



Navigating Cultural Dynamics: A Qualitative Study of Teacher Agency in the Hierarchical and Collectivist Educational Context

Hossein Ali Manzouri

English Department, University of Zabol, Zabol, Iran.

Vahid Ghafrooi

English Department, University of Zabol, Zabol, Iran.

Abstract

Teacher agency, defined as educators' capacity to act purposefully and autonomously, is vital for fostering innovative and effective educational practices. In Iran's collectivist and hierarchical educational context, teachers navigate a complex interplay of cultural expectations, systemic constraints, and professional aspirations. Using semi-structured interviews for data collection and content analysis through a constant comparative method, this qualitative study explores the lived experiences of 32 English language teachers to reveal that agency-framed teachers' decisions and acts are deeply influenced by collectivist cultural norms. Teachers shared stories of resilience and resourcefulness, striving to balance respect for authority with their desire to innovate and adapt teaching methods according to students' needs. The findings revealed that collectivist values, hierarchical social structures, rigid curricula, parental expectations, and economic challenges constrain language teachers' agency. Results of the current study emphasize the need for systemic reforms that assist teachers in exerting their agency advocating for educational policies that humanize and empower educators as agents of transformative change in diverse global contexts while honoring cultural values. Implications of the findings for language teachers, macro-policy makers, and other stakeholders are discussed in details.

Keywords: Teacher agency, Hierarchical social systems, Collectivist culture, Educational reform.

Introduction

Teacher agency as the capacity of educators to act purposefully and autonomously has been identified as a crucial factor in fostering innovative and effective educational practices (Biesta et al., 2015; Heikkilä et al, 2022; Mirzaee & Aliakbari, 2018; Nazari, et al, 2023; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al, 2017; Rostami & Yousefi, 2020). Teacher agency is "the capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom and, choice" (Lipponen & Kumpulainen 2011, p. 812). Signaling the significance of teacher agency, Eteläpelto et al. (2013) view it as a need at both classroom and school levels. As Van der Heijden et al. (2015) assert at classroom level teacher agency will lead to significant improvements both in learners' success rate and efficacy of teachers' practices. This may be done through trying a new curriculum, selection of recently developed materials, implementation of different instructional strategies, enacting various classroom management systems, and modifying assessment tools. On the other hand, teachers at school level, can reshape their collegial collaborations in order to make positive changes. Teacher agency at both levels is possible only when teachers "feel in control of the choices they make within their work" (Eteläpelto et al., 2015, p. 663). In reality; however, there are constraints in educational systems for teachers to practice agency.

These constraints range from macro-policies of the educational system to everyday exercises of the schools' principals (Cochran-Smith et al, 2022; Lee, 2021; Li & Ruppap, 2021).

In addition to the limiting factors that are related to the educational settings, the exercise of teacher agency is not uniform across cultural contexts; it is profoundly shaped by the socio-cultural and systemic structures in which teachers operate (Poulton, 2020; Tran & Li, 2024; Warren & Ward, 2021). Collectivist cultures are characterized by hierarchical power structures and collectivist social values (Krys et al, 2022; To et al, 2020; Torelli et al, 2020). In such societies, the professional agency of teachers is often mediated by deeply entrenched cultural norms and expectations. These hierarchical tendencies can restrict teachers' freedom to innovate and assert their professional judgment (Lau et al, 2024; Li & Ruppap, 2021). Hierarchical cultures emphasize clear power structures and deference to authority, often placing teachers in roles where compliance is valued over agency (Hofstede, 1980; Kauppinen et al., 2020; Ukkonen-Mikkola, & Varpanen, 2020). Collectivism, with its focus on group harmony and shared objectives, can discourage deviation from the established norms (Hornsey, 2006; Triandis, 1995).

Agency has received much attention in recent studies on teacher education (e.g., Bordie, 2019; Buchanan, 2015; Cochran-Smith et al, 2022; Cong-Lem, 2021; Dang et al., 2024; Hadar & Benish-Weisman, 2019; Lau, et al., 2024; Priestley et al., 2015; Sahragard & Rasti, 2017; Tao & Gao, 2017; Veliz et al., 2024). It has been found to play a significant role in teacher professional development as well as in boosting student learning (Castro et al., 2023; Imants & Van Der Wal, 2019; Lau et al., 2024). Despite a robust body of literature on teacher agency, existing research is predominantly situated in individualistic cultures where autonomy is celebrated, and systemic structures are more permissive (Priestly et al., 2016). There is a paucity of studies examining how teachers in hierarchical and collectivist societies, such as Iran, perceive and negotiate their agency within cultural constraints. This lack of representation from non-Western contexts limits our understanding of the cultural mediators that shape teacher autonomy globally. In Iran's educational system, as a country with deeply rooted social hierarchies, many cultural factors interplay to form a complex web of constraints and opportunities, challenging educators to navigate cultural expectations while striving to maintain their professional agency (e.g., Ahmadi, 2021; Amini & Kruger, 2022; Ashraf, 2020; Soleimani & Shirbagi, 2024). This study aims to explore how Iran's hierarchical cultural values influence English language teachers' agency. This research offers both academic and practical significance. Academically, it bridges a critical gap in the literature by examining teacher agency in a non-Western, collectivist society, contributing to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of how culture shapes educational practices. Practically, it provides actionable recommendations for policymakers and school leaders in Iran and other similar settings, highlighting strategies to empower teachers within culturally oriented frameworks. To this end, the following research question is formulated:

1. How do Iranian teachers of English as a foreign language perceive the impacts of hierarchical and collectivist cultural values on their professional agency?

Review of the Literature

Teacher agency

Agency as a socio-psychological concept that has absorbed significant attention in recent educational studies incorporates understandings from various fields of study and theoretical domains rooted mainly in psychology, education, and sociology. It is generally understood as people's potential to act in hegemonic discourses (Bernal, 2023; Castro et al., 2023; Castro & Pineda-Báez, 2023; Eteläpelto et al. 2013) and the desire to have a capacity for autonomous action, where they can purposefully change and reshape their worlds and take control of their lives, rather than merely reacting to others' actions and reproducing pre-decided practices. Bandura (2001) considers people as "agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences" (p. 4). Therefore, agency is often viewed as "a situated activity something the individual does within contexts-for-action characterized by particular interactive ecological circumstances influenced by time, relations, and a potential for transformation and achievement" (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 2).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998), define agency within social theory framework, as "the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (p. 971).

Therefore, agency denotes the purposeful direction of an individual's actions aiming at achieving a certain goal through engaging in situations to produce a change. In this way, agency shapes and drives the direction and course of action (Wilson & Deaney, 2010). It goes in line with Rogers and Wetzel's (2013) definition of agency as "the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (p. 63) and implies autonomy, freedom, and will (Castro et al., 2023; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015). Agency in this regard can be thought of as opting the choice from among all possible options which best serves an agent's objectives through taking initiative and exerting agentic power (Eteläpelto et al. 2013).

The dynamism and fluidity of agency is what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) refer to when they view the concept as "temporarily constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations". (p. 970). Taking temporal dimension into account, Priestley et al. (2015) believe that "agency is rooted in past experience, oriented to the future and located in the contingencies of the present" (p. 20). Influenced by Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualization of agency, Priestley et al. (2015) proposed a three-dimensional model for understanding agency comprising the past, the present, and the future (see Fig. 1). The first

dimension, iterative dimension, states how past achievements, understandings and actions affect agency and includes personal values, personal capacity, and beliefs. The second dimension, the practical-evaluative dimension, where agency can be performed relates to the present, and is influenced by both past and future dimensions. This dimension is founded on the lived experience of day-to-day actual teaching (Priestley et al., 2015). The third dimension, the projective dimension, denotes teachers' plans and attempts to bring about required changes in future. It concerns teachers' inclination to exert their personal and professional values which may be affected by the hegemonic instrumental factors to improve education.

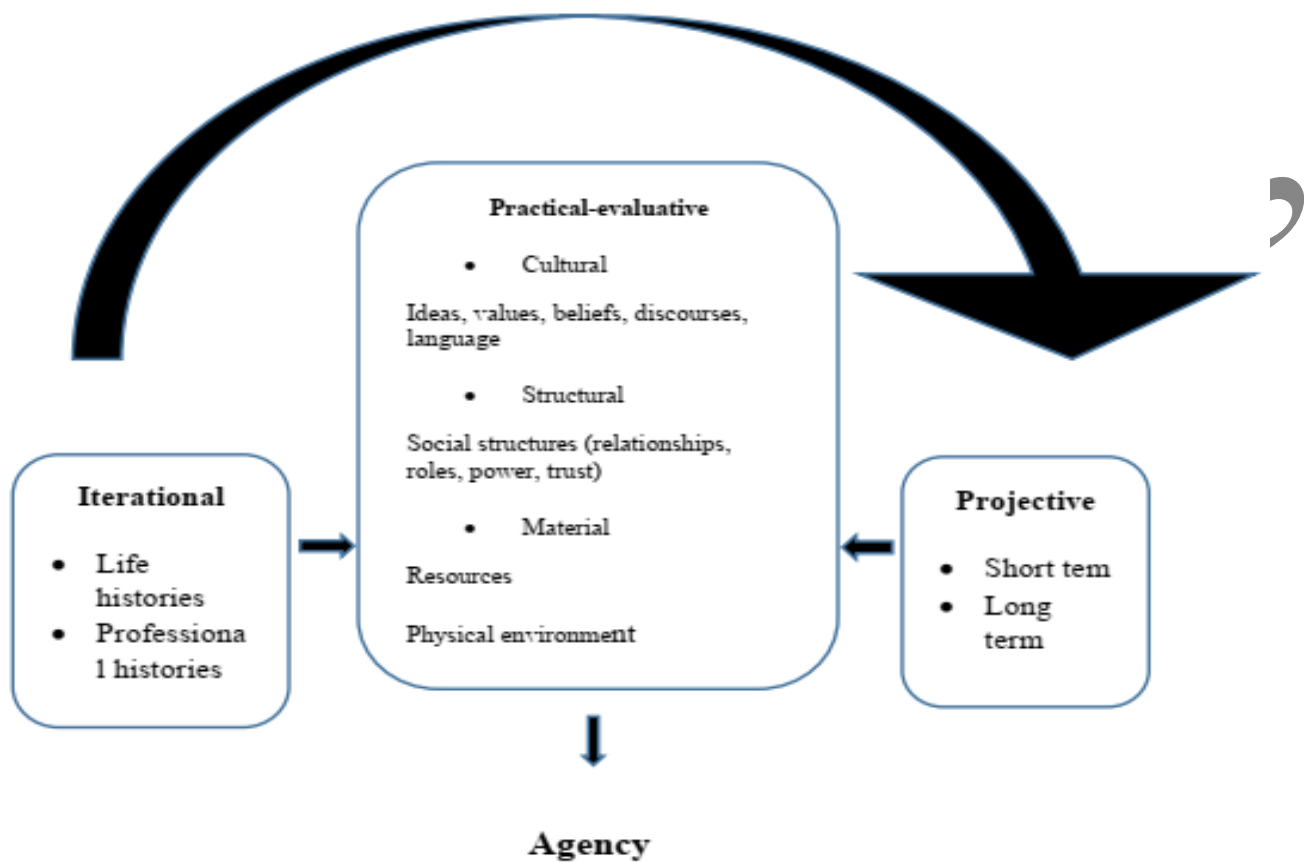


Fig. 1. A model of Agency (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 4).

It is noteworthy that agency is shaped and reshaped by social interactions, social relations and structures, and power relations (Buchanan 2015; Crossley, 2021; Etelapelto et al. 2013; Kayi-Aydar, 2015) and therefore influenced by the surrounding socio-cultural context. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) acknowledge that agency is a concept that possesses both social and relational facets which is framed by the positioning of all relevant contextual factors. Taken as a socially constructed concept, agency possesses a dynamic, transitory, and fragmented nature (Davies, 2000) which encompasses a set of socially mediated options which influence and can be influenced by the interactants. Such influences are part of human social relations since “humans as agents [are] able to influence their contexts, rather than just react to them, in a relationship of ongoing reciprocal causality in which the emphasis is on the complex, dynamic interaction between the two elements” (Mercer, 2011, p. 428). Agency, as Biesta et al. (2015) state, results from the interaction between individual and contextual factors. Therefore, individuals may exercise more agency in one context and less in another, according to agentic space they receive. In fact, exercising agency is a process that is governed through dynamic interaction between so many in every supposed context (Lau et al., 2024). In collectivist and hierarchical societies, teacher agency manifests differently due to cultural values and systemic constraints. Studies in East Asia and the Middle East reveal that teachers often negotiate their autonomy within cultural and institutional norms, balancing individuals' goals with communal expectations (Fadaee et al., 2021; Lee, 2021).

Language teacher agency (LTA)

Language teachers play a pivotal role in policy-making, implementing, and reshaping educational practices (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). As a result, Language Teacher Agency (LTA) has emerged as a vital concept within the discourse of language teaching and learning, influencing the implementation of educational strategies at all levels (Mifsud & Vella, 2018). Haneda and Sherman (2016) further emphasize that LTA encompasses the various actions of teachers that reflect their professional commitment, values, and self-perception. These actions, in turn, contribute to the dynamic process of shaping their professional identity. Recent literature on teacher agency in general education abounds, however, as Ashton (2020) argues, teacher agency in the field of applied linguistics needs more exploration. The prominent role of LTA as a vital aspect of teacher identity and profession has been emphasized across various studies, including those by Feryok (2012), Haneda and Sherman (2016), and Kayi-Aydar (2015). For instance, Kayi-Aydar (2015) utilized a positioning framework to explore the identity construction and agency of three teachers in the United States. The study indicated that these teachers adopted various identities in relation to their

students, which significantly influenced their agency. She argued that the participating teachers could take on different and sometimes conflicting identities (e.g., confident and proud vs. struggling) based on the various contextual factors and the interactions with mentor teachers or language learners. It was found that adopting such identities influenced their agency as language teachers. Comparable findings were observed in Feryok (2012), who examined how professional development impacted a teacher's agency in the U.S. The study revealed how different roles of the participant (student, teacher, and teacher trainer) affected her agency during the study. Similar findings were also reported by Haneda and Sherman (2016), who stated that professional identities of the participant in different contexts (school vs. kindergarten) influenced his agentic decision-making. In Iran, Khezerlou's comparative study indicates that Iranian EFL teachers perceive less autonomy in their teaching methods compared to their Turkish counterparts, suggesting a cultural context that restricts personal initiative and decision-making (Khezerlou, 2013). This lack of autonomy is further compounded by the hierarchical nature of the educational system, which prioritizes adherence to prescribed curricula over innovative teaching approaches (Safari & Pourhashemi, 2016). Teachers often face constraints that limit their agency, particularly due to the prescriptive nature of the curriculum and standardized materials. Moreover, an autoethnographic analysis by Javahery (2024) highlights how these constraints affect teacher identity and professional satisfaction, revealing a significant reduction in autonomy that undermines effective teaching practices.

Research has also explored the restrictive influence of context on LTA. Li and De Costa (2019) conducted a case study suggesting how the participant struggled to assert agency, while developing a teaching method to foster student autonomy. Likewise, De Costa et al. (2019) examined the impact of power dynamics on the agency of two teachers, emphasizing the intertwined relationship between their emotions and agency that were shaped by the broader sociocultural factors inherent in their contexts. Hamid and Nguyen (2016) explored LTA by examining the challenges English teachers encounter in addressing the increasing social expectations for English proficiency within Asian contexts. They pointed out that while English teachers demonstrate adaptability and initiative to respond to these evolving demands, policymakers often fail to adequately consider the practicalities of the educational policies. Instead, policies are imposed on English teachers, leaving them to shoulder the responsibility of executing them. This line of research on LTA generally highlights that agency can foster teachers' sense of autonomy (Vitanova 2018); agency and identity construction of English teachers are closely connected to one another (Kayi-Aydar 2015); agency and teachers' beliefs are intertwined (Haneda & Sherman 2016); agency is closely related to emotional factors (Miller & Gkonou 2018); agency is highly context-bound and under the influence of power relations (Hamid and Nguyen, 2016; Kayi-Aydar 2015). Thematic analysis of studies on LTA reveals the relation between agency and new curriculum policies (e.g., Biesta et al. 2015; Buchanan, 2015; Dinh, 2022; González & Calle-Díaz, 2023), accountability regimes (e.g. Kayi-Aydar 2015; Haneda & Sherman 2016), teacher beliefs and agency (e.g. Bonner et al., 2020; Molla, & Nolan, 2020), teachers' vision and agentic power (e.g. Van der Heijden et al., 2015; Vaughn, 2013), teacher professionalism and agency (e.g., Imants & Van Der Wal, 2019; Kauppinen et al., 2020; Molla & Nolan, 2020), teacher agency and policy implementation (e.g., Cong-Lem et al., 2021; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Lau et al., 2024;), and role of agency in educational change (e.g., Bonner et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2023; Etelapelto et al., 2013).

Collectivism and Cultural Dynamics

Collectivist cultures, such as Iran, prioritize group harmony, shared goals, and interdependence. These values shape professional relationships and decision-making processes, fostering a sense of community among educators (Triandis, 1995). While collectivism promotes collaboration and mutual support, it may discourage dissent and individual innovation, as group harmony often takes precedence (Lee, 2021). In educational settings, collectivist values manifest through collaborative practices and peer networks, which enhance teachers' sense of belonging but may limit their ability to challenge established norms (e.g., Wagner, 1995). This duality requires teachers to navigate cultural expectations carefully, balancing their autonomy with their commitment to the collective good. Such hierarchical cultures, characterized by clear power structures and respect for authority, significantly influence teacher agency and autonomous decision-making (Hofstede, 1980). In high-power distance contexts, such as Iran, educators often operate within rigid frameworks where decision-making is centralized and innovation is constrained (Molla & Nolan, 2020).

Iran's educational system reflects its cultural values, emphasizing collectivism, respect for authority, and centralized governance (Ahmadi, 2021). The Ministry of Education in Iran oversees curriculum development, teacher training, and school administration, limiting teachers' ability to adapt materials or methods to local contexts (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). Strict adherence to national standards reduces teachers' flexibility, compelling them to prioritize compliance over innovation (Ahmadi, 2021). The cultural context in which Iranian teachers operate significantly influences their decision-making processes. The collectivist nature of Iranian society emphasizes group harmony and conformity, often at the expense of individuals' expression and agency. This dynamic is echoed in the work of Hashemi Moghadam et al. (2019) who employed a Bourdieusian framework to analyze the educational field and the professional identity of EFL teachers, illustrating how cultural capital shapes teachers' roles and their ability to enact change. Furthermore, the findings of Safari and Pourhashemi (2016) suggest that the oppressive educational system stifles critical thinking and creativity among teachers, leading to a reliance on traditional pedagogical methods. This cultural backdrop necessitates a reevaluation of how teacher agency is conceptualized and enacted within the Iranian educational system.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is particularly suited to exploring the context-specific, lived experiences of participants within their socio-cultural frameworks (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method to enable an in-depth examination of teachers' perspectives on the influence of cultural norms on their professional agency. This approach balances structure with flexibility, allowing for consistent data collection while providing room for participants to express nuanced insights (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Participants

The study engaged 32 English language teachers employed in various Iranian public schools. Purposive sampling was used to ensure a diverse participant pool, capturing variations in gender, age, educational qualifications, professional experience, and institutional types. Participants were selected both from Tehran, the multicultural capitol of the country; and from the less-privileged regions of the country where cultural hierarchies can be felt more tangibly. The diversity in participant demographics allowed the study to encompass a wide range of experiences, offering comprehensive insights into the cultural mediators of teacher agency. The participants who voluntarily took part in the study were assured anonymity, and were asked to sign consent forms, indicating their understanding of the study's goals and methods. Table 1 depicts demographic information of the participants.

Table 1

The Demographic Information of Teachers

Variables	Categories	Frequency
Gender	Male	14
	Female	18
Degree	B.A.	21
	M.A.	9
	PhD.	2
Experience	1-5	7
	6-10	20
	+11	5
Residence in English-speaking Country	Yes	3
	No	29

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over two months to gather rich, detailed accounts of participants' experiences. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via video conferencing for remote participants. The interview protocol was adapted from Buchanan (2015) and Brodie (2019). The interview questions (See Appendix A) pivoted around participants' perceptions of their professional agency and the influence of cultural norms (hierarchical and collectivist) on their agency. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and pseudonyms were used during transcription.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to extract the main themes through content analysis using a constant comparative method (Ary et al., 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2021). NVivo software was utilized for open coding, enhancing the transparency and reliability of the analysis process. As Ary et al. (2014) argued open coding deals with labeling and categorizing the phenomenon using the comparative method, and then grouping similar incidents together and giving the same conceptual label so that the concepts are grouped together into categories. The researchers extracted themes by comparing the responses of each participant with those of other participants. First, the first participant's response to the first interview question was analyzed and explored for the themes and then compared with the responses of the other parties to the same question. The same process was followed for all of the interview questions. Then, the responses of each individual to all the questions were compared and analyzed to extract the themes as accurately as possible. Names of the codes were extracted from the participants' responses. For instance, the sentence "Most of the time because of the values of the Iranian society I feel I cannot exert my agency as a teacher in the English class" was categorized under the code "*Norms of the collectivist culture*". The same is true about the sentence "I think only one variety and that is the native variety for example American English needs to be the center". As suggested by In'nami et al. (2020), to ensure the maximum reliability of coding, a second round of coding was carried out by the researcher

two weeks after the first round. Such time lapse was chosen to minimize the memory effects of the first round. Intra-rater reliability was calculated to be 0.91 which, according to Pallant (2010) is high. Extractions of the themes continued until no more themes could be identified in the interview data.

Findings

The findings from the study reveal the multifaceted influences of cultural, institutional, and systemic factors on teacher agency in Iran. The analysis is organized into thematic categories that illuminate the constraints and opportunities experienced by teachers. To present a clearer picture of the findings, each theme is elaborated with supporting excerpts from the participants' responses.

Norms of the collectivist culture

The collectivist norms in Iranian society significantly shape roles and responsibilities of all its members, including those of teachers. In many parts of the country, especially the remote areas or the border towns, elder people decide on every aspect of people's lifestyle. Instances of direct impacts of the elders can be seen during elections (to determine for whom others should vote). They allow themselves to shape teaching and assessment processes in the region, often creating conflicts between professional duties and cultural expectations of teachers.

Excerpt 1: *"We as English teachers live in a collectivist society that imposes its norms on all people to obey. The other day, the head of a tribe whose son is my student asked me not to be so strict with the students because he thought English was a difficult language. This puts my agency under pressure and question."* (Teacher 5)

Excerpt 2: *"Most of the time because of the values of the Iranian society I feel I cannot exert my agency as a teacher in the English class. For instance, a famous religious man in the village I teach asked me to talk to students about morals, or to ask the students to say their prayers!"* (Teacher 1)

As evident in the teachers' excerpts, the collectivist culture with its social hierarchy can significantly impact the EFL teachers' agency through putting them under the pressure to act based on the accepted values and norms of the society, or according to the expediency of powerful others. The society itself reproduces such hierarchy through prioritizing religious, financial, or elderly elites over the other members of the society. Consequently, such elites find themselves in a position to exert their agency over that of the EFL teachers. EFL teachers, therefore, have to compromise their agency through complying with the hierarchical structure of the society.

Administrative Decisions

Iranian schools are deeply hierarchical, with decision-making power concentrated in administrators' hands. Teachers often feel excluded from meaningful participation in school policies, limiting their professional agency and innovation.

Excerpt 3: *"Decisions are usually made by the school administrators, and as teachers, we just implement them. There's little room for us to make our own choices."*

Excerpt 4: *"The administrator told me not to give a good mark to a student because of his misbehavior, even though he performed well in the exam. I felt highly pressured to do that."*

Excerpt 5: *"It seems to me that the school administrators are given carte blanche to direct the educational objectives the way they like. As a young teacher I feel still like a student to the principal. He was graduated 25 years ago and does not seem updated, but he lets himself tell me what to do what not to do."*

English teachers in the current study clearly stated that in the Iranian high schools, educational decisions are mainly made by the administrators and school principals. The teachers, especially if they are novice, are not usually consulted about the educational plans and policies. While the regulations of the ministry of education do not give such authority to school administrators, the hierarchical system of the society existing in the schools imposes itself to the educational relationships of the school personnel. Teachers, therefore, find themselves unable of exerting their agency in the majority of cases.

Influence of Parental Expectations on Teacher Agency

In Iran's collectivist culture, parents play a significant role in shaping the educational process, often influencing teachers' decisions about grading and discipline. Teachers are frequently caught between their professional judgment and the expectations of parents, leading to ethical dilemmas and compromises in their agency.

Excerpt 6: *"According to relations with parents, many times I am forced to give students more than their real marks because their parents would otherwise be upset."*

Excerpt 7: *"Some parents insist on punishment, while others prohibit it. They also demand good grades regardless of their children's performance."*

Excerpt 8: *"Parents have strong opinions about what and how their children should be taught. This often affects my teaching choices."*

As illustrated in the above excerpts, teachers in the Iranian educational system find it rather cumbersome to appropriately exert their agency in the language teaching processes. A significant part of the pressure teachers experience relates to the parents' expectations from the teachers regarding grades. Most of the teachers usually have to change the grades to satisfy such expectations.

Resistance to Innovation

Teachers face resistance when attempting to introduce innovative teaching methods or materials. Institutional inertia and rigid cultural norms often discourage creativity in the classroom. The traditional culture of the society usually indoctrinates its members to respect the traditions and follow them.

Excerpt 9: *"When I suggested teaching innovative skills, administrators laughed and told me to follow the system."*

Excerpt 10: *"Any attempt to change traditional teaching methods is seen as unnecessary or even disruptive."*

Excerpt 11: *"I played an English song to teach vocabulary, but the administrator told me it was inappropriate."*

EFL teachers, due to their language knowledge, have the chance to be in direct contact to the latest teaching methods and practices through having access to the mainly-English content over the Internet and social media. This can be considered as part of the informal professional development of the English teachers that they learn from expert teachers in other YouTube channels, for instance. The challenge arises when the teachers like to implement what they have learned. As the teachers in the present study argued, there are signs of resistance to innovation in the school system that at the same time hinder innovation and prevent the teachers from exerting their agency.

Exam-oriented system and curriculum

The majority of the teachers mentioned that since students are required to prepare for certain national exams that are mostly unrelated to real-life needs of the learners, they find themselves compelled to teach for the exams. Therefore, teachers' agency is breached:

Excerpt 12: *"I must teach the contents of high school books for entrance exams, but they don't prepare students for real-life scenarios and dialogues."*

Excerpt 13: *"The majority of my students like to learn oral/aural skills of English language. As a teacher, I am certain that these skills are more required in the modern world. However, the curriculum requires us to work on writing, grammar, and vocabulary."*

As the teachers argued, another factor that runs counter to the teachers' potential for exerting their agency is the fact that they have to teach for the national exams that students have to take part in. These exams usually check the students' vocabulary knowledge, grammatical proficiency, and reading comprehension. Therefore, the EFL teachers are required to prepare the students for such exams. The teachers, on the other hand, believe that language learning is mainly for communication among the speakers that requires -to a large extent- speaking and listening abilities. However, they have to teach for the exam.

Discussion

The present study investigated how teacher agency as a significant prerequisite of teachers' qualifications is straightjacketed by macro-cultural factors that impose their hierarchical structures on every aspect of teachers' practices. Teachers navigate a complex landscape where systemic constraints, cultural expectations, and personal values intersect. The findings of this study offer an in-depth understanding of how cultural, institutional, and systemic factors in Iran shape teacher agency. Enriched with the latest research on the agency of the language teachers, this discussion unpacks the complexities of their experiences while providing actionable insights for reform.

As depicted by the analysis of interviews with the teachers, teacher agency in Iran is deeply influenced by collectivist and hierarchical cultural norms. These findings align with Hofstede's (1980) Cultural Dimensions Theory, particularly the high-power distance and collectivist tendencies of Iranian society. Teachers in such situations find themselves surrounded by numerous factors both inside the educational settings and beyond it in the broader sociocultural contexts (Poulton, 2020; Tran & Li, 2024). Excerpts of the teachers' interviews showcased the hegemony of the collectivist culture on educational decisions of the teachers, limiting their capacity to exert their agentic power. This finding aligns with suggestions of similar studies (e.g., Kryś et al, 2022; To et al., 2020; Torelli et al., 2020) emphasizing group harmony and respect for authority to reflect a broader cultural narrative.

Teachers frequently reported being compelled to adjust grades or follow advice received from the locally recognized and socially powerful people in the region. Pressures on the teachers also extend to parents who, because of living in the same town or village, know the teachers and can negotiate educational decisions with them. In the majority of cases, such pressures clearly contradict teachers' agency. Parental and societal expectations significantly influence teachers' agency (Warren & Ward, 2021) often placing them in ethical dilemmas to inflate grades or adjust disciplinary practices, highlighting the intersection of cultural values and professional agency (e.g., Lau et al., 2024). The strong influence of parents and community expectations on teacher practices reflects the collectivist nature of Iranian society. Besides, from a psychological perspective, such pressures contribute to teacher stress and burnout in the long run. This hierarchical structure limits opportunities for teachers to act as

autonomous agents (Lau et al, 2024; Li & Ruppar, 2021; Priestley et al., 2015). Besides, in the educational contexts teachers often operate within rigid structures since schools' administrators dictate decisions to limit teachers' agency (Kauppinen et al., 2020; Ukkonen-Mikkola, & Varpanen, 2020). Teachers' innovation and critical thinking in classrooms may be suppressed as the direct consequence of such pressures. This runs counter to most of the western educational systems with low power-distance culture that encourage teacher agency and innovative decision-making through prioritizing individualistic values over the collective traditions. Systemic reforms in favor of teachers' agency need to be enacted (e.g., Crossley, 2021; Li, 2016) to assist the teachers exert their agency in the educational policies and practices in the high school context.

The findings also reveal a pervasive resistance to innovation, rooted in both cultural traditions and systemic inertia. Teachers expressed frustration with the outdated curriculum and lack of support for implementing 21st-century skills. Those who dared to introduce new methods or materials often faced pushback from administrators and colleagues. The resistance to adopting innovative methods highlights the disconnect between global pedagogical trends and local practices that contribute to questioning teacher agency (Dinh, 2022; González & Calle-Díaz, 2023; Poulton, 2020). Moreover, the suppression of creative approaches and techniques for language teaching stifles the potential for transformative education and contradicts Kumaravadivelu's (2016) call for context-sensitive teaching practices that cater for cultural, social, and individual differences.

The interplay between teacher agency and cultural dynamics contributes significantly to the literature on language teachers' agency both in the local settings of Iranian educational system and in other similar contexts. As Priestley et al. (2015) suggest, agency is not merely an individual trait but a product of the interaction between personal, cultural, and structural factors. As highlighted by Castro et al. (2023), fostering an environment that supports teacher agency is essential for implementing effective educational reforms. The authors argue that teachers who are permitted to exert their agentic decision-making are more likely to engage in innovative practices that enhance student learning outcomes. This perspective aligns with the findings of similar studies that emphasize the importance of self- and peer-assessment in promoting learner autonomy, suggesting that empowering teachers can lead to broader educational improvements (e.g., Rezaee & Shabani, 2019).

Conclusions

The present study aimed to explore the impacts of hierarchical and collectivist culture on language teachers' agency. The findings of this study illuminate the intricate relationship between cultural, institutional, and systemic factors and teacher agency in Iran as a society where collectivist culture rules. The experiences shared by participants showcased significant challenges that Iranian educational context presents to language teachers. The findings reveal a complex landscape where teacher agency in Iran is deeply shaped by the cultural fabric of the society, and highly influenced by power relationships. From a social perspective, cultural characteristics cater for a strong sense of community and collective purpose; however, in the educational context these cultural elements suppress individual agency and professional innovation. Teachers were found to be pressured by norms of the collectivist communities, parental expectations, and organizational policies. Therefore, they resort to balancing respect for authority with efforts to assert their professional agency. Despite the challenges revealed in the study, the teachers need to show the resilience and adaptability to maintain their agency as a necessary potential of every teacher.

Findings of the current study suggest an urgent need for cultural awareness raising activities so that teachers can work without being under pressure of parental expectations and requirements of the collectivist society. Moreover, systemic reforms are required in the schools to change the educational context in order to respect teacher agency. To address teacher agency as a foundation for sustained educational development (Biesta et al. 2015; Buchanan, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015), teacher training programs should be reframed to include practical strategies for language teachers to enable them in enacting their agency. In-service professional development programs should address strategies for navigating cultural constraints while maintaining professional integrity. To reduce the impacts of collective cultures on teachers' agency, consciousness-raising programs and policies need to be developed by the local authorities. At the school level, clear policies should be established to mediate parental expectations and protect teachers from undue pressure. Establishing clear boundaries for parental involvement and creating forums for dialogue between teachers and families can promote mutual understanding so that parental expectations do not hinder teacher agency. At the macro educational levels, systemic changes such as revising curricula to include spaces for teacher creativity and fostering a culture of professional collaboration can empower teachers to exert their professional agency.

While the current study revealed some major aspects of the challenges that Iranian high school teachers of English face in exerting their agency, there are some limitations that could have impacts on the findings. First, a significant limitation is the restricted perspective offered by focusing solely on teachers. While their viewpoints are crucial, this approach excludes the direct voices and experiences of students, parents, and administrators. As a result, the study may present a one-sided view of the topic under study. Another limitation stems from the reliance on interviews. Social desirability bias might lead participants to report what they believe is socially acceptable rather than their true experiences. Recall bias could affect the accuracy of participants' memories of past events. Future studies can compensate for these limitations. Additionally, other studies can continue to explore the dynamics of agency in other centralized cultures. Besides, influences of collectivist culture on other teacher-related topics such as professional development of language teachers can lead to fruitful results.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions:

1. What is your understanding of the term "teacher agency"?
2. How do you evaluate the impact of agency on your teaching quality?
3. Do you consider yourself as having agency in your career?
4. What factors do you think can affect your agency?
5. How do cultural values and norms affect language teachers' agency?
6. Can you remember instances of cultural norms limiting your agency?
7. How does living in a collectivist society impact teachers' agency?
8. Do you feel that your agency is limited because of the collectivist society you are living in?