



# Teacher Agency in the Context of Curriculum Reform: The Case of Iranian Educational System



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## ABSTRACT

In line with the perspective that teachers are the most significant agents in language policy enactment, teacher agency in general and the pivotal role of agency in curriculum reforms, in particular, have received a surge of attention in recent years. This study aims to investigate the way a group of experienced EFL teachers exerted agency in the context of curriculum reform in Iran. Narrative enquiry was utilized to explore teachers' agency by drawing on the ecological approach proposed by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015). Seven teachers (aged between 30 to 45 years) of English as a foreign language with more than 10 years of teaching experience at state high-schools participated in this study. Snowball sampling was utilized for selecting the teachers who had been involved in teaching both old and new books, designed by the Iranian Ministry of Education, for over five years. The results indicated that the teachers construct agency in order to cope with the changes in the curriculum by adhering to many past experiences, creating an image of the future, and enacting the curriculum despite the challenges. This study also highlighted the importance of teacher agency in professional development and improvement of education and learning in the time of curriculum reform.

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## 1. Introduction

Educational improvement has been a permanent topic concerning policy makers and practitioners for decades (Priestley, Edwards, Miller & Priestly, 2012). Along with the increased attention to the significance of micro levels of language policy and planning (LPP) in recent years, many researchers have been preoccupied with the participation of myriad of actors involved in the LPP at both macro and micro levels (Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). Among all the actors involved in LPP, teachers play a pivotal role in enactment of policy (Obaidul Hamid & Nyguyen, 2016) and they are "central agents in language policy development" (Baldauf, 2006, p. 154). According to Obaidul Hamid and Nyguyen (2016), the success of the macro level LPP is mainly tied to how it is understood by the people who are actually involved in the process of implementing it. As a result, "teacher agency is critical to the process of implementing educational changes" (Nguyen & Bui, 2016, p. 89). Accordingly, the significant role of teachers as agents of change has received attention by many scholars in the sense that teachers exert profound influence on the way LPP is implemented (Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008; Menken & Garcia, 2010; Li, 2010).

Moreover, agency is constructed as the result of the interplay between both cultural and contextual environment and personal capabilities and beliefs (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Parker (2016) also contends that the context in which teachers are positioned affect the construction of agency. With regards to the importance of context and also the changes in LPP, it is worth mentioning that the Iranian Ministry of Education (MOE) incorporated new

textbooks for public high schools in 2013, which emphasizes the importance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Unlike the previous curriculum which focused on reading-based approaches, the current curriculum running in Iran aims to emphasize and bolster communicative competence of learners.

In addition to that, the gap between language policy at macro level and how teachers enact it at micro level requires more attention to the concept of agency since it is believed that by exploring teacher agency, useful insights on the relationship between top-down policy and bottom-up enactment in local contexts can be attained (Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Johnson, 2018). On the other hand, many scholars maintain that teacher agency is a less-explored area of research (Johnson, 2018; Menken & Garcia, 2010; Priestley et al., 2012; Pantic, 2015; Wang, Mu, & Zhang, 2017). Thus, to fill this void, this paper aims at investigating how a group of Iranian EFL teachers experienced and responded to the changes in curriculum in the Iranian context. Due to the English language education policy reforms in Iran, the present study is to investigate teacher agency in relation to the curriculum reforms brought upon experienced teachers in order to obtain a detailed understanding of how the macro policy is implemented at the local level and how the teachers respond to the curriculum change.

## 2. Review of the Literature

LPP in recent years has put emphasis on the importance of actors who not only impose the change in curriculum but also on the ones who implement the change. Therefore, attention rate to teacher agency has soared since teachers are the ones who decide how to respond to the changes in various agentive ways (Obaidul

Hamid, 2010; Li, 2010; Nguyen & Bui, 2016). Intrinsic to this view is the importance of the concept agency. Priestley et al. (2015) define agency as "the ability or potential to act" (p. 22). Therefore, agency denotes one's capacity to take action in a particular situation. In line with this view, Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013) consider teacher agency as a concept stemming from "the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together" (p. 188). In this sense, agency is constructed as a result of interaction between individual attempts and the contextual factors. Agency can thus be perceived as an attribute helping teachers deal with challenging situations by drawing on contextual factors. Moreover, Priestley et al. (2015) contend that agency represents the interplay between the influences from past, present, and future aspirations of an individual. Moreover, Vitanova (2018) contends that teacher agency is a context-bound notion which may be presented more or less depending on the context in which teachers are positioned.

A dearth of studies has examined teacher agency in the time of curriculum change in recent years (e.g., Biesta et al., 2015; Adidulhamid & Nguyen, 2016; Molina, 2017; Ollerhead & Ollerhead, 2010) and there have been a number of researches reporting how teachers responded to the changes in curriculum. Martin (2005a, 2005b) was among the pioneers who focused on teacher agency in Malaysia and Brunei by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork. The curriculum presented to teachers as textbooks varied widely with the actual levels of students and also local context where teachers were required to be the mediators between textbooks and realities through exercising agency in order to actualize the curriculum in the

local context. Another study is done by Zacharias (2013) who investigated how Indonesian teachers reacted to English-medium classrooms proposed by government. The result showed that they demonstrated agency through innovative ways such as using google translate or mobile devices. Moreover, Yang (2015), exploring teacher agency in terms of how teachers conformed to the educational reform in china, contends that there is a need to provide courses for teachers to improve teacher agency in the time of curriculum reform. Drawing on Fullan's theory, Nguyen and Bui (2016) investigated how teachers reacted to government-initiated English policies in Vietnam. Their results suggested that teachers can exert agency as implementers of the curriculum indicating that they can refrain from inappropriate language policies and instead gravitate towards more suitable and contextualized plans. They exerted their agency through four factors including personal vision, inquiry and mastery, and collaboration with colleagues.

Another study which is worth mentioning here is Tran's (2018) work in which he focused on agency construction of 20 transitioned teacher in Vietnam. The results shed light on the dynamic and multi-layered process of agency construction. In their study, Tao and Gao (2017) investigated teachers' professional development through exercising agency in the face of curriculum reform at a Chinese university. The findings revealed that teachers tended to improve their professional knowledge through their agentic choices and involvement in the reform. They exercised their agency in three dimensions including learning, teaching, and conducting research. They tied to constantly learn how to enact the new curriculum however, there were minor individual differences in their learning approaches. Regarding teaching,

they faced numerous challenges however their belief in the importance of the teaching content made them exercise agency through different strategies such as drawing on past experiences and developing the content needed by students.

In addition, Pappa, Moate, Ruohotie-Lyhty, Etelapelto (2019) also focused on agency construction of teachers in Finnish context and the results revealed that teachers faced certain challenges which required agency construction through employing various strategies. In another study, Khezerloo and Pourfeiz (2012) investigated teachers' autonomy in Iranian and Turkish contexts. They conceptualized autonomy as agency which consisted of four aspects including choosing the teaching method, drawing on appropriate strategies to meet students' needs, teachers' involvement in decision making process, and taking initiatives to resolve the problems. The results indicated that Turkish teachers were slightly more autonomous in comparison to Iranian teachers and that Turkish educational system exerted less control on the teachers.

Most of the studies indicate that teachers need to exert agency in order to deal with the challenges posed by the curriculum reform. Given the variety of attitudes in different contexts and the influence of environmental factors on construction of agency, the present narrative enquiry aims at exploring Iranian EFL teacher agency in the time of curriculum reform. This study tends to investigate how experienced Iranian EFL teachers demonstrate their agency in relation to curriculum change.

## **2-1. Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The theoretical model on which the present study is grounded, is the ecological approach to teacher agency proposed by Priestley et al.

(2015). Based on this conceptualization, agency, is what people do under the influence of both personal and environmental factors rather than what they possess. According to this approach, teacher agency is defined as "an emergent phenomenon" (p. 136) which is constructed as a result of the interplay between three dimensions, namely iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative. The iterative orientation represents "the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). It focuses on the past experiences of individuals and it is composed of personal and professional histories. This aspect of teacher agency includes personal capacity, beliefs, and values of individuals which are all shaped based on past experiences (Priestley et al., 2015). They further argue that the personal experiences such as schooling might affect constructing agency more than professional experience.

The projective orientation denotes "the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). It is believed that teacher agency is mainly rooted in future directions of teachers (Priestley et al., 2015) in terms of development of different aspects of teaching. Teachers' aspirations which can be both long and short terms, are mainly rooted in their experiences, identities, and even motivations. Considering the practical-evaluative dimension, cultural, material, and instructional aspects should be

taken into account (Priestley et al., 2015). The practical-evaluative orientation encompasses "the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). This aspect deals with everyday context in which teachers are present (Priestley et al., 2015) and it may affect the achievement of teacher agency. Moreover, the practical-evaluative dimension can both promote or inhibit teacher agency. This dimension also encompasses cultural and educational dimension.

### The present study

Many English national curricula have been subject to criticism in recent years (Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018) hence, policy makers have been trying to adopt new policies to improve the curricula. Moreover, the reforms in LPP are realized through launching new textbooks. In the same vein, Iranian MOE has developed new textbooks based on the 'National curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran' which includes 12 educational domains among which the 11<sup>th</sup> one is on foreign languages (Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2013). The previous textbooks which were used in Iran since Islamic Revolution were entitled "*Right Path to English*" which emphasized reading-based approach of teaching. However, the new national curriculum focuses on the nature of "interactive self-reliance communicative approach" (p. 227) which is realized through applying CLT (Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2013). As a result of this shift from reading-based approach to CLT, new book series named as "*English for Schools*" were introduced by Organization for Educational

Research and Planning (OERP) in 2013. The new textbooks have 6 volumes to be used from grade 7 to 12 of high school which is comprised of junior and senior high school with the former working on *Prospect Series* and the latter working on *Vision Series*. The new textbooks have witnessed unprecedented attention to all the four skills of acquiring a language facilitating the use of language communicatively.

## 3. Method

### 3-1. Participants

The participants of the present study include seven experienced EFL teachers who have been teaching at public high schools with more than 10 years of experience. A purposive, snow ball sampling method was utilized as to select the teachers who have taught both the old and the new textbooks provided by MOE for more than five years. The age range of the participants was 30-45 to ensure that they have enough experience of teaching. Table 1 indicates the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Participants	Years of Experience	Degree	Gender
T1	23	MA	Male
T2	19	MA	Female
T3	20	BA	Male
T4	18	MA	Female
T5	20	MA	Female
T6	15	BA	Male
T7	22	BA	Female

Note. 'T' stands for Teacher

### 3-2. Narrative Enquiry

Narrative enquiry sheds light on teacher agency from an ecological approach as it is comprised of three aspects namely, temporality,

sociality, and place (Clandinin & Huber, as cited in Vitanova, 2018), which is accordingly compatible with teacher agency dimensions including past experiences, present situations and also the future aspirations of teachers. In this sense, in order to be able to tap into the teachers' agency, narrative enquiry, being a self-revealing method of data collection, was utilized (Langum & Sullivan, 2017). Narrative inquiry helps individuals express their experiences in a more independent manner since it is not restricted by the questions of an interview or questionnaires. The oral narratives in the present study were created by seven experienced EFL teachers who were asked to recount their life experiences and stories regarding the curriculum change and the way they responded to that change. During recounting the narratives, they were also asked some questions such as what do you think of current language policies in Iran? Is the new curriculum, more useful for students? What are your suggestions for a successful curriculum? How do you feel about the cultural content of the new textbooks? Can you elaborate on your teaching methods?. The narrative enquiry, which took 30 to 45 minutes for each participant, was done in both English and Persian. With the participants' consent, all the narratives were audio recorded. First the narratives were transcribed and then the Persian narratives were translated into English. In order to ensure the credibility of the translations, one of the researchers translated the data and then it was checked by the other researcher to draw out the differences observed. Moreover, member checking (Dörnyei, 2007) was also implemented by further asking the teachers to cogitate about the interpretations of the researchers after coding the data.

## 4. Results

In order to analyze the data, a hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was utilized. The transcribed and translated narratives were utilized so that the recurrent themes can be found. As for the inductive analysis, data was analyzed to extract new themes; however, in the deductive phase of the analysis, Priestley et al.'s (2015) theory of teacher agency was adopted to explicate the three dimensions of the ecological model of agency.

### 4-1. Prior Experiences and Agency, Iterational Aspect

As suggested by the ecological model, previous experiences of teachers exert profound influence on construction of agency. This aspect is mainly concerned with how life and professional histories affect agency of teachers. In this study, the focus is on how teachers constructed agency after the incorporation of new textbooks and how past experiences affected the way they achieved agency. The participants in this study exhibited expansive range of personal and professional experiences which, in turn, might have affected the way they enacted the new curriculum and they also talked explicitly about how they adapted themselves to the new curriculum. Some of them mentioned how their past experiences influenced the way they accepted the change. For instance, one aspect that teachers referred to was how their life long personality characteristics inspired them to react to the changes. The followings have been extracted from the narratives:

**T4:** *Inherently, I'm a determined person and if I don't know something I'll go after it until I learn it. Since my*

childhood, I enjoyed trying new activities and learning different things, a sort of curiosity was there. Some of my colleagues treat Vision Series unkindly, since they do not like change. But I adapt myself to any change rapidly in every phase of my life. I like change. I know the books have some limitations however, I enjoy teaching them.

**T1:** I remember our classes were teacher-fronted. Our teacher was like an authority controlling everything which annoyed me all the time. But now I engage my students even in small activities like checking the meaning of words... actually I do not follow my teachers especially after the curriculum change.

Many of the experiences were related to external sources and settings. The teachers demonstrated determined approach toward teaching which was constructed as a result of their professional experiences. Some of the participants explained that:

**T7:** Unfortunately, the ministry didn't hold training classes for us, I needed to change my teaching approaches but I wasn't trained how to do so, even I didn't know how to assess students. So, I had to spend a lot of time to learn and to be able to deal with the books. I had to check everything, even the pictures incorporated there. Actually, I myself took action and learned how to teach by attending

different workshops and also discussing with many experienced colleagues.

**T3:** The new books brought me into a sort of challenge. I was teaching the old books for 19 years. While I was teaching them, I came to the conclusion that my knowledge was being fossilized as to the knowledge of school students. It was as if I knew nothing more than high school level, so I had to change... I wasn't satisfied with myself. I started reading and studying for the whole summer... the new textbooks proved that my knowledge didn't suffice... So, I started taking part in different classes and workshops in order to improve my knowledge. I studied many files and then applied them in my classes.

**T6:** The new books guided me toward practicing speaking. Because in the workplace we didn't speak English and I had to find something, so I searched YouTube. This has become my habit. Every night I search YouTube and listen to different videos for 15 minutes as a result my listening skill was also improved. In a nutshell, I got used to listening to YouTube to improve myself.

It can be inferred from the above narratives that the way teachers achieved agency was highly dependent on their past experiences, whether internal or external sources. As for the internal experiences, one's personal characteristics can

determine how a person reacts to the changes. Regarding the external sources, teachers' own schooling and context in which they have taught for years might affect how teachers achieve agency. Despite the limitations regarding training classes for dealing with the new textbooks, many teachers circumvented the challenges by adopting different strategies such as searching YouTube, attending different workshops, studying different books, and collegial support. This implies teachers' ability to construct agency by drawing on so many past experiences and strategies. Even though the teachers faced some challenges during enacting the new curriculum, they still utilized their own strategies and interpretations to deal with the complexities.

#### 4-2. Future Orientations, Projective Dimension

According to Priestley et al. (2015), teachers should create a wide range of future possibilities in order to construct their agency. This aspect deals with future aspirations of teachers in order to bring about a change which distinguishes future from the past. They argue that it relates to hopes, wishes and fears of the teachers about both themselves and their students. Some teachers emphasized the importance of professional development. Examples of narratives include the followings:

**T4:** *I use my experiences to move forward, experiences from the previous years. I have improved my teaching during the past four years. I know how to incorporate new games in order to motivate and excite students. I give them the energy to enjoy the class. I believe I will keep improving my knowledge*

*of both content and also teaching methods as a result of working with these new books.*

**T2:** *After working with the new textbooks, I have learned something. I have learned how to develop my knowledge of language. I know how I should improve myself to be regarded as a distinguished teacher who has reputation among his/her colleagues. I am thinking of running some workshops for novice teachers to help them get along with the challenges existing in the books.*

Furthermore, others have considered the development of their students as the result of implementing the new textbooks. Examples of the narratives include:

**T1:** *I like the new curriculum since students learn how to speak and listen because this matters for their future development. With the old books, students did not learn anything with regards to communication but now I see students who have made progress in speaking for example from grade 1.5 to 5...I do believe the new textbooks have a better result and outcome. Even I guess incorporation of new books is going to prepare students for academic English which they will face at universities.*

**T5:** *The new themes are related to society, so at least we are preparing students to be a member of the community. This has many*



*advantages for the students. For instance, students become familiar with important issues related to nature and language. It seems as if the new themes in the books are more tangible so that students can apply what they learn in real world.*

In short, the future orientations of teachers included their own professional aspirations and those aspirations pertaining to their students with the former focusing on how teachers continuously try to enhance their professional knowledge as a means of future progress and improvement and the latter representing the fact that teachers were concerned with the development of their students in the future not only in terms of English development but also in terms of preparing students to be a member of a larger community. Hence, how teachers react to the changes and achieve agency is inexorably tied to their future directions about both themselves and their students. In other words, teacher agency is realized through encouraging students to be involved in the content of textbooks and also by fostering the values suggested by textbooks in learners so that they can be a member of future community.

#### **4-3. The Current Practices against the Challenges, Practical-Evaluative Dimension**

As mentioned earlier, agency is related to the past experiences and future aspirations of teachers. However, it is exercised in the present being affected by many contextual factors including factors which may be hindrance to curriculum enactment and also the ones contributing to the enactment and also construction of agency. The teachers in the

present study first introduced a number of challenges with which they were faced and then mentioned how they tried to cope with the challenges through exercising agency. Teachers' actions influenced how they achieved agency in the face of many pressures and challenges during the curriculum reform.

##### **4-3-1. Contextual Limitations**

Almost all teachers referred to the limitations they faced in different schools. The teachers believed that the textbooks demanded the use of technology and other facilities while they were deprived of using them due to the lack of facilities in many public schools. The following examples are extracted from the narratives:

*T2: Regarding the context, in one school we can work based on the lesson plan, use video projector or check the internet to find something, but the other school has only one smart board which can be used by all teachers, so we are limited, we cannot use as much resources as we wish to. But as a solution, I use my laptop and cellphone to play the audios.*

*T4: Our schools are not equipped. I have never been at a school which provides necessary equipment for listening and speaking. We work on these skills more or less but this is not satisfactory. I remember last year for implementing listening exam, the speakers broke down and I had to read the text for students to answer...but we don't have a choice and have to make the best out of what we have.*

Regardless of many challenges that teachers faced, they were able to deal with them through different agentic choices and actions. Most teachers were dissatisfied with the gap between the expectations and the actual facilities available at schools since the books demanded the use of different pieces of technology such as computers, speakers, and video projectors while many schools lacked such facilities. However, the examples indicate that although the working context was unsupportive in terms of facilities needed for enacting the new curriculum, the teachers found various ways of compensating for inadequacies. In other words, they attempted to enact the new curriculum to a great extent by adopting different strategies. The agentic actions that teachers took in response to the many contextual limitations represent the achievement of agency.

#### 4-3-2. Lack of Time

The other limitation with which teachers were faced was the reduction in class time. The teachers believed that MOE had reduced the time allocated to English at schools. Therefore, teachers were confined to just teaching what is necessary for examination and they did not have spare time to concentrate on speaking and listening skills. The teachers explained that:

*T6: In order to apply CLT, we need more time. Instead of dedicating more time, they have reduced it. So, I have to work with more paces in order to be able to cover the content of textbooks. But I sometimes ask other colleagues to let me have their classes so that I can compensate for this lack of time.*

*T1: The reduction in class hours has caused many problems for us. I cannot dedicate much time to practicing speaking and listening because I have to work on many tests to prepare them for entrance exam, after all this is what the students expect me to do! All I can do is to apply some pair work and group work tasks to make them exposed to language as much as possible.*

These excerpts indicate that the most of the participants were inclined to apply CLT in their classes, however; they believed time constraint deprived them from truly concentrating on promoting communicative skills of students. Nevertheless, they exercised agency by adopting different approaches such as applying pair work and group-work tasks which will provide more time for each student to share ideas or participate in small groups. This reflects how the teachers have adapted themselves to the requirements of the new curriculum despite time limitation.

#### 4-3-3. Content of the Material

The teachers in this study were satisfied with the content of new books, however; they were challenged with the way culture was presented in the books. The participants contended that the textbooks have downgraded the significance of international culture as a means of awareness-raising of students. For example, the teachers said that:

*T4: The new textbooks are amazing in the themes, however; the books have deemphasized the role of culture. Language acquisition is integrated with culture*

*acquisition...The previous books did not allow or give space for cultural integration but this one is better if the teacher wants to do something. I bring culturally-related video-clips as a means of improving listening. The language of one country cannot be learned without learning its culture. We must teach culture and I do it whenever possible.*

**T2:** *For culture, they must have incorporated international realities. Students should be familiar with culture of different countries. In order to deal with this challenge, I ask students to conduct small projects for example, on the culture of different countries or monuments in each country. Even if they are not proficient in English, I ask them to present some parts in Farsi because I just want them to learn the cultural points.*

**T7:** *The books have been over localized. It is like when one person is trying to learn Persian but the name of Iran is nowhere in the book. We do not have any reference to English speaking countries. It is not culture free; it is culture-bound but to Iranian culture. But in order to compensate for this, I ask my students to give lectures on the related issues or I myself share some information with them.*

Obviously, despite the overall satisfaction with the themes and topics incorporated in the

new textbooks, the teachers in this study believed that the role of culture has been underestimated in the books. They argued that the books have only focused on the national culture which will result in students' lack of awareness of international cultures. Even though the teachers followed the content of the curriculum, they still had different understandings of the importance of culture incorporation. On the surface level, they accepted the policies and followed them however, at the deeper level they questioned the policies and tried to take agentic actions by assigning different tasks to students such as presenting lecture or doing different culturally-related projects to raise their awareness. Various understandings that teachers attached to the policies during implementing the curriculum implied that they did not simply accept the top-down policies but rather constructed agency in response to the opposing policies.

#### **4-3-4. Relationships**

Many teachers can enhance agency through enhancing their relationship with colleagues. Teachers can build rapport with each other only if the context provides such atmosphere since this is mainly dependent on the school culture or the context in which they are positioned. Therefore, social relations affect agency constructions. Also, formal relationships such as the relationship with school personnel and also the relationship with parents have substantial influence on achieving agency. In general, these relationships are sources which help teachers construct agency and deal with every day challenges at work. Examples include:

**T3:** *I do try to establish friendly rapport with my colleagues at work, because I guess I can learn many*

*things, I can use their experiences. Usually, when there is a problematic situation in my class, I try to consult my colleagues before taking action. I remember once I had a student whose English was at advanced level so she couldn't communicate with me or the other students. I did not know how to deal with her, so I consulted some of my colleagues to solve this problem.*

**T4:** *There are various things affecting us at schools. For instance, the relationship between principles and parents is what may hurt us. Sometimes the manager defends the parents and students and downgrades the role of teacher. This is what really hurts me. Sometimes establishing rapport with students seems a tough job but I do my best to see them as my friends or family because if they don't enjoy accompanying me...Fortunately, with the speaking part incorporated in the new books, we can allocate some time to discuss different issues with students.*

**T2:** *Although the ministry of education did nothing for us, we ourselves as a teaching community, created some telegram groups to be able to discuss and share our experiences. I learned many things from my colleagues there.*

In short, the gap teachers were facing at the beginning of enacting the curriculum, as well as

the way they chose to cope with it, confirm the tensions they had in the early stages of applying new books. However, by establishing rapport between different individuals at workplace, teachers were able to achieve agency because first they could improve their professional knowledge and then they could deal with their actual problems by the help of supportive colleagues. The useful strategies that teachers adopted in order to compensate for their lack of knowledge highlighted their agency in the time of curriculum reform. In other words, teachers considered collaboration with their colleagues as a main source for constructing agency and development of their professional knowledge. Moreover, the relationship between teachers and parents and principles affect the way teachers enact the curriculum since the positive encouragement and respect that they receive is one energy source. Considering the atmosphere of school, the role of principles receives attention since teachers often believed that how principles act might influence the way they achieve agency and also how they plan for the improvement of school.

## 5. Discussion

The process of implementing language planning can be considered as a dynamic one requiring different individuals at both macro and micro levels among whom teachers are inexorable elements of any LLP. Based on teachers' narratives about the new curriculum, the present study investigated how experienced teachers exercised agency in the face of changes in the curriculum. The overall findings of the present study are indicative of the active role of teachers in applying the policies (Ollerhead & Ollerhead, 2010; Wang, 2008). The data obtained in this study resonates well with the ecological

model of teacher agency in which construction of agency is affected by many past experiences, contextual factors, and also future directions of teachers.

Most of the teachers under study indicated that they have embarked upon learning and improving themselves after the curriculum reform. This self-initiated learning procedure was mainly inspired by the void between their old knowledge and the knowledge required for teaching the new textbooks. The endeavor to enhance learning is derived from their past experiences and what they already knew about the content. This finding is in line with Tao & Gao (2017) in that teachers' learning was mediated by their past experiences. Many of the teachers attested that MOE did not help them in the process of professional development for enacting the new curriculum, but they themselves attempted to enhance their knowledge. This is supported by Glasgow (2017) who found that the teachers felt potential gaps in their knowledge which required support from MOE to prepare them for the new curriculum. However, in order to deal with challenges, the teachers in the present study have exerted agency to learn by themselves through applying various agentic strategies and this is in line with previous studies (Ollerhead & Ollerhead, 2010; Pyhalto, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2014) which indicate that teachers direct their own learning to enhance their professional knowledge. Regarding the teachers' endeavors to improve in their job, some of them explicitly mentioned the need to enhance their speaking skill and this relates to the difficulty that non-native teachers face in applying communicative methods of teaching (Zhang & Hu, 2010). Moreover, Glasgow (2017) contends that non-native teachers admit the potential gaps in their

knowledge required for enacting the new communicative curriculum. Despite the challenges, the participants in this study tended to apply the CLT method in the classes and all of them agreed that they needed to change their role as transmitters of knowledge in order to adapt to the new curriculum (Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Priestley et al., 2013; Pappa et al., 2019; Tao & Gao, 2017).

Moreover, most of the participants felt the urge to improve them to be professional members of their teaching community in the future. This aspect relates to the role of projective dimension of agency in which teachers responded to the changes in various agentic ways to improve their future. In addition, some of the teachers were concerned with development of their students in different ways. For instance, they believed the themes of the new textbooks will prepare students for future involvement in community. This finding is supported by Priestley et al. (2013) in that they argue teachers consider themselves as individuals playing active role in influencing lives of students who may come from different social backgrounds.

Despite the advantages of the new curriculum, it has caused many challenges including contextual limitations, time management, and cultural underrepresentation. Time limitations for teaching English at schools is a major problem in Iranian educational system (Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghadam, 1398). However, the teachers in this study made some agentic decisions and choices and then enacted those decisions to bolster the functions of the new textbooks and this is in line with Pappa et al. (2019) who indicated that teachers were confronted with some tensions including lack of many resources required for enacting the new

curriculum, so they had to exert agency by using the internet, consulting with other colleagues, and cooperation with other people. One of the challenges that the participants in this study faced was the fact that in applying the new teaching methods, they had many contextual constraints such as the lack of facilities, which is in line with the findings of Kaivanpanah, Alavi, and Tabaeifard (1394). The finding is in line with Etelapelto, Vahasantanen, Hokka (2015) who found that the teachers faced some challenges in enacting the new curriculum such as lack of musical instruments. Put succinctly, the participants experienced a gap between the requirements of the book and actual classroom context, which restricted how teachers could act. However, teachers in this study adopted some strategies to deal with the contextual constraints. This finding underlined the need to exercise agency in coping with the gap between the ideals of the textbooks and everyday school challenges.

The teachers also argued that they did not have sufficient time for applying CLT and this was also experienced by the participant in Molina's (2017) study who said that they didn't have enough time to engage students and the class hour did not suffice for incorporating extra-curricular activities. In line with this finding, Etelapelto et al. (2015) found that teachers couldn't act based on their own beliefs and standards due to lack of time. In addition to the insufficient amount of time dedicated to English classes, teachers said that they were forced to prepare students for different examinations since students believed that entrance exam was more important than communicative abilities, so teachers had to allocate more time to testing rather than focusing on communicative abilities of learners. As Liyanage, Bartlett, Walker, & Guo

(2014) note, the gap between practices focusing on communicative aspects of language and the significance attached to the practices preparing learners for examination is a hindrance to promoting teacher agency. Furthermore, when the larger community emphasizes the significance of examinations and future success of the students is determined by the results of exams (Wang, 2007; Liyanage et al., 2014) teachers are forced to prepare students for examinations. As Molina (2017) puts it, this exam-oriented instruction might be a hindrance to actual application of communicative approaches. However, the teachers in this study tried to apply communicative tasks to compensate for this lack of time through adopting various tasks which might help learners achieve communicative competencies.

Regarding the content of material, teachers were satisfied with the themes incorporated in the textbooks; however, they criticized the inadequate attention paid to international cultures. Culture is indispensable part of language teaching and this is compatible with the findings of many studies which indicate culture has a pivotal role in the acquisition of language (Brown, 2007; Ho, 2009; Schulz, 2007). However, according to Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2014), Iranian textbooks highlight the importance of L1 culture to expose learners to their own cultural heritage and they are concerned with representing social values and standards based on which students are expected to act (Canale, 2016). Nevertheless, the teachers in this study constructed agency through applying various techniques which expose learners to both their L1 culture and international cultures and this is in line with Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2014) who contends that local teachers should

aim at awareness raising activities among their students through cross-cultural comparison between different cultures by using supplementary materials.

Among various strategies employed by teachers to adapt to the changes and circumvent the challenges, cooperating with other colleagues to enhance learning seems to be the most efficient one. Constructing rapport with a particular community sheds light on the practical-evaluative aspect of agency in which teachers try to construct their agency in relation to the community in which they are positioned. This is also supported by Tao and Gao (2017) in which teachers exert agency by making themselves close to the community of teachers who teach ESP. Teachers can also share their experiences by holding some regular meetings in which they can cooperate with each other. Many teachers believed that this collegial support would help them enact the curriculum as is the case for teachers in Pappa et al.'s (2019) study who believed the collegial support could provide them with a sense of security for circumventing the challenges faced. Moreover, Parker (2016) believes that professional relationship contributes to construction of agency through various ways "which provide support, access to new ideas and a protective shield when undertaking innovation" (p.10). In line with Nguyen and Bui (2016), the participants agreed unanimously that through collaboration, they would be provided with ample opportunities to learn how to teach and how to enact the new curriculum.

On the other side, social relationship with parents, colleagues, and students has profound influence on constructing agency and this is supported by Priestley et al. (2013) in that they claim "the complex social structures found in

schools – the myriad of relationships and roles – exert significant effects on the possibilities for teachers to achieve agency". Accordingly, construction of agency can be hindered or promoted by the context in which teachers are positioned. In line with this finding, Toom, Pyhalto, Rust (2015) contended that teacher agency can be promoted or prohibited by the school principals who either provide the context for innovation or prohibit it. The participants in Etelapelto et al.'s (2015) study also believed that the principle plays a pivotal role in determining the construction of agency in teachers and also in the development of schools.

To conclude, they enacted agency in order to improve their teaching and to engage in enhancing their learning and also students' learning through agentic choices and actions (Tao & Gao, 2017). Many of these choices and actions were mediated by past experiences and also future aspirations of teachers for instance, the way they reacted to the changes can result from their previous experiences in dealing with the changes or how they wish to take advantage of the changes to create a better future. This shows the intermingling of past experiences and future aspirations in influencing the present practice of teachers. Moreover, these attempts and strategies for coping with the challenges indicated how teacher agency helps them circumvent many caveats in the new curriculum and also how this agency contributes to the improvement of teaching and also professional development of teachers (Tran, 2018).

## 6. Conclusions

The findings of the present study have enriched us with ample evidence about how teachers exert influence on policy enactment and

also how experienced teachers improvise and respond to the changes in the time of curriculum reform. This reflects that teachers are not only considered as "mere transmitters of knowledge, but as agents of change" playing a pivotal role in enacting any curriculum reform (Molina, 2017, p. 8). The analysis of the narratives confirms the importance of teacher agency in enacting the new curriculum since the teachers are "the final arbiters of language policy implementation" (Menken and Garcia, 2010, p. 1) indicating that when a new curriculum is designed at the macro level, teachers exert their agency at the micro level implementation to bring about the desired changes. In particular, teachers' experiences with the new textbooks suggest that agency contributes to better enactment of any change provided that the context supports teachers' agentic choices and actions. Moreover, the challenges which demonstrated a part of their agency reflects the need for further collaboration between top-down policy makers and bottom-up policy enactors in order to improve the working conditions for teachers and enhance the effectiveness of the materials.

On the other side, agency is a vital element of professional development of teachers, which can be explored through teachers' attitudes toward themselves and the context, and this may yield valuable information regarding teachers' perceptions and learning in the workplace (Gurney & Lyanag, 2016). Furthermore, by putting emphasis on exercising agency, teacher training courses should invest in raising this quality in their trainees so that they can possess critical minds problematizing the context in which they are positioned (Lai, Li, & Gong, 2016). In addition, considering teacher agency

might be essential to understanding teaching experiences because agency is a mixture of present and past experiences and also future orientations. The experiences gained from past and present might be a gateway toward improving future plans. Moreover, the concept of agency helps teachers understand the complexity of curriculum reform by developing their ability to circumvent many challenges caused by the context (Simpson, Sang, Wood, Wang, & Ye, 2018).

The main limitation this study was faced with is the fact that it was not a longitudinal study which offers useful insights on how teacher agency is developed within a particular context. Moreover, large-scale studies such as investigating teacher agency through questionnaires may provide more generalizable findings. Further research on the nexus between teacher agency and other contextual variables such as identity and emotions would provide a more transparent picture of the way these contextual factors influence teacher functioning, particularly in the context of curriculum change. On the other hand, the present study investigated how school teachers exercise agency in time of curriculum reform however, the large community of institute teachers who may experience curriculum reforms more often, has been left untouched. Furthermore, teacher agency can also be investigated at different levels of teaching profession such as preparing a lesson plan, designing different tests, etc.



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