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'I want to become an IELTS teacher': emotion labour and professional identity disillusionment in a novice Iranian public school EFL teacher

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ABSTRACT

Language teacher identity (LTI), and its essential component, teacher agency, are inextricably intertwined with emotion labour. This qualitative case study explored how the agency and LTI of an early-career Iranian female teacher of EFL (English as a foreign language) were affected by her engagement in emotion labour in two public schools. Data in the form of class observations and semi-structured interviews were collected, focusing on the emotional episodes of the participant's practice at her previous and current workplaces, and then analysed through grounded theory procedures. The findings revealed that while the favourable emotional atmosphere of the first school helped the novice teacher to be at ease with her LTI, growing emotion labour caused by the deep-seated contradictions in the second school eroded her sense of agency and made her give her current job affiliation a second thought. Implications and suggestions for further research are discussed.

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Emotion labour; Iranian public school EFL teacher; language teacher identity; agency; novice female teacher

Introduction

Teaching is a highly emotional profession in that teachers often reflect on how they feel about their practice and themselves as professionals (Gkonou and Miller 2020). Experiencing desired emotions boosts teachers' mental well-being and helps them construct desired identities (Wolff and De Costa 2017). Feeling undesired emotions, on the other hand, can render teaching quite a daunting experience, causing teachers great uncertainty in adopting and developing their desired identity (Song 2016). This normally happens when teachers perceive serious discrepancies between their professional preferences and the occasionally unreasonable expectations of their workplaces; the required negotiation or management of such tensions has been described as 'emotion labour' (Benesch 2017). Of the various factors leading to emotion labour on the part of language teachers, complying with the institutional demands and policies has been reported to be the main contributory one (e.g. Aminifard et al. 2023; Benesch 2018; Nazari and Molana 2022). In other words, feeling heavy demands being foisted upon them, language teachers find themselves engaged in emotion labour which could lead to LTI disruption (Askaribigdeli and Feryok 2024).

This fact has recently prompted scholars to recommend that institutions improve working conditions so that language teachers can operate as efficiently as possible in their workplace (see Benesch and Prior 2023). Despite this growing concern, the potential repercussions of emotion

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labour on the LTI of novice Iranian *public* school EFL teachers have remained underexplored compared to some studies conducted in the private sector (e.g. Aminifard et al. 2023; Nazari et al. 2023). Exploring this topic becomes even more intriguing as the English language teaching profession is overwhelmingly female in Iran. Specifically, the question of how teachers' emotion labour influences the enactment of their agency should enhance our understanding of this issue since agency is an integral aspect of identity construction (Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate 2016). Our research thus aims to address the following question: how does the emotion labour of a novice Iranian female public school EFL teacher affect her agency and LTI?

Theoretical framework

Engeström's (2015) activity theory and Gee's (2000) identity framework served as our theoretical foundation. Engeström's third-generation activity theory makes both inward and outward analyses of activity systems feasible. Moving inward, it explores issues like 'subjectivity, personal sense, emotion, embodiment, identity, and moral commitment' (Engeström 2015: xv-xvi); moving outward, it addresses interconnected activity systems since 'a single activity system is influenced by multiple other life events' (Lantolf and Thorne 2006: 225). The interconnection between the activity system of a school within which early-career teachers are operating and the activity system that they have envisioned and built throughout their teacher education programme, is a common example. Engeström and Sannino (2010) maintain that the object of the activity systems usually provokes contradiction, prompting individuals to take joint actions in order to push a historically new form of activity into emergence. Engeström (2001) calls this process 'expansive learning', resembling Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), in which individuals collectively come up with a solution to the double bind inherent in everyday actions.

In modern activity theory (Engeström 2015), the actions of individuals occur at the nexus of seven components. The *subject* is the individual whose agency is the focus of the analysis, and the *object* is where all actions are directed. The object is continuously transformed into an *outcome*, which can be shaped by different *mediating artifacts*. The *community* refers to a group of individuals who share the same object. Within each community, there is a *division of labour* that specifies the responsibilities of its members. Similarly, how things get done within a community is shaped by explicit and implicit *rules*.

The second concept supporting our theoretical underpinning, identity framework, recognises identity construction as a process mediated by discourse and practice (Gee 2000, 2008). Gee proposed distinguishing among four types of identity: Nature or *N-Identity* (a state given by birth), Institutional or *I-Identity* (a position authorised by institutions), Discursive or *D-Identity* (an individual trait constructed interactionally), and Affinity or *A-Identity*, which is achieved by 'allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices' (Gee 2000: 105). However, Gee does not see these identities as discrete categories and believes that a person might enact different identities in particular circumstances.

Since LTI is influenced by broad sociocultural factors as well as the dynamics of the school and classroom (Lee 2013), activity theory should provide more insight into the emotion labour that novice language teachers experience due to the contradictions that they perceive in the activity system of their schools. Gee's (2000) framework allows us to take a closer look at how language teachers navigate identity options against the backdrop of their emotion labour within their institutions.

Literature review

Emotion labour

Contrary to the biological view of emotions as innate traits (Wilson-Mendenhall et al. 2013), poststructuralists assert that emotions are discursively constructed (e.g. Prior 2019; Zembylas 2003a).

Zembylas (2003b) regards teachers' emotions not only as psychological dispositions, but also as social experiences that are constructed in their families, cultures, and workplaces. He also maintains that thinking of teachers as 'all-knowing' deprives them of experiencing genuine emotions and constructing unorthodox identities. This is reminiscent of Hochschild's (1983) study in which Delta Airlines flight attendants were expected to display kindness to passengers through both surface and deep acting. Hochschild (1983) found that the conflict between these 'feeling rules' and flight attendants' authentic selves caused them enormous emotional labour.

Benesch (2017) rejects Hochschild's dichotomisation of selves, which was assumed to be the same across all individuals, as it was later revealed that some flight attendants defied the mandated feeling rules. Distancing herself from the negativity associated with emotional labour, Benesch used the term '*emotion* labour' instead, highlighting it as a capacity that can prompt individuals to act for change in their workplace (Benesch 2018). Benesch (2018) defines emotion labour as resulting from any discrepancy experienced between institutional demands and teachers' professional preferences. She also views emotion labour as the 'inevitable result of unequal workplace power' (p. 64) which could trigger language teachers' agency (Benesch 2018) and affect their professional identity development (Song 2021).

Emotion labour and teacher identity

Central to the concept of emotion labour is teachers' struggle to reconcile different competing selves within themselves to meet the demands of their profession (Loh and Liew 2016). Ongoing research reflects a burgeoning interest in exploring how emotion labour affects LTI construction (e.g. Aminifard et al. 2023; Kałdonek-Crnjaković and Czopek 2023; Nazari and Karimpour 2022; Song 2016, 2021).

Song (2016) explored how the anxiety that Korean EFL teachers experienced, owing to projecting the all-knowing impression prescribed by their school, adversely affected their treatment of fluent students who had just returned from the US. Liu and Xu (2011), though not specifically focusing on emotion labour, showed how a Chinese novice EFL teacher had to negotiate her professional identity to survive a reform policy after quitting the department due to her initial frustration with the mandated curriculum. Benesch (2020) interviewed fifteen ESL instructors to explore their opinions about a high-stakes reading and writing test which immigrant students were required to take. Almost all respondents reported that the so-called literacy test projected a 'dubious gatekeeper' (p. 8) image of them rather than that of reliable second language instructors. In Nazari and Karimpour (2022), Iranian EFL teachers collectively harnessed the potential of their emotion labour to resist a syllabus mandated by their institutes. In a recent study, Kałdonek-Crnjaković and Czopek (2023) studied the emotion labour of two Ukrainian EFL teachers who arrived in Poland two weeks after Russia had invaded Ukraine. The authors found that keeping a happy face in times of conflict to establish interpersonal peace in class caused emotion labour on the part of the participants and took its toll on their LTI.

There has recently been considerable interest in novice LTI (e.g. Golombek and Doran 2014; Lemarchand-Chauvin 2023; Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2022; Wolff and De Costa 2017), particularly highlighting the link between teachers' perceived emotion labour and their LTI construction (e.g. Aminifard et al. 2023; Nazari et al. 2023; Song 2021). A cogent justification for this new avenue of research is that the identity transition from graduate student to language instructor is not normally a smooth one (Kanno and Stuart 2011). For example, Song (2021) found that Brianna, an American preservice teacher, went through feelings of loss and dissatisfaction due to perceiving a substantial gap between her pedagogical knowledge and the realities of English language teaching at her school. Aminifard et al. (2023) also demonstrated a link between unresolved emotion labour and professional identity dilemmas. Their participant, an early-career private language institute teacher, became ambivalent about staying in the job, owing to her institute's excessively profit-driven policies. Despite a good number of studies on the interplay between emotion labour and LTI in the private sector and at the tertiary level, there is still a dearth of research on this phenomenon in

the public sector, particularly in the Iranian EFL context where particular institutional rules and ideologies might have significant impacts on language teachers' identity construction. These impacts could be even greater for language teachers who are at the early stages of their career.

Methodology

Research context and participant

In Iran, English language courses are offered at public high schools, from grades 7 (13 years old) to 12 (18 years old). The Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for developing the English textbooks that are used in those courses. Although the textbooks have allegedly been revised in line with the communicative approach, they still reflect high-stakes test content, which prioritises language usage over use (Riazi 2005). Importantly, there have been growing governmental efforts in recent years to expunge any traces of the sociocultural aspects of the English language (Borjian 2013); thus, the textbooks conspicuously represent pro-government ideologies (Eslamdoost et al. 2019). Prior to recruitment, all early-career EFL teachers must pass an interview that mostly revolves around their religious and political viewpoints. An early-career EFL teacher is paid roughly 60000000 IRR (equivalent to 143 USD) per month. A public all-girls school in a small southwest town was selected for the purpose of this study because we hypothesised that the above-mentioned issues could precipitate emotion labour on the part of our novice participant, Malihe (pseudonym), in this context, revealing a clear picture of her agency and LTI.

Malihe received her Bachelor of Arts (BA) in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in 2014, and then in 2016, she obtained an MA in the same major. A year after graduation, she was employed as a full-time high school teacher by the MoE. The criterion for selecting Malihe for this study dates back to a workshop for public school English teachers in 2018, which the first author (henceforth *I* and *me*) also attended. During the session, Malihe showed great enthusiasm for her job and volunteered most of the answers to the teacher trainer's questions. It occurred to me that since Malihe was a highly motivated novice teacher, studying her agency and LTI against the backdrop of her emotional experiences in her teaching context would contribute to the scholarship on the development of novice language teacher identity. She initially refused to participate in the study, saying, 'I feel awkward at my school if my class is observed by a male researcher'. However, when I explained the research objective, she found it very relevant and thus welcomed the idea, and agreed to take part.

Data collection

Data were collected through class observations (CO) and semi-structured interviews (I). Data collection started immediately after COVID-19 restrictions were eased in Iran. The data were collected during a four-month period from March 2022 to June 2022. There were 12 interviews and eight class observations.

Class observation

Data collection began with classroom observations. Since observing a class as by a male researcher in an all-girls school was a challenge, especially in a small town in southwest Iran, I wanted Malihe to ask for the appropriate permissions. Fortunately, I was granted permission to observe and record Malihe's classes. I selected one of Malihe's 12th-grade classes for observation mainly because they were senior students who, owing to their imminent university entrance exam (UEE), invested more time in English. It was also assumed that they might pose more challenges for Malihe in class, thus potentially leading to her experiencing a wider range of emotions. COs served two purposes: (1) to generate further questions to be discussed in the interviews, and (2) to record how Malihe's perspectives of her agency and LTI were reflected in her practice.

Throughout COs, I sat inconspicuously at the back of the class to avoid causing distraction. I remained vigilant in recording potential emotion-labour incidents so that I could vividly review those critical moments in the follow-up interviews and when analysing the data (Charmaz 2006). For instance, I attempted to capture moments in which Malihe engaged in grammatical explanations in her and the students' first language (Farsi), fielding students' questions with anxiety, or reading a passage strongly reflecting pro-government ideologies. Malihe found the idea of filming her teaching moments interesting and hence bringing the filmed episodes to her attention during the interviews prompted her to share useful information.

Semi-structured interviews

We adopted an active interviewing perspective (Holstein and Gubrium 2003) based on the principle that meaning is actively co-constructed between the interviewer and interviewee. Interview questions primarily stemmed from class observations and the related literature. During the interviews, data were collected about Malihe's journey of becoming an EFL teacher, her agency, and LTI at her workplace as triggered by a range of emotions. For instance, by asking her if her desire to become an EFL teacher aligned with her current feelings, we prompted her to elaborate on the potential contradictions contributing to her emotion labour in her school – and whether and how she enacted her agency in reaction to episodes of emotion labour. Moreover, by asking whether she was satisfied with her job, we sought information about the extent to which she was comfortable with her professional identity.

Twelve semi-structured retrospective and concurrent interviews were conducted mainly through WhatsApp as I did not want to put Malihe in an awkward situation by interviewing her at her school (see Rolland et al. 2020). I was responsible for conducting the interviews. There was no specific time frame for the interviews. Therefore, whenever a question occurred to me while consulting my observation field notes, I immediately asked Malihe for clarification. She replied mostly through voice messages. The preference for the language of the interviews was left to Malihe to help the interviews go as smoothly as possible (Barkhuizen et al. 2014). After reaching data saturation, I began transcribing and then translating the answers into English. I did my best, through member-checking, to preserve Malihe' exact thoughts and opinions while translating her interview responses.

Data analysis

The focus of the analysis is on Malihe's LTI in her second school, where she experienced great emotion labour. We used grounded theory procedures (Charmaz 2006) for coding the data. The key feature of grounded theory is that it tries to avoid imposing preconceived notions on the data. I continued interviewing Malihe until I felt I had reached data saturation. I was responsible for both open and focused coding, while the other co-authors proofread the manuscript. Two examples from the interviews illustrate the coding procedure. In Interview 2, for instance, 'I was happy in my school', was subsumed under *I-Identity*. In Interview 5, 'I learned that even wearing foreign clothes is part of the target language culture, but it is disappointing that the school is against it' was interpreted as *unfavorable working conditions*. To ensure the trustworthiness of the coded data and findings, member checking was achieved by soliciting Malihe's feedback at both descriptive and interpretive levels, as suggested in the literature (Riazi 2016).

Findings

In the next two subsections, we first narrate the story of Malihe's teaching career in chronological order. Then, the findings are discussed through the lens of the theoretical frameworks outlined above.

Malihe in her first school

Malihe's desire to become a teacher came from her older sister, who was an English language teacher. She said that when she saw how much her sister was respected by her students, she decided she wanted to become a teacher of English too. In addition, the country's 'mass unemployment' prompted her to find a job right after graduation. She recalled with joy: 'getting a job was my main priority in this terrible economy. They needed a female teacher for public high school. It was very competitive, but I made it' (I1). Malihe felt nostalgic recalling a short practicum offered by the MoE before the commencement of the academic year in which she 'aced all the tests' (I1). She was eagerly waiting for the classes to start 'to transfer my knowledge to students and establish rapport with them' (I1).

In the first year of her career, Malihe was assigned to 'the best female high school in the town' (I2). She was the only teacher with an MA in TEFL and was recognised by her colleagues as 'a young lady with fresh knowledge' (I2). Thus, the positive atmosphere within the school and the recognition of Malihe's English language knowledge by the principal and her fellow teachers motivated her to establish close relationships with them. As she said, 'I was happy in my school. There was a team spirit'. (I2).

Although the passages in the textbooks were 'dull' and 'full of pro-government viewpoints' (I3), the rapport she built with the students helped her to 'sarcastically discuss those ideologies with students and hence enjoy the class'. (I3) She explained:

> Some passages are ridiculous and far from reality. There is a text titled 'Iran: A True Paradise', which I feel frustrated about whenever I teach it because I don't believe in the content. Even the students start chuckling when I'm teaching it. The books are too biased. (I3)

Malihe happily recalled: 'I enjoyed my authority in the school. No one dictated how to teach. Most of the students had attended an English institute, so we could discuss the controversial topics that arose in the lessons' (I4).

Malihe in her second school

Malihe's job satisfaction lasted only two years because she was then assigned to a new school. Since Malihe was an early-career teacher, she lacked power over the selection of her workplace. At her new school, from the very beginning, a reprimand by the school principal about Malihe's hijab and her make-up made her 'frustrated and anxious'. The principal's 'unkind reprimand' disturbed Malihe's concentration during teaching. She said, 'my clothes are not the principal's business. I just wanted to look pretty in my class'. (I5) Before long, the principal's second warning about Malihe's hijab further ignited her frustration – this time there had allegedly been 'a confidential report from the security department of the local Education Office (EO)' (I5).

Describing the principal as 'narrow-minded', Malihe lamented, 'I learned in my studies that wearing foreign clothes is part of the target language culture, but it is disappointing that the school is against it' (I5). She confessed, 'I had to comply with the school's rules; otherwise, they'd spread gossip about me and create problems for my job' (I5). The incident caused Malihe 'to detest the principal on sight'. She recalled happily: 'Luckily, I didn't see her much because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the online classes' (I5).

Malihe also felt 'exhausted' by some parents who pestered her to 'not assign their children too much homework, yet expecting good grades' (I6). She added, 'I think, nowadays, the schools try hard to please students and their parents. This excessive client-oriented policy of schools has caused my motivation to decline in recent years' (I6).That was just 'a tip of the iceberg' according to Malihe. To her disappointment, the school principal also strongly disapproved of the authentic materials that Malihe was sharing with the students during the COVID-19 quarantine period. She described the incident as follows:

> Last year, during the pandemic, I sometimes shared YouTube clips with students so that they would have enough exposure to English due to the inefficient online teaching platform provided by the MoE. But I was told off by the principal that these clips are not culturally appropriate and students' parents will complain because their kids are taking the UEE this year and they should study just their textbooks. (I7)

Disappointed with the principal's 'conservative attitude', Malihe tried to convince her that these clips were both 'innocuous and helpful' and she 'just liked to teach creatively,' but it was 'like water off the duck's back with the principal' (I7). Describing her as 'very traditional and overbearing', Malihe added that she felt that the principal was 'encroaching on my authority'. She vehemently added that the principal 'had no right to tell her what and how to teach' (I7). However, Malihe ultimately gave up sending out YouTube clips and ended up 'teaching the textbook based on the rules of the school' (I7).

When pandemic restrictions were partially lifted, and Malihe was attending the school in person, her colleagues' pessimistic views about the future of teaching made her feel like 'a fish out of water' at the school. Yet, at the same time, she identified with them:

> When my colleagues saw me spending too much time and energy teaching even in my break time, they told me 'No one is going to appreciate you in the EO, and you'd get tired soon.' At first, I disagreed with them, but then I understood that they were quite right. (I8)

Although her colleagues' 'skipping online classes during the pandemic' (I9) had already caused Malihe to avoid their community for the sake of her 'mental wellbeing', their attitude about 'the bleak future of teaching' turned out to be true when a video of an experienced teacher who was being beaten and handcuffed by pro-government security forces – due to Iranian teachers' nationwide protest for a salary increase – went viral. One evening when I saw that Malihe had shared that saddening video as her WhatsApp status with the caption 'What can I do for you? 😔', I immediately solicited her opinion about the incident. Recalling the scene with deep sadness, she added, 'why should I work more than I get paid when they treat teachers so cruelly?' (I9).

In a post-class observation interview (I10), Malihe was shown a short clip in which she devoted a large proportion of the class time to grammatical explanations in the students' L1. When asked, 'How do you feel when you engage in excessive grammar explanation in Farsi?', she replied, 'I am really fed up with teaching grammar in L1, but I have to because my class is not homogeneous'. (I10). Finding herself in a tug-of-war between teaching to the UEE test and teaching based on the communicative approach, she put the blame on the test developers:

> The UEE lacks items on listening, speaking, and writing skills. I sometimes feel puzzled about how to teach: teaching to the test or the communicative approach! Many students pass the test without being able to produce even simple English sentences. Consequently, I have to use Farsi to make myself understood, which makes me feel guilty. (I10)

Malihe also expressed her boredom with teaching 'ideologically-laden conversations and listening tasks' (I10), adding that 'the target language culture is seriously missing in the textbook' (I10). She explained:

> In my new school, I cannot supplement the textbook with authentic materials. I do not dare to question the ideologies within the textbook either … because most of the students come from religious families, so I fear that they might report me to the principal or the security department of the EO. (I10)

Regretting 'a wealth of pedagogical knowledge' that she had accumulated throughout her studies which turned out to be 'of little use in the new school', and missing the 'favorable atmosphere' of her previous school, made Malihe feel that teaching in the EO had really 'drained' her (I11). She added, 'repeating the dull content of the same textbook during the week and at the same time having to follow school obligations for a low salary has greatly decreased my motivation' (I11). Then she concluded, 'All the techniques that I learned throughout my studies are not applicable in high school with its heterogeneous and crowded classes'. (I11)

Interestingly enough, she had mixed feelings about her job. Emphasising in triumph that she had taken the right path by 'prioritising finding employment over applying for a Ph.D.', Malihe said that some of her friends were doctoral students, yet still teaching at private language institutes for low pay. Having experienced a rollercoaster of emotions, Malihe explicitly prioritised her (mental) well-being over professional development in the MoE:

> There's no future in being a teacher in the MoE. At best, they'd assign me to a good school. You may think I'm not a good teacher because I just talk about money. But our salary isn't worth our demanding job. I have been employed since 2017, but I can't afford to buy a car. I won't do a Ph.D. either. How is it going to benefit me? It is of little value in the MoE. I just want to follow my life interests. I also want to become an IELTS teacher. I've recently followed some IELTS trainers on Instagram to learn about the test. I'd like to be known more as an IELTS teacher rather than a high school teacher and make good money. (I11)

Discussion

We aimed to explore how the emotion labour of a novice EFL teacher affects her agency and LTI. As revealed above, Malihe's agency and LTI were considerably affected by a whirlwind of emotions that she experienced in two schools, causing her sense of her professional identity to oscillate from a calling to an imposition. In the next two sections, we discuss Malihe's narrative based on the theoretical frameworks of the study and also the related literature on language teacher emotion labour, agency, and identity.

Favourable activity system and enacting desired LTI

Gee (2000) believes that people sometimes try hard to be recognised in the way that they desire – i.e. to achieve a desired D-Identity. However, Malihe did not experience a challenge to do so. The immediate recognition of Malihe's linguistic capital in the community of her first school's activity system, as 'a young lady with fresh knowledge', encouraged her to enact an I-Identity as a calling (Gee 2000). Building on this favourable ascribed D-Identity, she also established rapport with her fellow teachers that, in turn, helped her forge an A-Identity at the school, as she acknowledged: 'There was a team spirit.'

Importantly, the tool of the activity system – i.e. the ideologically-laden textbook – could have inflicted enormous emotion labour on Malihe. However, thanks to the rapport she had established with the students and capitalising on their shared N-Identity as Iranians dissatisfied with the country's status quo, she turned an otherwise 'dull' content into an enjoyable communicative activity. In other words, the comfortable atmosphere of her class served Malihe an affordance to nip in the bud the potential emotion labour that could have disrupted her LTI.

Mounting contradictions and LTI disillusionment

However, the unresolved emotion labour stemming from the contradictions between Malihe' beliefs and the rules governing the second school's activity system rendered her I-Identity as 'an imposition' (Gee 2000: 103). In other words, she simply followed the rules of the activity system to stay in the job. As shown in Figure 1, two core factors, namely unfavourable working conditions and non -standard teaching of English, accounted for the main sources of emotion labour on the part of Malihe in her second school. Among the factors which had the most crippling effect on her LTI were the school's strict dress code, the principal's meddling in her teaching, the low salary, and having to teach uninteresting materials.

With schools in lockdown, Malihe experienced even further emotion labour coming from other nodes of the activity system, the most salient of which was the principal's disapproval of the authentic materials that she shared with the students. The object of the school's activity system conflicted with Malihe's desire to engage in creative teaching. Lantolf and Thorne (2006: 223) argue that the

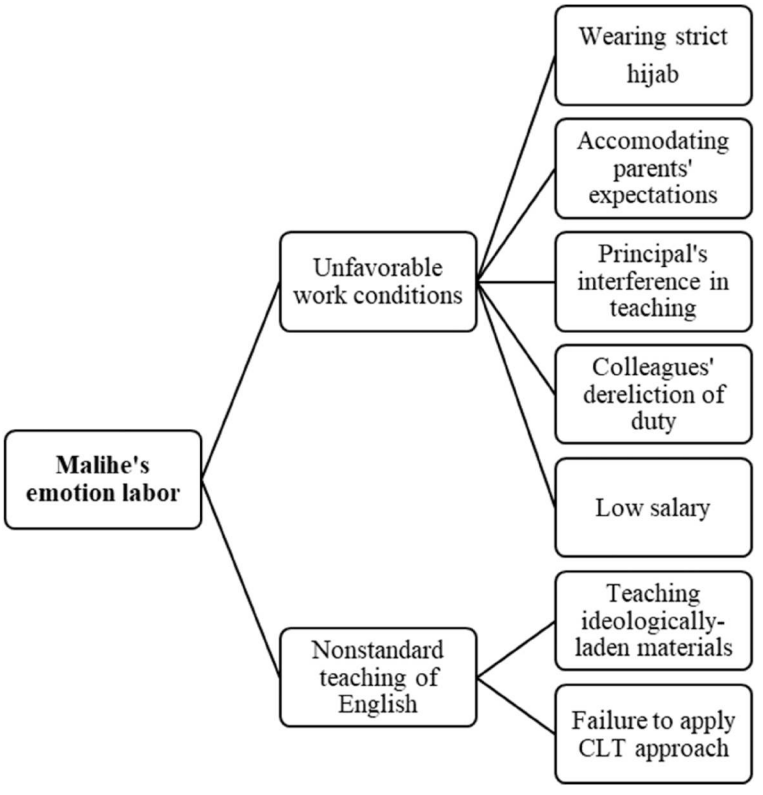

Figure 1. Factors contributing to Malihe's emotion labour in her second school.

object is 'a nexus of power and resistance'; thus, unfavourable policies can potentially provoke teachers' objection. However, Malihe surrendered when her justifications for the benefits of authentic YouTube clips turned out to be futile at the first attempt. This is different from previous studies in which teachers agentively acted on their emotion labour to ameliorate institutional policies (e.g. Benesch 2018; Nazari and Karimpour 2022). Malihe's dwindling agency partly parallels the futile agentive attempts of Farzaneh, a novice Iranian EFL teacher in Aminifard et al. (2023), who decided to quit her institute when finding herself in high emotion labour caused by the institute's profit-seeking policy at the expense of implementing sound teaching principles. Gao (2017) argues that with the commercialisation of ELT, parents consider themselves eligible to interfere with teachers' practice. This is relevant to Malihe's case, as she reported that her motivation had declined due to 'the client-centeredness' of the school. As seen in the narrative, parents' unreasonable expectations, fuelled by the principal's green light, came out as another source of emotion labour for Malihe.

The community of the second school's activity system, once again, caused Malihe emotion labour. A gloomy description of the teaching profession by her colleagues and their dereliction of duties during the pandemic caused Malihe to remain aloof from their community, hence with scant motivation to construct an A-Identity. This was similar to the case of Brianna, a novice teacher in Song (2021) who experienced high emotion labour owing to her colleagues' bad treatment of the students. In Malihe's case, disturbing footage of a veteran teacher violently treated by the security forces for protesting about Iranian teachers' financial hardship subsequently made her hesitate to invest further in her job, hence her decision to prioritise her mental well-being. This partly mirrors the case of Valerie in Loh and Liew (2016), who lowered her teaching standards to maintain her mental and physical well-being after understanding that the school leadership did not appreciate

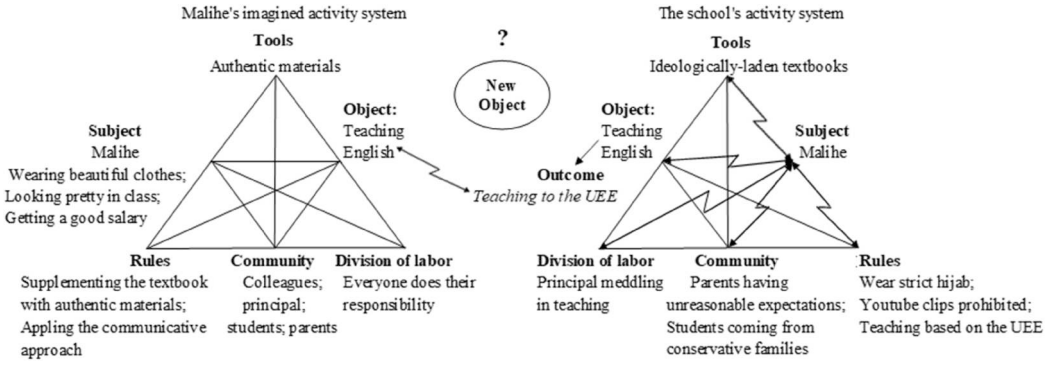

Figure 2. Unresolved contradictions in the school's activity system and Malihe's persistent emotion labour.

her efforts. Having found that her desired professional identity was disrupted by the MoE, Malihe became extremely reluctant to apply for a Ph.D. to further it.

Despite serious contradictions in the second school's activity system, shown by zig-zag arrows in Figure 2, there was little sign of any concerted action by Malihe and the principal to resolve them. The failure to collectively resolve the contradictions stopped Malihe and the principal from coming up with a new object (depicted by a question mark in Figure 2) – perhaps one that would have allowed Malihe to teach creatively, applying the communicative approach and, at the same time, prepare students for the UEE. In this regard, Malihe's case is in sharp contrast to Mona, a novice Iranian EFL teacher in Feryok and Askaribigdeli (2019), who managed to resolve the contradictions in her institute and establish a strong A-Identity thanks to the emotional and pedagogical scaffolding provided by her manager. In contrast, Malihe's decision to enrich her personal identity was reminiscent of Puja in Wolff and De Costa (2017) and Hannah, an early-career teacher in Sulis et al. (2023), who gave up putting all their eggs in the proverbial professional basket and decided to boost their own well-being instead.

To sum up, Malihe's surrender to her emotion labour, and the principal's inflexible attitudes, ruled out the occurrence of any expansive learning, leading to her navigation of other identity sources such as following IELTS trainers on Instagram in order to be recognised more as an IELTS instructor and also acquire more economic capital. This supports Darvin and Norton's (2015) opinion that individuals invest in a language for different reasons, among which is seeking financial security.

Conclusion

This study explored how a novice Iranian EFL teacher's engagement in emotion labour affected her agency and LTI. We found that the emotional landscape of the participant's teaching contexts considerably affected her agency enactment and LTI. Thanks to the favourable emotional ambiance of her first school, Malihe managed to exercise her agency quite effortlessly and felt satisfied with her LTI. However, with her relocation, her agency and LTI were disrupted due to experiencing emotion labour emanating from serious contradictions that she perceived in the activity system of the new school.

A number of implications can be drawn from this study. First, Malihe's failure to deal with her emotion labour caused by contradictions in the second school confirms the fact that resolving the contradictions requires collective agency (Engeström and Sannino 2010). However, conflicting evidence showing novice teachers surmounting the obstacles in their school through subtle use of the available affordance also exists (see Feryok 2012). To do so, they first need to receive appropriate teacher preparation on emotional literacy (Benesch 2020) to become capable of regulating their undesired emotions. Therefore, it is suggested that teacher education programmes explore

how to equip novice teachers like Malihe with emotion regulation strategies to enhance their ability to navigate workplace obstacles successfully. Second, the low salary proved to be a contributory source of emotion labour for Malihe. The Iranian MoE could preserve novice teachers' motivation by increasing their payment to help them establish strong I– and A-Identities. Third, as ideologically-laden teaching materials turned out to intensify Malihe's emotion labour, education authorities such as MoE need to consider how their textbooks can minimise potential identity disillusionment on the part of the early-career teachers.

This study offered only a snapshot of Malihe's LTI as influenced by her emotional experiences. More longitudinal research is needed to delve into the interplay of emotion labour, agency, and novice LTI construction, especially in the context of Iranian ELT. An interesting line of inquiry could be which emotion regulation strategies can afford teachers more agency over their emotion labour – as we can argue that emotional literacy and intelligence are prerequisites to successful enactment of agency. Prospective researchers could also investigate how Iranian public school EFL teachers navigate their identity options – with the English language recently fading into oblivion following the MoE's decision to remove it from the UEE. Further, keeping in mind that the sombre dress code enforced at the second school inflicted emotion labour on Malihe, future research could explore this sensitive issue of how strict appearance rules affect the LTI of Iranian female (EFL) teachers.

Finally, a major limitation of this study was the principal's intentional interruption of my post-class interactions with the participant. Malihe later revealed that being observed and interviewed by a male researcher was not a common sight at her school. She even confessed that after the first observation session, her colleagues were staring unpleasantly at her in the staff room, insinuating that we were in a relationship. To sum up, I might have obtained richer data about Malihe's emotion labour and her LTI at the research site if the school dynamics had allowed less restricted access.

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