the universal application of Western relational models and provide a culturally situated framework for teacher professional development in non-Western hierarchical education systems.

1. Introduction

The teacher-student relationship is widely recognized as an important factor influencing classroom climate, student involvement, and academic performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). From a Western educational psychology perspective, particularly within Self-Determination Theory (SDT), close, warm, and supportive teacher-student relationships have been consistently linked to greater intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Reeve, 2009). The dominant school-based paradigm in the educational literature advocates for reduced relational distance (Niemic & Ryan, 2009), less teacher-student aloofness, and more emotionally supportive and collaborative classroom cultures.

However, the universality of this framework has been increasingly challenged. Lee and Lee (2018) found that teachers' cultural dispositions toward uncertainty and hierarchical relationships in contexts like Singapore significantly moderate the effectiveness of collaborative practices, indicating that approaches grounded in low-power-distance values may not translate effectively to high-power-distance societies. According to Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions model, Iran is characterized as a high-power-distance culture, with hierarchical relationships, deference to authority, and formal social roles being strongly rooted in institutional practice. Observational studies confirm these patterns: in Iranian classrooms, professors tightly control discourse and student contributions, revealing high power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Moradi, 2024).

A comparative study of EFL and non-EFL teachers in Iranian high schools revealed that English teachers demonstrated statistically significantly higher power distance toward their students than non-English teachers, suggesting that the language learning environment may exacerbate hierarchical dynamics (Bijani et al., 2022). Despite this cultural complexity in EFL classrooms, the existing literature provides relatively few accounts of effective practice in high-power-distance EFL contexts. Iranian EFL instructors operate in a particularly challenging professional context characterized by competitive institutional environments, exam-driven curricula, and cultural norms that reinforce teacher authority in ways that differ from Western settings (Aliakbari, 2015; Abdoli et al., 2017).

Most importantly, many Iranian teachers experience a troubling phenomenon: when they attempt to adopt Western models of warm, friendly relationship-building, this goodwill is often exploited by students. Students interpret teacher flexibility, leniency, or relational kindness as opportunities to negotiate grades, request special favors, circumvent rules, or undermine classroom authority. According

to Abdoli et al. (2017), Isfahan students perceive teacher favoritism as the most frequent barrier to building positive relationships, while teachers identify inconsistencies between their stated principles and actual teaching behavior as a source of student dissatisfaction. This process of misuse of teacher goodwill in high-power-distance, collectivist cultures has received little scholarly attention.

The primary variable in this research is professional distance, defined as the level of formality, role clarity, and relational boundary maintenance employed by teachers in relation to students. Secondary variables include student exploitation acts (e.g., grade negotiation, rule challenging, inappropriate requests, boundary testing) and classroom authority (defined as the perceived capacity of teachers to maintain classroom rules, discipline, and instructional order). The overall goal of this work is to provide an empirical foundation for PDT, which argues that in collectivist cultures with high power distance, such as Iran, establishing an appropriate level of relational distance is necessary to prevent exploitation of teacher goodwill and to promote effective classroom management.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Background

2.1.1 SDT and Universality

According to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), fulfilling three fundamental psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, cultivates intrinsic motivation and well-being across cultures (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness, the need to feel connected and cared for, has been articulated in educational research as teacher closeness and emotional support for students (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). However, the relational prescriptions articulated by SDT may not be universally applicable across cultural contexts. In Asian and Middle Eastern contexts, some researchers suggest that teacher control may be even more important than autonomy support, and that relatedness may be expressed differently across cultures (Reeve et al., 2014). The need for autonomy may be universal, but its expression through support is culturally constructed; teachers from high-power-distance cultures may view autonomy support as inappropriate to their role or as undermining their legitimate authority. Therefore, uncritically employing Western relational models may not lead to relatedness satisfaction but rather to role confusion and degradation of authority.

2.1.2 Hofstede's Power Distance and Collectivism in the Iranian Context

Hofstede (2001) categorized Iran as a high-power-distance culture, characterized by acceptance of hierarchical order, respect for authority, and expectations of formal role differentiation. While

collectivism, another Iranian cultural dimension, emphasizes group harmony, mutual loyalty, and relational bonds among group members, these values do not necessarily translate to egalitarian teacher-student dynamics. In fact, Moradi (2024) showed that Iranian teachers enacted more power inequity than their Chinese counterparts, with professors micromanaging classroom discourse. Critically, power distance moderates student expectations of teacher behavior: high-power-distance learners expect clear markers of authority, formal role enactment, and dominance. When teachers violate these norms through overly friendly or egalitarian behavior, students perceive this not as support but as role failure, creating potential for boundary testing and exploitation.

2.1.3 Teacher Authority and Boundary Theory

Teacher authority refers to the teacher’s legitimate right to direct student behavior, enforce rules, and assess student performance. Authority can derive from positional status, expertise, or relational quality. In high-power-distance cultures, positional authority is paramount, and students expect teachers to behave in ways that reinforce this authority. Practices that blur boundaries, such as sharing excessively personal information, deferring to inappropriate requests, or failing to enforce consistent consequences, undermine positional authority while inviting exploitation. Boundary management, therefore, is not merely a professional ethics issue but a functional necessity for effective classroom governance in hierarchical systems.

2.1.4 Hypothesis on Kindness Exploitation

Expanding upon attribution theory and social exchange theory, the kindness exploitation hypothesis suggests that in high-power-distance cultures, relational closeness may not simply be interpreted as helpfulness by students but may be cognitively reframed as a resource to be manipulated. When teachers are “too nice,” students may attribute this behavior to teacher weakness, a desire for validation, or lack of alternatives, perceptions that can directly encourage manipulative behavior. Paradoxically, the relational strategies recommended by Western educational psychology may become self-defeating in high-power-distance contexts.

Table 1: Professional Distance Continuum			
Level	Label	Characteristic	Predicted Outcome
1	Distant/Authoritarian	Strict rules, minimal interaction, frequent punishment, no personal sharing	Low exploitation; low engagement; student resentment

2	Moderate Professional Distance	Clear rules, consistent enforcement, appropriate personal sharing, role clarity, respectful communication	Low exploitation; moderate-to-high engagement; stable authority
3	Personal/Overly Close	Frequent personal sharing, high flexibility, minimal consequences, friendship expectations	High exploitation; unstable authority; student manipulation
4	Overinvolved/Inappropriate	Blatant favoritism, secrecy, emotional dependence, boundary violation	Extreme exploitation; authority collapse; ethical violations

2.2 Prior Related Studies

Iranian EFL classroom management literature has reported on assertive strategies centered on organization, teacher-student relationship management, and consequences in the Iranian context (Aliakbari, 2015). Iranian teachers employ various classroom management strategies, including organizational teaching methods, teacher-student relationship approaches, and reward-punishment systems, with teacher assertiveness positively correlated with student performance. Importantly, assertiveness in the Iranian context may not involve relational closeness but rather consistent and clear communication of expectations and enforcement of consequences, elements of professional distance.

Regarding student exploitation, the main barriers to constructing positive relationships identified from the student perspective were teacher favoritism and inappropriate teacher responses to students with achievement and discipline issues (Abdoli et al., 2017). Teachers themselves cited obstacles such as classroom boredom, contradictions between their speech and action, and making students hopeless about pursuing their education. These perceptions of favoritism (a predictable result of differential closeness) compromise teacher credibility and institutional legitimacy, while inconsistency between words (showing caring) and actions (failing to enforce consequences) creates exactly the role ambiguity that allows behavioral manipulation and testing.

Discursive enactment of power in Iranian EFL classrooms has been analyzed through critical discourse analysis, showing that teacher-dominated instructional environments can be characterized as

oppressive educational practices from a critical perspective. However, what is characterized as oppression can also be considered an enactment of culturally normative authoritative instruction.

Critically, Western-style egalitarianism may inadvertently create a power vacuum that students fill through testing, negotiation, and manipulation, dynamics that teachers subjectively experience as exploitation of their goodwill. Despite extensive research on classroom management and teacher-student relations in Iran, no investigation has systematically theorized the link between professional distance and student exploitation behavior. Iranian teachers find themselves caught between Western models of teacher-student intimacy and the real socio-cultural conditions of high-power-distance contexts with conflicting signals about their role.

This gap is addressed by the current study, which proposes Professional Distance Theory (PDT) and empirically tests its core assumptions. Although considerable research on classroom management and teacher-student relationships in Iran has been undertaken, three major areas require attention: (1) the need for a systematic theory establishing student exploitation of teacher goodwill as a function of professional distance in high-power-distance cultures; (2) a lack of empirical studies measuring how teacher relational proximity affects the frequency of boundary violations with students in Iranian EFL contexts; and (3) a dearth of culturally situated models for managing professional distance that balance maintaining authority with promoting student engagement. This study seeks to fill these gaps by investigating the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What are the reported forms of student exploitation of teacher goodwill among Iranian EFL high school teachers?
- **RQ2:** Is teacher professional distance (relational proximity) related to the frequency of student boundary violations?
- **RQ3:** What is the ideal extent of professional distance perceived by teachers to prevent exploitation while still stimulating student engagement?
- **RQ4:** What are the main elements and propositions of Professional Distance Theory (PDT) based on the data?

The importance of this research is multi-faceted. Theoretically, it presents PDT as a culturally situated alternative to universalist Western relational models by articulating a direct connection between professional distance and student exploitation behavior. Empirically, it offers practical guidelines for Iranian EFL teachers on establishing optimal professional distance that allows them to maintain high-quality classroom climate and student motivation. Drawing out the mechanisms through which goodwill

is exploited may enable this study to inform teacher professional development and classroom management training not only in Iran but also in similar Middle Eastern and Asian contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-method design was employed. The quantitative phase used a cross-sectional survey to measure professional distance, student exploitation frequency, and classroom authority across a large sample. In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to investigate mechanisms, contextual factors, and teacher strategies. This design was selected to allow for both broad generalizable claims (quantitative) and extensive contextual insights (qualitative) into the complex culturally embedded phenomenon.

3.2 Participants

The sample consisted of 150 Iranian EFL high school teachers (86 female, 64 male) from 25 public and private schools in Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad provinces, selected using stratified random sampling. Stratification was conducted by school type (51% public, 49% private), sex, and teaching experience (mean = 9.2 years, SD = 5.1). Inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) currently teach English at the high school level, (2) have taught in their current school for at least three years, and (3) work full-time. Private school teachers were purposefully oversampled to reflect differences in school-level autonomy and systemic pressure. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

3.3 Instrument

The researcher-developed Teacher Professional Distance Scale (TPDS) was designed for this study with 28 items across four subscales: (1) Professional Distance (10 items; e.g., “I maintain clear emotional boundaries with my students”), (2) Student Exploitation Frequency (8 items; e.g., “Students frequently try to negotiate for higher grades”), (3) Rule Enforcement Consistency (5 items; e.g., “I enforce consequences consistently regardless of student popularity”), and (4) Role Clarity (5 items; e.g., “Students understand that I am their teacher, not their friend”). Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never/strongly disagree; 5 = always/strongly agree).

The TPDS was designed in English, translated to Persian using a blind back-translation procedure, and piloted with 30 teachers, showing a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91. The semi-structured interview protocol included 12 open-ended questions designed to gauge teacher experiences with student

exploitation, coping strategies for boundary management, perceived cultural expectations, and perceived effectiveness of different distance levels. All interviews were conducted in Persian, audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for subsequent analysis.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over a three-month period (January through March 2025). At each participating school, research assistants distributed the TPDS paper questionnaire during teacher meetings; completion took approximately 15 minutes. Participation was voluntary and conducted anonymously. A total of 160 questionnaires were administered; 150 were returned fully completed (93.8% response rate).

Subsequently, 25 teachers (15 from the quantitative sample) were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews based on TPDS scores representing low, moderate, and high professional distance levels. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes each and were conducted in private rooms after school hours.

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS v.29. Preliminary procedures included descriptive statistics, reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha), and normality analysis (Shapiro–Wilk). For RQ1, descriptive frequencies and means for exploitation forms were determined. For RQ2, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between professional distance scores and student exploitation frequency. ANCOVA was used to examine exploitation frequency by teacher age, experience level, and institution type. For RQ3, mean comparisons identified the professional distance level associated with minimum exploitation and highest authority ratings; one-way ANOVA and Tukey HSD post hoc tests were conducted.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure. Transcripts were independently coded by two coders; inter-coder reliability exceeded 90%.

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary Analysis

The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that all variables were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$). The TPDS demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 (subscale alphas ranged from 0.84 to 0.89). Descriptive statistics for key variables are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	M	SD	Range	Skewness
Professional Distance	3.42	0.71	1.8–4.9	-0.24
Student Exploitation Frequency	3.18	0.92	1.2–5.0	0.17
Rule Enforcement Consistency	3.56	0.65	1.9–5.0	-0.43
Role Clarity	3.79	0.58	2.2–5.0	-0.58

Note: N = 150. All scales range from 1 to 5.

4.2 Results for Research Question 1

The first research question addressed reported forms of student exploitation of teacher goodwill among Iranian EFL high school teachers. Four distinct exploitation types were identified, with frequencies presented in Table 3. Grade negotiation (M = 3.89, SD = 0.94) was the most widely reported form of exploitation, followed by rule challenging (M = 3.45, SD = 0.88), inappropriate requests (M = 3.21, SD = 0.78), and boundary testing (M = 2.87, SD = 0.72).

Table 3: Frequency of Student Exploitation Behaviors

Exploitation Type	M (SD)	% Reporting Often/Always
Grade Negotiation	3.89 (0.94)	67.3%
Rule Challenging	3.45 (0.88)	54.7%
Inappropriate Requests	3.21 (0.78)	42.7%
Boundary Testing	2.87 (0.72)	29.3%

Grade negotiation (M = 3.89) was the most common and severe form of exploitation, with a majority (67.3%) of teachers reporting that students asked them to raise their grades without justification. Rule challenging was also common (54.7%), signifying that students challenged teacher authority when they felt relational closeness (e.g., questioning why they must follow rules that others do not). More than 40% of teachers (42.7%) reported inappropriate requests (e.g., requesting special treatment based on personal relationships). Finally, boundary testing (29.3%) was the least common but still notable, with nearly 30% of teachers reporting that students frequently tested behavioral boundaries.

4.3 Results for Research Question 2

The second research question sought to test whether a relationship exists between teacher professional

distance (relational proximity) and the frequency of student boundary violations. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between professional distance and frequency of student exploitation ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.68, -0.46]$), suggesting that teachers with higher professional distance experienced significantly lower rates of student exploitation.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Variable	Professional Distance	Exploitation Frequency	Rule Consistency	Role Clarity
Professional Distance	1.00			
Exploitation Frequency	-0.58**	1.00		
Rule Consistency	0.51**	-0.44**	1.00	
Role Clarity	0.46**	-0.39**	0.48**	1.00

$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

In the ANCOVA controlling for teacher age and school type, no significant effect of these covariates was found ($F(1, 146) = 0.84$; $p = 0.36$). The relationship between professional distance and exploitation frequency was uniform across school types (public vs. private) and teacher experience levels. The strong negative correlation indicates that student exploitation behavior decreased dramatically as teachers moved from closer, more informal relationships to greater professional distance. The magnitude of the association ($r = -0.58$) reflects that professional distance explains approximately 34% of the variance in exploitation frequency, a considerable effect. The lack of covariate influence suggests that this pattern holds true across all teaching contexts in Iran.

4.4 Results for Research Question 3

The third research question sought to define the degree of professional distance perceived by teachers as most effective for avoiding exploitation while maintaining student engagement. ANOVA comparing distance quartiles revealed significant differences in exploitation frequency: $F(3, 146) = 31.47$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.39$, indicating that distance level explains 39% of the variance in exploitation. Tukey HSD post hoc tests showed that teachers in the moderately distant quartile (Professional Distance Score 3.8–4.2) displayed the lowest exploitation prevalence ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.61$) and the highest classroom authority ratings ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.54$). Teachers in the closest quartile (very close relationships) showed the highest exploitation rates ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.78$) and the lowest authority ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 0.69$).

Table 5: Professional Distance in Use: Exploitation and Authority

Distance Level	n	Professional Distance M (SD)	Exploitation M (SD)	Authority M (SD)
Very Close (Quartile 1)	38	2.41 (0.34)	4.21 (0.78)	2.56 (0.69)
Moderately Close (Quartile 2)	42	3.18 (0.29)	3.45 (0.71)	3.34 (0.58)
Moderately Distant (Quartile 3)	40	3.94 (0.18)	2.34 (0.61)	4.23 (0.54)
Distant/Authoritarian (Quartile 4)	30	4.63 (0.22)	2.89 (0.67)	3.87 (0.62)

The optimal distance level was not the maximum possible distance (authoritarian quartile 4), which was associated with increased exploitation and lower authority compared to the moderately distant level. Instead, the “sweet spot” was moderate professional distance: clear boundaries, consistent expectations, appropriate role differentiation, and polite communication, but without excessive personal sharing or the inflexibility that can lead to student resentment. The curvilinear pattern indicates that both overly close and overly authoritarian approaches yield worse outcomes.

4.5 Results for Research Question 4

The fourth research question aimed to identify the components and propositions of PDT derived from the data. Qualitative thematic analysis of interview transcripts (n = 25) revealed three main mechanisms connecting low professional distance to student exploitation and five core propositions of PDT.

Table 6: Qualitative Mechanisms of Student Exploitation

Mechanism	Description	Frequency (%) of Participants)
Kindness Trap	Students perceive teacher closeness as weakness to be exploited	92%
Role Ambiguity	Blurred boundaries encourage testing of teacher limits	84%
Authority Erosion	Excessive friendliness erodes perceived legitimacy	88%

The Kindness Trap is a counterintuitive phenomenon in which students reinterpret teacher flexibility, leniency, or personal warmth not as genuine support but as a sign of weakness. In high-

power-distance cultures like Iran, students expect clear hierarchical boundaries. When teachers deviate from this expectation by being “too nice,” they implicitly signal that their authority and power are subject to challenge or that rules can be renegotiated. Consequently, students take advantage of this perceived weakness by escalating demands, making special requests, or testing teacher tolerance.

“The more flexible I was, the more they pushed. They saw every accommodation as a sign they could demand more.”

This quotation vividly describes the Kindness Trap. The teacher describes a clear dose-response pattern: each act of flexibility was followed by increased student pressure. The phrase “saw every accommodation as a sign they could demand more” suggests that students actively monitored teacher behavior and viewed concessions as entitlements rather than gifts. Teacher goodwill was systematically exploited because the students’ cultural frame did not recognize unilateral leniency as legitimate teaching practice but rather as a resource to be extracted.

Role Ambiguity occurs when the line between teacher and student begins to fade, often due to informality, self-disclosure, or inconsistent enforcement. In hierarchical educational cultures, students need clear role definitions to determine their behavior and what they may expect from teachers. When these distinctions become blurred, students experience confusion that they often resolve by actively testing boundaries. Ambiguity itself becomes an invitation to probe how far they can bend the rules.

“They started calling me by my first name, then asked me to overlook their absences. The line became fuzzy.”

This quote demonstrates a clear sequence of escalation. Changing address (from formal title to first name) was the first sign of boundary erosion. After the teacher accepted this informality, students logically followed with substantive demands (overlooking absences). The teacher’s closing remark, “The line became fuzzy,” acknowledges that the teacher could no longer distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate requests. This fuzziness is precisely what makes exploitation possible: when rules are ambiguous, students feel entitled to negotiate.

Authority Erosion refers to the decline in a teacher’s perceived authority to direct behavior, enforce rules, and evaluate performance. High-power-distance cultures maintain authority through role-consistent behavior (i.e., clear boundaries, professional formality, and consistent consequences). When teachers adopt overly friendly or egalitarian approaches, students adjust their expectations accordingly. Later, if the same teacher attempts to assert authority (e.g., by imposing rules or consequences), students perceive this as inconsistent or hypocritical. Teacher authority collapses

because it was never properly established.

“When I tried to be strict after being friendly, they laughed. I had lost my authority permanently.”

This quote illustrates the irreversible nature of authority erosion. The teacher’s shift from friendly to strict was met not with compliance but with ridicule (“they laughed”). Laughter here is not merely an emotional reaction; it is a social signal that the teacher is no longer taken seriously as an authority figure. The phrase “lost my authority permanently” suggests that the teacher believes this loss cannot be recovered within that class. The implication is that professional distance must be established from the outset; attempting to introduce it after a period of closeness is ineffective.

Table 7: Core Propositions of Professional Distance Theory (PDT)

Proposition	Description
P1	In high-power-distance cultures, teacher relational closeness is associated with increased student boundary-testing behavior.
P2	The relationship between professional distance and student exploitation is curvilinear; both overly close and overly authoritarian distances produce suboptimal outcomes.
P3	Moderate professional distance (clear boundaries, consistent enforcement, role-appropriate communication) optimally balances exploitation prevention and student engagement.
P4	Professional distance is not merely authoritarianism; closeness without distance predicts stable authority collapse.
P5	Cultural moderators (power distance, collectivism) determine the optimal distance threshold; PDT is culturally situated, not a universal framework.

Qualitative results across all 25 interviews strongly supported the findings. The Kindness Trap was almost universally applicable (92%), with participants frequently reporting how attempts to be nice backfired. Teacher after teacher described losing authority after initial overfriendliness. Role Ambiguity (84%) and Authority Erosion (88%) were also highly prevalent, suggesting systematic rather than anecdotal mechanisms. The five PDT propositions together create a cohesive, empirically grounded theory of professional distance in high-power-distance EFL contexts.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion of Research Question 1

The first research question explored the extent to which Iranian EFL high school teachers reported student exploitation of teacher goodwill and the forms this exploitation took. The results indicate that Iranian EFL teachers frequently reported student exploitation behaviors and were most likely to encounter grade negotiation (67.3%), rule challenging (54.7%), and inappropriate requests (42.7%).

The finding that grade negotiation was the most prominent form of exploitation is consistent with qualitative reports from Abdoli et al. (2017), where teacher favoritism was identified as a predominant obstacle to building teacher-student relationships from the student perspective. The high frequency of grade negotiation reveals that Iranian students actively utilize relational proximity to pursue substantive academic benefits, a strategic action made possible when teachers do not maintain clear evaluative boundaries.

Notably, the regularity of rule challenging is striking. From the perspective of attribution theory, when teachers enact relational closeness, students tend to attribute teacher authority to personal whim rather than to legitimate positional authority, leading students to actively question and negotiate rules. Social exchange theory similarly predicts that students who are close with their teachers perceive an implicit exchange system: their loyalty and compliance are traded for preferential treatment. This becomes particularly problematic when there is inconsistent enforcement of rules built into the implicit contract, which can lead to frustration and increased challenging behavior overall.

5.2 Discussion of Research Question 2

The second research question examined whether a meaningful relationship exists between teacher professional distance (relational proximity) and student boundary violations. A significant negative correlation was found ($r = -0.58$) between professional distance and frequency of student exploitation, with professional distance accounting for approximately 34% of the variance. This finding provides direct support for PDT Proposition 1: teacher relational closeness is associated with increased student boundary-testing behavior in high-power-distance cultures.

While the relatedness construct in Self-Determination Theory suggests universal need satisfaction, the Iranian context, characterized by high power distance and role differentiation, generates different expectations. Students demand that teachers uphold formality; when teachers fail to meet this expectation, cognitive dissonance may be alleviated by interpreting closeness as a sign of weakness

rather than strength. Approaching the analysis from an attributional perspective, students in high-power-distance cultures are predisposed to attribute teacher behavior to role-consistent traits such as authority and expertise. By enacting egalitarian closeness, teachers act in ways inconsistent with student expectations, leading to situational attributions that diminish teacher legitimacy.

The correlation estimate ($r = -0.58$) is higher than commonly considered effect sizes for classroom management variables, indicating that professional distance is especially influential in predicting student behavior. According to Aliakbari (2015), Iranian teachers who utilized assertive management strategies (i.e., clear communication and consistent consequence enforcement, elements of professional distance) achieved higher student performance. The current study expands on this finding by specifically comparing distance to the prevention of negative behavior, as opposed to the generation of positive outcomes.

5.3 Discussion of Research Question 3

The third research question sought to determine the degree of professional distance that teachers consider optimally efficient for preventing exploitation while maintaining student engagement. The most effective level was moderate professional distance (Quartile 3), not maximum distance; both close relationships and authoritarian relationships were associated with increased exploitation. This curvilinear relationship is a fundamental feature of PDT and is directly explicated in Proposition 2.

The finding that authoritarian practice (Quartile 4) was associated with more exploitation than moderate distance may seem counterintuitive. However, excessive authoritarianism, harsh punishment, inflexibility, and lack of explanation for rules, can lead to student resistance and covert boundary testing. In authoritarian classrooms, students may not challenge rules outright but may exploit them in more subtle ways: withholding effort, pretending to comply, or working around loopholes. By contrast, moderate distance combines clear role boundaries with respectful communication, consistent consequence enforcement, and appropriate personal sharing. This preserves teacher positional authority while suggesting that rules are sensible and just. Lee and Lee (2018) discovered that teachers' cultural dispositions toward uncertainty management played a significant moderating role in the effectiveness of collaborative practice in hierarchical cultures; the moderate PDT position provides precisely the structure that high-uncertainty-avoidance students require.

5.4 Discussion of Research Question 4

The fourth research question focused on presenting the main elements and propositions of PDT based on

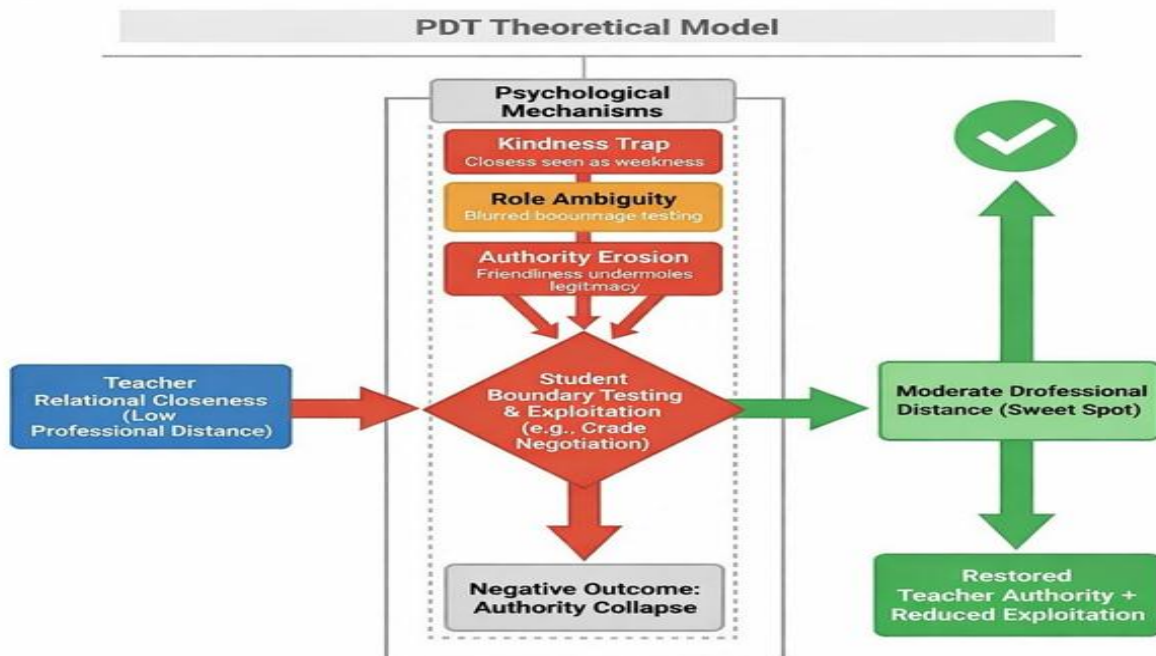
the data. Three fundamental mechanisms (Kindness Trap, Role Ambiguity, and Authority Erosion) were discovered, and five main principles of PDT were conceived.

The Kindness Trap (P1) exemplifies PDT's core contradiction: an act believed to be one of goodwill (flexibility, leniency, informality) is perceived by students as an exploitable resource. This mechanism is consistent with social exchange theory: when teachers show unilateral generosity without requiring reciprocal responsibility from students, students may develop a sense of entitlement rather than gratitude.

Role Ambiguity (P3) is supported by cross-cultural research showing that students in high-power-distance cultures experience anxiety when role boundaries are ambiguous. As a psychological necessity, role clarity is not merely an administrative nicety; without it, testing behavior emerges.

Authority Erosion (P4) aligns with teacher proximity continuum frameworks demonstrating that overly close teacher behavior is significantly related to low professional credibility. The most actionable insight from this theory is the proposition that moderate distance optimizes outcomes (P2).

Figure 1: PDT Model



The Professional Distance Continuum (Table 1) and PDT Model (Figure 1) serve as practical foundations for teacher self-assessment and professional development. The claim that PDT is culturally situated (P5) is an essential qualification: PDT does not assert universal relevance but specifies cultural moderators (power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance) relevant for defining optimal distance thresholds in specific contexts.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Conclusions

This study developed PDT and tested it empirically, demonstrating that maintaining moderate professional distance, as opposed to the Western model of close egalitarian relationships, in the high-power-distance Iranian EFL context optimizes classroom authority while minimizing student exploitation of teacher goodwill. Key conclusions of the study are:

1. Iranian EFL teachers report high levels of student exploitation behaviors, including grade negotiation and rule challenging.
2. Professional distance is strongly negatively correlated with the frequency of exploitation.
3. Moderate professional distance, rather than extreme positions, produces optimal outcomes.
4. Three mechanisms (Kindness Trap, Role Ambiguity, Authority Erosion) and five PDT propositions create a cohesive cultural theory.

6.2 Research Implications

PDT challenges the universality of Western relational models across different contexts and presents a culturally situated alternative for high-power-distance contexts. It extends the relatedness concept of Self-Determination Theory by arguing that relatedness may be maximized in these contexts not through closeness but through role clarity, respect, and fair consistency. In high-power-distance cultures, professional distance (rather than relatedness in the Western sense) may be the primary means by which students' psychological needs are met; such students require role security and formal authority as well as emotional support.

Teacher training in Iran should explicitly address the Kindness Trap and alert teachers to the fallacy that Western relational models are readily transferable. Pre-service and in-service programs can use the Professional Distance Continuum to help teachers identify their current positioning. Training should emphasize that moderate distance, clear boundaries, consistent enforcement, appropriate personal sharing, is not coldness but professional respect.

School leaders should examine policies that coerce teachers toward excessive closeness (e.g., “be a friend to your students” mandates). In light of professional distance appropriateness, evaluation criteria should be revised to account for the extent to which teachers model care while maintaining appropriate boundaries. PDT offers a framework for teachers in international contexts to align their relational styles with their students' cultural expectations, rather than being dictated by models from other cultures. This

is particularly important for expatriate teachers working in Iran and similar high-power-distance settings.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged:

1. Student perspectives were not collected, as the study relied exclusively on teacher self-report. This is an interpretive constraint that narrows the theoretical claims considerably.
2. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences regarding the direction of the professional distance–exploitation relationship. Associations should be interpreted as correlational rather than causal.
3. While stratified, the sample may not fully represent all Iranian provinces or educational levels.
4. Social desirability bias may have affected reporting, particularly on sensitive issues like favoritism.
5. The TPDS, while demonstrating strong internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$), requires further validation evidence. No evidence of construct, convergent, or discriminant validity is currently available. The instrument should therefore be treated as preliminary pending cross-validation with independent samples.

6.4 Future Directions for Further Research

Future research should:

1. Examine longitudinal relationships to investigate causal directions.
2. Obtain student perspectives on perceived professional distance and the distance levels that motivate them.
3. Test PDT in other high-power-distance contexts (e.g., Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China) to determine generalizability.
4. Compare public versus private schools to evaluate distance dynamics.
5. Develop and evaluate professional distance training interventions.
6. Examine potential interactions among teacher gender, student gender, and professional distance appropriateness.

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