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Making sense of EFL teacher agency: Insights from an Iran case study*

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Abstract

This investigation set out to look into the issue of teachers' exercise of agency in the Iranian EFL context. More specifically, as part of a larger study, it reports on the ways two Iranian Ministry of Education teachers make sense of and operate in the country's educational setting under the demands of a centralist system of education. Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson's (2013) framework of teacher agency formed the conceptual backbone of the present study as well as guiding the data collection/analysis of the study. Qualitative data, from semi-structured interviews as well as follow-up data collection procedures, were gleaned from the participants over the course of an academic year and were subjected to analytical interpretation in the light of the said framework. The researchers came up with findings which, in the main, gave more weight to the well-roundedness of Priestly, Biesta, & Robinson's model of teacher agency. The results also pointed to the highly situated nature of teacher responsiveness and action, thereby undermining the still prevalent views of the essentialist and idealized character of (teacher) agency. The results of the study are liable to be of use, among others, to case-based teacher education programs.

Keywords: Teacher Agency; English as a Foreign Language; Iran; Teacher Education

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Introduction

The concept of agency, in general, i.e., the fact that ‘human beings have the ability to influence their lives and environment while they are also shaped by social and individual factors’ (Lasky, 2005, p. 899), and teacher agency specifically, i.e., the way teachers perceive and react to the ever-changing dynamics of their immediate educational setting and even the further removed local and global forces impacting on their life and career, is a research domain bearing enormous potential and attraction to the investigators. All the same, the notion of agency is an overly confused and confusing one. Part of the confusion surrounding this ‘slippery concept’ (Hitlin & Elder Jr. 2007, p. 171) lies in the fact that, like so many other human-related constructs, it is seen through a variety of lenses by different scholars often with much overlap and, at times, redundancy. This seems partly inevitable, but it is unfortunate that, as far as human agency is concerned, very few attempts are generally made at disambiguating the term as used in diverse disciplinary discussions. There is usually tacit consensus on its very existence. In fact, its presence is, more often than not, posited a priori by most researchers. Its definition and an analysis of its mode(s) of exercise, however, vary greatly across investigations approaching the issue, even within the same disciplinary boundaries, let alone across fields as removed in nature and focus as possible.

Another source of confusion enshrouding the concept is that the term, especially in the fields of general education and English Language Teaching (ELT), is often not isolated for analytical purposes. Rather, it is commonly used in tandem with other entwined concepts and terms such as autonomy, identity, subjectivity, and the like (cf. Clarke, 2008; Fleming, 1998; Lasky, 2005; Sloan, 2006; van Lier, 2008). This indicates that the construct is still much in an embryonic state of theorization and in need of further academic refinement and fine-tuning. Hence the need for more studies treating the concept either theoretically or empirically and in as diverse geopolitical contexts as possible.

A brief review of the concept of on agency

Agency is arguably a relational term at least on two distinct planes. First and foremost, it is relational in the sense of being associative and also variegated. That is, as already alluded to, it is defined or explicated in

association with other closely related terms – terms such as freedom, autonomy, rationality, etc. This relationship has been either of a part-to-whole, or conversely, of a whole-to-part nature. In fact, few scholars have attempted – as has Sherwin (2012) done to disentangle agency from autonomy, for instance – to distinguish agency from other terms it has come to be associated with. A glimpse at the literature indicates that it has been addressed, partially or comprehensively, in tandem with other intimately linked terms such as autonomy (Toohey, 2007), identity (Sexton, 2008; Toohey, 2007), motivation (Al-Hoorie, 2014; Williams & Burden, 1997), to name a few.

Another interpretation of agency as a relational term – and indeed a recent construction of it by the social sciences and the humanities scholars – has to do with Mackenzie & Stoljar's (2000) assertion 'that persons are socially embedded and that agents' identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants' (p. 4). Such a view sees agentic action as inevitably inter-subjective. The relational approach to agency, thus, conceives of human actions and decisions as being nested i.e., embedded within an intersection of contextual factors, where a whole range of relationships – human-wise or system-wise – are at work in order for an agentive subject to make something happen in some way.

The studies conducted exclusively on teacher agency are few and far between. More specifically, those dealing with the language teacher's sense and exercise of agency are minimal (Clarke, 2008; Fleming, 1998; Ray, 2009; Robert & Graham, 2008 are a few exceptions). The concept also seems to have been in the spotlight mostly in the Western hemisphere of the world (where individuality and activism are supposedly rated highly), and have been dealt with apparently no or scanty attention in most other geographical locations.

The current study belongs to the category of interpretative investigations in that it indicates that 'not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied, and the researcher seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on what is heard' (Creswell, 2009, p. 26). In regard to the topic of the study i.e., the way Iranian teachers go about expressing or enabling their agentic powers in the face of broad global or local societal issues or institutional

demands, no study whatsoever, to the best of the knowledge of the authors, has been carried out in the Iranian context to date.

Purpose of the study

This research, being of a qualitative nature, is an attempt at staking out the factors (both facilitative and debilitating) at work in bolstering a sense and conception of agency among Iranian teachers teaching EFL at the country's secondary education level. This investigative task will be conducted through bringing to light their experiences of teaching at an age apparently informed by more 'affordances and enablements as well as constraints' (Clarke, 2008, p. 28) than ever before in the history of (language) education. With regards to the constraining factors, it is often the case that teachers are working in an era complicated by the demands of more high-stakes testing practices, especially accountability. Other prescriptive measures including scripted curricula as well as fast-pacing forces of globalization are also at work in making teachers adopt certain strategies of coping with those demands and even, in some circumstances, surviving them (Townsend & Bates, 2007). To Edwards (2005), agency is the human potential to interpret a task or problem and to act on it. This simple conceptualization of the term *agency* by Edwards seems quite pertinent to the topic of the present research since it strives to, first of all, examine how agents, in this particular case Iranian teachers, construe and experience the exigencies of their jobs and, consequently, seek to tackle them in their unique and/or generalizable ways.

In keeping with what has already been stated, the study aims at answering the following overarching research question:

- What is the nature of teacher agency as perceived and/or experienced by Iranian EFL teachers teaching at public schools at upper secondary level?

Method

The design of the study

This qualitative case study reports on the views of two teachers (a male and a female fully-tenured English teacher) who were singled out from among a cohort of Iranian Ministry of Education teachers consenting to participate in a longitudinal investigation on the issue of teacher agency. The data collection/analysis procedures took a whole Iranian academic

year (roughly eight months) to complete during which time the researchers engaged in carrying out six one-hour-long semi-structured interviews with the two cases as well as taking up the process with follow-up emails. The sound files of the one-on-one interviews were transcribed and then analyzed in the light of a template of categories adapted from the theoretical framework of the study i.e. Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson (2013).

Since, in a typical qualitative research, the twin processes of data collection/analysis are nonlinear and take place at almost the same time, upon the conduction of the first interview, the researchers embarked on reading and rereading the data culled and spotting relevant themes therein. As previously stated, the setting of the interview questions was based on the analytical levels of Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson's (2013) conceptualization of teacher agency. As the study informants were assured anonymity, pseudonyms have been used to refer to the two case teachers throughout this investigation.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical model, taken from the field of general education and employed in the present study for guiding and assisting the processes of data collection and analysis, is the framework of teacher agency put forward by Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson (2013). Having been inspired by and adopting the conceptualization of agency by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), the said authors developed a model of teacher agency as encompassing three interrelated temporally-oriented dimensions of iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective action types. Figure 1. shows their further fine-tuning of the three agency dimensions as originally conceived of by Emirbryar & Mische:

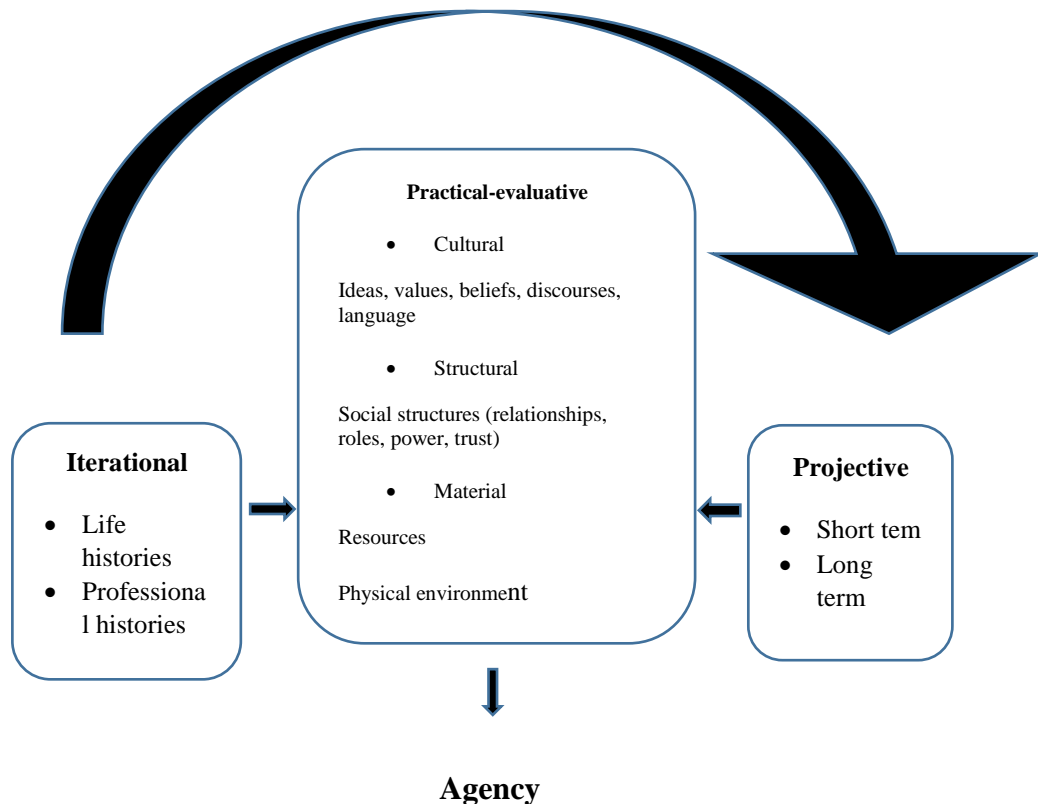


Figure 1. Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson's (2013) three-dimensional model of teacher agency

The above model, at its core, seeks to capture the various temporal social manifestations of human agentic action so that, whereas the iterational dimension deals with one's past history, the practical-evaluative dimension concerns with what individuals do in the here and now, and the projective section of the model is, in turn, associated with the courses of action people intend to pursue in the future.

Describing their view of agency as an 'ecological' one, Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson maintain that 'it is important not to see agency as a capacity residing in individuals, but rather to conceive of it as something that is *achieved* [italics in the original] through engagement with very specific contextual conditions' (p. 188). In their view, 'actors always act *by means* of their environment rather than simply *in* their environment'.

As already alluded to, Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson's conceptualization of people's agentic behavior owes much to, and

stems from, Emirbayer & Mische's (1998) view of human agency as being temporally oriented, consisting of three interrelated dimensions of iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective choices and decisions. According to the latter authors, agency is 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)' (p. 963). In fact, by switching within and among these various temporalities (past, present, and future), agents come to display 'varying degrees of maneuverability, inventiveness, and reflective choice ... in relation to the constraining and enabling action' (p. 964).

As far as the concept of teacher agency is concerned, the authors seek to capture, in their model, the past education of teachers in general (i.e. life histories) and the specific concrete experiences and understandings they have accrued over the course of (past) years (i.e. professional histories). Such fine issues fall under the iterational dimension of agentic action. The second dimension i.e. the practical-evaluative one, has to do with the fact that teachers build upon their value and belief systems and develop their own discourses and language (i.e. the cultural aspect) as they assume a variety of roles and identity types in a nexus of power relations (i.e. the structural aspect) and they attempt to gain access to diverse resources in physical environments (i.e. the material aspect of the second dimension). Finally, they consider the short-range and long(er)-range consequences of the action they take.

The participants' profiles

The following is a description of the two case teachers, Farid and Haleh, respectively.

Farid's personal and professional account

Farid, currently a 38-year-old teacher having taught English at both comprehensive and selective schools in the Iranian education system, has made himself a name, in the geographical location he works as a teacher, as a highly organized and diligent teacher catering successfully to the needs of his many various classes. This fact dawned on the researcher, in part, through the informal chats he had with some of his colleagues. The key to his success, from his own personal side, has to

do with the fact that he never shies away from learning the tricks of the trade with which he is associated.

His lifecourse has had its twists and turns, though. Farid comes from a family already stricken by two bereavements. His younger brother, a 19-year-old draftee, was reportedly shot dead while serving in a navy base in the center of the country. Following the sad event, he also lost a twin brother, who happened to be an MOE English teacher teaching both at junior high schools and high schools mostly in an under-privileged area. He died of a brain tumor he suffered from for quite a long time. What is noteworthy about Farid's background is that his twin brother and he chose their teaching careers almost at the same time (with a time lapse of just one year), attended the same university (a prestigious state university in the south of Iran), and taught in the same town, albeit in different countryside areas. As he divulged to the researcher in the course of one interview, this unfortunate incident impacted on him more profoundly than did the demise of his younger brother, presumably because he identified more with this twin brother of his – a playmate, a colleague as well as a sibling of the same age, as he revealed.

Farid has three sisters, all of whom are practicing teachers having always exerted, as he disclosed to the researcher in a face-to-face interview, a great influence on his conduct as well as his mindset as a teacher. Farid maintained that he would, in many cases, take their advice (seriously) on a variety of issues – professional or otherwise, and that they were more than available, willing, and ready to provide him with suggestions and even warnings on a range of points. The sisters are all married and have their own children to tend to.

Although Farid is rather young, he comes across as a seasoned teacher and, in fact, he already possesses a wealth of experience – a teaching knowhow rooted in and associated with his having taught English at various levels (governmental and private-sector levels) and across diverse age groups.

He is married with two children, a six-year-old daughter and a newborn one. His wife, who also happens to be an English teacher, used to teach at junior high schools but then applied for a position as a high school teacher and obtained the teaching job after sitting an exam to decide, from among several candidates, who should be entitled to teach

at a higher level i.e., at the upper secondary education level (i.e., high school level). Both Farid and his wife have experiences of teaching at private institutes, even though he outdid his wife in this at one point and started teaching and is still teaching English at intermediate levels. Farid has also been teaching general and ESP English courses in the humanities at a local university branch and a technical college for one year now since he got his MA degree from a university in a seaside town in proximity to his hometown.

Haleh's personal and professional account

Haleh, the oldest of four sisters, is a single 39-year-old teacher. She lives in a big city in the south of Iran, but commutes to a small town for her teaching career. As a high school student, she singled out the Natural Sciences as her chosen field of study since she yearned to become a doctor. In the meantime, she also attended private language institutes to improve her English. Having failed to get accepted into the field of medicine, she instead opted for Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at a local branch of Islamic Azad University, a nationwide non-governmental university. Looking back, she remembers the university, where she attended ten years ago, as one with 'knowledgeable, patient, flexible, and sympathetic professors' and one having a 'friendly atmosphere'.

Having worked as a part-time teacher for several years in some villages in the town she used to teach, she finally managed to become a fully tenured teacher. Four years ago, she decided to get a master's degree and studied for another three years in (TEFL). Now she is an MA holder. All she collected from her MA program of study, according to her, was some (practical) tips in research literacy. She is not content with the instruction she received there. As a teacher, she has been teaching at high schools for eleven years now. Coming from a 'disciplined' yet supportive family (her father used to be a colonel in the Iranian Air Force and used to move homes several times as his job required), she is a self-made person who almost strikes out on her own. One can see the mark of military life in her career, where she doggedly pursues her goals. She is really enthusiastic about her job and discipline and grabs, as she contends, every opportunity to further her teaching skills and knowledge types.

Results and discussion

This section presents an account of the major findings of this study in light of the theoretical and analytical framework introduced earlier, and seeks to bring to light the factors at work, at a micro- and macro-level, in shaping case teachers' perceptions of their role and functioning in the social space they occupy. Precisely, Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson's (2013) temporally-oriented model of the elements of (teacher) agency is drawn upon to help the readers see the responsiveness of teachers towards a complex of factors at various points in their teaching careers.

The iterational elements of the participants' agency

One major theme of the present study related to the iterational element of agency in the model proposed by Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson (2013) i.e. one's life and professional history, was the strong socializing aspect of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990) i.e. the total sum of one's past experiences, dispositions, and attitudes, at the family level. The 'formative conditions' of habitus make 'external structures [be] internalized' (Swartz, 1997, p. 103), in turn, influencing the way individuals perceive certain courses of action to be possible or likely, or conversely, impossible and less likely. The two case teachers in the current study displayed the impact, on their career decisions and trajectories, of the familial side of habitus. This was strongly felt and perceived by what Farid said of the influence, on his early work life, of his two sisters and his brother-in-laws, who were all teachers and who tended to provide him, on a regular basis, with cautionary advice, prior to his becoming a teacher or upon entering the profession as a beginning teacher, on how to act towards the school and district authorities lest he should get into trouble with them:

When I was employed by the Ministry of Education as a student [teacher], I was very careful about how I behaved at university. It was important for me to become employed as a teacher because of the high unemployment at that time among the young ... the young people and so ... I didn't want to be fired. Sometimes I was not satisfied with some ... things. I didn't complain. It was because my sisters who were teachers also ... repeatedly told me that I should be careful about my behavior. If I take part in some activities

like student protests or if I say something, I might not be employed. They told me such things. They warned me that I was under ... under observation by the Ministry of Education. They even told me stories about teachers who had become fired by ... or even suspended by the Ministry because they hadn't followed some rules properly.

As the above quote suggests, the influence of significant others in the family environment on Farid in the 'primary socialization' (Kendall, 2016, p. 97) phase of his work and personal life cannot be underestimated. This type of socialization refers to 'the process of learning that begins at birth and occurs in the home and family' (p. 97). The same familial background with its formative atmosphere was voiced by Haleh as she spoke about her 'military' father,

My father was a military person who had a great discipline at home. He forced us ... I mean, me and my teen sisters ... to wake up early ... at a particular time, go to school early because of emergencies and study our lessons at home hard. Now that I travel every day to reach in this town for teaching, I follow the same discipline. ... Last year the manager of a good school phoned me and invited me to teach in that school. She said that I have heard that you are very punctual in your job.

The two teachers also reported on the great value they attached to the effect of especially the two fields of their secondary education and their student teacher period and the critical incidents they recalled from those two significant periods. With regards to the former, it should be pointed out that the learning of foreign languages subject for Iranian learners begins formally upon their entry into the (lower) secondary education period and is taken up at the next phase i.e., the upper secondary education level. Here, the participants highlighted the substantial role played by their secondary education English teacher in arousing their enthusiasm of the subject and influencing the parameters of their choice of career (i.e. getting into teaching generally and, more specifically, becoming English teachers). An interview with Farid gives a picture of the influence of the experiences of their being a high school student,

When I was at high school, I was in a class with my twin brother. We were in the same class. We had one teacher who taught us English for three years for grades one, two, and three and then our teacher changed. The teacher I told you about made us really interested in English so that ... I and my twin brother practiced English ... of course broken English at home, listened to English programs on the radio. We made a lot of progress and we had high scores in that lesson [= subject]. ... the reason he made us interested in English was because he explained the lessons ... the points in a very good way and we were active in his classes. At that time it was not ... teachers did not speak English in the classroom but he taught with English. He spent a lot of time for our class for example he took flashcards to the classroom and taught the new vocabulary. His teaching had a ... an effect ... very much effect on my English teaching and also my twin brother. When we became English teachers we often remembered his teaching ...

The above quote conjures up immediately Lortie's (1975) often-cited 'apprenticeship of observation', i.e. 'the phenomenon whereby student teachers arrive for their training courses having spent thousands of hours as schoolchildren observing and evaluating professionals in action' (Borg, 2004, p. 274) – a phenomenon which 'contrasts with novices learning other professionals, such as those of lawyers or doctors'. It thus happens that even practicing teachers sometimes follow the examples of their own teachers' teaching style and adopt pedagogical strategies upon walking into teaching of a specific subject area at school. This 'tendency of the ... teachers ... to revert to their default model' (Borg, 2004, p. 275), being itself part of the complex of the teacherly habitus of some participants, was also mentioned, in passing, in the interview remarks of Haleh,

The English teacher of my second grade was a very young man who taught us English lessons in a fun way and we really understood the lessons that he taught. He had ... some inventions and ... innovations in his teachings ... for example before teaching reading passages in the books, he

used warm-up techniques like showing some newspapers pictures about the topic of the lessons, or ... he wrote new words on the blackboard ... Generally, teachers didn't do these techniques ... they didn't use them ... I am thankful to him. Even now that I myself am a teacher of English I am under his effect on me ...

The teachers in this research were also not hesitant, in their self-disclosed data, to point up the impact of the institutional and departmental culture and atmosphere of especially their BA program experiences on shaping some of their dispositions and attitudes towards their current practices as teachers and on galvanizing them into pedagogical action. To some, the lifeworld of the university BA program was not as balanced and unproblematic as they conceived it to be before their arrival at and settling down in the program location, and tended to move them to think reflectively about the experiences inhering in it.

The practical-evaluative elements of the participants' agency **Teachers' discourses and language**

The material gleaned in the course of the present study further highlighted some elements of 'linguistic agency' (Oliviera, 2012) as revealed by the two case teachers' self-disclosing data. Farid, specifically, seemed more oriented towards drawing on those linguistic and discursive agentive resources in his remarks. This was something that attested to his, at times, silently non-conformist mindset. Farid, for instance, was not hesitant to couch his remarks in discourses of cynicism, particularly when mention was made of the education system at large and the politics-related issues involved in the schooling. In response to a question about the participants' views of the English high-school textbooks in use in the country at the time of data collection/analysis, he asserted sarcastically,

Well, ... (heaving a sigh) ... perfect. They are perfect (laughing). Our students can speak English well when they are graduated ... (giggling) ... well ... what can I say ... nobody is satisfied with the books ... the books that we teach now ... even students are not satisfied. I had students who made fun of the books. Why? ... Because their parts

and sections have not been designed well ... for example the pictures are ridiculous. The grammar is presented and practiced in substitution drills and lots of other problems ...

Haleh, in her own turn, conceives somewhat metaphorically of the current textbooks as a *problem* that ‘somebody must do something about’.

Masterpiece ... they are masterpieces. We face books that are ... have faults in every section ... somebody must Do something about them This is what I always say ... if we don't take action ... sooner ... we will educate generations of illiterate.

Teachers' ideas, values, and beliefs

A thriving domain of research in teacher education is the study of teacher values and beliefs and their role in the instruction delivered by teachers. Beliefs are referred to as ‘psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true’ (Richardson, 2003, p. 2). They are further thought to be the driving force behind action and decisions (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Richardson, 2003). Research shows that the earlier beliefs are formed or acquired, the more long-standing they will be and the more difficult they will be to change (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Beliefs and values are also related to the Bourdieusian concept of habitus (alluded to in the previous section) in that they come into being early in life and, once established, they take the form of dispositions. They particularly find expression in what individuals do and how they react to the demands of their surroundings.

As far as the current investigation is concerned, some striking patterns concerning the participants' stance on various aspects of (foreign language) pedagogy were spotted in the data. The major themes which surfaced in regard to the case teachers' views and beliefs pointed, in the main, to the revelation that, while they had already developed a critical and reflective awareness of the value-laden macro-level factors and variables affecting the teaching of English language in the country, including the workings of the externally imposed/enforced English Language curriculum and the role of those involved, one way or another, in its creation and/or implementation (e.g., governmental

bodies, school/district authorities, etc.), they had apparently not developed the same reflective approach towards their personal and professional theories and assumptions so that, to use Widdowson's turn of phrase, their deeply held "dogmas [had become] disguised as common sense" (Widdowson, 2012 , p. 3), and their views of how teaching/learning was to be done passed off as unshakeable pedagogical truth. A case in point was the fact that whereas they could see clearly the society's deficit view of teachers and how they taught the curriculum, they were ignorant of their own deficit views of some learners and how they had to deal with them. In one interview about his relationship with the students he taught, Farid said,

I go to the class prepared ... I often study ... I prepare quizzes and other things. I do my best in my classes and my students are usually successful. They get good grades and ... they go ... they become accepted at university. Of course there are some weak students who do not want to learn ... they fail but the students who are clever ... and hardworking ... they become successful.

This attribution of failure of some students (also brought up by Haleh) to their low IQ and their own proclivity for failure, as stated earlier, is in stark contrast to the way they chastise their society at large for attributing the high rate of school dropout across the country to the irresponsible behavior of teachers coming up in the next section.

Creating online/offline teacher support groups

The informants of the present study were also reportedly involved in forming collectivities of likeminded people, thereby furthering their growth at an interpersonal level. They lamented the fact that their colleagues were, for the most part, loners who preferred not to let things out past the four walls of their classrooms, and that they tended to keep themselves to themselves. They believed that this was not the correct mindset to be prevalent within schools and districts as it would deprive them and their colleagues of dearly earned teacher savvy. For this reason, they reported that they currently had one way or another some sort of get-togetherness – real or virtual – and that they were involved in a give and take of professional ideas and experiences. Farid remembers the first time they came together, in a small circle of like-

minded teachers, to discuss the issues which were of import to them as professional teachers,

Some years ago, before I become the supervisor in this district, there was another teacher who supervised over teachers' work. In a meeting we had with that supervisor I suggested holding weekly meetings to improve our general English and technical knowledge ... I mean knowledge of theories ... of how to teach different methods In that meeting all the teachers of the district were present and they accepted my idea ... they said it is a great idea and they will attend such meeting but, you know, teachers are generally ... are not so much active ... some of them just talk but they don't act. In the first conversation meeting we had ... about eight or nine teachers were present but at other meetings they became less ... their number decreased. We said it is better if the number of teachers is small. We will have more opportunity to express our opinions ... those classes are still active ... there have been some stops ... some pauses ... and they are not about teaching methodology or linguistics or testing ... language testing and evaluation ... but we are still holding those classes ...

In retrospect, the widespread use of technology among the members of the society, especially teachers, such as smart phones and the free messenger softwares was for the participants in the study also reminiscent of the difficulties they had, as learners of English and even as teachers a few years ago before the advent of such new technological advances as 'e-collaboration' (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2012, p. 101), in dealing with the questions they came upon in their classes or the sporadic meetings they had with their colleagues. Haleh maintained, for example,

At our time, we didn't have access to any technology ... we didn't have smartphones, we didn't have access to the Internet ... the only thing we had were some chalks and a blackboard ... and of course a book. When we had a problem ... I mean when a student asked us a question ... a question that we couldn't answer ... well ... we had many

problems in finding the answer. But now some students even try to get us into trouble by challenging us ... by asking difficult questions ... questions that they get from the Internet. ... it's both good and bad. For example, about the advantages ... we have made online groups with some colleagues ... we discuss difficult points ... and learn many new things.

As the above typical interview excerpts show, the teachers in the present investigation were keen not to miss the opportunity brought about by the new technological advances for them to form professional collectivities so that they could benefit from them psychologically, cognitively, and professionally.

Teachers' relationship with students/ parents/ administrators

Another strand of relationship the case teachers engaged in was related to the kind and nature of relationship they created and maintained with their students, and among the interest groups and stakeholders, with their learners' parents. In dealing with their students, they reported to be acting out a rather wide variety of roles from that of an assumed caring parent to that of a pedagogue to that of a counselor and they reported to be giving vent to a range of feelings and emotions in their encounters from love and care to the extremes of sympathy. The expression of this latter emotion type can probably be attributed, to some extent, to the already stated deficit view of their learners they held. In a typical interview extract, Farid stated

I feel sorry for my students and their families, especially students who come from a very poor family. When I see them and ... or when their parents come to see me I decide to ... to spend more time for their children. Some of them as I said before don't want to learn and don't have any motivation to study but I try hard to change them ... I want them to become successful.

Haleh speaks of the school-based intervention she undertakes to rectify pedagogical matters pinpointed by students or their parents, and perceived by her to be based on legitimate terms,

Some students are very clever. They see things that we don't see in the class ... when we are teaching and our back is ... toward the students, they understand things better. So if they say something about my teaching I listen carefully to them and I try to improve my teaching if it is problematic ... for example, two weeks ago I was teaching grammar ... grammar of book four lesson three ... the reduced adjective clauses ... and after I finished I asked the students whether they learn it or not. A few students said that they didn't learn the lesson because my examples are not enough ... I stood and thought for a while and I ... I didn't become angry of them ... I saw that they are right ... I hadn't written enough examples on the board so I began to explain the grammar again ... I gave more examples.

In regards to their relationship with school principals and assistants, Haleh openly said that she entertained negative attitudes to them in cases they were being judgmental and assertive. Here on such occasions she reported that she was not on cooperative terms with the school authorities, and that she did not comply with their wishes and demands whatever they might be. This, she revealed, would mostly happen when she wore her teaching hats in totally new teaching environments, especially, selective schools.

I taught at villages for several years and I tried to notice ... to be noticed by the principals of selective schools. I wanted to teach the clever and good students in the selective schools and I thought that it is a ... an easy job but I faced with many problems. The principals tried to ... told the teachers sometimes that they must change their teaching method. I didn't like it ... at first I resisted. I tried to explain to the principal that my method is good and correct. She didn't know about my field of study and I think she didn't trust me. After some weeks and months, she understood that my teaching was successful.

Teachers' exploitation of the environment-specific resources

Still another arena where the teachers commented they would display some sort of agentic action was in the ways they made sense of and

worked on the material affordances offered by their local educational setting. Given the slow but apparently sure transition of the Iranian schools from traditional sites of chalk and blackboards to appropriately-equipped sites with multimedia resources, teachers initially expressed mixed feelings towards their use of technology in their classes. They underwrote the mismatch between the time allocation factor and the external demands of teaching the whole content of the books and not skipping any parts. At the same time, they were, conversely, of the opinion that the use of technology gave their teaching more variety and aroused the interests of some otherwise unmotivated students. Haleh commented,

One problems we have is that we don't have labs ... language labs and also technicians in our schools to help us prepare the equipments [sic] and facilities and we often don't have enough time to ... to handle the equipment ... one strategy I use is that I go to class a little earlier and I prepare the computer and the projector ... therefore I don't have any stress or I have little stress ...

Farid was also reportedly an advocate of the use of currently available technology in a teacher's pedagogical practices. He further made references to the edge such use gave a teacher of selective schools over his/her competitors i.e. other teachers striving and displaying their quality teaching in an effort to win the principals' favor by being put in their enlist of chosen teachers,

I always say to myself that teachers are like a ... like soldiers that should use modern weapons; otherwise they can't protect their country and land and lose. Teachers must also be equipped with modern technology and facilities to teach in a good way. I think the quality of their teaching increases if they use computers and the Internet and other things in their class. Especially, teachers in selective schools which ... which among them is a hard competition to be accepted ... to be selected by the principals of selective schools ... they need to equip themselves with knowledge of modern technology.

The projective elements of the participants' agency

The informants in this research reported that they intended to continue their weekly get-together and the virtual-world groups they reported they had formed. They also were not reticent to speak about their future plans and the kind of innovations they would introduce in the makeup, administration, and content of the sessions they presently had with other colleagues in an attempt to further their professional development. Haleh, for instance, spoke passionately of the prospect of online sessions,

Fortunately, we could invite some university professors to our online group and they accepted and jointed our group. And we want to continue to ... request more university professors and other members, for example colleagues in other cities and provinces to join our online group and ... share their knowledge and experiences with the members.

Another resolve pointed to by Farid was his wish to continue his studies at the PhD Level abroad, where he believes he can 'kill two birds with one stone' i.e. he will be able to enjoy life in a preferably English-speaking country where he can come in contact with the language as well as the elements of the target country culture, and also he will be able to take a PhD degree in TEFL. The same wish cropped up in the course of an interview session with Haleh.

Here is where the participants do not comply with the pervasive and dominant atmosphere among most teachers in their district – an atmosphere based on ethos of professional indifference and nonchalance as well as built around a lack of desire to continue their professional development.

As the findings of the present study indicate, the trajectory of some Iranian teachers' agentive action and thinking is fraught with winding turns and twists and eludes neat definition and categorization, and that even teachers working apparently under similar working conditions and in the same locale will perceive and experience it differently though some similar patterns of thought and initiation can be delineated. That is because a whole range of issues and influences are at work in shaping teachers' responses and responsiveness to the events unfolding around them in their profession.

The present research also seems to give more weight to the well-roundedness of Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson's (2013) model of teacher agency, where teacher action is temporally-oriented as well as highly situative. This is a far more realistic conception of human agency than those held by some idealists who view agency as being monolithic and essentialist i.e. as simply some quality that individuals possess or what Ritchie & Wilson (2000) call 'an uncomplicated view of teacher agency' (p. 11).

The findings also seem to shed light on some of the fine-grained reactive and proactive strategies the Iranian case teachers employ (and for which possibly some supportive evidence could be found among some other teachers working in the same educational setting) to tackle the demands of their job's routines as well as exigencies.

Conclusion

The present study was part of a longitudinal case study of the modes via which Iranian English teachers in the governmental-sector displayed and enabled their agency. The data culled were mostly based on semi-structured interviews and taken up by follow-up procedures for the clarification and better crystallization of the notions developed. The results are, for that matter, suggestive and not generalizable. However, they help bring to the light some of the many ways the Iranian teachers strategically go about tackling the issues impacting on them. The findings were, as already stated, indicative of the highly contested as well as context-specific nature of (English) teacher agency – a view which sees agency as being far from being essentialist and idealized, but filled with not only affordances (coming from within a person as well as offered by the surroundings) but also the constraining factors similarly rooted in one's perceptions of how things unfold around him or her and the world he or she inhabits and operates in.

The significance of practicing teachers' action and cognition cannot be dismissed offhand by the current state of theory and practice. In the final analysis, any change, and for that matter, the ultimate success of educational systems of varying sizes 'depends on what teachers do and think – it's as simple and as complex as that' (Fullan, 2001, p. 117). This reflection on the way teachers perceive and respond to the events playing out in their situative context should lie at the very heart of any teacher education program seeking to be productive in bringing about

changes in an ever-increasing complex world, especially those based on a dissection of case reports (Richards, 1998).

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