Being and remaining a teacher: exploring language teacher agency in a neo-nationalist context

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore how two Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers exercise agency within a neo-nationalist educational context that imposes ideological and cultural constraints on English language instruction. Drawing on the Douglas Fir Group's (DFG) transdisciplinary framework and positioning theory, the paper investigates how teachers navigate macro- and meso-level policies while enacting agentive practices in their classrooms. By analyzing narratives across three stages of their professional journeys, the study highlights how educators negotiate identity, resist restrictive policies and promote pedagogical autonomy.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative case study employs a narrative inquiry approach, using "restorying cycles" to collect data from two Iranian EFL teachers across three key stages: before, during and after their Master's in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages program. Data sources include reflective journals and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Analysis was guided by positioning theory and the DFG transdisciplinary framework, allowing for a multi-level examination of teacher agency within sociopolitical constraints. Open coding and constant comparative methods were used to identify emergent themes. Member checking and peer examination ensured trustworthiness and credibility throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Findings – Findings reveal two distinct forms of agency: critical agency, involving reflective resistance to dominant policies and pragmatic agency, focused on adapting pedagogy within constraints. Both teachers navigated neo-nationalist and institutional pressures by prioritizing student well-being, linguistic growth and sociocultural awareness. While one teacher exercised broader sociopolitical critique, the other focused on pedagogical flexibility and learner-centered strategies. The study shows that language teacher agency (LTAG) is shaped by policy environments, personal convictions and institutional cultures. Teacher education played a pivotal role in fostering awareness and agency, enabling participants to respond to ideological constraints with professionalism, care and context-sensitive judgment.

Originality/value – This study offers a rare longitudinal perspective on LTAG in a neo-nationalist context, highlighting how sociopolitical constraints shape professional identity and classroom practice. Combining the DFG transdisciplinary framework with positioning theory advances a multi-level understanding of agency as both personal and political. Restorying cycles provide a nuanced account of teacher development over time. This work contributes original insights into how EFL teachers in restrictive environments enact agency, resist ideological control, and foster learner growth, offering valuable implications for teacher education, policy and critical pedagogy in global English language teaching contexts.

Keywords English as a foreign language, Language teacher agency, Neo-nationalist context

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Second language (L2) education has, although much tardily, outgrown the reproduction approach to education and the myopic perspective that teaching and learning a language is a neutral and apolitical activity (Canagarajah, 2005; DFG, 2016). Described as an "interested activity" (Canagarajah, 2008, p. 224), L2 teaching and, more specifically, English language

teaching (ELT) is an act of power assertion within the target communities of practice. Thus, any form of knowledge produced via such process can also be regarded as *interested* since education is "fundamentally political" – that is, education is "constantly involved in the (re) production of social and cultural inequalities (both within and between nations), and of particular forms of culture and knowledge" (Pennycook, 1989, pp. 590–591). Inspired by such realizations, the profession has come to recognize that any kind of educational system, and by extension, any L2 class, mirrors the social, cultural, and political structure(s) and discourse(s) where it functions (DFG, 2016). As such, language teaching has, in a sense, become more socially involved and responsive, and more politically aware in the way it addresses curricular policies and classroom happenings.

Thus, ongoing discussions in the field have begun to address aspects of criticality and underlying ideologies, such as neoliberalism and neo-nationalism, implicitly and/or explicitly represented in a given L2 education discourse (Motha, 2020; Windle and de Araujo Rosa, 2023). While neo-nationalism is often framed as a counterforce to globalization and linguistic imperialism, its influence on ELT is paradoxical. On the one hand, it advocates for protecting local languages and identities; on the other, it reinforces exclusionary practices through policy constraints, curriculum reform, and teacher monitoring. This contradiction puts English teachers in ideologically charged positions where they must navigate cultural ambivalence, exercise discretion, and often self-censor, particularly when expected to teach about or through a language viewed as politically problematic.

As an integral force in moving the wheels of ELT, language teachers and language teacher educators across the globe have been the focus of numerous studies exploring the ways they personally and professionally develop their identities (Yazan *et al*., 2023a), develop and practice their pedagogical knowledge (Moradkhani and Mansouri, 2023), and position themselves within the broader sociocultural and political contexts (Windle and de Araujo Rosa, 2023) to name a few. These studies emphasize that language teaching involves more than knowledge transfer; it is a socially, emotionally, and politically situated practice shaped by personal, institutional, and ideological forces.

As teachers go through such a process, they have to make choices and "act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (Rogers and Wetzel, 2013, p. 63) as they "engage in innovative teaching practices, adapt themselves to changing situations, meet expectations and requirement in their work environment and implement policies" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019, p. 1). In other words, by making decisions on aspects of their practices, teachers continuously put their agency to work. Central to understanding the way teachers enact their agency within their situated educational context is exploring how they view the effect of policies in their day-to-day practices as well as their actions in moving along or resisting those policies. Additionally, since language and languaging are, in essence, social actions (Kayi-Aydar, 2019), anyone involved in the process is also a social actor. Thus, with this aim, the current study, guided by the research question: *How do two Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers exercise agency while navigating contextual constraints within and beyond their classrooms?,* explores the ways two EFL teachers in Iran navigate through their teaching practices in a context filled with contextual constraints.

Theoretical framework
In this study, we underscore the dynamic and discursive turn of research on language teacher agency (LTAG) as supported and explicated in various theoretical frameworks, and we strive to explore it via combining two major existing conceptualizations in the literature: The DFG's transdisciplinary framework (DFG, 2016) and positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990). DFG (2016), initially proposed by the DFG team and elaborated upon by Hall (2019), was developed to meet the challenges of the shifting real-world issues in the L2 field, recognizing the ecological amalgamation of factors, elements, and players actively affecting L2 education. Utilizing the DFG's framework (2016) as one aspect of our theoretical conceptualization, we focus on the multi-level examination of ideological structures.

Specifically, the study investigates how English language teachers navigate and respond to neo-nationalist policies and rhetoric within and beyond their classrooms. Additionally, it delves into the contextual dynamics of how these policies are perceived, adopted, and implemented in language use within educational contexts. Incorporating DFG's transdisciplinary framework also sheds light on the contextualized interactions between neo-nationalism and English language education. It seeks to explore how the resurgence of neo-nationalism influences the teaching and learning of English, considering the complex dynamics between official policies and cultural ambivalence. Furthermore, the study considers the broader implications of neo-nationalism within the globalized landscape, particularly the political connotations associated with ELT in the specific context of Iran.

Additionally, we employ positioning theory, introduced in the seminal work of Davies and Harré (1990), which posits that the concept of *positioning* facilitates the exploration and focus of encounters and social interactions. In this theory, position (and positioning) is viewed as "the appropriate expression with which to talk about the discursive production of a diversity of selves" (Davies and Harré, 1990, p. 47), challenging the perceived static or fixed nature of roles in society and, by extension, of identity. As a social constructionist approach rooted in social psychology, positioning theory posits that individuals utilize language and discourse to situate both themselves and others (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010). This act of situating, known as positioning, entails invoking a specific persona or identity through verbal communication. The process of positioning is dynamic, as individuals continually shape and reshape themselves through their participation in various discursive practices (Davies and Harré, 1990).

In line with St. Pierre's (2011) notion of *thinking with theory*, we do not simply use positioning theory as an after-the-fact analytical lens. Rather, it informs the entire research arc, from the design of our restorying cycles to how we attend to moments of subject positioning, resistance, and realignment within the participants' narratives. The theory guides how we pose interview questions, interpret micro-level discourse moves, and make sense of teacher identity as a continuously negotiated process embedded in power-laden interactions. In this way, positioning theory serves as conceptual scaffolding and as an active co-participant in meaning-making. Further, it provides a lens to explore how individuals, in our case, two female Iranian EFL teachers, position themselves and others within their contexts. It also allows us to explore the perceived rights, duties, and obligations assigned and distributed to each participant either by themselves or others. From this purview, we employ positioning theory in the analysis of data at the micro-level by focusing on social action and on the individual (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). In particular, through positioning theory, we can best explore how teachers assume, negotiate, and resist particular roles (Morita-Mullaney *et al.*, 2023), while simultaneously exercising agency in their contexts. Figure 1 shows a visual representation of this theoretical framework.

The study
The study reported in this article is part of a larger longitudinal qualitative study investigating personal and professional identity construction among a group of Iranian EFL teachers who transitioned from teacher education programs to full-time teaching careers. Guided by the research question, data were collected from two female participants with a focus on how they exercised agency in their teaching practices. Both teachers were part of a cohort of 12 student teachers who started their Master's in Teaching English to Speakers of other languages (MATESOL) in September 2018 and completed it in the summer of 2021. The principal investigator of the study kept contact with them and continued collecting data from the participants who were willing to be part of the study. At the end of the teacher education program, four of the participants remained in the study, and the rest discontinued their collaboration due to various reasons, including opting out of a teaching career, transitioning to a new field of study, migration, and career change. Out of the four remaining participants, two EFL teachers were selected through purposeful sampling.
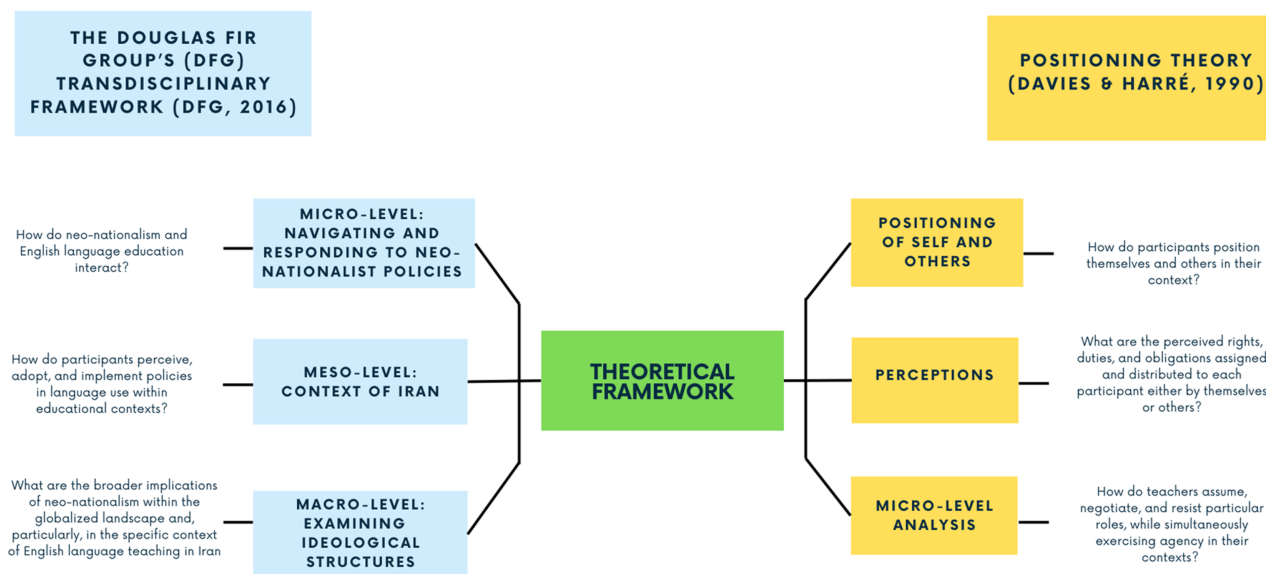
Figure 1. Theoretical framework. Source: Figure created by the authors using Canva

The two participants of this study, "Mina" and "Mahsa," were selected based on several criteria, including years of teaching experience, education level, teacher education programs, type of classes the participants taught, and their specific educational setting. The other two participants opted out due to shifting to private tutoring and teaching for international tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Due to the focus of this study on teachers teaching in K-12 settings, we only report on the data collected from the two teachers who met these criteria along with earlier mentioned ones. Both teachers, Mina and Mahsa, had taught at the elementary level as well as private language schools. Both teachers started their teaching careers before enrolling in the MATESOL program and continued doing so after graduation. At the time of data collection for the current study, Mina had been maintaining a full-time teaching career in a private elementary school and a private English language institute for seven years. Similarly, at the time of data collection for this study, Mahsa had been working full-time at a middle school for three years.

Data collection and analysis

We adopted a narrative inquiry approach in collecting and analyzing data from the two focal participants. As one form of qualitative methodology, narrative inquiry has been extensively used as a theoretical, methodological, and analytical approach in researching educational phenomena in various contexts (Barkhuizen, 2016). Narratives are, in fact, the stories of people's lived experiences that provide "a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17). As an integral part of every narrative inquiry approach, stories enable people to understand their lived experiences and how they make meaning out of them. These stories would act as sources through which individuals not only can construct and claim their identities and situate themselves in various positions in their stories, but also they can give voices to people whose stories are told and heard and empower them as they are active participants in the process of research studies.

Looking at data as stories built upon each other and acknowledging the difficulty in setting clear boundaries where stories start and end, we applied the "restorying cycles" (RC) approach (Liu and Xu, 2013, p. 184; St. Pierre, 2011) to collect data from the two participants in three separate time frames: (1) at the beginning of their MATESOL program and prior enrolling in teacher education courses, (2) end of their two-year MATESOL program, and (3) two years later once both participants had taught in the K-12 school system in Iran. Each RC started by asking participants to write in a journal about and reflect on the critical moments they experienced within and beyond their teacher education program and their classroom teaching practices. They also had the opportunity to send their reflections to the first author and seek feedback on turning them into a grand narrative. Each RC cycle ended with a semi-structured interview with each participant to have deeper conversations about the stories they wrote in their journals. On average, each interview lasted around 90 min, guided by questions extracted from their written narratives. Each RC lasted for three months, giving enough time for both participants to write, reflect, and share their experiences. It should also be noted that each RC consisted of multiple micro-narratives and reflections, leading to a grand narrative at the end.

Both participants agreed to share their written journal narratives via secure and individualized Google documents and opted to use English in writing their narrative journals and talking during the interviews. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, we used member checks and peer examination throughout the data collection, and data analysis process.

The data analysis followed an open-coding process where the journals were first evaluated for the sake of annotating the initial interpretations and formulating the questions to be asked in the semi-structured interviews. During this process of analysis, we dissected the data into meaningful expressions, assigning meaningful phrases or words that best described the information. For example, for both Mina's and Mahsa's reflections, the effect of graduate

education was evident, so we named data connected to these experiences *MATESOL*. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and shared with the participants for the sake of validation and member checking. Upon completing all rounds of data collection, we utilized a constant comparative method (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) to compare and contrast the cases and the data, resulting in the findings. Throughout this iterative process, two major storylines emerged in the data collected: (1) critical agency, and (2) pragmatic agency. In the first theme, teachers revealed their personal actions and agentic performances with regard to the implemented policies, and in the second theme, teachers explained the way they professionally worked around such policies in their workplaces and beyond.

Findings

Mina

Mina, thirty-six years old, started learning English when she was in fourth grade by attending a private English language institute. She started to learn English because of her father, as he believed that without knowing English, she would not be able to have a bright future. In order to start her higher education, Mina needed to take the National College Entrance Exam, which is a high-stakes test for all students who intend to attend colleges and universities in Iran. Based on her cumulative score in that exam, she opted to study English Translation as her major in college, and she started to work temporarily as a private tutor.

She recalled that as a child, she used to play the role of teacher in her games by teaching her dolls and mimicking the ways her teachers taught her. While working on the completion of her graduate studies, she taught both in a private language institute and a private middle school. Unlike certified teachers, Mina was an hourly-paid teacher who was not required to complete professional development programs. However, due to her enthusiasm for making a difference in her classes, she started to attend some self-funded professional development programs and Teacher Training Courses (TTCs). Her students were mainly young language learners with an age range of 10–15 years old. At the time of data collection, Mina had been maintaining a full-time teaching career in a private elementary school and a private English language institute for seven years. When asked about her motivation for becoming an English teacher and staying in the field of ELT, she commented:

> I should say that I really love teaching! Teaching gives me a good feeling! When I tell my students something that they don't know, and they just look at me with open eyes, I really enjoy that time! But whenever I tell them, for example, a grammar point or maybe . . . actually most of the time about the grammar when I tell them something and they don't understand, most of the time I think that this is my problem that the students didn't get the point! (Interview #1)

Mina's description of her perseverance in continuing as a teacher highlights two key issues. First, she connects her practice to her emotions. Looking at her students' learning as a source of joy and happiness, she describes this feeling as an inner drive to continue to be a teacher. Second, she describes herself as a caring teacher who takes responsibility for her students' failure.

Mina's trajectory of identity (re)construction featured positioning herself and teachers—more generally—as agents of change who should actively take the initiative to exercise praxis. Mina emphasized the positive contributions that the MATESOL program had on her and her classmates' identity (re)construction. She made frequent references to the importance of teachers' developed knowledge base as a factor that could increase their awareness of the sociopolitical structures guiding language education. For example, she positioned teachers as agents of change in one of her journal entries and noted:

> [It] would be so great for teachers to know the history of language and the ways to teach different skills to students by having the knowledge of language, not just imitating techniques from authorities and supervisors in institutes (who don't have enough knowledge of teaching language to learners and no academic studies toward teaching and learning). (Reflective Journal [RC] #2)

The common thread in Mina's narratives was how teachers could position themselves as sources of self- and other-awareness in order to agentively contribute to the growth of education. She was also critical of the positionality of authorities. More specifically, she is critical of the supervisors and school principals when they step in and want them to do as said. This has brought her a sense of frustration. As she stated,

> Sometimes, for example, our school principal tells us that "you have to go through these rules, you have to obey the rules or, for example, don't go over these discussions and don't talk about this or that." So, I think that can change a teacher's way of teaching! It happens to me a lot, for example, "OK, in one session, do this and in another session, do that." The funny part is that they are not the teacher in the class, so the teacher can have and should have the right to develop the syllabus or design of the class, "you are not in my class, and you cannot do it yourself"! But I have to be able to make decisions about my class because most of the time, I change my curriculum/ syllabus, or maybe I say something else, and I go through another way of teaching! (Interview #2)

Mina was also extremely critical of the religious-nationalist policies that, according to her, could impede teachers' effective teaching and agency. In her first interview, she shared how working in a language school, which primarily operated as a for-profit institute, had led to her turnover due to the incongruity of institutional policies with her professional principles.

> It is not just about the class! Ummm . . . sometimes it's out [of] the class! It's because . . . ummm . . . because of the policy that we have! It is not just related to my students; it's because of the limitations that I have. For example, it was so limited that I told my students, "OK, look up these words in a dictionary, and we'll talk about them in the next session; find these words"! Some of them came to me and said that "teacher . . . what is bacon?" and I told them what bacon is, and they said that "Oh, pig!!! It's forbidden in Islam!" (Interview #1)

She started this narrative with how contextual constraints shape teachers' identities and position them as suppressed individuals both discursively and practically. Finding herself entangled within the dominant attitude of us vs. them, Mina underscored that the Islamization of English education would have swept across all players and especially teachers of English, being viewed as the "others" and anomalies threatening the cultural integrity of the society.

> You know, sometimes those with decision-making power think about English teachers in a way that we are always blamed for anything that is not domestic, I mean something that is not part of "our culture"! You know, if you want to work here as an English teacher, you have to go through the filtering and selection process! Once, I went to one of those offices for a job interview, and they just discarded my application without even asking me to do a mock teaching. I guess, that was not important to them, just, for example, the religion that you have, how you pray, and things like that! Teaching is not important for them, but these things are! As I remember the conversation, it went like this:
>
> Administrator (A): What is your major?
>
> Mina: I studied English Translation!
>
> A: Oh, you people again! You English teachers, it's quite clear that you are different from other [subject] teachers.
>
> Mina: What do you mean?
>
> A: Your outfit, the way you talk, words you drop in a normal conversation! Everybody knows that English graduates are more Western-like (Interview #2)

As her professional practice proceeded, Mina came to position herself as an agentive teacher who is responsible for students and their awareness as socially meaningful individuals. In particular, Mina positioned herself as a teacher who, in the clash between mandated policies and student learning, should prioritize the latter. As she noted:

I believe that these policies necessarily do not carry the benefit for many people, including my students. In other words, it is my job to keep reminding myself that I have a responsibility toward my students and help them to benefit from what I teach as much as possible and turn them into critical thinkers. (Final Interview)

Mina believed that the key to such an agentive initiative to turn her students into critical thinkers is developing emotionality within them. That is, she claimed the identity of a caring teacher who can be positioned as a close friend of her students, and this way, facilitate the path for their becoming critical thinkers: "You know, there are topics and things that students even do not share with their parents or ask from them, but they feel comfortable with their teachers, and that is the moment where I can work to change those policies" (Final Interview).

As Mina continued her teaching practice throughout COVID-19, she identified several barriers which could have pushed her to change her career and do something else for a living. As she narrates,

It has been so tough, you know, not being able to go to the class and meet everyone in person. There is a huge pressure on me, on other teachers, I guess, and personally, I have thought about quitting [teaching] every now and then. (RC #3)

Identifying the barriers that she faced, she expressed her frustration with the sudden shift to online teaching, which has brought about a new dynamic and complexity compared to traditional in-person classes.

Because now, in the classes, we have cameras, we have the students, but we don't know what's happening in their homes, and the reason that I say "I'm not free" is that we have more limitations compared to the past, I mean compared to the time that we were at school and in class. When we were at school, it was just me and my students for most of the time! But now, I am in a class with my students and their whole family! So, it's another limitation; it is something that happened since COVID. So, knowing that moms and dads are watching you, sometimes makes me more concerned about what and how I teach, and it also sometimes affects my creativity. (Final interview)

As part of her creativity, Mina has been able to exercise her agency in a way to involve parents and possibly other members of the family in order to be able to teach what she needs to teach without raising any issues. As she reflected,

Once I feel that topics and discussions get out of hand and move beyond the level that they should be, I try to make it clear that this is something that they should learn later, or some other time and it is not appropriate for their age level. I also say that they might want to ask their parents to explain those to them, you know! All I am saying is that I am making myself responsible to a level, and beyond that, the responsibility should be on someone else's shoulder! You know, perhaps if I do it all by myself, the parents may criticize me later! And I have tested this many times and their parents are so happy with that, you know! They say that "we trust you a lot because we know that you don't say anything in the class that might be somehow taboo," and that gives me a good feeling! (Final Interview)

These extracts show that Mina could exercise agency in resisting neo-nationalist and other contextual policies by engaging in classroom work that regulates students' competencies. This way, she could claim the identity of a critical individual who, in her view, has fulfilled her professional responsibilities as a teacher.

Mahsa

Mahsa, thirty-four years old, completed her high school with a diploma in Mathematics, and upon her success in the National College Entrance Exam, she continued her undergraduate studies in Applied Mathematics. However, due to a lack of interest, she dropped out of college after one semester. After a while, and due to her interest in learning languages, she started to read about Farsi/Persian and got a job in a study-abroad company where she needed an

acceptable level of mastery in English in order to succeed. Her main job in the company was to provide information about the process of application and admission from universities abroad in English, and she could use her knowledge of English from high school to meet the requirement. To do so, once again, she took the National College Entrance Examination and opted to study English Translation at a large university in Iran.

Mahsa did not have any experience learning an additional language outside the K-12 school system. However, upon starting her undergraduate studies in English Translation, she felt that she was falling behind in terms of her proficiency in speaking English. In order to catch up, she started watching movies and reading graded books. Upon graduation from college, she decided to enter the ELT field as a temporary job and attended two simultaneous TTCs as a requirement for entering the field of teaching. Successfully passing these courses, she started to work in one of the language institutes where she received teacher training. Less than a year into teaching, she enrolled in an MATESOL program. When asked about her motivation for learning English and becoming an English teacher, she commented:

> My knowledge of English was just based on what I have learned in high school and nothing beyond that . . . I did not even go to a private language institute to learn English. After a while, I found that I could not speak English and even could not understand someone who spoke English. So, I decided to self-study and enhance my knowledge of English, and it has been almost six years that I have been learning English all by myself. I have been teaching for almost two years.

Mahsa's description shows that learning English was about acquiring a skill to make herself more competitive in the job market. Hence, she initially positioned herself as a learner of English who was dissatisfied with the type of education she received. In reversing such reflexive positioning, she made herself committed to her own learning in pursuit of her goals.

Mahsa believed in exercising agency at the classroom level (i.e. middle school) and preferred the pragmatic dimensions of exercising agency at the pedagogical level. In this sense, she attempted to balance her personal preferences with institutional demands. She raised critical questions about the adequacy of overarching policies that limit teachers' agency and problematize their effective identity construction. In the first interview, she shared narratives about how institutional demands operate as powerful impetuses constraining teachers' agency and how such agency could be reformed over time:

> In teaching young learners, they [institutional leaders] always say that you should apply rote learning or the audio-lingual method. If not done, because we are checked by overhead cameras [in our classrooms], we become criticized that their approach has not been implemented, and that is why the learner has not learned [the information]. And then the parents complain as well. They [institutional leaders] always promote a syllabus that must be implemented by the teachers unless like when I, after some time, made some modifications in my teaching. (First Interview)

In contrast with her restrictive teaching environment, Mahsa viewed her MATESOL experience as an enlightening incident that could enhance teachers' awareness by positioning them as critical individuals. She made references to her MATESOL coursework experiences that made her aware of the socio-cultural nature of language education. For example, in her second journal entry, she noted "Familiarity with social and cognitive dimensions of listening was essential for me as a teacher because I didn't have any familiarity and background information about that." Mahsa also mentioned similar points in relation to other skills and sub-skills, which shows that coursework experiences gradually made her aware of the role of grand policies in teaching English.

Mahsa was a person who, drawing on experience, positioned herself as an efficacious teacher and claimed the identity of a teacher who could improve students' learning. The key to her narratives, however, was the interaction between the lack of educational policies that could lead to student maintenance and her effective instructional practices as an alternative to the policies. For example, she shared:

I remember that once, parents came to me and said that "we don't want to send our child to this school anymore." I asked about the reason, and they said that it was because [their] child [was] not making progress in this school. I told them to wait so that I could apply the methods I had been practicing for 15 years. I showed them children who had similar problems, and they agreed. At the end of the semester, the child was speaking [English] fluently, and we were happy. (Second Interview)

In response to institutional problems, Mahsa has shown agency by practicing her personal/ professional philosophy, which has been associated with beneficial outcomes for her learners and with gratifying emotions for herself. Pointing to her challenges while going over and teaching about the culture of L2 represented in learning materials, Mahsa assumed a reflective position for herself in the sense that it is her responsibility to teach everything the way they are. As she wrote in one of her reflective journals,

I always explain it to my students and describe language learning as learning a new culture. If you see something that is not like what we have in our own culture, we should accept it as a cultural element of that language! Learning English or any other language means that you are traveling through that country and you should know, for example, what they eat, how they act and behave! You should know about the relationship that people have (RC #3)

When requested to further elaborate on this comment in a subsequent interview, she stated,

As an example, we have a text in our book that is quite interesting: There is a child . . . let me put that this way. The text comes with a picture showing a family watching the recording of a wedding party from years ago. In the picture, there is a child, a baby who was born before marriage, we don't have such a thing in Iran; well, I mean, it is not acceptable here. The story says that the baby was 2 years old at the time, and it was the child's parents' wedding ceremony. And then, some of my students, it happened a lot actually, some of my students asked, "teacher, he was 2 years old when his mom and dad got married?," and I used to answer, "yes, that is something in their culture and that is ok for them! They spend some time together, and whenever ready, they may get married"! You know, students were shocked, "we don't have it in our culture; I say that it is not good or it is not bad" and had to bury it under the carpet [laughter] and then go one with "Ok, so in their culture maybe they need to first see that whether they are good for each other and then get married, spend time together." So, from this point, I could somehow touch base but could not go into detail, and that was in my regular in-person classes. But I don't do so in my online classes, and I must not talk about these things. The farthest that I can get is just to tell them we can get the positive things from their culture while not paying attention to the negative things. You know, because of things like that, I had to change the textbook that I am using in the class and pick something with less controversial topics or with safe topics to teach. In the old one, there were a lot of instances of singing, dancing, and things like that, and the families, especially the religious ones, started to complain! (Final interview)

Mahsa faces challenges when it comes to cultural differences, societal norms, and addressing sensitive topics in both her face-to-face and online classes. However, the way that she chose to work around such issues reflects how she exercises her own agency and how she positions herself in such a context. Prioritizing students' need for understanding and knowing about diverse cultural perspectives, especially the ones related to the target L2, she picks up a middle ground to provide such awareness on the one hand and not cause any tensions with parents on the other hand. Such exercising of agency and claiming the identity of a teacher who teaches well are also featured in Mahsa's direct positions about policy. She argued that raising sociopolitical issues could be effective for learners and can enhance their learning: "I agree with talking about social issues as this way students can have presentations or lectures about the topics they like. This way, they can hone their skills and, for example, develop their proficiency skills" (Final Interview). Mahsa was critical of neo-nationalist and mandated policies as well, yet she was more inclined to develop the students' language skills as she viewed this as the major issue teachers should exercise agency in:

Like anyone else, I am not a person who can like or tolerate top-down policies. But I think that we should pay more attention to what we can do in this condition and teach the learners in a way that they become competent language learners. (Final Interview)

Discussion and conclusions
In line with the existing research on language teacher identity and agency, our study also highlights that being a language teacher is essentially a political act bound in the multiple layers of the existing social, political, and cultural discourse (Yazan *et al.*, 2023b). As such, the existing neo-nationalist and religious discourses (i.e. macro-level policies) sweep their dominance through educational institutions. Since teachers are the primary decision-makers in the classroom, they have the ability to wield power over various aspects of their practices and function as "micro-level policymakers" who can make "instructional decisions that are shaped by their professional identities . . . situated within and influenced by the sociopolitical context" (Yazan *et al.*, 2023b, p. 2). However, as their professional identities are embedded within the broader social, cultural, and political context, their agentic practices become intertwined with the complex interplay of these forces. Consequently, they actively engage in negotiating the macro- and meso-level policies that are imbued with the dominant ideologies of the majority social groups and government parties in power (Yazan *et al.*, 2023b).

As the findings indicate, LTAG is closely linked to the existing policies in place and the degree to which they are implemented. The policies governing education set the parameters within which teachers can exercise their professional agency and plan for the type of practice that they may find fit. Restrictive policies mainly rooted in the broader ideological and political agendas developed and promoted by various institutions of power can limit teachers' ability to make meaningful decisions and adapt their instructional practices to benefit their students. In this regard, and as the findings showed, LTAG is not an isolated act initiated by teachers. Conversely, it is a collective phenomenon situated within the multiple layers of the existing context. Drawing from DFG (2016), both teachers in this study continuously found themselves within the micro, meso, and macro levels of their situated context. While facing restriction at the macro policy level (e.g. mandated policies by the government) and meso-level (i.e. parents and workplace), they were able to navigate with more freedom at the micro-level of their teaching. In other words, in direct contact with their students, they were able to step outside the set boundaries. Mainly looking at agency as a critical element of their practice, they were able to translate into their practice and reflect on their encounter with other layers, despite having varying approaches.

Contrary to Mina, who understands LTAG as a continuous practice of personal growth and self-awareness, Mahsa views LTAG at a more pedagogical level (i.e. classroom level) and believes that prioritizing the development of learners' linguistic skills enables educators to claim the identity of a professional teacher. Data reflected that the differences between Mina and Mahsa's discernment of LTAG are affected by their individual responses to micro-politics in their educational settings (Kayi-Aydar, 2021). That is, for Mina, working at a for-profit institute with somewhat fewer constricting policies – in comparison to Mahsa's – allowed her to recognize the broad effects that social policies had on her and her students inside and outside the classroom. Conversely, the overarching politics in Mahsa's middle school made her increasingly aware of teachers' responsibility to transform these policies at the classroom level for the benefit of learners.

Another important point emanating from the findings is the role of teacher preparation programs in awakening a sense of responsibility and awareness in pre-service teachers to respond to neo-nationalist policies. Mina and Mahsa described the MATESOL program as "positive" and "enlightening" in broadening their understanding of sociopolitical pressures surrounding language education which, in turn, affected their self-perceived identities as teachers and how they exercised their agency. Such transition in perspective and in practice should be attributed to the various types of knowledge that they gained in their teacher education program and specifically the critical issues discussed through their teaching methodology and practicum courses (see Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba, 2022). Thus, we recommend that future studies more closely explore the effects language teacher preparation programs have on teachers' self-perceived identity and agency when responding to contextual constraints imposed by neo-nationalist policies.

Acknowledging the influence of social worlds and ideological structures in the way L2 education is conceptualized and delivered, the present study takes a step forward in highlighting the role that EFL teachers play both in their classroom and in societies, as well as the ways in which they can navigate through complex networks. Underscoring the role of LTAG, this study calls for further attention to teachers' role in undermining the existing borderlines drawn by neo-nationalist ideologies. In this sense, teachers are positioned at the forefront of such endeavor and, by enhancing their pedagogical knowledge as well as gaining further autonomy in their practices, they can share the awareness they accrued with their students as well as their communities of practice. This, in essence, will shape their identity as more critical of their stance and their surrounding sociocultural world as they move toward actualizing their imagined position within their field of inquiry. Findings from this study contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how sweeping nationalist agendas intersect with/in ELT classroom practices. Such an understanding is valuable to the critical project of raising teachers' sensitivity to sociopolitical issues and their learning to resist/circumvent contextual barriers.

As a final point, the ELT policy in Iran largely reflects top-down perspectives. We recommend adopting a pluralistic framework that incorporates diverse stakeholder voices to better inform policy decisions. Scenario planning could support this effort by integrating a range of viewpoints and anticipating key contextual challenges, thereby guiding more inclusive and effective ELT practices in Iran.

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