An Exploratory Study of Iranian EFL Teachers' Agency: Conceptions and Practices

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Abstract
The need for a strong educational system is felt more than ever due to globalization. In this respect, teacher agency has an important role in educational change. This qualitative meta-study, therefore, addressed the attitude of the teachers towards agency and the way they enact agency to facilitate learning process. To this purpose, the needed data were gathered from the narrative of life, professional history and class observations of five English teachers in Iranian context. Then, based on the Grounded Theory Approach, the data were analyzed and the obtained results showed that teachers' pre-teaching and during teaching processes were made up of complex relationships among different resources; that is, teachers' life ideology (their perception towards themselves and their job) and financial status. At the same time, the results revealed that teachers' instruction experiences highly affect both their magnification of agency and their decision-making processes. It was further seen that agency was not stable at all, meaning that social factors and environmental conditions played important roles in shaping teacher's agency.

Keywords: EFL teachers' agency, Grounded Theory Approach, educational system, life ideology

Introduction
What is 'agency' is in social sciences? It is a serious source of growing difficulty and perplexity. Various theoreticians have advocated, criticized, eliminated, and restored this concept in often inconsistent and overlapping ways. Rogers and Wetzel (2013) take into account the individual dimension of the agency and define it as "the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (p. 63). Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, and Miller (2012) consider agency as a concept "strongly connected to the contextual conditions within which it is achieved and not as merely a capacity or possession of the individual" (p. 197). Yet, another group of scholars believe that humans neither are autonomous nor self-sufficient agents nor are they directed and regulated completely by external forces. They argue that agency is intervened by the interaction between the individual (characteristics and tendencies) and the instruments and structures of a social context (Lasky, 2005). Hence, the same individual may display varying degrees of agency in different contexts. It is, thus, necessary for every society to interpret the agent according to its social system and cultural and political backgrounds.

Language teachers, especially English as Foreign Language teachers (EFL), apply agency to make choices, affect, oppose, or take positions; hence, they achieve different objectives in distinctive contexts (Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate, 2016). From decision-making during classroom

teaching to raising an opinion at a staff/faculty meeting, agency is part of a language teacher's daily life. Global teaching of English demands teachers to have a sense of critical awareness, informed by a socio-culturally sensitive pedagogy (Alsagoff, McKay, Hu, and Renandya, 2012). In spite of the fact that many of these discussions exist within inner circle English speaking countries where teachers are getting ready to teach in foreign countries, discussions on how to make English language teaching pertinent to the local population by local teachers remains constrained.

In recent years, there has been a quick increase in investigating and theorizing teacher agency. Much of these attempts have been in the context of examining teachers' reactions to, and room for movement within educational reforms or forms of externally imposed responsibility (e.g., Buchanan, 2015, Stillman and Anderson, 2015). Tao and Gao (2017) regard teacher agency in the sense of professional development or reactions to curriculum or institutional changes. They add that any educational system which is determined to help all students in language classes today would agree that empowering teachers for the realities of today's classrooms is essential. If the standards and expectations of a democratic society grounded in free and public education for everyone are to be fulfilled, teachers must have the knowledge, skills, and agency fundamental to not only influence student learning but also to support students and their schools.
According to (Johnson, 2009), research on language teaching and teacher training and development has gone through evolutionary, even, alterations in the past 40 years with determination of teaching as both individually performed and socially located. However, EFL teachers' agency in their classes is not completely determined. Both the role of EFL teachers' contextualized personal experiences (Freeman, 1996) and social structures, especially of the limitations imposed by institutions (Crookes, 1997) are advocated. Accordingly, there is a need to clarify what are the roles of the EFL teachers themselves and their institutions in constructing of the EFL teacher agency and establishing the pros and cons of each dimension in the quality of teaching process.

Based on what was stated above, the present study aimed to focus on the EFL context of Iran and, using Grounded Theory Approach, thoroughly explore the causes of the EFL teachers' agency in the language classes and the consequences that this type of agency may have on the quality of teaching from their own perspective.

Literature Review
The concept of agency has been extensively theorized, and debated particularly in sociological literature with a focus on "the merits of holistic and individualistic explanations of social action" referred to as the structure-agency debate Biesta et al, (2015 p. 625). Broadly defined, agency refers to the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively in their world (Rogers, 2013). Vahasantanen (2014, p. 1) refers to professional agency, as "having the power to act, to affect matters, and to make decisions or choices in relation to their professional identities and work." Hitlin and Elder (2007) present several different definitions of agency. Elder (1994) in Hitlin and Elder (2007) defines agency as "a core life course that represents individual influences within structured pathwaysr" Some other researchers assume a sociological understanding of agency, recognizing agency as embracing actors' social choices that occur within structurally defined contexts often among an array of structurally provided alternatives. Individuals possess varying levels of agency and thus possess varying senses of agentic potential. In light of this information, it is clear that agency as a topic of analysis and study is complex and needs to be clearly conceptualized.

Giddens (1984) theorizes that in order for individuals to act as agents, one should assume that they have certain abilities to do so, and to use their knowledge (competence) to achieve a particular outcome. In addition to actors having the competence to act to achieve agency, actors must be vested with the power to mobilize within social structures, defined as the rules and resources associated with the production or reproduction of social systems. Within these social systems, some actors may interpret information in a manner that enables them to modify the conditions of the produced/reproduced system to achieve either status quo or seek changes, benefiting the actors, thus recognizing the ability of individual and collective agents to modify social or organizational structures, over time.

Subordinate agents, individually and collectively, may be able to influence their superiors' actions, based on the levels of power and autonomy that are available to the subordinate agents. Biesta et al., (2015) opines that this concept supports the need to study the effects of different structural factors of social systems on teachers' agentic power and autonomy. Unlike Giddens' view that an individual is no longer agentic if he or she loses the capacity "to make a difference," Archer (2000) in Pantic (2015 p.763) argues that an individual may still be agentic, but "rather his or her reaction and response to the context is uncoordinated and unarticulatedi" Pantic (2015) refers to Archer's (2000) use of the term "transformative agency" to describe an individuals' capacity to assess and reflect on social contexts, thereby envisioning creative alternatives, and collaborating with others to bring about these transformative options. Culture (e.g. ideology, societal or institutional views) according to Archer (2000) in Pantic (2015) is a key concept in tandem with structure in achieving this agentic capacity. Pantic also argues that material factors (such as resources and the physical environment) need to be distinguished from the cultural influences on agency.

Giddens (1991, p. 32) argues that a post-modernist society forces the "modern individual to become more agentic and take control of their lives." This ideology and the belief that agency positively affects the social actors (i.e., the agents), their benefactors and the communities in which they work, raises philosophical questions in regard to whether policies should foster the achievement of agency, and if so, what goals and processes contributing to or promoting the achievement of agency should be included in these public policies. Other philosophical questions concern the manner in which agents are specifically represented in policies. In the development and implementation of policies, agents as a category may not be directly engaged in the construction of these policies, but rather are subject to policies that maybe forcefully placed upon them. In educational settings, this phenomenon creates tension between the belief in theory and practice that teachers are agentic or can achieve agency versus being controlled or manipulated through the practices and structures of the educational system.

Although there is considerable literature on teacher agency in different countries, EFL teacher agency has rarely been taken into account in SLA research in Iranian context. Actually, little attention has been paid to the issue of EFL teacher agency by Iranian researchers, specifically in relation to teaching quality in the context of academic arena. There also seems to be a growing interest for improvement of pedagogical competences and an increasing need to enhance teaching quality of EFL teachers at national level. Hence, further research needs to be done in order to provide greater clarity of the concept in terms of its definition and the factors that significantly affect teaching agency and its implications for the language teaching. The present study, therefore, tried to fill this gap by exploring those critical factors that constitute to the professional agency of English as Foreign Language (EFL) teacher from the perspectives of the EFL participant teachers. Based on the objective of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What are the EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the factors contributing to the formation of their professional agency?
RQ2: What are the EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the role of their agency on the prosperity of their career?

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study consisted of five females and males EFL teachers at public high schools in Tabriz. They were randomly selected for the aim of the study. The teachers were coded as T1, T2, T3…T5 to remain anonymous and enhance confidentiality. Table 1 below shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Teachers (N=5)

Instructors / Categories	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Degree	MA	BA	MA	PhD	MA
Teaching Experience	10	12	5	13	8

Regarding agency commitment, the following information and key constructs were gathered from the teachers under study.
T1: -She has a high self-confidence. -She is a German Iranian hybrid. -She considers appearance very important.
T2: -He is proud of his job. -He usually studies to improve his knowledge. -He believes 'Time is money'.
T3: -She considers the consultation very critical. -She enjoys working with others. -She always updates her knowledge.
T4: -She establishes friendly relations with students to understand their problems. -She says she evaluated her teaching at the first years of teaching better because she was single and had more free time. -In terms of language information, she is better than her colleagues. -She believes the equipment is not important, but the interest and ability of the teacher is important
T5:-Teaching is his first priority. -He considers other English books besides the prescribed textbooks. -He is dissatisfied with the heterogeneity of students' academic level. -He is a serious teacher.

Procedures

In order to address the questions of how EFL teachers in public schools describe their understandings of agency phenomenon, some qualitative information on the viewpoints of these

English language teachers towards the agency and the factors related to it was needed. The primary and the only instrument utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview, which is the primary method of data collection in Grounded Theory (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006). The researchers tried, therefore, to elicit teachers' ideas towards agency phenomenon by qualitative interviews. Edwards (2005), believes 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 appeared to be quite pertinent to the objective of the present research since it strived to, first of all, examine how agents (Iranian teachers), construe and experience the exigencies of their jobs and, as a result, seek to tackle them in their unique or generalizable ways.

In the first phase of the study, (the pilot study), a semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 EFL teachers, 5 male and 5 female high school teachers who were informed about the nature of research. It is worth noting that the teachers voluntarily took part in the study after signing the consent form that already had been prepared by the researchers. A digital audio recording device was used to record the interviews. Also, all interviews were recorded using analogue technology. The analogue tape was then professionally transcribed and turned into analyzable text. A few notes were also taken during the interview, which provided the researchers with the opportunity to record memos and guidance for the next interview. Then, open coding of full interviews was done (ranging from 20 to 30 hours each for the first few one-hour interviews to 3 to 10 hours each for the last few). Although tape recording took a lot of time, listening to the participants triggered theoretical memos and facilitated the finding of relations. Moreover, listening and reading the interviews matched the researchers' cognitive style and, therefore, facilitated emergence.

The reason for conducting the interview was to probe deep into the participants' minds. The main question of the interview revolved round the concept of agency after elaborating on the concept of agency in brief. The interview session lasted for about 15-30 minutes for one session in this stage. The researchers' intention here was to allow the interview to remain fairly conversational and situational in order to gain a collection of comprehensive study data. Each audio taped interview was then transcribed after translating each sentence from Persian into English by an expert in translation studies from Yazd University, and the data obtained from 5 teachers were selected randomly, since the data reached saturation.

In the second phase of the study, the formal interview was conducted, in which the five selected teachers mentioned above participated. The interview lasted for about 15-30 minutes for each session and the whole interview data was gathered during five sessions. Each teacher was interviewed five times at this phase. The questions and sub-questions were as follows:

1.What does 'being agent' mean to you?
2.How does language teacher agency manifest itself in learning communities?
3.What role does language teacher agency play, if any, in learning communities?
4.If advocacy is present in learning communities, how is it exercised? If so, how is individual and collective teacher agency shaped?
5.How does a learning community provide a specific context for the shaping the agency of both new and experienced language teachers?

The interview questions were designed and asked in English, but with the purpose of a better communication and facilitation of expressing ideas, the interviewees were allowed to use their L1 (i.e., Persian), if needed. The focus-group interviews were also guided by some key questions as elaborated above, and the participants were given an opportunity to provide detailed

descriptions of their experiences regarding the practices of agency during their career. The researcher as the admin of the Telegram group acted as moderator, facilitating the discussion and encouraging all the members to participate. The interview lasted about one hour and 45 minutes and different ideas and opinions were brought up. The questions were asked to the point that information saturation was reached. All the interviews in the form of Telegram voices were transcribed for further analysis. In order to check the credibility of the obtained data, for the second time, peer-debriefing was used. The peer-debriefing involved an external check of the research by a graduate colleague who was provided with the raw data and the researchers' interpretations and explanations to check them in terms of plausibility and accuracy.

Regarding the coding stages, in the first stage (open coding), consistent themes from the interviewees' comments were first identified and categorized. The total number of identified concepts from the raw data in terms of teachers' agency was different for each teacher. Reoccurring concepts discovered in the interviews were grouped under the same themes (for instance, teachers' life ideology, their perception towards themselves and their job, and their financial status) in such a way that they formed the initial conceptual categories. It is important to mention that the order of presentation of concepts and categories was haphazard and it was not intended to imply any priority or importance of the concepts.

In the second stage, (axial coding), the categories were reexamined and the main categories along with their subcategories were developed. After constantly reviewing the categories, three main categories which constitute to the emergent theory in this study were developed. They were: family background, society power, and motivation. These three main categories summarize the whole task of codifying, grouping, and categorization of data. In other words, the axial coding of the study depicts the categories that revolved round the main axis of agency concept.

In the final stage of coding (selective coding), based on Grounded Theory, the researchers reached the core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), i.e. having identified the themes and categories in open coding, and the subcategories and main categories in axial coding, a core category of the issues related to agency phenomenon was developed. Actually, the main categories were joined together by one core category; namely, social factors and environmental condition.

As for the dependability of data codification, inter-rater agreement was gained, i.e. some of the transcriptions were randomly selected and given to one of the colleagues with great experience in qualitative research to do the coding based on the coding rubric identified by the researchers. After he had coded the data, the results were compared to the researchers' results, using the formula, 'Reliability=No. of agreements/total number of agreements + disagreements*100' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.64). The reliability was found to be 85% for the analysis. So, the differences were discussed and the modified model was presented with themes, and various codes under each theme were specified.

Results

Based on data analysis, the participant's self-report of agency were divided into two stages of professional progress in which each stage, in turn, was subdivided into several causal factors: Learning (pre-teaching activities), teaching (during class activities), after teaching activities (class analysis stages), and finally their internal and external sub-divisional factors.

The reports demonstrated that a vast majority of teachers showed high agency in learning investment stage but varied agency in teaching engagement stage, as shown in their agentive

activities. The reports also revealed that their agentive choices were mediated by various personal and environmental factors.

Almost all participants (3/4) displayed strong agency in their learning to be better prepared for teaching the new material, and although in some contexts teacher leaning activity seemed negative, they displayed strong agency in autonomously facilitating their own professional progresses in appropriate ways. Especially, when they noticed a gap between their educational background knowledge and needed the target subject, they showed high amount of interest to come up with barriers by investing time for learning. Their ways of acquiring knowledge were different and self-determined. However, their prior experiences and future goals had mediated and guided them to make a choice. Only one of the participants whose major was not related to her university field felt obliged to attend formal and systematic training courses.

Discussion

In this section, Iranian teachers' perceptions of how they deal with the teaching difficulties and what the causal key factors are about their agency (agency resources) are first reported (Research question 1), and then, the ways agency directed them to their professional success are discussed.

Several types of activities and resources were listed by the teachers for developing their FL proficiency. These activities involved using the media, podcast, watching TV and movie clips in the FL, teacher magazines, journals, articles, books, taking trips to other countries, and sharing their experiences with colleagues. When discussing the activities, however, the differences among teachers for various purposes were clearly dissimilar. Thus, peer learning, colleagues (the comparison of self with colleague provoke the sense of competition and self-develop), metalinguistic knowledge, the need for updating knowledge, motivation, self-image, moral sense, and internal and external forces were among the factors affecting the agency of the teachers. Furthermore, based on the attitudes of the teachers, the concept of agency rooted in the personal, social, and their educational backgrounds. The efficiency of the resources was also   dissimilar for the participants; for example, in Excerpt 3, T2 admires the cohesive network of Iranian teachers who share knowledge, experiences, and make collaboration. In contrast, Excerpt 4 shows T 5's regret about the activities offered by the English section of the professional-development group. His attitudes were not along with his colleagues' interests, and he was left alone in the learning stage. All the self-developing activities were self-directed. In sum, the activities employed by the teachers for developing their proficiency were increasingly dependent on the social and material resources available to them.

Another finding of the study is that language teachers' learning underlies their' decision-making in the teaching process; it is instrumental in helping teachers to practice and understand what the basics of teaching processes require. In fact, the peaceful and open colleague relationship made it possible for the teachers to share their experiences openly without worrying about its personal consequences, just as T1 said *"when I   my personal experience with the colleagues even if the others oppose it, I don't take offense, and I don't take it personal. Such differences of opinions will never affect the friendly relations among us"e*This caused all teachers to feel great progress in acquiring knowledge and gaining the ability of lesson delivery and classroom management, she added *"we don't have specific place for our meetings, just during break time, while drinking tea, even other teachers not necessarily English teachers benefit each other's views in this way".* She also mentioned that *"this leads to much unity and solidarity among our school co-workers which is unbelievable and surprising for the colleagues of other schools"e* According to Excerpt 3 (During the meetings), you may stumble on different ideas

about carrying on the same lessono… *"Retelling your problem and others monitoring may help you find out the main causes of students' failures in answering the questions or meeting your expectations; you may improve your teaching by applying others' comments on your lessons, even if they are not English instructors. This kind of practice is most effective to improve your teaching"*. T1 says *"we try to keep an open mind for listening to what those around us have to say about us. We might actually learn something that may help us become a better teacher"*c

In short, through discussions, the teachers got insight about classroom activities, benefit from sharing, and subsequently became interested in exchanging ideas which increase their proficiency and self-awareness, and help them to find solutions for their problems. This is in line with Atai (2017) who believes that teachers who are more aware and better informed about their teaching are in a good position to adjust different aspects of their practice in that they know where they are professionally. Also, recent literature on agency suggests that in order to strengthen and enhance teachers' agency in problematic situations propose self-narration as an important factor for teacher agency. Recently Edwards (2005) has introduced the concept of relational agency which means the capability to line up one's thoughts and actions with those of others to interpret problems of practice.

Conclusions

The main objective of the present qualitative case study was to explore EFL teachers' attitudes about the concept of agency and the way they enact agency to facilitate the learning process. Thus, the required data were collected from the narrations and professional experiences of five Iranian English teachers. The analysis of the data, based on Grounded Theory Approach, showed that teachers' pre-teaching and during teaching processes have been made up of complex relationships among different resources, i.e. teachers' life ideology (their perception towards themselves and their job) and financial status. At the same time, the results revealed that teachers' personal experiences highly affect both their magnification of agency and their decision-making processes. It was further shown that agency was not stable, since social factors and environmental conditions played important roles in shaping it. In this respect, the results of the study are suggestive, but not generalizable. However, they help bring to the light some of the many ways Iranian teachers strategically go about tackling the issues impacting them. In fact, the results are 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 with the constraining factors similarly rooted in one's perceptions of how things unfold around the teacher and the world he or she inhabits and operates in. Accordingly, the participants' self-report of agency can be divided into two stages of professional progress in which each stage again can be subdivided into several causal factors: Learning (pre-teaching activities), and teaching (during class activities) and after teaching activities (class analysis) stages, and their internal and external sub-divisional factors. Actually, the findings of the study demonstrated that almost all of teachers showed not only high agency in learning investment stage, but also varied agency in teaching engagement stage, as shown in their agentive activities. They also indicated that teachers' agentive choices were mediated by various personal and environmental factors. Finally, the findings of the study have implications for teacher trainers as well as researchers who focus on the nature of agency and try to empower it among student-teachers.

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